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Symposium introduction: Beyond secular order: The representation of being and the representation of the people by John Milbank

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What does Beyond Secular Order have to do outside of the quibbles of the theology and religious studies academy? What might Milbank be saying to plebeians like me who have to live our lives in a world whose order is understood as ‘secular’?

Milbank’s answer is to present two sequences, signaling that Beyond Secular Order is not to be read so much as a technical text, but as art, poetry, music, perhaps even a map. As an artist, poet, and musician (and geographer), Milbank has crafted a first sequence on ‘modern ontology’ tracing the strands of modern philosophy that serves as the basis for a second sequence on ‘political ontology’ that proposes nothing short of a full-fledged merger of Anglican, Byzantine, and Roman Catholic polities for a Christian socialist recovery of global Christendom. Underlying both sections is what Milbank claims to be the ‘hidden dimension of humanity’ of ‘trans-organicity,’ understanding that human persons are not only natural organisms but are teleologically oriented toward the supernatural.

Milbank’s argument is that this trans-organicity has largely been lost in modern accounts of human existence. In the first sequence, a ‘modern ontology’ depends on the separation of ‘philosophy’ and ‘theology’ into autonomous spheres, an effort that was accomplished (as readers of the Radical Orthodoxy camp will understand readily as one of their most core and contentious arguments) through medieval Franciscan theological moves, especially through the archnemesis of Radical Orthodoxy, Duns Scotus. Reality, Milbank argues, doesn’t refer to the actual essence of things, events, and persons anymore; he claims that, since the Franciscan triumph after the Middle Ages, it has tended to refer to virtual possibilities of what things, events, and persons could be.

This modern ontology looks egalitarian, Milbank says, but it is a false egalitarianism because there isn’t any more actuality in a world where everything is a substitute for a substitute that is substituting for another substitute. Acknowledging that phenomenologists (like Husserl) and radical empiricists (like Hume) have been looking for a way back to the ontological actual, one of Milbank’s most frequent refrains in this sequence is ‘common sense,’ that even as human persons living in a flat, modern world of substituted virtual realities, we literally sense in a pre-modern way that priority should be given to the actual and the analogical, that things, persons, and events have inner essences and participate in hierarchies. It’s a Romantic common sense, Milbank admits, but the Romantic is a sign that the eclipse of trans-organicity has not been fully successful in modern philosophy.

Recovering this trans-organicity has several political implications, Milbank claims. First, the animal rationale and sociale means that the ‘diminishing of the Few’ in a misguided effort toward the egalitarianism of the Many has to be reversed, revitalizing the intermediary community associations that buffer the masses from the political state and the market. Second, there has to be a recovery of ‘Christological constitutionalism’ in which the Many find themselves participating in the One who is the king who participates in the risen Christ’s reign, which is not hard (as Milbank claims) because even contemporary representative democracies (especially the most egalitarian social democracies) channel power to the One on top anyways. Third, because this political ontology of the One and the Few depends on Byzantine and Anglican readings of Latin sources discussing the subsuming of the royalty in the church, there needs to be an ecumenical Byzantine-Anglican-Roman Catholic recovery of the Church as a cosmopolis in a global Christendom. In this way, the One and the Few are not

modern virtual substitutes for the Many, but are higher orders of a trans-organic humanity in which all can find themselves being a part. With the Many participating in the charitable constitution of the One and the Few, all are invited to be part of the co-creation of a social order that is infused with supernatural grace, exemplifying (as Milbank suggests) in the democratization of exaltation.

These sequences have in turn elicited the five comments we are hosting on this forum. One of the most sympathetic is perhaps one of the most surprising, as Bethany Joy Kim finds herself resonating with this Byzantine-Anglican-Roman Catholic ecumenical project as a scholar in the charismatic Vineyard tradition of healing prayer because such ecstatic activities exemplify for her the co-constitution of the fabricating animal and supernatural charity, a point with which Milbank himself openly agrees in their discussion. Another point of agreement can be seen in Matthew Tan's piece, as he discusses how Milbank's excoriations of modern substitutionary representations is useful for understanding how much of popular culture is just simulacrum after simulacra piled on top of each other. Jonathan Tran waxes practical, noting that the end of Radical Orthodoxy's heyday seems to be making Milbank more interesting while attempting to nudge Milbank to give prescriptions in *Beyond Secular Order's* projected sequel *On Divine Government* on how to do the practical work of governance. Devin Singh is also sympathetically critical, acknowledging that Milbank's political theology makes for convincing reading but wishing that Milbank would consider African, Near Eastern, and Asian influences on Christendom. Finally, Eugene McCarraher launches a scathing critique of *Beyond Secular Order*, with excoriations of Milbank for all manner of theocratic colonization that has in turn brought a surprising and interesting response from Milbank: he might actually be a working-class socialist.