

Deeper Engagement Still Needed

A Surreponse to John Lunn

Paul Oslington
Professor of Economics and Theology
Alphacrucis College, Sydney, Australia
Resident Member, Center of Theological
Inquiry, Princeton 2020

Introduction

I thank John Lunn for his response to my criticisms. It clarifies his position on a few of the issues. I would like to use this opportunity that the editor has provided to briefly expand on three issues: historiography, the Christian socialist background to Radical Orthodoxy, and ecclesiology.

Historiography

John Lunn's response reiterates the point made in his original article that Radical Orthodoxy underplays the role of material history and overplays the role of ideas in shaping our contemporary predicament. I doubt John would want it put this way, but he seems to be calling for a bit more Marx in the way Radical Orthodoxy does history. However, as I read the major texts of Radical Orthodoxy, they are not doing history in the traditional sense, where the relative strengths of forces have to be weighed, but instead offering a genealogy of certain features of contemporary intellectual life.¹ Their genealogical mode of history owes something to Nietzsche and Foucault, though as Radical Orthodoxy writers point out, the approach of Nietzsche and his followers is deeply problematic when viewed in the light of the authentic Christian approach that they claim to have recovered.

Christian Socialism

Lunn, I think, also needs to say more about what he means by Christian Socialism than that he did not get a satisfactory description of it from Graham Ward, when he asked Ward a question after a lecture some years ago. One of the frustrating things about the Christian economics literature is its insularity, especially the insularity of much of the literature that emerges from North American Christian colleges. It should be obvious that Radical Orthodoxy writers build on the English tradition of Christian Socialism that became prominent in the nineteenth century, including figures such as F. D. Maurice, Charles Kingsley, and Scott Holland, and carried into the twentieth century by R. H. Tawney, William Temple, V. A. Demant, and Maurice Reckitt. John Milbank wrote *Theology & Social Theory* as the first Fellow of the Christendom Trust that was set up by Reckitt, and Milbank proudly identifies himself with this tradition of Christian Socialism. Part of the problem with Radical Orthodox writings on economics in my view is their continued adherence to some of the less-well-informed economic positions of this tradition, even positions that seem to be at odds with their theological arguments, or, as the second Fellow of the Christendom Trust Anthony Waterman put it, “the Christendom Group as propagated in the writings of Maurice Reckitt, V. A. Demant and T. S. Eliot. It is now well known that these much-admired authors were totally ignorant of economics and frequently committed to egregious nonsense.”² Whatever view we take of this tradition of Christian Socialism, it is essential background to understand the positions Radical Orthodoxy takes on economic matters.

The Church

The final issue raised by Lunn on which I would like to comment is ecclesiology. In Radical Orthodoxy writings, especially *Theology & Social Theory*, the church is the place where an alternative economic vision is lived out, rather than merely a pulpit from which to preach to economic policy makers. Or to put it another way, the church is a sign or sacrament of a renewed economic order. This is tied up for the Radical Orthodox writers with their Anglo-Catholic incarnational theology, and am not sure Lunn fully appreciates this. Lunn’s comment, though, that the church needs to get its own house in order before preaching to others resonates with the common criticism, expressed particularly in Rowan Williams’ review of *Theology & Social Theory*, that Milbank operates with an overly idealized picture of the church.³

Conclusion

I hope that this exchange between John Lunn and me opens up new conversations between Radical Orthodoxy and economics, with the grace and depth that is necessary if there is to be real learning on both sides.⁴ We need more such conversations, and less of the ignorance, stereotyping, and trading of abuse between a Christian left and Christian right that is even duller than its secular equivalent.⁵

Notes

1. These different modes of history are discussed in Richard Whatmore and Brian Young, ed., *Companion to Intellectual History* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016); John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 2007).
2. The quotation comes from Martin Jarrett-Kerr, “Twenty Years of the Christendom Trust: An Historical Account, Guide and Commentary by a Founder Member,” 2019, <https://mbreckitttrust.org/index.php/15/49>. Anthony Waterman has discussed Radical Orthodoxy more fully in idem, “Is ‘Political Economy’ Really a Christian Heresy?” *Faith & Economics* 51 (Spring 2008): 31–55. Further discussion of English Christian Socialism may be found in Edward R. Norman, *The Victorian Christian Socialists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); idem, *Church and Society in England 1770–1970* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).
3. Rowan Williams’s review and some of the other early responses to *Theology & Social Theory* are collected in Robin Gill, ed., *Theology and Sociology: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1996).
4. A grant from the John Templeton Foundation made possible a multiday residential conversation between economists and theologians in Montreal on the back of the 2009 annual conference of the American Academy of Religion. Milbank, Waterman, McCloskey and some of the other authors mentioned by Lunn participated. A report may be found in Paul Oslington, “Whither Christian Economics? Further Reflections in the Light of a Conference on the Future of Economics and Theology as an Interdisciplinary Research Field,” *Journal of the UK Association of Christian Economists* 003 (2009): 1–9, https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/1bd725fe-b962-45d0-a959-d70afb527618/downloads/1cflp33sl_751104.pdf?ver=1601157947497. This conversation, however, did not focus on Radical Orthodoxy, and it would be great to have a similar meeting where Radical Orthodox authors and theologically literate economists could engage more deeply over the economic aspects of Radical Orthodoxy.
5. Since writing my response to John Lunn’s article, I have come across and recommend Steven McMullen’s fine article “Radical Orthodox Economics,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 43, no. 4 (2014): 43–64.