'Why Christianity?': An Analysis of Radical Orthodoxy's Preference for Christian Theology over Platonism/Neoplatonism

Kornelius LUMBANBATU
Jakarta Theological Seminary, Jakarta, Indonesia

ORCID: 0000-0002-6638-5906

Abstract: This paper contributes to the scholarly discussion on Radical Orthodoxy by analyzing its retrieval of Christianity. Such analysis will be grounded in two questions, each concerning reasons underlying the Radically Orthodox theologians' usage of Christian theology despite their dependence on the Platonic notion of participation (μέθεξις) and the validity of the movement's position if its proponents were to lean instead on Platonism/Neoplatonism. To answer these questions, the author formulates a two-fold explanation constructed through library research. The first part investigates the Radically Orthodox theologians' argumentation for using Christian theology as shown in the work of John Milbank and Conor Cunningham. The second part evaluates a hypothetical case in which Ralph Cudworth, the Cambridge Platonist with whom the Radically Orthodox theologians claim resonance, were to argue for Radical Orthodoxy's antisecular agenda.

Keywords: Christian theology, participation (μέθεξις), Platonism, Radical Orthodoxy, Ralph Cudworth, secular reason.

Introduction

'If Christianity is just one of the many possible perspectives, then why believe any of them?'[1] This is the question John Milbank poses in one of his old essays, which was published nine years before the inauguration of Radical Orthodoxy (1999).[2] As stated

---

[1] John Milbank, 'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short Summa in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions', *Modern Theology* 7, no. 3 (April 1991): 226, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.1991.tb00245.x.

[2] Scholars such as Marenbon and Sławomir Zatwardnicki believe that the inception of Radical Orthodoxy is marked by the publication of John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999). See John Marenbon, 'Aquinas, Radical Orthodoxy and the Importance of Truth', in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*, ed. Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005), 60–61; Slawomir Zatwardnicki, 'Radical Orthodoxy as Suspended Middle', *Wroclaw Theological Review* 27, no. 2 (2019): 123.

by John Marenbon, this question remains unanswered throughout the essay, and an answer to it only appears in another essay published by Milbank ten years later.[3] Delineating the general program of Radical Orthodoxy, Milbank states that the movement's preference for Christianity rests upon its belief that only Christian theology is capable of relativizing the 'ontological violence' of modern discourse and asserting the 'reality of truth' on modernity's 'nihilist demonstration of truth of untruth', saving matter while at the same time claiming to be 'the only possible materialism'.[4] The catch, however, is that such belief only amounts to 'a wager on the possible harmony of all discourses in a universe that might be harmonised'.[5] In other words, Milbank pretty much assents to the same postmodern suspicion that he had ten years prior, albeit in this essay he considers Christianity as a special one among many perspectives available due to its utility as 'a necessary fiction'.[6]

Until recently, Marenbon is one of the few scholars to question Radical Orthodoxy's retrieval of Christianity despite it not being his main concern. Most of the scholarly discussion on Radical Orthodoxy of the last two decades revolves around the disputation of the metanarrative (or at least particular aspects of it) that the Radically Orthodox theologians espouse.[7] Some scholars also try to appraise the thought of Radical Orthodoxy in general, whereas others attempt to evaluate the movement's

---

[3] Marenbon, 'Aquinas, Radical Orthodoxy and the Importance of Truth', 60–62; John Milbank and Laurence Paul Hemming, eds., 'The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy', in *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry*, Heythrop Studies in Contemporary Philosophy, Religion and Theology (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 33–45.

[4] Milbank and Hemming, 'The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy', 42.

[5] Milbank and Hemming, 42.

[6] Marenbon, 'Aquinas, Radical Orthodoxy and the Importance of Truth', 61.

[7] On Platonism, see Eli Diamond, 'Catherine Pickstock, Plato and the Unity of Divinity and Humanity: Liturgical or Philosophical?', in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*, ed. Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005), 1–16; Wayne J. Hankey, 'Philosophical Religion and the Neoplatonic Turn to the Subject', in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*, ed. Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005), 17–29. On Augustine, see Todd Breyfogle, 'Is There Room for Political Philosophy in Postmodern Critical Augustinianism?', in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*, ed. Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005), 31–47. On John Duns Scotus, see Richard Cross, 'Duns Scotus and Suarez at the Origins of Modernity', in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*, ed. Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005), 65–80; Thomas Williams, 'The Doctrine of Univocity Is True and Salutary', *Modern Theology* 21, no. 4 (October 2005): 575–585, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2005.00298.x; Daniel P. Horan, *Postmodern and Univocity: A Critical Account of Radical Orthodoxy and John Duns Scotus* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2014). On modernism, see Neil G. Robertson, 'Milbank and Modern Secularity', in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*, ed. Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005), 81–97. On Søren Kierkegaard, see Steven Shakespeare, 'Better Well Hanged Than Ill Wed?: Kierkegaard and Radical Orthodoxy', in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*, ed. Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005), 133–148. On Johann Georg Hamann, see Katie Terezakis, 'J. G. Hamann and the Self-Refutation of Radical Orthodoxy', in *The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Marko Zlomislic (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 32–57. On Protestantism, see Arne Rasmusson, 'Radical Orthodoxy on Catholicism, Protestantism and Liberalism/Liberality: On the Use of Historical Narratives and Quantitative Methods in Political Theology', *Modern Theology* 37, no. 1 (January 2021): 44–61, https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12596.

proximity to other streams of thought, such as Romanticism.[8] The rest strive to pinpoint some variables (e.g., epistemology, ontology, politics, and economy) in which the argumentation of Radical Orthodoxy has failed and propose alternatives per these variables.[9]

In a different fashion to the scholarly discussion already mentioned, the present paper posits an analysis of Radical Orthodoxy's retrieval of Christianity. Specifically, it tries to answer the problem regarding the Radically Orthodox theologians' preference for Christian theology over Platonism/Neoplatonism when the movement itself has the notion of participation (μέθεξις), which originates in the philosophy of Plato, as its backbone. This dependency becomes evident when one attempts a quick survey on some of the major works that Radical Orthodoxy has to offer. For example, in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward testify that 'The central theological framework of Radical Orthodoxy is "participation" as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity'.[10] In *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (*TST*), Milbank states that, 'When I talk about "the analogizing process," I am trying to give a Catholic theological equivalent to Heidegger's temporalizing of Being. This process is our participation in divine Being, now understood as a participation also in the divine creativity which reveals itself as ever-new through time'.[11] In *After Writing: The Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, Pickstock denotes that, 'Liturgy is therefore not a constative representation now and then of what is praiseworthy, but constitutes a whole way of life. To give praise to what is praiseworthy by definition involves participation in it, just as emulation (Socratic mimesis) of the transcendent good must perforce involve methexis in the good'.[12] In *Cities of God*, Ward argues that Christianity should counteract contemporary social atomism with 'a strong doctrine of participation' which locates the 'divine participation in the particular and the social'.[13]

---

[8] For a general appraisal of the theology of Radical Orthodoxy, see D. Stephen Long, 'Radical Orthodoxy', in *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Chad V. Meister and James K. Beilby (London: Routledge, 2015), 647–657; Zatwardnicki, 'Radical Orthodoxy as Suspended Middle'. For an assessment of Radical Orthodoxy's proximity to Cabbalism and Romanticism, see Henk-Jan Prosman, 'Radical Romanticism: Postmodern Polytheism in Richard Rorty and John Milbank', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 81, no. 1 (January 2020): 18–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2018.1542610.

[9] See for example Steven Shakespeare, 'The New Romantics A Critique of Radical Orthodoxy', *Theology* 103, no. 813 (May 2000): 163–177, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X0010300302; Benjamin James Wood, 'Montaigne and Christian Secularity: An Alternative to Radical Orthodoxy', *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* 3, no. 2 (2017): 128–171; Scott Cowdell, 'Politics and Virtue: Radical Orthodoxy and Wisdom for the Common Good', *International Journal of Public Theology* 12, no. 3–4 (November 2018): 317–331, https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341545; John Lunn, 'Radical Orthodoxy's Flawed Critique of Markets and Morality', *Journal of Markets & Morality* 22, no. 2 (2019): 373–389.

[10] Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 3.

[11] John Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden & Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 308.

[12] Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford, UK ; Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 39.

[13] Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 75.

If, as we have seen, Radical Orthodoxy truly depends on the Platonic notion of participation in formulating its argumentations, then why does the movement opt for a retrieval of Christian theology over Platonism/Neoplatonism? And would the position of Radical Orthodoxy be valid if its proponents were to depend instead on Platonism/Neoplatonism?

In this paper, the author argues that the main reason for Radical Orthodoxy's retrieval of Christianity is its antithetical position towards secular reason, and such a position would be contradictory if its proponents were to rely on Platonism or Neoplatonism instead of Christianity. The author will defend this argument through a two-fold explanation that is constructed through library research on two key texts of the Radical Orthodoxy corpus, namely *TST* and *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology* (*GN*),[14] as well as primary and secondary resources on the thought of Ralph Cudworth, the Cambridge Platonist with whom Radical Orthodoxy claimed to have resonance.[15] The first part will investigate the underlying reasons for Radical Orthodoxy's strict *ressourcement* of Christianity. Such investigation will focus on Milbank's and Conor Cunningham's explanation of their preference for Christian theology over Platonic philosophy in formulating their critique against the secular reason that manifests itself in modern social theory, postmodernism, and Western philosophies of nothing. The second part will then attempt to use Ralph Cudworth's philosophy to support the antisecular agenda of Radical Orthodoxy. Such an attempt will show why it is wise for the Radically Orthodox theologians to leave Platonism/Neoplatonism alone.

In Praise of the View from the 'Celestial City': Radical Orthodoxy's Arguments for Retrieving Christianity

Radical Orthodoxy was inaugurated as a resistance to secular reason that is 'soulless, aggressive, nonchalant, and nihilistic'.[16] This theme pervades the movement's thought as a whole despite differences of subject and focal point amongst its corpus. In the opening segments of the second edition[17] of *TST*, Milbank already defines nihilism and violence as culminating from reason that is left to its own devices.[18] By formulating paradigms that promote irrationality and agonistic notions, the autonomous reason has

---

[14] Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*. These texts are chosen because they contain examples of the Radically Orthodox's retrieval of Christianity as well as their argumentation for performing such retrieval. The author is aware that Milbank has published a spiritual sequel to his *TST* entitled *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* in 2014. However, the author decides to center his analysis upon *TST* due to the agreement among scholars that it serves as the foundation and linchpin of the Radical Orthodoxy movement. See for example Hankey and Hedley, *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy*, xiii; Long, 'Radical Orthodoxy', 648.

[15] 'We feel that our positive invocations of Plato, Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas have resonances with the Cambridge past. And we hope that what we have written is not foreign to the spirit of Ralph Cudworth and Christopher Smart'. Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, xi.

[16] Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, 1.

[17] The first edition was published in 1993 by Wiley-Blackwell.

[18] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xiv–xx, 5–6.

ironically failed to satisfy its fundamental preference for rationality and peace. As an alternative, Milbank offers a metanarrative that overcomes the flaws of secular reason by redirecting the desire of humanity toward the infinite divine mind. This is the first appearance of his retrieval of Christianity.

What follows after these prefatory remarks is Milbank's 'archaeological'[19] tracing of the history of secular reason. This exhaustive analysis, which spans almost three-quarters of *TST*, exposes the artificiality of secular reason by denoting how it was generated out of a series of theological deflections.[20] Two variations of theology, namely voluntarist-nominalist heterodoxy and Machiavellian paganism,[21] are consistently detected throughout the variations of modern social theory; a discourse in which the secular reason and its corresponding space are invented. Such variations include the liberal political theory of Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza, the political economy of Adam Smith and Sir James Steuart,[22] the sociology of Émile Durkheim[23] and Max Weber,[24] and the dialectical historicism of Georg W. F. Hegel[25] and Karl Marx.[26]

It is only towards the end of *TST* that Milbank performs his retrieval of Christianity in depth. After exposing the nihilistic and violent postmodern difference[27] as the culmination of secular reason, Milbank posits Christianity as the only perspective capable of counteracting the latter's theological deflections. Christianity, he argues, supports claims for objective truth and value while also 'refusing ultimate reality to all conflictual phenomena', which in turn overcomes secular reason.[28] In comparison to Christianity, Platonism is inhibited by its ontological construction of 'an irredeemably chaotic and conflictual cosmos' despite its orientation towards the Good.[29]

---

[19] Milbank, 3; In his recent paper, Milbank terms this method of analysis as 'genealogical' instead of 'archaeological'. Such method focuses on locating 'unacknowledged shared contemporary assumptions' and demonstrating their 'debatability' by tracing their 'exact contingent origins'. See John Milbank, 'Genealogies of Truth: Theology, Philosophy and History', *Modern Theology*, November 2022, 16, https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12830.

[20] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9–13.

[21] The voluntarist-nominalist heterodoxy defines God as a mere agent behind certain aspects of nature. Examples of such heterodoxy are the Newtonian God, i.e., the creator of the laws of physics, and the Hobbesian God, i.e., the sovereign Will who sanctions the autonomy of the State. On the other hand, the Machiavellian paganism promotes an opportunistic politics that maintains 'continued conflict of interests' within the republic to preserve its political independence, hence Milbank's designation of it as 'ontology of violence'. Variations of such ontology includes Montesquieuan/Steuartian political economy and Hegelian/Marxist dialectics of history. See Milbank, 13–25.

[22] Milbank, 28–41.

[23] Milbank, 54–68.

[24] Milbank, 84–99.

[25] Milbank, 147–175.

[26] Milbank, 177–205.

[27] Nihilistic because it denies humanity any access to objective truth and value. Violent because it defines the many values and truths as manifestations of the will-to-power, 'the play of force, fate and chance' that stems out of 'incommensurable language games'. Milbank includes the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard into this claim. See Milbank, 260–261, 278–326.

[28] Milbank, 262.

[29] Milbank, 262.

Milbank's retrieval of Christianity begins in Chapter 11 of *TST*. Here he appreciates Alasdair MacIntyre's intention of going beyond secular reason through the process of *ressourcement*. However, he also denotes that MacIntyre's countermeasure is rendered contradictory in part due to his appeal to Platonism.[30] The basis of this disagreement is Milbank's analysis of Plato's notion of virtue (ἀρετή) and participation. Milbank discovers that Platonic virtue ultimately conforms to secular reason due to the influence of Greek mythology—notably Hesiod's *Works and Days*—which rendered Plato incapable of imagining 'an ontological peace that was more than suspended warfare'.[31] Put differently, virtue for Plato is fundamentally related to a heroic victory in a war. It ontologically prioritizes conflict, hence its congruence with secular reason's Machiavellian element. Moreover, Plato himself believes that the highest form of objective truth and value, the divine Good, is 'an abiding state' that can only be mediated by the distribution of justice and peace throughout the entire city (πόλις).[32] Such belief entails that the participation of humanity in the transcendent Good depends upon whether or not a truly harmonious human order is possible. Plato's notion of virtue rules out such possibility, and his later understanding that the divine Good is incomparable to finite goods prompted him to talk more about *horizontal* over *vertical* participation. The latter, according to Plato, is only accessible through the means of intellectual contemplation, the same kind that eventually formulates secular reason.

This is not the case, however, with Christianity. In Chapter 12 of *TST*, Milbank executes his retrieval of Christianity using three-pronged arguments. The argument of counter-history, which follows and goes beyond the thought of George Lindbeck, affirms the capacity of Christian theology to be used as a metanarrative in a Hegelian fashion, i.e., as a 'philosophy of history' grounded in faith.[33] Here Milbank denotes that Christian theology can be a social theory in its own right, detached from the presuppositions of its secular counterparts. This is because the Christian narrative not only identifies the divine but also criticizes other historical human communities (e.g., ancient Israel and the antique Greco-Roman world) based on its form of social practice (i.e., the Church). The argument of counter-ethics, which follows the thought of Augustine in his *City of God*, emphasizes the efficacy of Christian ethics over antique virtues (e.g., Platonism) in solving the Machiavellian element of secular reason.[34] Here Milbank testifies that Christian theology, instead of positing an ever-conflictual cosmos as the precondition of its heroic virtue, contrasts the Greco-Roman myth of the will-to-power (*libido dominandi*) with its myth that ontologically prioritizes peace. In turn, Christian theology derives from the latter the ethics of forgiveness, charity, and a social ontology that is centered upon the *recession* of human individual autonomy (*dominium*). The argument of counter-ontology, which follows the thought of Augustine, pseudo-Dionysius, John Scotus Eriugena, and Thomas Aquinas, asserts the capacity of Christian theology to support

---

[30] Milbank, 331–337, 366–381.
[31] Milbank, 332.
[32] Milbank, 335.
[33] Milbank, 382–390.
[34] Milbank, 391–395, 402–417.

claims of objective truth and value through its notion of participation.[35] Here Milbank states that Christian theology places the created world in a constant participation into the 'divine creative power/act' that continuously sustains their existence *ex nihilo* in time. In other words, Christian theology, unlike Platonism, does not necessitate intellectual contemplation to participate in the transcendent Good. It construes humanity as always already living in the Triune God, who alone is the source of all knowledge.

Conor Cunningham subsequently develops Milbank's arguments for Christianity in *GN*. Utilizing the same archaeological method, Cunningham traces the development of nihilism in 'crucial historical moments' along the history of Western philosophy.[36] He determines such moments by detecting whether or not a philosophy claims that the significance of being and thinking rests upon its disappearance; a logic that he terms 'meontotheology'.[37] Sure enough, Cunningham discovers that this logic permeates Western thought from antiquity to postmodernity. Specifically, philosophies that tend to propose dualism-within-monism are also the ones to propagate nihilism, which sunders 'the something, rendering it nothing, and then having the nothing be after all *as* something'.[38] This includes thoughts from thinkers who contributed to the formation of secular reason, e.g., Spinoza's God and Nature,[39] Immanuel Kant's phenomenal and noumenal,[40] Hegel's infinite and finite,[41] Martin Heidegger's Being and the Not,[42] and Jacques Derrida's Text and Nothing.[43]

The important aspects of Cunningham's discovery are delineated in chapters 1 and 8 of *GN*. In Chapter 1, Cunningham finds the first crucial moment of nihilism in the thought of Plotinus, founder of Neoplatonism, whose ontology is a system of hypostases centered upon the One (το ἕν).[44] The One, according to Plotinus, is the only source of being that is 'beyond or *otherwise than being*'.[45] He likened it to Ouranos of Hesiod's *Theogony*, who fathered Kronos (i.e., emanates Intellect or νοῦς) and became the grandfather of Zeus (i.e., in turn, the Intellect emanates Soul or ψυχή), who was the king of the gods (i.e., in which the many are). Unlike Greek mythology, however, the emanations of the One are univocally produced out of its plenitude and returned to it by contemplation to preserve its simplicity and supremacy. Furthermore, since the One itself is not a being, it follows that the Intellect and the Soul remain within the One's 'placeless providing', or put differently, 'all that which emanates from the One is nothing, because it has being'.[46] Being, therefore, is a mode of existence that is

---

[35] Milbank, 429–434.

[36] Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, xii–xv.

[37] Cunningham, xiii.

[38] Cunningham, xiii.

[39] Cunningham, 59–71.

[40] Cunningham, 74–94.

[41] Cunningham, 100–125.

[42] Cunningham, 132–142.

[43] Cunningham, 155–163.

[44] Cunningham, 1–9.

[45] Cunningham, 6.

[46] Cunningham, 4–5.

indifferent and subordinate to non-being for Plotinus, whereas non-being itself is the ultimate reality or 'highest principle'.[47] Plotinus's thought marks, for Cunningham, the birth of meontotheology, which influences even the thought of modern and postmodern secular thinkers; Heidegger and Derrida being the most notable.

Cunningham performs his retrieval of Christianity following these findings. In chapter 8 of *GN*, he argues that only Christian theology is capable of transforming the negativity of the logic of nothingness into a positivity that enables humanity 'to say, to do, and to see'.[48] Referring to Augustine and Aquinas, Cunningham defends his argument by explicating that Christian theology, instead of subjecting all things to the foundational neutrality of systemic formal knowledge that erases their significance— their forms (εἶδος)—with every description,[49] grounds them in the essence of God who is an eternally subsistent being (*esse*) instead of non-being. Christian theology constitutes the world as a 'gift' instead of a 'given'.[50] The world is substantially beautiful and not ontologically neutral since the Triune God causes it analogously (i.e., God creates the world *ex nihilo* 'by his intellect as well as his nature'), unlike the univocal emanations of the One.[51] Furthermore, Christian theology emphasizes that every knowledge implicitly appeals to transcendence through analogous invocations of the delicate forms of creation mediated by the divine mind—the Son as the Word (λόγος)—who is with all things and in whom all things participate. In this way, humanity can truly communicate, act, and perceive reality without resorting to meontotheology. For the diverse forms that they analogously comprehend are the world's similitude to its Creator, and the aforementioned things amount to performing a repetition proportional to a vision of God.

Based on the arguments delineated in *TST* and *GN*, we can formulate two answers to the first question of this paper. *First*, thinkers of Radical Orthodoxy perform their retrieval of Christianity to overcome secular reason, or reason left to its own devices (i.e., without reference to God). The secular reason that the Radically Orthodox theologians criticize has two striking characteristics: it posits nothingness as the ground of being and promotes some variations of agonism. *Second*, thinkers of Radical Orthodoxy argue that the retrieval of Platonism and Neoplatonism is contradictory to their intention. Three reasons underlie this argument: (1) Platonism proposes a notion of virtue that rests upon an agonistic ontology; (2) Platonism offers a means of participation that eventually formulates secular reason itself; and (3) Neoplatonism, particularly the Plotinian variation, espouses an ontology that is centered upon non-being.

---

[47] Cunnningham adds that Plotinus, being a Greek philosopher, used the number 'one' because he had no figure for zero. 'Plotinus's One can be beneficially considered as zero'. See Cunningham, 5, 8.

[48] Cunningham, 169–208.

[49] As a demonstration, Cunningham quotes R. Doyle's take on the scientific definition of humans as 'meat puppets run by molecular machines'. This definition takes away the significance of humanity, rendering them into entities that are fundamentally the same whether dead or alive. See Cunningham, 176.

[50] Cunningham, 174.

[51] The analogous manner of this causality preserves the ontological difference between God and his creation, whereas the fact that this causality is carried *ex nihilo* overcomes the negativity of nihilism. See Cunningham, 182–187.

In summary, the elaboration provided in this part indicates that the Radically Orthodox theologians' retrieval of Christianity stems from their antithetical position towards secular reason. Their arguments in doing so are also in alignment with the latter half of the argument posited by the author of this paper: their position would be contradictory if they were to rely on Platonism or Neoplatonism instead of Christian theology. However, this part only captures Radical Orthodoxy's retrieval of Christianity from their perspective; a view from the 'celestial city', so to speak. To provide a deeper and more objective account of this retrieval, further analysis that involves a more Platonic/Neoplatonic perspective is required. We will carry out such analysis in the next part by constructing Ralph Cudworth as a hypothetical champion of Radical Orthodoxy's antisecular agenda.

Considering the View From the 'Earthly Paradise': Ralph Cudworth vis-á-vis Secular Reason

Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688), like his fellow Cambridge Platonists (e.g., Richard Hooker and Benjamin Whichcote), is known to be a polemical thinker.[52] His usage of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy stems from his resistance to the dominant philosophical and theological streams of his time that mainly consisted of empiricism, voluntarism (e.g., English Calvinists and Hobbes), and Cartesian rationalism. Due to upholding this resistance, Cudworth's thought can seem to be inconsistent at times. Such inconsistency is visible when one compares his sermons to his *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* (*TEIM*). The sermons, which denote the importance of character and motivation as opposed to propositional knowledge concerning religiosity, seemingly run counter to *TEIM*, which emphasizes the geometric and propositional nature of morality.

There is, however, one overarching argument that underlies these antinomical works: the essence of morality and religion lies inside human nature, not outside of it.[53] It is this argument that simultaneously powers up Cudworth's polemical sermons against the voluntaristic morality of the Calvinists and feeds into his systematic critique of the sentimental morality of the empiricists. The basis of the argument itself is a Platonic notion that has some Christian undertones. As can be seen in *TEIM*, Cudworth believes that, since all objects of reason (including morality) reside in God, humanity can participate in the divine life by exercising its intellect in comprehending its innate ideas that are universally mediated by God himself.

> Now, all the knowledge and wisdom that is in creatures, whether angels or men, is nothing else but a participation of that one eternal, immutable, and increated wisdom of God, or several signatures of that one archetypal seal, or like so

---

[52] Michael B. Gill, 'Rationalism, Sentimentalism, and Ralph Cudworth', *Hume Studies* 30, no. 1 (2004): 149–160, 169–171, 174, https://doi.org/10.1353/hms.2011.0243; Benjamin Carter, 'Ralph Cudworth', in *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis (Durham: Acumen, 2009), 113–115.

[53] Michael B. Gill, 'Rationalism, Sentimentalism, and Ralph Cudworth', 174.

many reflections of one and the same face, made in several glasses, whereof some are clearer, some obscurer, some standing nearer, some farther off.[54]

In general, Cudworth has a predisposition to spread a tinge of Christianity into his Platonic/Neoplatonic critique of modernity. His proof of the existence of God, for example, is an amalgam of René Descartes's ontological argument and Platonic/Neoplatonic ontology cemented with some Christian undertones.[55] After arguing against Cartesian scepticism and theistic voluntarism, Cudworth proceeds to define God with distinctly Plotinian phrases, such as, 'an overflowing and inexhaustible fountain' and 'thought thinking of itself'.[56] Cudworth even goes so far as adapting the Plotinian hierarchy of hypostases by constructing a 'ladder of entity' based upon the 'intellectual flow of creation' from the most perfect being (i.e., God), with divine goodness and wisdom as his main attributes, to the lowest of beings (i.e., non-living matter).[57] Naturally, the existence of humanity in this hierarchy of beings results in their capacity to comprehend rational thoughts and subject the physical world to rational scrutiny, since all objects of reason are mediated to the human mind by the intellectual God. Here, Cudworth's notion of participation serves as his proof of God's existence.

Another example that shows Cudworth's proclivity to add some sort of Christianity into his Platonic/Neoplatonic thought is his argument for free will.[58] In response to Hobbesian and Spinozian mechanistic account of conflictual human behavior as stemming from the blind will or instinct of self-preservation (*conatus essendi*), Cudworth formulates his notion of the will by drawing from the notion of το ἡγεμονικόν formulated by Plato and developed by Origen. This ethics makes its appearance in *A Treatise of Freewill* (*ATF*). Here, Cudworth defines the will as the capacity of the human soul to orient itself toward goodness through contemplation.

> I say, therefore, that the το ἡγεμονικόν in every man, and indeed that which is properly we ourselves..., is the soul as comprehending itself, all its concerns and interests, its abilities and capacities, and holding itself, as it were in its own hand, as it were redoubled upon itself, having a power of intending or exerting itself more or less in consideration and deliberation, in resisting the lower appetites that oppose it, both of utility, reason, and honesty; in self-recollection

---

[54] Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality: With, A Treatise of Freewill*, ed. Sarah Hutton, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 26. Also quoted in Gwenaëlle Aubry, 'An Alternative to Cartesianism? Plotinus's Self and Its Posterity in Ralph Cudworth', in *Self-Knowledge in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 224, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198786061.003.0010.

[55] Sarah Hutton, 'Ralph Cudworth, God, Mind and Nature', in *Religion, Reason and Nature in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Robert Crocker (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2001), 62–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-9777-7; Carter, 'Ralph Cudworth', 116–118; Douglas Hedley, 'Ralph Cudworth as Interpreter of Plotinus', in *Plotinus' Legacy: The Transformation of Platonism from the Renaissance to the Modern Era*, ed. Stephen Gersh, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 150–151, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108233019.

[56] Carter, 'Ralph Cudworth', 118.

[57] Carter, 118.

[58] G. A. J. Rogers, 'The Other-Worldly Philosophers and the Real World : The Cambridge Platonists, Theology and Politics', in *The Cambridge Platonists in Philosophical Context*, ed. G. A. J. Rogers, J. M. Vienne, and Y. C. Zarka (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1997), 7–12, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-8933-8; Hedley, 'Ralph Cudworth as Interpreter of Plotinus', 152–156.

and attention, and vigilant circumspection, or standing upon our guard; in purposes and resolutions, in diligence in carrying on steady designs and active endeavours—this in order, to self-improvement and the self-promoting of its own good, the fixing and conserving itself in the same.[59]

Due to the unboundedness of this will, the soul is also capable of going towards evil and wickedness. This capacity is revealed when humanity chooses to entertain their 'spontaneous and unreflective reactive attitudes' instead of exercising moral control utilizing self-awareness.[60] Consequently, humans are responsible for their deeds and deserve punishment should they choose to do evil instead of good. In turn, this notion not only allows Cudworth to safeguard the autonomy of every individual but also helps him in reacting to the socio-political conflict of his time by strengthening his conception of general religious tolerance. Such religious tolerance is rooted in none other than Cudworth's belief that reason is at the heart of every religion, which amounts to every stream of Christianity in his context.

It is this integrative philosophical method that ultimately results in some differences between Cudworth and the Radically Orthodox theologians, who claim to resonate with the former. While both direct their critique to the same philosophical streams (e.g., voluntarism, empiricism, rationalism) for similar reasons (e.g., their mechanistic ontology that entails some form of nihilistic agonism), their paths diverge as soon as it comes to their proposed alternative. Whereas the Radically Orthodox theologians' strict retrieval of patristic and early scholastic sources produces a view from the 'celestial city', Cudworth's mixture of Platonism/Neoplatonism and a little dose of Christianity gives rise to a view that is more appropriate to the 'earthly paradise'. Such divergence raises the central question of this part: How would the Cambridge Platonist fare as a champion of Radical Orthodoxy? Can Cudworth go beyond the fully matured secular reason that Milbank and Cunningham have overcome?

Let us first recall how the Radically Orthodox theologians deal with the secular reason and its two distinct characteristics. The secular reason, as we have already delineated in the previous part, was born out of voluntarist-nominalist heterodoxy and Machiavellian paganism that in turn developed into philosophical nihilism and political agonism. We have seen that Milbank and Cunningham counteract both characteristics by establishing Christian theology as a metanarrative that grounds social reality, objective knowledge, and true value in the divine creative power/act of the Triune God who ontologically prioritizes peace over violence. We have also seen that both thinkers argue against Platonism and Neoplatonism by pointing out their agonistic and meontotheological traits.

Judging from the performance of Milbank and Cunningham, it is safe to say that Cudworth could not go beyond the fully matured secular reason. This statement becomes evident when one considers the ontological and ethical aspects of the Cambridge Platonist's position. Indeed, Cudworth would not fall flat on his face from the

---

[59] Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, 178.
[60] Hedley, 'Ralph Cudworth as Interpreter of Plotinus', 154.

outset thanks to the Christian undertones of his philosophy. His God is not the same as
Plotinus's singular non-being, and his notion of participation in the divine life is not as
reserved as Plato's since he believes that humanity exists in the intellectual hierarchy of
beings. As a result, it would not do justice to Cudworth if we were to claim that the logic
of nothingness pervades his philosophy. However, Cudworth's position ultimately does
little to subvert the Machiavellian trait of secular reason. Emphasis on the ontological
priority of peace over violence is nowhere to be found in his thought even though he
categorizes goodness and wisdom as the main attributes of God. Moreover, his notion
of free will still preserves the individualism espoused by his secular contemporaries,
such as Hobbes and Spinoza, even though it counteracted their mechanistic notion of
self-interest.[61] This puts Cudworth in a position similar to that of MacIntyre; for one can
still develop a *weaker* version of secular reason from the Cambridge Platonist's lines of
thought despite his apparent resistance to the secular philosophical streams of his time.
Such a secular reason would maintain the autonomy of the human individual in the
presence of a transcendent intellectual God, as opposed to Christianity's theocentric
anthropology, while putting both ontological peace and violence on an equal footing in
terms of priority, as opposed to Christianity's ontological priority of peace.

In summary, the elaboration provided in this part answers the second question of
this paper by showing that Cudworth would not be able to support Radical Orthodoxy's
antisecular agenda. This result is in alignment with the argument of Milbank,
Cunningham, and the author of this paper that the Radically Orthodox theologians'
adherence to Platonism/Neoplatonism would result in a contradictory position in
which their *ressourcement* would still make room for secular reason. It also amplifies the
aforementioned argument since Cudworth, despite his title as a 'Cambridge Platonist',
is more of a Christian Platonist than a full-fledged Platonist.

Conclusion

Through library research on the works of John Milbank (*TST*), Conor Cunningham
(*GN*), the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth (*TIEM, ATF*), and research papers on the
latter, this paper has analyzed the underlying reasons for Radical Orthodoxy's retrieval
of Christianity. The result of such analysis is elaborated in a twofold explanation that
corresponds to the questions posited by this paper. The first part answers the question
of Radical Orthodoxy's preference for Christian theology by denoting how Christian
theology allows them to overcome the nihilism and agonism of secular reason. The
second part answers the question regarding the validity of a Platonist/Neoplatonist
Radical Orthodoxy by showing that depending on either of the two (or both) would
inhibit the movement's antisecular agenda, as demonstrated by the possibility of
developing a weaker version of the secular reason (which is a secular reason nonetheless)

---

[61] Hedley was not entirely wrong in stating that Cudworth and his fellow Cambridge Platonists are
'quintessentially liberal'. See Douglas Hedley, 'Radical Orthodoxy and Apocalyptic Difference: Cambridge
Platonism and Milbank's Romantic Christian Cabbala', in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern
Theology, Rhetoric and Truth*, ed. Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley (Aldershot, Hants, England
Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005), 99.

from the philosophy of Cudworth. In turn, this twofold explanation proves that the Radically Orthodox theologians' usage of Christian theology undeniably stems from their antithetical position towards secular reason, and such a position would indeed be contradictory if they were to rely instead on Platonism/Neoplatonism.

While the analysis posited in this paper has successfully answered questions regarding the reasons underlying the Radically Orthodox theologians' preference for Christian theology, it also opens a research gap concerning the nature of their theological retrieval. As already delineated in the first part of this paper's twofold explanation, Milbank and Cunningham tend to refer to Western patristic and early scholastic sources in formulating their theology. Other thinkers of Radical Orthodoxy, such as Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, also show similar tendencies regarding this matter. Therefore, the author recommends further research that pertains to the Radically Orthodox theologians' preference for the Western tradition of Christianity over its Eastern counterpart.

References

Aubry, Gwenaëlle. 'An Alternative to Cartesianism? Plotinus's Self and Its Posterity in Ralph Cudworth'. In *Self-Knowledge in Ancient Philosophy*, 210–30. Oxford University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198786061.003.0010.

Breyfogle, Todd. 'Is There Room for Political Philosophy in Postmodern Critical Augustinianism?' In *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*, edited by Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, 31–47. Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005.

Carter, Benjamin. 'Ralph Cudworth'. In *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis, 113–26. Durham: Acumen, 2009.

Cowdell, Scott. 'Politics and Virtue: Radical Orthodoxy and Wisdom for the Common Good'. *International Journal of Public Theology* 12, no. 3–4 (November 2018): 317–31. https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341545.

Cross, Richard. 'Duns Scotus and Suarez at the Origins of Modernity'. In *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*, edited by Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, 65–80. Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005.

Cudworth, Ralph. *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality: With, A Treatise of Freewill*. Edited by Sarah Hutton. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Cunningham, Conor. *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology*. First edition. Boca Raton, FL: Taylor and Francis, an imprint of Routledge, 2002.

Diamond, Eli. 'Catherine Pickstock, Plato and the Unity of Divinity and Humanity: Liturgical or Philosophical?' In *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*, edited by Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, 1–16. Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005.

Hankey, W. J., and Douglas Hedley, eds. *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*. Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005.

Hankey, Wayne J. 'Philosophical Religion and the Neoplatonic Turn to the Subject'. In *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*, edited by Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, 17–29. Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005.

Hedley, Douglas. 'Radical Orthodoxy and Apocalyptic Difference: Cambridge Platonism and Milbank's Romantic Christian Cabbala'. In *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth*, edited by Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, 99–116. Aldershot, Hants, England Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005.

———. 'Ralph Cudworth as Interpreter of Plotinus'. In *Plotinus' Legacy: The Transformation of Platonism from the Renaissance to the Modern Era*, edited by Stephen Gersh, 1st ed., 146–59. Cambridge University Press, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108233019.

Horan, Daniel P. *Postmodern and Univocity: A Critical Account of Radical Orthodoxy and John Duns Scotus*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2014.

Hutton, Sarah. 'Ralph Cudworth, God, Mind and Nature'. In *Religion, Reason and Nature in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Robert Crocker. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2001. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-9777-7.

Long, D. Stephen. 'Radical Orthodoxy'. In *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought*, edited by Chad V. Meister and James K. Beilby, 647–57. London: Routledge, 2015.

Lunn, John. 'Radical Orthodoxy's Flawed Critique of Markets and Morality'. *Journal of Markets & Morality* 22, no. 2 (2019): 373–89.

Marenbon, John. 'Aquinas, Radical Orthodoxy and the Importance of Truth'. In *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*, edited by Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, 49–63. Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005.

Michael B. Gill. 'Rationalism, Sentimentalism, and Ralph Cudworth'. *Hume Studies* 30, no. 1 (2004): 149–81. https://doi.org/10.1353/hms.2011.0243.

Milbank, John. 'Genealogies of Truth: Theology, Philosophy and History'. *Modern Theology*, November 2022. https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12830.

———. 'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short Summa in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions'. *Modern Theology* 7, no. 3 (April 1991): 225–37. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.1991.tb00245.x.

———. *Theology & Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed. Malden & Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

Milbank, John, and Laurence Paul Hemming, eds. 'The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy'. In *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry*, 33–45. Heythrop Studies in Contemporary Philosophy, Religion and Theology. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.

Milbank, John, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds. *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*. London ; New York: Routledge, 1999.

Pickstock, Catherine. *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*. Challenges in Contemporary Theology. Oxford, UK ; Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.

Prosman, Henk-Jan. 'Radical Romanticism: Postmodern Polytheism in Richard Rorty and John Milbank'. *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 81, no. 1 (January 2020): 18–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2018.1542610.

Rasmusson, Arne. 'Radical Orthodoxy on Catholicism, Protestantism and Liberalism/Liberality: On the Use of Historical Narratives and Quantitative Methods in Political Theology'. *Modern Theology* 37, no. 1 (January 2021): 44–61. https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12596.

Robertson, Neil G. 'Milbank and Modern Secularity'. In *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*, edited by Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, 81–97. Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005.

Rogers, G. A. J. 'The Other-Worldly Philosophers and the Real World : The Cambridge Platonists, Theology and Politics'. In *The Cambridge Platonists in Philosophical Context*, edited by G. A. J. Rogers, J. M. Vienne, and Y. C. Zarka. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1997. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-8933-8.

Shakespeare, Steven. 'Better Well Hanged Than Ill Wed?: Kierkegaard and Radical Orthodoxy'. In *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth*, edited by Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, 133–48. Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2005.

———. 'The New Romantics A Critique of Radical Orthodoxy'. *Theology* 103, no. 813 (May 2000): 163–77. https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X0010300302.

Terezakis, Katie. 'J. G. Hamann and the Self-Refutation of Radical Orthodoxy'. In *The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy*, edited by Lisa Isherwood and Marko Zlomislic, 32–57. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012.

Ward, Graham. *Cities of God*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Williams, Thomas. 'The Doctrine of Univocity Is True and Salutary'. *Modern Theology* 21, no. 4 (October 2005): 575–85. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2005.00298.x.

Wood, Benjamin James. 'Montaigne and Christian Secularity: An Alternative to Radical Orthodoxy'. *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* 3, no. 2 (2017): 128–71.

Zatwardnicki, Slawomir. 'Radical Orthodoxy as Suspended Middle'. *Wroclaw Theological Review* 27, no. 2 (2019): 121–47.

«Чому християнство?»: аналіз вибору радикальної ортодоксії між християнською теологією і платонізмом/неоплатонізмом

Корнеліус ЛУМБАНБАТУ
Джакартська богословська семінарія, Джакарта, Індонезія

ORCID: 0000-0002-6638-5906

Анотація: Ця стаття долучається до наукової дискусії про радикальну ортодоксію, аналізуючи її звернення до християнства. Такий аналіз спирається на два питання щодо причин використання радикальними ортодоксами християнського богослов'я, попри їхню залежність від платонівського поняття співучасті (μέθεξις), а також щодо обґрунтованості позиції цього руху, якщо б його прихильники спиралися на платонізм/неоплатонізм. Щоб відповісти на ці питання, автор формулює двоєдине пояснення, сконструйоване на основі бібліотечних досліджень. У першій частині досліджується аргументація радикальних ортодоксів щодо використання християнського богослов'я на основі праць Джона Мілбанка і Конора Каннінгема. У другій частині оцінюється гіпотетичний випадок, в якому Ральф Кадворт, кембриджський платонік — ідеї якого, на думку радикальних ортодоксів, перегукуються з їхніми — мав би відстоювати антисекулярний порядок денний радикальної ортодоксії.

Ключові слова: християнське богослов'я, участь (μέθεξις), платонізм, радикальна ортодоксія, Ральф Кадворт, секулярний розум.