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“That They Might Have Ontology”:

Radical Orthodoxy and the New Debate

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I may be the only one, but I admit it: I found *Theology and the Political* to be a confusing volume to read. The problem could perhaps be a simple mental block on my part. Before studying theology in graduate school, I was a student of English literature, trained up in the methods of the New Criticism. One of the key points of the New Critical method, at least as it is typically presented in the classroom, is to discern the connection between the title of the work and its contents. While the main title did not pose a major obstacle, I did find the subtitle—*The New Debate*—problematic. I searched diligently for this “debate” and for its “newness,” and though I do believe that I have now found both, what immediately presents itself to the reader is a sheer multiplicity, a kind of performative enactment of the by now infamous Scotist univocity of being at its worst. The introduction by Rowan Williams does not provide a program for the volume, at least not one that is actually followed by the contributors, and the essays that follow are radically heterogeneous, to the point where it is difficult to see them as addressing the same topic, much less participating in the same debate.

Faced with such a mass of confusion, one is thrown back on the contributions of the editors, which may be reasonably supposed to reflect something of their intention in putting the

volume together. Slavoj Žižek's contribution offers little assistance here, since it is yet another reprint of a text that has appeared, at minimum, in two of his other books (namely, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf*).¹ While GK Chesterton is a fascinating figure, he is hardly at the center of current "debate," new or old, on theology and the political. Conor Cunningham offers a critique of Lacan, but due to Žižek's lackluster contribution and the lack of any other Lacanian contributors such as Alenka Zupančič or Mladen Dolar, the potential Lacanian angle on this debate is less than fully explored.

Creston Davis, writing with Patrick Aaron Riches, gives us a fairly standard Radical Orthodox typology of "ontologies." In this case, we are presented with four categories, three of which ultimately collapse back into the univocity of being and one of which is supposed to correspond to that specific mutation of Platonism achieved by Christian orthodoxy. Some discussion of Žižek's ideas comes into play, but the main targets are clearly Badiou and above all Deleuze. The holy grail here remains the *analogia entis*, the foundation of the only "ontology" that can properly be designated as "robust." The same basic contentions are found in John Milbank's essay, which aside from being a very impressive piece of work, also seems to give some indication of the volume that Milbank had hoped he would be responding to—that is, an encounter among Lacanians, Deleuzians (these two perhaps being bridged by Badiou), and Radical Orthodoxy.

A volume fitting that description would have certain advantages over what we actually have, not least among them being greater compactness and portability. More seriously, one could have made a concerted effort to avoid one of the perennial deadlocks in the relationship between theology and philosophy in the modern world: theologians are eager to engage with philosophy,

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (New York: Verso, 2002) and *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

but philosophers have virtually no interest whatsoever in contemporary theologians. If by “theology” one means “certain classic works of the Western tradition written by brilliant persons who are now safely dead,” then it is clear that there is indeed a growing trend toward putting political theory in dialogue with “theology”—but the encounter between contemporary philosophy and presently living theologians remains one-sided. The present volume is, for the most part, a case in point. Most of the Radical Orthodox contributors make some reference to Alain Badiou, but I am unaware of any mention of John Milbank in Badiou’s writings. Similarly, even in the context of a volume co-edited with two theologians, Žižek’s contribution betrays no knowledge of the continued existence of theology as an academic discipline.

This returns me to the issue of this volume’s subtitle: *The New Debate*. Clearly, a debate must involve at least some level of mutual response. A volume filled with various political philosophers going about their business while the Radical Orthodoxy camp rails against the nihilism of all philosophy post-Scotus would not seem to contain an actual debate. Assuming for the time being that the subtitle bore some relation to the content of the book, I looked through *Theology and the Political* for something like a response from the “univocalist” camp. I found two such responses.

One is found in Kenneth Surin’s contribution. Having established the necessity of some form of “exteriority” for any project of liberation, Surin turns to Radical Orthodoxy’s vision of the “universal pacified myth.”² He isolates two problems with this option: “The first is Radical Orthodoxy’s reliance on the *via analogia*, as opposed to a Scotist, Spinozist, or Deleuzean univocity” (257-58). Or to put it more briefly: The problem with Radical Orthodoxy is its central

² Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 257. All in-text citations are from this volume.

claim. This is, at the very least, funny. Yet his reasons for rejecting this central claim are quite serious and, in my view, persuasive. He argues that the *analogia entis*

necessarily introduces a hierarchy among beings, this hierarchy being specified in terms of a being's proximity in principle to the Godhead (angels being nearer the Godhead than humans, and so forth), so that there is the inevitable possibility of the sad passions arising when ontologically a being is lower down the hierarchy (258).

Christianity avoids "the pathos of resentment that is bound to exist between the different levels of being" by endorsing the legitimacy of the existing order. Therefore, "Christianity's 'peaceableness' is ... guaranteed only when there is a logically prior commitment to the ontological requisites of a preestablished harmony," that is, by deciding *a priori* that there is some scheme of ontological difference that is inherently peaceful (258), meaning not established through violence (259). The only possible way to implement this is to make the entire world Christian, so that the entire world will adhere to the proper ontological order. For Surin, this approach is much less appealing than the more "Scotist" view that "harmony can come only from the striving of collectivities whose efforts are organized by the operation of a will guided by eros," a view that obviates the need for hierarchy because there is "no hierarchy among singularities" (259).

Radical Orthodoxy does not seem to me to try to obscure this need for hierarchy, but it remains the case that the authors in this movement do not particularly foreground it. Simply from a public-relations standpoint, this makes perfect sense. Very few educated people in the modern world are likely to find the idea of an ontological hierarchy appealing, or perhaps even comprehensible. Still less would they consider it especially plausible that an ontological hierarchy is the only possible ground for a genuine socialism, unless Stalinism is still seen as a live option. One is here reminded, fairly or unfairly, of Marx and Engels' assessment of religious

socialism in *The Communist Manifesto*: “Christian Socialism is but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat.”³

Building on this basic critique, Surin moves on to his second objection to Radical Orthodoxy: “Second, there is the matter of what comes first: the universal myth that founds peaceable difference, or solidarity with other human beings, out of which comes the development and consolidation of a rationality that enjoins peaceability” (259). Surin identifies the former position with Christianity, although later in his essay he admits that Christianity may not be as inextricably tied to ontological hierarchy as he has assumed (262). Still, if John Milbank is taken to be the chief representative of theology, such an identification is understandable in light of passages such as the following in his contribution to the volume:

Socialism ... requires our solidarity in the name of the project of positive affirmation of life and more abundant life: we are to love others as active expressive affirmers and not, or not primarily, as victims. As theology puts it, we are to love people because—and even only insofar as—they display the image of God (399).

The last sentence here strikes me as deeply, even disturbingly wrong—more akin to Žižek’s invocations of Stalinism than to anything I would feel comfortable calling Christianity. In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, for example, the question of “seeing the image of God” is completely bracketed, insofar as neither side realized that there was any relationship between needy people and Christ. Instead, the reward is based solely on the practice of meeting concrete need through the concrete solidarity of sharing.

Beyond a reference to Jesus’ parables, one could also point to theories of the atonement, including the classic “penal-substitutionary” theory of Anselm advocated by Daniel Bell in his contribution to *Theology and the Political*. The shared presupposition of all of atonement theories, the thing that gives the saving work of Christ its sense, is the antecedent solidarity of all

³ Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 492. This quotation is found in section 1.A. of part III of the *Manifesto*, “Socialist and Communist Literature.”

of humanity. In the Western tradition, this solidarity is thought primarily in terms of sin, but in the patristic period, there was a broad consensus that this solidarity applied to salvation as well. Not only Origen, but also Gregory of Nyssa and many others simply *assumed* that salvation was ultimately universal, with due allowances for punishment, purification, etc. Bell makes a valiant but ultimately implausible effort to save Anselm from completely correct modern critiques (stemming from Deleuze and Nietzsche), primarily by claiming that Anselm's argument means nearly the opposite of what it obviously means. But he apparently never considers the possibility that it was precisely the intellectual trajectory *begun* by the branch of the Augustinian heritage represented by Anselm and later Calvin that led to our current "economic" mindset. More seriously, he does not evince any awareness that Anselm's theory of the atonement—as brilliant as it is—is not the only option and does not need to be defended as doctrinal orthodoxy in the same way as, for example, the definition of Chalcedon.

A potentially more fruitful approach would have been to attempt to revive the much-derided ransom theory of the atonement, which has been more or less spontaneously revived in Latin American and other forms of liberation theology as a way of making sense of their concrete situation of oppression. Gregory of Nyssa gives what seems to me to be the most brilliant and politically subversive account of the ransom theory, in which God plays along with the terms of the illegitimate ruler who holds humanity captive, in order to trick that ruler into undoing himself. (This can in turn be read as perhaps the most rigorous commentary on Romans 13, and the most rigorous theory of "the state," in Christian thought.) The fact that liberation theology, Latin American or otherwise, is not the subject of any sustained treatment in a volume supposedly devoted to "theology and the political," presumably because of the Radical Orthodox bias of the theological contributors, is not only bizarre, but it also renders obscure what precisely

the political goals of Radical Orthodoxy *actually are*—unless one is to edit Christ’s famous statement: “I have come that they might have ontology, and have it robustly.”⁴

All this is to say that for me, a theology based in solidarity with other human beings seems to be more credible both theologically and politically than one based on the *analogia entis*. In essence, I agree with Surin’s critique of Radical Orthodoxy, though I am more optimistic about the possibility of a non-hierarchical basis for Christianity.

The other example of “debate” can be found in Mary-Jane Rubenstein’s contribution, which works within the type of post-Heideggerian negative theology represented by figures such as Mark C. Taylor, John D. Caputo, Jean-Luc Marion, etc. Rubenstein issues an internal critique of this tradition on two interrelated points: first, “its failure to dismantle what Mark C. Taylor calls ‘the proper theological self’”; and second, “its unwillingness, or inability, to ground a politically engaged ethos.” Both of these failings are grounded in the same underlying problem, namely “a refusal to take relation seriously,” a problem that is found in Heidegger’s work as well (341). Heidegger establishes in *Being and Time* that *Dasein* is *Mitsein*—being-there is being-with—but quickly backs away from this insight through his focus on “the ‘authenticating’ attunement of being-toward-death,” an attunement that is “nonrelational (*unbezügliche*).” For Rubenstein, this occlusion of relationality leads directly to the failure of Heidegger’s later work to sustain “a viable *ethos*” (342) and ultimately to an ontotheological conception of Being as “yet another permanent, self-identical presence beyond the ontic fray”—or in other words, a kind of relapse into Platonism (343).

In order to escape this impasse, Rubenstein contends, “theology must reopen (and keep open) the space of *Mitsein*, sustaining a relentlessly antiessentialist critique by beginning with—and remaining with—being-with.” For guidance in this project, she turns to Jean-Luc Nancy, and

⁴ Cf. John 10:10.

specifically to his remarkable essay “On Being Singular Plural.” In this essay, Nancy attempts to think a being-with or relationality that “goes all the way down to the ‘original alterity’ of origins; to the ‘originary coexistence’ of existence itself.” One way that Nancy tries to get at this being-with is through the concept of singularities that are thought as arising from the plurality, always one-by-one, and yet having their being only in relation to other singularities. It is at this point that Rubenstein makes her explicit response to Radical Orthodoxy:

... precisely because it ex-ists as spatio-temporally severed from the (Scotist) undifferentiated ontological continuum, the singular *is* as related to others—not continuously but contiguously—across both time and space.... There is, [Nancy] insists, no singularity that is not always also plurality, for a singularity always takes place in relation to other singularities: “One equals more than one, because ‘one’ cannot be counted without counting more than one” (344).

In summary, then, we have two claims: first, that Nancy manages to escape from Scotist univocity; and second, that he does this through following Heidegger’s lead up until the point where he took a turn that could be called “Platonic.” According to the scheme of ontologies offered by Radical Orthodoxy, these two accomplishments are not compatible—yet it seems to me that Rubenstein is correct here.

So perhaps we can say that if Surin’s critique was directed at the Radical Orthodox “robust ontology” based on the *analogia entis*, Rubenstein’s claims with regard to Nancy are at least implicitly a critique of the entire Radical Orthodox typology through which ontologies are assessed. This typology seems to me to be, if anything, even more worthy of critique than the Radical Orthodox ontology itself. There is undeniably a certain reckless majesty to an intellectual scheme that allows, for example, John Milbank to say the following: “Between Hegel, Heidegger, and Deleuze the intellectual differences are trivial” (420). Yet if one steps back for a moment and ponders what has been said, the only reasonable response is, “Wait—what? Are you *sure*?” Such a polemical stance has its uses, but it can easily become a license for

misrepresentation of opponents, something of which Radical Orthodox writers have not always been innocent.

There are some signs that indicate that the Radical Orthodox camp is moving away from the strident aggression of Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, most notably in their stance toward Alain Badiou. While Radical Orthodox writers can often be deeply critical of Badiou (as represented by certain contributions to this volume), Badiou is often regarded as being somehow along the way to the correct position, as opposed to the intensely negative treatment given Gilles Deleuze. The reasons that Badiou has been singled out as the recipient of this grace are unclear to me. Early on in Badiou's reception in the English-speaking world, we had little to work with other than a rather undistinguished book on Saint Paul, a book on ethics written for French high school students, and various polemical materials. Now that *Being and Event* is finally available in English, we learn not only that we expected to master an idiosyncratic form of Cantorian set theory, but also that this ontology is very much under construction. More specifically, the author himself views the theory of subjectivity and of the event, the aspects of his thought of most interest to scholars of religion, as precisely the parts of his system that are least satisfactorily worked out. Surely, then, one can be forgiven for being a Badiou skeptic. And much as I would like to believe that the sympathetic treatment of Badiou betokens a new leaf for Radical Orthodoxy, it seems much more likely to me that it stems from Badiou's having produced a critique of Deleuze and having embraced something like the Augustinian theory of "evil as deprivation" in his *Ethics*. In other words, far from representing something new, the enthusiasm about Badiou's work is *a direct product* of the most familiar hobby-horses—literally nothing could be *less new* for Radical Orthodoxy than insistently critiquing Deleuze and advocating a return to the teachings of Augustine.

This brings us directly into the other half of the subtitle: “new.” Although the Radical Orthodox party certainly provoked the responses that justify the designation of this volume as a debate, it should be clear from what I’ve said that I don’t believe their contribution to represent the “newness” of this encounter. Instead, the “newness” stems first of all precisely from the juxtaposition of so many disparate views. While the extremely wide net cast by the editors of this volume has its drawbacks, the end result is a testimony to the actual state of affairs: we have not yet begun to have this conversation, not really. There are some tantalizing connections hinted at, some promising new areas for investigation, and probably not a few blind alleys—but in any case, there are strong indications that this is a conversation that we need to have, and I for one am committed to making sure that we have it.

It seems clear to me, however, that when we begin to have this conversation, one of the blind alleys we need to avoid is this question of the *analogia entis*, this whole typology of the various ontologies and their various levels of robustness. That line of conversation is directed firmly toward the past, if only on the superficial level of the utopia of a return to the classic synthesis of Thomist scholasticism—but beyond that, it is *by definition* directed toward the unchanging and the unchangingly known. That such an ontology has been believed to be compatible with and necessary for Christianity is undeniable; that Christianity can survive after its eclipse is still uncertain. Yet its eclipse seems to me to be a simple fact. If this conversation is to be a matter of ontology—and on some level this is surely unavoidable—then it must be an ontology that starts from where we are. Rather than railing against modern ontologies for failing to describe a world that is long dead, perhaps one should engage the challenging and thankless task of actually *developing* an ontology that will be credible to us, precisely *us*, here, now, today. From this perspective, Mary-Jane Rubenstein’s essay seems to me to be potentially the most

important contribution to this volume, if only for its recommendation of the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, who is actually carrying out that labor. Nancy's results thus far are challenging and fragmentary—but they seem to me to indicate at least the magnitude of the task and the initial direction it must take. Christian theologians should be more patient than anyone in this process, recognizing that the synthesis of Aquinas took over a millennium to come to fruition.

That being said, I would be remiss if I did not point out that “the political” must surely include at least some element of *practice*. The early Christian apologists are often remembered for their attempted syntheses of classical philosophy and Christian doctrine, but even in the case of a brilliant speculative mind like Origen of Alexandria, the philosophical concepts never formed the real basis of the argument. Instead, the apologists argued that Christianity had to be true because of its superior practice—including things like sharing of all goods, generously caring for all in need, and allowing even women and children to reach the apex of the philosophical life: not fearing death. That the most sophisticated and brilliant apologists of our time, the Radical Orthodox school, stay almost entirely on the level of philosophy is perhaps indicative of something more than a contingent flaw in their intellectual approach. The type of radical witness described by the ancient apologists is not absent from contemporary Christianity—one thinks immediately of the Latin American base communities, of Catholic Worker houses, of the charismatic communities making life livable in Third World slums, and in the recent past, of the African American civil rights movement—yet we cannot claim that such movements are in any meaningful sense *representative* of contemporary Christianity as a whole. Nor can we say that Christians have a monopoly here. I have some confidence that Christians, and even Christianity, will have a role in future attempts to transform the world for the better—but I cannot say in advance what that role will be.

Again, this is a conversation we need to have. But in order for it to take place, we must admit that it is a conversation that we have not quite begun to have and that we will never have if we believe we already know where it will end up.