

## Critique of Radical Orthodoxy

### A Response to Paul Oslington

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### Sources

Paul Oslington offers a sharp attack on the criticisms I made of Radical Orthodoxy in the Fall 2019 issue of this *Journal*.<sup>1</sup> He accuses me of engaging with only a small sample of Radical Orthodoxy's writings. I confess that I have not read everything written by the Radical Orthodoxy writers, and that I did not cite every book or article I have read. But I did deal with major works, especially written by John Milbank, and I tried to give a sense of the theological underpinnings to the social theory. Oslington also criticizes me for referring to some figures he believes are unimportant in Radical Orthodoxy, such as D. Stephen Long and his book *The Divine Economy*. This last point is interesting to me since my first contact with Radical Orthodoxy occurred about fifteen years ago when a former editor of this journal suggested I should read Long's book. From Long's book I went to Milbank's *Beyond Secular Order*. If I had left out Long's book, I think many readers would question that decision.

### History

Oslington's next criticism of me is that I criticized Radical Orthodoxy for ignoring history in their accounts of how we got to where we are. He says my criticism is like criticizing a work of economic theory for not having empirical analysis in it. Actually, I think the more apt comparison is with history of economic thought and economic history. I am not suggesting that philosophical genealogy

should be purged from the scholarly literature, but I am suggesting that history is also important, especially given the connection between ideas and political reality Milbank made early in his book *Beyond Secular Order*. I noted in my paper that Milbank claimed that “there has to exist a concealed symmetry between the most rarefied expressions of modern thought in ‘philosophy,’ on the one hand, and modernity’s collective ‘political’ deeds on the other.”<sup>2</sup> He is claiming a relationship between ideas and deeds, and I am suggesting a relationship between historical events and ideas may also exist. I also cited Heiko Oberman’s suggestion that the Plague made it easier for people to accept nominalism.<sup>3</sup> Radical Orthodoxy does make the claim that changes in philosophical and theological thought had the effect of bringing into being the modern world, including capitalism. They may have the genealogy correct, but I am saying that historical events may have influenced the evolution of the ideas or the willingness of some to consider different philosophical or theological positions.

## Christian Socialism

Oslington says that my claim that for the agenda outlined by Milbank and Pabst to be implemented requires that a society be Christian is absurd and that I offered no textual support for the claim. They do not directly say that society must be Christian to implement their ideas, but my reading of their proposals says that it cannot happen in the pluralistic societies in Europe and North America today. Admittedly, I tend to read things through American eyes. Perhaps their plan for greater Church of England involvement in society and the government can happen in Great Britain.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, perhaps there is a way in Britain for the aristocracy to have a role, with an aristocracy rethought so more virtuous people are selected.<sup>5</sup> I am skeptical.

Radical Orthodox writers consistently refer to adopting *Christian* socialism, although they fail to flesh out what they mean by that.<sup>6</sup> I am assuming they mean more than having the adjective “Christian” added to a party name as is the case in Germany and some other European countries. If an order beyond secular order is sought, it is not clear how current secular people will jump on board.

Oslington says that I ignored the last chapter of *The Politics of Virtue* where Milbank and Pabst discuss possibilities of putting their ideas into practice. However, the three citations he makes from the chapter offer only vague and hopeful ideas.<sup>7</sup> I understand that theologians often want to act in a “prophetic” mode in which they criticize aspects of the status quo without providing practical alternatives to the status quo. I do not see *The Politics of Virtue* offering realistic proposals to achieve the desired social order.

## **Economic Growth**

The next complaint Oslington has is that I make the claim that the Radical Orthodox do not seem to care that economic growth has brought millions of people out of poverty. He claims my evidence is that they do not cite Deirdre McCloskey's defense of capitalism. He is misinterpreting what I said there. I stated that there is no evidence that the RO theologians care about it. My evidence is actually difficult to cite because I can only recall seeing one statement in their writings related to the "Great Enrichment," and even then, Milbank and Pabst did not comment on whether it was a good thing or not. I cited McCloskey as having used the term in her defense of capitalism. I do not know if that is where Milbank and Pabst picked up the expression, and it does not matter. I find the absence of references to economic growth striking.

## **The Division of Labor**

Looking back over my section on the division of labor, it is not as clear as I would like. I probably should have left off the reference to Adam Smith since I was not relying on his work. The division of labor is not due to capitalism. The Soviet Union had extensive specialization. Instead, the coordination problem associated with extensive specialization is great, and markets function better than other approaches. But for some reason many theologians I have read or even spoken with fail to grasp the complexities associated with such extensive specialization of labor. For this reason, I do not think Milbank's ideas concerning gift or reciprocity are useful.

## **The Church**

The final area of criticism is my comments concerning ecclesiology. I do not deny that Radical Orthodoxy theologians write often about ecclesiology. In some cases, they are referring to life in the church. But in other cases, they write as though the ecclesiology should inform the economic order or the entire social order. Oslington is correct that I had in mind Long's discussion of ecclesiology as a basis of economic life. What I have in mind is that instead of trying to tell society how to act, let the Church live as the Church should live. I think the visible church today is falling short of that ideal, and should get its own house in order before advising others.

## Conclusion

Oslington's concluding section presents some of his ideas about engaging with Radical Orthodoxy. He criticizes how Milbank treated Adam Smith in *Theology & Social Theory*, and how many theologians, including Milbank and other Radical Orthodoxy writers, fail to properly account for the movement from personal interactions to impersonal interaction via markets.<sup>8</sup> This is an area where Oslington and I seem to be in agreement. Even so, Oslington obviously thinks I failed to engage with Radical Orthodoxy in a productive way.<sup>9</sup> Oslington and I differ over whether Radical Orthodoxy's philosophical theology can offer much help in creating an economic or political order, especially in a world tainted by sin. Perhaps Professor Oslington should undertake the task of engaging Radical Orthodoxy in a deeper way. I would read such a paper with interest.

## Notes

1. John Lunn, “Radical Orthodoxy’s Flawed Critique of Markets and Morality,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 373–89, reprinted for this controversy in this issue: 177–93.
2. John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Oxford: Wiley, Blackwell, 2013), 2. My citation is on page 380 of my paper, this issue: 177–93.
3. Lunn, “Radical Orthodoxy,” 381.
4. John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Roman & Littlefield, 2016), 230–39.
5. Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 226–29.
6. In a brief personal conversation that I had almost ten years ago with Graham Ward, I asked him what he meant by Christian socialism. He did not give an answer except to say that he thought he should write up a genealogical treatment of Christian socialism.
7. Paul Oslington, “Radical Orthodoxy Encounters Economics: Deeper Engagement Needed—A Response to John Lunn,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 24, no. 1 (2021): 177–93.
8. For an attempt I (with P. J. Hill) made to discuss the difference between personal and impersonal relationships, see Peter J. Hill and John Lunn, “Markets and Morality: Things Ethicists Should Consider When Evaluating Market Exchange,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35 (2007): 657–83.
9. I was not intending to “engage” with Radical Orthodoxy since they are unwilling to engage with other disciplines. I know they do have some engagement with “Civil Economy,” but I remain more of a mainstream economist.