

Radical Orthodoxy Encounters Economics

Deeper Engagement Needed—A Response to John Lunn

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John Lunn's recent article in this journal is one of the few attempts by economists to engage with one of the most influential movements in contemporary theology, the Radical Orthodoxy movement of John Milbank, Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock, Adrian Pabst, and others. However, Lunn fails to properly contextualize the movement, bases his engagement on a small and idiosyncratic sample of their writings on economics, and mischaracterizes their views on some issues. This does not mean that Radical Orthodoxy's treatment of economics is beyond criticism. Parts of its account of economics are inaccurate, and there are questions about the consistency of its theological and economic arguments. Despite these flaws there is much that economists can learn from grappling with the questions posed by Radical Orthodoxy, because it raises important questions from outside the modern secular framework inhabited by most modern economists.

Introduction

For all the attention the Radical Orthodoxy movement of John Milbank, Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock, Adrian Pabst, and others has attracted among theologians, the movement has received very little attention from economists. The recent article in this journal by John Lunn,¹ Professor of Economics at Hope College in Michigan is one of the rare engagements by economists with Radical Orthodoxy.² It is thus important that it offers an accurate and balanced account of Radical Orthodoxy, especially the movement's engagement with economics and economic policy. Unfortunately, it does not, and the purpose of this article is to point out some of the shortcomings of Lunn's account of Radical Orthodoxy,

to briefly indicate what a more accurate and balanced account would look like, and to suggest why further engagement between Radical Orthodoxy and economics might be fruitful.

Radical Orthodoxy

The key figure is John Milbank, whose *Theology & Social Theory* was published by Blackwell in 1990.³ He was then a Fellow of Peterhouse and a member of the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. The book caused a minor storm among theologians, as well as annoying many of the historians, philosophers, and sociologists who still read theology. It is not hard to see why when Milbank explained that he was seeking to restore Christian theology as the queen of the sciences, which should position, qualify, and criticize other discourses, though on quite different terms to the way theology has done so in the past. For Milbank the pathos of modern theology is its false humility, as theology has allowed itself to be framed by supposedly secular social theory with disastrous consequences. He argued the secular as understood by much modern social science is illusory, and that most social theory is in fact deformed theology, which has less claim on us than the original Christian version. Moreover, supposedly secular social theory is prone to violence, so we must restore the peaceable Christian version.

There was a political edge to the book, which Milbank is more explicit about in his introduction to the 2006 second edition. There he explained that he was seeking a more solid basis than he could find in secular social theory to oppose Margaret Thatcher's agenda for Britain in the 1980s. Milbank is a committed Christian socialist and Anglo-Catholic, though with a certain zeal that perhaps comes from his Methodist upbringing. There is much more to Milbank's book than these brief comments suggest, and for readers wanting more without tackling five hundred pages of dense prose, there is an article-length summary of the argument of *Theology & Social Theory* by Fergus Kerr, which Milbank has endorsed.⁴

The name Radical Orthodoxy comes from a collection of essays edited in 1999 by Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, chosen to emphasize the radical nature of their reassertion of what they see as Christian orthodoxy.⁵ In the years that followed that manifesto Milbank and his growing band of collaborators have written on a dazzling array of topics in theology, philosophy, politics, economics, and literature.⁶ Book series with major presses are devoted to it along with journals and conferences. Milbank has recently retired from the Centre for Theology and Philosophy at the University of Nottingham that has been a base for the movement in recent years (after previous appointments in Virginia and

Cambridge); Ward holds the Regius Chair in Divinity at Oxford; Pickstock holds the Norris-Hulse Chair in Divinity at Cambridge; and their students hold senior positions throughout the world. Radical Orthodoxy has been described by the eminent theologian David Ford as the most important theological movement in the English-speaking world.

Milbank's own writing on economics has evolved from strong criticism of capitalism and advocacy of statist socialism in early essays written before *Theology & Social Theory*, to a more nuanced criticism of capitalism and advocacy of the Italian civil economy tradition and Catholic Social Teaching, especially the encyclicals of Benedict XVI. Through all this he remains a proud Christian socialist and he and his collaborators are heavily involved in political debate, especially in Britain. A good sample of his current views on economics is the two chapters devoted to economics of his 2016 book *The Politics of Virtue*, coauthored with Adrian Pabst, and a recent series of articles on inequality, financialization, and other topics written for *ABC Religion and Ethics*.⁷

One of the problems with Lunn's article is inadequate contextualization of Radical Orthodox writings on economics. If the aim is to understand these writings we need to hear more about the theology of the movement and its place in the wider intellectual landscape, perhaps even about the background and concerns of its major figures. It is hard to get any sense from the disjointed quotations Lunn offers of their places in the arguments of the books from which they are taken. Another problem is Lunn's failure to engage with more than a small and strange sample of Radical Orthodox writings. Aside from Milbank's major work *Theology & Social Theory*, he only references the 1999 *Radical Orthodoxy* manifesto, Milbank's 2013 book on ontology and politics, *Beyond Secular Order*, and Milbank's 2016 book with Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*. There are no references to any of the many essays Milbank has written on economics and particular economic policy issues. Most strangely, there is no reference to the chapter of *Theology & Social Theory* on political economy, perhaps the most important Radical Orthodoxy text on economics. Rather than concentrating on the works of the core Radical Orthodoxy writers Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock, Lunn instead discusses the work of marginal figures in the movement such as Daniel M. Bell Jr.'s book on liberation theology, and D. Stephen Long's anemic survey of recent writing on economics and theology, and the work of William Cavanagh, who is increasingly distant from the movement.

Lunn and Radical Orthodoxy

It is clear from Lunn's discussion that the theological orientation of Radical Orthodoxy and its views on economics do not accord with his own. He begins his critique of Radical Orthodoxy with the suggestion that they place too much emphasis on the role of ideas in history and that they "allege connection between political philosophy and political operation."⁸ This comment does not seem to grasp the difference between the genealogical approach of the Radical Orthodoxy writers and other modes of history. For instance, Lunn suggests that a "difficulty is that the genealogical approach ignores history and historical events"⁹ and goes on to criticize their philosophical genealogy for ignoring "the Plague, the Papal Schism and the Hundred Years War."¹⁰ This is like criticizing a work of economic theory for not conducting empirical tests, or criticizing a work of prose for lacking rhyme. Is Lunn suggesting that philosophical genealogy should be purged from the scholarly landscape? He then criticizes specifics of "the genealogy of individualism offered by RO [Radical Orthodoxy]" as inadequate because there were ideas of individualism before William of Ockham, mentioning the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and the Apostle Paul as examples.¹¹ Lunn states that Radical Orthodoxy downplays the notion of individual salvation and emphasizes a more collective or social notion of salvation, without offering any textual support for this.¹²

We then encounter the absurd claim that the "agenda outlined by Milbank and Pabst in particular requires that society be Christian and the economics Christian socialism."¹³ No textual support is offered here for this claim, though a few pages earlier Lunn discussed various other aspects of the Radical Orthodoxy program. Lunn strangely does not mention Milbank and Pabst's seemingly relevant discussion of possibilities for putting their ideas into practice in the concluding chapter of *Politics of Virtue*, observing that Christians are a declining minority and calling for Christians across different traditions and others to work together and to form coalitions with others of like mind. For instance they call their proposal a "post-liberal politics of virtue,"¹⁴ and to implement it they seek to draw on a latent "conservative-associationist outlook"¹⁵ that they believe has been neglected by major political parties to construct a "broad popular movement in shaping politics for the common good."¹⁶ They do hope, unsurprisingly for Christian theologians, for a religious revival, but this is neither necessary nor sufficient for implementing their proposals. Nowhere is there any suggestion in Milbank and Pabst's chapter that the society must be Christian for their ideas to be put into practice. By contrast, the whole point of Radical Orthodoxy is reasserting what they see as Christian orthodoxy in our modern pluralistic environment. How can Lunn have missed this?

When Lunn moves to discuss the economics of Radical Orthodoxy the absurd claims continue. He claims, “There is no evidence that RO theologians care about either economic growth or that tens of millions of people have come out of poverty in the last few decades.”¹⁷ The evidence offered is that Milbank and Pabst’s *Politics of Virtue* does not cite Deirdre McCloskey’s three-volume defense of capitalism; Milbank and Pabst fail to comment positively on “the great enrichment”; plus a quote from Daniel Bell about capitalism wrongly deforming human desire even if it generates wealth. I too appreciate McCloskey’s work, but failure to comment positively on that work hardly establishes Lunn’s sweeping claim about *The Politics of Virtue*, let alone the Radical Orthodoxy movement as a whole.

The next point Lunn makes is similarly absurd and lacking in textual support. He claims “When an RO writer refers to the capitalist division of labor, it sounds as if specialization of labor is due to capitalism. Instead, the division of labor was recognized by ancients, practiced by households as far back in time as we have evidence of human life.”¹⁸ While difficult to work out what exactly Lunn means and to which Radical Orthodoxy texts he refers, the claim seems to be that Radical Orthodox writers wrongly connect capitalism with the division of labor. If it could be established that they are making such a claim (and my sense that accumulation and financialization are more important elements of capitalism for Radical Orthodox writers), then they would have Adam Smith for company, who famously began his *Wealth of Nations* with an argument that intensification of the division of labor was central to the rise of commercial society and the new wealth it brought. Lunn’s interpretation of Smith here is just as puzzling as his reading of Radical Orthodoxy.

A final example of Lunn’s misleading account of Radical Orthodoxy is his concluding reflection on how starting with the church might be more fruitful than Radical Orthodoxy’s flawed and unrealistic program of Christianizing society. He seems to have completely missed one of the main themes of *Theology & Social Theory*: that the church is Milbank’s preferred site for the renewal of social practice and the renewal of theology, for theology is the elaboration of the praxis of the church. Many of the original reviews picked out this theme of *Theology & Social Theory* for criticism, for example, Rowan Williams’ argument that Milbank had placed too much emphasis on an idealized view of the church.¹⁹ It is astounding for Lunn to claim “the church would be the natural starting point for thinking about human interactions based on the doctrine of ecclesiology” as an original insight offered in criticism of Radical Orthodoxy.²⁰

Lunn may be right that economic growth matters, that markets on the whole have delivered better lives for large numbers of the world’s poor, and so on,

but his discussion of Radical Orthodoxy and its view of economics is seriously misleading and in need of correction.

Radical Orthodoxy and Economics

Radical Orthodoxy is not without its problems, and a large secondary literature considers the accuracy of its genealogy of secular modernity, its reading of key figures such as Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, its social program, and many other issues.²¹

I will highlight here a few problems with its account of economics. It is not surprising that a movement offering a comprehensive re-reading of the intellectual genealogy of the West will get things wrong about particular disciplines they discuss. Taking as an example Milbank's chapter on political economy in *Theology & Social Theory*,²² he offers a highly idiosyncratic view of Adam Smith's intellectual background, sees Smith as a key figure in the de-ethnicization of economics against overwhelming textual evidence, confuses the Jacobite economic writer James Steuart with Smith's biographer Dugald Stewart, seems unaware of Smith's writings on the analogy between language and markets, and overemphasizes the contrast between Smith and Malthus, who is painted as the main villain in the construction of political economy's heretical theology and agonistics. The discussion of Malthus is particularly strange and disconnected from the texts and what we know of Malthus in his context. Some of these errors are probably due to reliance on secondary sources such as Milton Myers, who reads political economy as an answer to Hobbes's problem of how order is possible in the absence of a Leviathan state (itself dependent on the earlier work of Albert Hirschman), and Michael Perelman's unreliable history of economics.²³ One gets the sense reading Milbank's chapter that certain conclusions about political economy are inevitable, irrespective of the authors and texts considered, because of the part political economy plays in the overall argument of *Theology & Social Theory*.

My main concern though about Radical Orthodoxy's account of economics is lack of consistency between the theological arguments and the views of economics and economic policy offered. Milbank's early works such as the 1986 essay in *Modern Theology* were extremely hostile to capitalism and in my view naive about the modern state as a remedy, for instance his conclusion that "economic and social arguments are finally theological" and his claim "I hope that I have shown how Capitalism is to be regarded as Christian heresy, and Marxism the ally of Christian Orthodoxy."²⁴ The enthusiasm for Marx is tempered in *Theology & Social Theory* but the attachment to state intervention

persists. For instance, in a 2011 essay Milbank outlined a seven-point economic policy agenda, which includes anti-usury legislation, the regulation of wages and prices, and government action to redistribute assets.²⁵

To my mind, large scale statist policies are associated with the social theory Milbank dismantles in *Theology & Social Theory* and are much more vulnerable to his theological criticisms than free market policies. Markets decentralize power and do not respect any supposed secular realm. The logic of Milbank's theology seems to me to lead much more naturally to libertarian or anarchist political economy than statism. One Radical Orthodox response to this might be that contemporary capitalism is not in fact characterized by decentralization of power and free competition, but by monopoly. Another response might be that supposedly free markets are in fact backed by state coercion and violence, echoing Marx, and perhaps citing contemporary examples of Pinochet's Chile and Trump's USA. It may be true that my view of these matters idealizes free markets in the same way that Milbank idealizes the church as an agent of social transformation, but the point about the greater intellectual consonance of Radical Orthodox theology with free markets than statist socialism remains. In fairness to Radical Orthodoxy, it must also be said that recent work is less favorable to statist solutions, more open to markets, and emphasizes much more the role of nonstate associations: for example, the proposal for free guilds and the proposed organization of welfare through state-aided voluntary bodies that are part of the seven-point agenda in Milbank's previously mentioned 2011 essay. A similar emphasis is evident in chapter 4, "The Civil Economy Alternative," of Milbank and Pabst's *Politics of Virtue* in 2016. In other words, Radical Orthodoxy has broadened its understanding of socialism to encompass less damaging forms, closer to Pope Benedict XVI's economic vision in *Caritas in Veritate*, G. K. Chesterton's distributism, or versions of contemporary communitarianism.

In the interdisciplinary field of economics and theology, we need much more attention to tracing these sorts of historical and intellectual connections between theological and economic arguments. Some writers within Radical Orthodoxy such as Milbank, Pabst, and the earlier work of William Cavanaugh at least attempt to trace connections between theological and economic arguments, whether or not we find the theology or economics or particular connections plausible. Lunn makes no attempt to consider such connections; all we get is a dubious account of the theology of Radical Orthodoxy, then his disagreement with what he understands to be their economics.

One thing, though, that Lunn gets right is that we are still waiting for an adequate theology of markets or, to put it another way, the extension of theological ethics from its traditional focus on small-scale personal interactions to consider

the ethics of large-scale impersonal interactions. Milbank shares the traditional focus when he writes that “Radical Orthodoxy rejects this distinction [between personal and impersonal] and claims all interactions should be relational and personal.”²⁶ This focus on an ethical prioritization of small-scale personal interactions is also evident in Milbank’s claims that shifting moral evaluation from individual actions to the system is de-ethicization: “morality might determine the whole system, but could not impinge within the system; morality was endlessly postponed.”²⁷ However, Radical Orthodoxy is not alone among modern theological movements in failing to recognize that a different sort of theological ethics is needed to deal with a modern market economy. Such a theological ethics could augment rather than replace the traditional concern. Insightful commentators on the dialogue between economists and theologians such as Frank Knight, Paul Heyne, and Anthony Waterman have been pointing this out for many years.²⁸ Radical Orthodoxy has so far not provided an adequate theology of markets, but at least they are engaging economics theologically and excavating resources of major premodern theologians that may provide the building blocks for such a theology of markets.

Conclusion

Deeper dialogue between economists and theologians is needed, but Lunn’s article does not advance the discussion of the relationships between Christian theology and economics. The contemporary influence of Radical Orthodoxy means that it is important to have a reliable account of its theology and economics as a basis for further dialogue. I have indicated what a fuller and more satisfactory account of Radical Orthodoxy might look like, and how a deeper engagement with it might be fruitful because of the questions it brings from outside the modern, secular framework. Such an account, however, is a large task well beyond the scope of this short article.

Notes

1. John Lunn “Radical Orthodoxy’s Flawed Critique of Markets and Morality,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 373–90; reprinted in this issue, 177–93.
2. Anthony Waterman’s characteristically robust argument against Milbank’s view of economics as a heretical theodicy is one exception, A. M. C. Waterman, “Is ‘Political Economy’ Really a Christian Heresy?” *Faith & Economics* 51 (Spring 2008): 31–55. The Italian Catholic economists Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni are much more positive in their assessment, and engage particularly with Milbank and Pabst around the civil economy tradition of the eighteenth-century Neapolitan Antonio Genovese, which they believe is superior in some ways to the dominant post Smithian Anglo-American tradition. L. S. Bruni and S. Zamagni, *Civil Economy: Efficiency, Equity, Public Happiness* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007); L. S. Bruni, *The Genesis and the Ethos of the Market* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). None of these authors are cited by Lunn.
3. John Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2006 [1990]).
4. Fergus Kerr, “Simplicity Itself: Milbank’s Thesis,” *New Blackfriars* 73, no. 361 (1992): 306–10.
5. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, “Introduction” to *Radical Orthodoxy* (London: Routledge, 1999).
6. A sample of other Radical Orthodox writing on economics includes Milbank’s essays “The Body by Love Possessed: Christianity and Late Capitalism,” *Modern Theology* 3, no. 1 (1986): 35–65; “A Socialist Economic Order,” *Theology* 91 (1988): 412–15; “On Complex Space” in his *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1997); “Socialism by Grace” in *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003); “The Future of Love: A Reading of Benedict XVI’s Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*,” *Communio* 33, no. 3 (2006): 368–74; “The Real Third Way” in *The Global Crisis of Capitalism: Caritas in Veritate and the Future of Political Economy*, ed. Adrian Pabst (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011); “Can the Market Be Moral? Peace and Prosperity Depends on a Reimagined Socialism,” *ABC Religion and Ethics*, October 24, 2014; “Oikonomia Leaves Home: Theology, Politics, and Governance in the History of the West,” *Telos* (Spring 2017): 77–99; “Capitalism in Question: Thomas Piketty and the Crisis of Inequality,” *ABC Religion and Ethics*, June 6, 2014 (with Adrian Pabst). Graham Ward has written less on economics, but there is some commentary in his *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000); *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); and “The Myth of Secularism,” *Telos* (Summer 2014): 162–79. Catherine Pickstock has written nothing that I am aware of on economics.

7. John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).
8. Lunn, "Radical Orthodoxy," 177–93.
9. Lunn, "Radical Orthodoxy," 177–93.
10. Lunn cites Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978).
11. Lunn, "Radical Orthodoxy," 177–93.
12. Lunn, "Radical Orthodoxy," 177–93.
13. Lunn, "Radical Orthodoxy," 177–93.
14. Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 380.
15. Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 382.
16. Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 382.
17. Lunn, "Radical Orthodoxy," 177–93.
18. Lunn, "Radical Orthodoxy," 177–93. The next footnote where one might expect the citation of several Radical Orthodoxy texts in support of the claim, Lunn puzzlingly suggests that the Apostle Paul's discussion of the gifts of the Spirit might be relevant.
19. This theme about the role of the church comes out especially in Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 12.
20. Lunn here is writing against what he gathers is the Radical Orthodoxy view from D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy* (London: Routledge, 2000). Again, Lunn would have been much better served by engaging with the core Radical Orthodoxy writers and texts.
21. The secondary literature on Radical Orthodoxy and economics includes J. K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004); Jennifer A. Herdt, "The Endless Construction of Charity: On Milbank's Critique of Political Economy," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2004): 301–24; Sarah Coakley, "Why Gift? Gift, Gender and Trinitarian Relations in Milbank and Tanner," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61 (2008): 224–35; Christopher J. Insole, "Against Radical Orthodoxy: The Dangers of Overcoming Political Liberalism," *Modern Theology* 20, no. 2 (2004): 213–41. Robin Gill's *Theology and Sociology: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1996) collects some of the early reviews of *Theology & Social Theory*, including Rowan Williams' review. Neil Ormerod has pointed out some problems in the detail of Milbank's arguments in "It Is Easy to See: The Footnotes of John Milbank," *Philosophy & Theology* 11, no. 2 (1999): 257–64.

22. Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, chap. 2. These errors remain in the second edition of the work.
23. Milton L. Myers, *The Soul of Modern Economic Man: Ideas of Self-Interest, Thomas Hobbes to Adam Smith* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). Michael Perelman *Classical Political Economy, Primitive Accumulation and the Social Division of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983). Further discussion of the historical issues may be found in Paul Oslington, *Political Economy as Natural Theology: Smith, Malthus, and Their Followers* (London: Routledge, 2018).
24. Milbank, “The Body by Love Possessed,” 61. Milbank’s enthusiasm for Marx and state intervention may reflect the highly charged, 1980s Thatcherite British context in which this essay was written.
25. Milbank, “The Real Third Way,” 65–69.
26. Lunn, “Radical Orthodoxy,” 177–93.
27. Milbank, “The Body by Love Possessed,” 39. Similar claims about de-ethicisation are repeated several times in idem, *Theology and Social Theory*, chap. 2.
28. Frank H. Knight, *The Ethics of Competition and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935); Paul Heyne, “Are Economists Basically Immoral?” and *Other Essays on Economics, Ethics and Religion*, ed. Geoffrey Brennan and A. M. C. Waterman (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 2008); Geoffrey Brennan and A. M. C. Waterman “Christian Theology and Economics: Convergence and Clashes” in *Christian Theology and Market Economics*, ed. I. R. Harper and S. Gregg (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2008), 77–93; Paul Oslington, “*Caritas in Veritate* and the Market Economy: How Do We Reconcile Traditional Christian Ethics with Economic Analysis of Social Systems?” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 14, no. 2 (2011): 359–71.