12 *Creation, Contingency, and Truthful Nonviolence: A Milbankian Reflection*

MILBANK'S POLEMIC AGAINST LIBERALISM and the secular in *Theology and Social Theory* is so dramatic as to cause one to overlook the constructive theological proposals in the book.[1] I am not suggesting that the polemical thrust of *Theology and Social Theory* is separable from Milbank's theological claims, but there is a temptation among commentators, at least initially, to concentrate on the former because in that book almost no one is free from having his or her ox gored. In this essay, however, I want to call attention to the quite extraordinary manner in which Milbank interrelates reflection on the Trinity, creation, contingency, truth, and nonviolence. In particular, I want to show why Milbank's argument for the unavoidability of narrative as the form of truth reflects his understanding of creation as the ongoing nonviolent work of the God we know as Trinity.

I am interested in drawing out Milbank's understanding of these matters because his reflections help me to respond to a challenge by Robert Jenson about aspects of my own work. Jenson, as usual, goes to the heart of the matter by challenging not only me but also anyone who, like Milbank, accepts the critique of "foundational" accounts of knowledge. Many think that our willingness to assume the contingency of our own convictions means that we must abandon all attempts to claim Christian beliefs as true. Accordingly, are we not committed to the belief that any claim to truth is but a mask for power and is resolvable only on the basis of violence?

Jenson's question was provoked by the suggestion I made in *After Christendom?* that the Christian alternative to hegemonic and violent narratives that dominate liberal education, such as "Columbus discovered America," is simply that of witness.[2] In a letter appended to the book, David Toole, then a graduate student in theology, notes that the very notion of witness can be violent if that witness asserts for the other a truth

that the other does not already possess. I acknowledge Toole's point, observing that this is but "a reminder that the way of nonviolence is never easy and that our language can embody . . . violence in ways we hardly [know]."

Jenson's question follows:

> Can Hauerwas's thinking finally sustain its own central claim, that the church is the world's salvation? The church cannot save the world in any of the ways the liberal church tries, and Hauerwas rightly rubs our nose in this plain fact. But *how* then is the church the world's salvation? The student has a point: every claim to speak truth does indeed exercise something that might plausibly be called "violence," if we so choose to use the language. If Hauerwas accepts this usage of "violence," he must abandon also witness as what the church can do for the world. It seems, indeed, he must end with a doctrine that the church saves the world simply by silently existing. Now even such a doctrine may be sustainable, but only by a lot of more speculative systematic theology than Hauerwas seems willing to countenance.[3]

But if the Christian witness is one of silence, then what does that do to Christ's commission to the church to make disciples of all nations? Surely such a commission requires witness to Native Americans as much as to liberal societies. Moreover, such a witness surely must entail some account of conversion from one narrative, one community, to another.[4]

Of course, I can "say" that Christians ought to witness and try to convert "Native Americans," but saying that seems more assertion than argument. I can respond to Jenson, "It all depends on what you mean by 'violence.'" "Violence," as well as "nonviolence," are context-dependent notions that require display in order to make sense. So I cannot answer Jenson's question in the abstract, since that would only reinforce the ahistorical accounts of Christian practices and convictions I am trying to counter.[5] Yet I think such a response would leave Jenson rightly dissatisfied, since it could not help but appear, like my attempt to stand neither with the "multiculturalists" nor with the "Eurocentrists," as but another "dodge."

An adequate response to Jenson therefore requires the display of material theological claims I believe Milbank has begun in *Theology and Social Theory*. Milbank provides the theological resources necessary for appeal to truth without those appeals embodying, or at least underwriting, the false universalism of secular epistemologies. He does so by helping us see the intrinsic connection between the Christian conviction that the God of Jesus Christ creates nonviolently and the necessity of those who worship that God to learn to live nonviolently in a world of violence. In effect, Milbank has taken up the task of explicating the metaphysics of a

nonviolent creation in the hopes of providing a counter ontology to the pervasive metaphysics of violence embedded in Christian and non-Christian discourse.

Milbank contrasts the Christian conviction that creation is essentially nonviolent to that of the Greeks and liberalism (which Milbank suggests may have begun with the Greek distinction between religion and politics [329]), both of which assume agonistic accounts of existence. For Christians, violence is always a "secondary willed intrusion," which is known only because of a profounder peace. Such a peace is not driven to hegemonic or totalizing accounts of existence, since God's creation is the ongoing actualization of a sociality of harmonious difference displayed in the Trinity. That is why

> Christian logic is *not* deconstructable by modern secular reason; rather, it is Christianity which exposes the nonnecessity of supposing, like Nietzscheans, that difference, nontotalization and indeterminacy of meaning *necessarily* imply arbitrariness and violence. To suppose that they do is merely to subscribe to a particular encoding of reality. Christianity, by contrast, is the coding of transcendental difference as peace. (5–6)

Accordingly, Nietzsche was correct to single out Christianity for attack. He rightly saw that Christianity was the only viable alternative to his agonistic world. That does not mean that theology can "rationally" refute, à la MacIntyre,[6] the ontology of difference at the heart of Nietzschean postmodernism, but theology can help narrate why, given the creation of "the secular," Nietzsche's account of our "world," insofar as it is the world created by "liberalism," was inevitable.

Although Milbank's account of this thinker or that thinker may be open to challenge, it is my conviction that he is right in his claim that the very creation of the "secular" is implicated in an ontology of violence. Thus, liberal political and social theory is unable to imagine any society able to control violence except through counterviolence. Liberalism's "universalism," in this respect, is but the mirror image of Christian presuppositions—indeed, as Milbank tells the story, liberalism is only possible as a counternarrative to that of the church. In *Theology and Social Theory* Milbank attempts to display a counterontology to liberalism in the hope that by so doing he will force the "secular" to acknowledge its own contingency.

Many may think that such a "display" is insufficient, for how can Milbank defeat liberalism by using its own tools?[7] When Milbank says that he finally can only out-narrate liberalism, he is not giving up on a truthful witness. Rather, he is reminding us why it is that the very God to which Christians witness requires narrative display. That is why he argues that narrative is

> a more basic category than either explanation or understanding: unlike either of these it does not assume punctiliar facts or discrete meanings. Neither is it concerned with universal laws, nor universal truths of the spirit. Yet it is not arbitrary in the sense that one can repeat a text in just any fashion, although one can indeed do so in any number of fashions. . . . If reading texts means that we renarrate them or repeat them, and if, as we have seen, textuality is the condition of all culture, then narration—of events, structures, institutions, tendencies as well as of lives—is the final mode of comprehension of human society. (267)

Milbank argues that because narrative is more basic than explanation, there can be no genuine sociological comprehension of the inherently "inexplicable" character of Jesus of Nazareth (116).[8] Jesus' reconception of Israel through his life certainly entails a sociology but it cannot be construed sociologically—that is, Jesus cannot be accounted for by assembling "explanations." In this respect, there is a continuity between Jesus' refusal to seize power and the early church's refusal to overthrow existing structures. If the church tried to overthrow the existing structures, it would have simply become a parallel structure, a parallel "cause." Instead, the church attempted to create alternative, "local" areas of peace, charity, and justice.

That our existence is created means that insofar as "science" is possible, it can only be a "science of the particular." Accordingly, history remains theology's great ally. For it is written history that defies the universal by reminding us that lived history enacts the different. Positivist and dialectical traditions, with their corresponding forms of social science derived from the Enlightenment project, tried to defeat the "particularistic obscurantism" of Judaism and Christianity in the name of the universal.

> But this challenge is at an end, for it has seen that it was itself made in terms of metaphysics, and of a "religion." In the "new era" of postmodernism the human has become subordinate to the infinitely many discourses which claim to constitute humanity, and universality can no longer pose as the identical, but can only be paradoxically invoked as the different. (260)

What drives Milbank's display of the ontological relationship between nonviolence and narrative is not the epistemology and ontology of postmodernism. Rather it is Jesus Christ, through whom we learn of God as Trinity, who is the fundamental ontological claim that must shape all other claims. Hence, though Milbank is in general agreement with Blondel, he nonetheless criticizes him for developing a general ontology. In contrast, "one ought to say that *only* because one first experiences the 'shape' of incarnation, of atonement, is one led to formulate the abstract notion of their occurrence; and only then does one construe reality in terms of the need for the perfecting offering of love" (217). Milbank is re-

minding us that though theology certainly makes metaphysical claims, such claims must remain disciplined by the prior theological commitments. That our existence is contingent is surely a metaphysical claim correlative of our created status. Yet any metaphysical speculation that such claims invite can never become an end in itself but must serve to remind us that finally our salvation comes from the Jews—thus the unavoidability of narrative and, correlatively, analogy, for any knowledge worth having.

These themes in Milbank's work are focused through his account of the Trinity. According to Milbank, Trinity denotes that God is the God in which nothing can be unrealized and yet in which no actualization, even an infinite one, can exhaust God's power.

> Infinite realized act and infinite unrealized power mysteriously coincide in God, and it must be this that supports the circular "life," that is more than *stasis*, of the Trinity. Yet "power-act" plays out through, and is constituted by, the Trinitarian relations: it is not that the Father is power and the Son act, for this would depersonalize their relation and make it *not* a real surface relation at all (this is why the Father-Son relation is not *just* a signified-signifier one, implying an "absence" of the Father, but also an "adjacent," figurative relation). (423)

Accordingly, the Trinity in the most concrete fashion possible witnesses to the nonviolence of God's creation. Creation is not a finished product but rather God's continuously generated ex nihilo in time. Creatures thus do not assist God in creation but participate in God's continuing creation as Trinity.[9] In this respect, one of the most interesting ways to think of *Theology and Social Theory* is to interpret it as an extended reflection on the work of the Holy Spirit. The materiality of the Spirit's work is the reason Milbank can make the astounding claim that theology must be its own social science. It must be so exactly because Christian convictions are necessary for us to locate the final causes shaping our history as God's ongoing work of creation.

Milbank is not suggesting that a Christian sociology can be deduced from the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in and of itself—because there is no doctrine of the Trinity in and of itself. A distinguishable Christian social theory is possible only because there are Christian practices. Put in terms of Christian dogmatics, Milbank's position assumes that Christian theological reflection "begins," insofar as Christian reflection has a beginning, with ecclesiology. For

> the Church stands in a narrative relationship to Jesus and the Gospels, within a story that subsumes both. This must be the case, because no *historical* story is ever over and done with. Furthermore, the New Testament itself does not preach any denial of historicity, or any disappearance of our

> own personalities into the monistic truth of Christ. Quite to the contrary, Jesus's mission is seen as inseparable from his preaching of the kingdom, and inauguration of a new sort of community, the Church. Salvation is available for us after Christ because we can be incorporated in the community which he founded, and the response of this community to Christ is made possible by the response of the divine Spirit to the divine Son, from whom it receives the love that flows between the Son and the Father. The association of the Church with the response of the Spirit which arises after the Son, and yet is fully divine, shows that the new community belongs from the beginning within the new narrative manifestation of God. Hence the metanarrative is *not* just a story of Jesus, it is the continuing story of the Church, already realized in a finally exemplary way by Christ, yet still to be realized universally, in harmony with Christ and yet *differently*, by all generations of Christians. (387)

Milbank's position cannot help but challenge the narratives of the enlightenment, since it is the church that ultimately interprets and locates all other histories. As he says:

> if one takes one's salvation from the Church, if one identifies one's self as a member of the body of Christ, then inevitably one offers the most "ultimate" explanation of socio-historical processes in terms of the embracing or refusal of the specifically Christian virtues. Not to embrace such a metanarrative, or to ascribe to it a merely partial interpretive power, would undo the logic of the incarnation. For why would we claim to recognize the divine *logos* in a particular life, unless we had the sense that everything else was to be located *here*, despite the fact that this life is but one more life, itself situated along the historical *continuum*? Thus if the enlightenment makes this sort of thing impossible, it also rules out salvation to the Church as traditionally understood. (246)

Milbank, in one of his striking asides, which I think nicely suggests the power of his theology, observes that to be part of the church is to have "the moral luck to belong to the society which overcomes moral luck" (231).[10] For to belong to the church means one has become part of those "practices of perfection" that make us capable of becoming friends with one another, ourselves, and God. The "music of creation" is thus constituted and continued in the church. The music that the church has learned to sing through becoming friends of God and one another is a music for all God's creation. If the church is about "out-narrating," it can do so only to the extent that it can "out-sing" the world.[11]

Therefore, Milbank cannot offer us a theory of truth that is more determinative than the Christian witness to Trinity through song. For if we had such a theory, then we should worship that theory rather than praise the Trinity. What good are definitions of truth when such definitions can distract from that which constitutes us as truthful witnesses to God's

very life? The very contingent character of a truthful witness cannot be denied if we are to witness truthfully to the truth that we are creatures of a gracious creator. That is what I think Milbank means when he claims that truth for Christianity is not correspondence but rather *participation* of the beautiful in the beauty of God (427).

I do not know if Milbank represents the kind of "speculative systematic theology" that Jenson suggests I need, but I think the relationships Milbank develops between theology and social theory help me respond to Jenson's questions. Given Milbank, it should be clear why I am not as deferential to the narratives of the Enlightenment as I am to those of the Native Americans. Put quite simply, the narratives of the Native Americans do not represent the subtle co-option of the Christian narratives in the way that those of the Enlightenment do, born as the latter are from Christianity's own life. Indeed, I think it imperative that Christians challenge the narratives of liberalism exactly because they fail to acknowledge their own violence. Of course, the confrontation between theology and "the secular" cannot be other than conflictual, as hegemonic narratives, when confronted by their hegemony, always attempt to claim that "peace" is being threatened.

Moreover, Christians seek no less to witness to and thus convert Native Americans than Enlightenment liberals. I do not think, however, that conversion means the same for each. Indeed, if conversion is the recognition of membership in a more determinative community than the one in which I first found myself, then the conversion for most liberals is going to be more dramatic than for most Native Americans. For the liberal presumption that they belong to no community, no narrative, other than the community they themselves have chosen masks the deepest violence of modernity.

Christians should try to convert Native Americans, but since I am not living among Native Americans, I have little idea what that means. I do know, however, that it should have at least meant that the Christians who first confronted Native Americans should have refrained from killing them. As part of that peaceable witness, they would have also had to ask the Sioux not to kill the Pawnee if they were to live as Christians. Native Americans might have found that quite a challenge, even a violent challenge, to their very identity. But I have no way of knowing that in principle. It depends, indeed, on what the concrete narratives and practices are that Christians confront. What I do, of course, challenge is the assumption that conversion has primarily to do with an individual's self-understanding rather than his or her being put in the context of a different community with a different set of practices. To be sure, a Navaho might become Christian and still remain a Christian Navaho. We would simply have to wait and see what the full implications of that would be across generations. I am, after all, still a Texan even though I am a Christian.

One aspect of the problem we confront as part of the Christian witness to Native Americans is how that witness can be made in the face of the extraordinary violence perpetrated on Native Americans in the name of Christianity. Jenson chides me for siding with the fashionable "multicultural" attack upon "Eurocentrism." I certainly have no wish to be "fashionable," but I am willing to take that risk in order to challenge the accommodation of the church to those narratives that underwrite murder in the name of "progress."[12] By challenging the story Enlightenment historiography tells about the triumph of Columbus, I am trying to help Christians discover how our narrative practices have been captured by a sociology that subsumes Christ and the church within a narrative in which "Western civilization" becomes the primary actor.

The more challenging theological issue is how Christians, white and Native American Christians alike, are to witness to Native Americans in the face of the violence perpetrated on them in the name of Christian "civilization." In that context I think the witness of the church might well take the form of silence through presence. Learning to live with those you have wronged may not be a bad place to begin if the salvation we believe has been made present by Christ is as materially palpable as body and blood.

Milbank notes that Augustine denied the existence of true virtue and justice in a pagan society because the pagans failed to worship the true God. Augustine argued that

> the form taken by true worship of the true God is the offering of mutual forgiveness in the community, and at one point he associates absence of the practice of forgiveness ("true sacrifice") with the absence of monotheism. In addition, thought of God the Father seems for Augustine to have been quite inseparable from the thought of heaven, our Mother, or the eternal community of all unfallen and redeemed creatures enjoying visions of the infinite Trinity. Thus, when he says that the pagans fail to "refer" all earthly *usus* to the peace of the one true God, he adjoins to this a failure of referral to the peace of the heavenly community. Without "mutual forgiveness" and social peace, says Augustine, "no one will be able to see God." The pagans were for Augustine unjust, because they did not give priority to peace and forgiveness. (409)

Missing in Milbank, however, is the concrete display of such forgiveness and reconciliation that makes God's peace present. What we need are stories, witnesses, like the one Rufus Bowman tells regarding the relationship of the Brethren, German "Dunkards," to the Indians in Morrison's Cove, Pennsylvania, during the French and Indian Wars.[13] In order to tell this story, Bowman has to draw on U. J. Jones's quite unsympathetic account of the Brethren contained in the latter's *History of the Early Settlement of the Juniata Valley*. Bowman notes that Jones was quite critical

of the Brethren both for refusing to take up arms and for refusing to pay money to support those willing to take up arms, not only during the French and Indian War but also in the Revolutionary War. In the tone of "they got what they deserved," Jones describes the behavior of the "Dunkards" during an Indian raid in the midst of the Revolutionary War:

> On their first expedition they would have few scalps to grace their belts, had the Dunkards taken the advice of more sagacious people, and fled, too; this, however, they would not do. They would follow but half of Cromwell's advice; they were willing to put their "trust in God," but they would not "keep their powder dry." In short, it was a compound they did not use at all.
>
> The savages swept down through the Cove with all the ferocity with which a pack of wolves would descend from the mountain upon a flock of sheep. Some few of the Dunkards, who evidently had a latent spark of love of life, hid themselves away; but by far the most of them stood by and witnessed the butchery of wives and children, merely saying, "Gottes wille sei getan." How many Dunkard scalps they carried to Detroit cannot now be, and probably never has been clearly ascertained—not less than thirty, according to the best authority. In addition to this they loaded themselves with plunder, stole a number of horses, and under cover of night the triumphant warriors marched bravely away.[14]

Bowman notes that Jones ended his account with a brief aside, the significance of which Jones completely missed. It seems that during the massacre the Brethren repeated so often "Gottes wille sei getan" that the Indians retained a vivid recollection of them. During the war, some of the Indians who had massacred the Brethren were later captured. Interestingly enough, they were anxious to discover whether the "Gotswiltahns" still lived in the Cove. They thought "Gotswiltahns" must have been the name of that quite strange tribe.[15]

I think, finally, that such an example is what Milbank's book is all about. Without such examples Christianity makes no sense and there is no witness. It is when we lose the practices necessary to remember these people that the contingent witness that we must always make as Christians cannot help but be violent. I suspect, when all is said and done, that the Brethren of Morrison's Cove do not need Milbank. But I am sure that Milbank, and the rest of us that would do theology, need the Brethren of Morrison's Cove. They are God's witness that as God's creatures we can live nonviolently in a world of violence.

Notes

Phil Kenneson, David Matzko, and John Berkman made extremely helpful criticisms of an earlier draft of this chapter. I am in their debt.

1. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). Page references to Milbank appear in the text and notes.

2. Robert Jenson, "Review of Stanley Hauerwas's *After Christendom?*" *First Things* 25 (August/September 1992).

3. Ibid.

4. Questions like these about *After Christendom?* have been raised by my colleague George Marsden. I am grateful to him for the serious consideration he gives my work.

5. John Berkman puts the matter this way: "Is Christian witness necessarily violent? I wonder if that is like asking is sex necessarily violent? or is sports necessarily violent? or is the master/apprentice relationship necessarily violent? or is Jesus' relationship with the disciples necessarily violent? If there cannot be peaceable varieties of witnessing, sexual relationships, ice hockey (yes! ice hockey!), vocational training and discipleship, then I do not know what it would mean to call any of these activities violent. Violence depends on there being a contrast. Now, whereas a concept like 'a peaceable axe murder' is an oxymoron, certainly 'peaceable witness' is not. It seems to me that the core uses of 'violence' cannot refer to 'witnessing,' but rather only extended senses of 'violence,' senses commonly employed in some of the deconstructive literature. Perhaps we need to ask, 'Whose violence? Which peaceableness?'" The comments were made in a letter to me. John Berkman is a former graduate student of mine who now teaches at Catholic University.

6. Milbank's relationship to MacIntyre is obviously complex. In many ways, *Theology and Social Theory* could not have been written if MacIntyre did not exist. Milbank wrote *Theology and Social Theory* prior to the publication of MacIntyre's *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*. It is my guess, however, that MacIntyre's "realism" in that work would only reinforce what Milbank takes to be his disagreement with MacIntyre. Milbank senses that his disagreements with MacIntyre finally come down to this: He approaches social theory as a theologian, whereas MacIntyre approaches it as a philosopher. The key point at issue here is the role that must be accorded to Christianity and to Christian theology. For MacIntyre, it is true, Christianity has come to matter more and more, but Milbank argues that it remains the case that MacIntyre "opposes to philosophy and practice of difference not, primarily, Christian thought and practice, but the antique understanding of virtue, with the accompaniments of Socratic dialectics, and the general link of reason to tradition. Of course, for MacIntyre, one must subscribe to some *particular* tradition, some *particular* code of virtue and here he identifies himself as an Augustinian Christian. But, all the same, the *arguments* put forward against nihilism and a philosophy of difference are made in the name of virtue, dialectics and the *notion* of tradition in general" (327).

7. There is a very serious problem about the character of Milbank's whole project as he attempts to supply a counternarrative to that of liberalism. Does he reproduce exactly the violence of liberalism by trying to write such a grand narrative of how we have gotten in our peculiar straits today? In that sense his project is not unlike MacIntyre's project in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Obviously, in my own work I have tried to chip away at liberalism one piece at a time. Milbank, however, may be right that you can only counter a totalizing narrative with an-

other narrative that is equally totalizing, but I fear that in the process the Gospel cannot help but appear as just another "system" or "theory."

8. Though Milbank's Christology remains underdeveloped, I hope I am correct to think that when he does turn his attention to these matters, he will be sympathetic to the portrayal of Jesus by John Howard Yoder.

9. It is crucial to note that Milbank's account of participation is quite different than that of Gustafson. Milbank is making an ontological claim correlative to his trinitarian account of creation. Accordingly, participation is not, as it is for Gustafson, a self-validating claim about our status as humans.

10. Milbank's reflection on the notion of luck obviously draws deeply on the work of Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum. I think he does so profoundly, since our violence is often the attempt to render certain and necessary contingent moral commitments that we have made and for which others have paid the price—i.e., our attempt to rid our life of luck is the source of our greatest violence. The word Christians use to describe how our lives are constituted by such luck is grace. Yet grace does not remove, as the Greeks tried to remove through theory, the contingency of our existence. I have thought that it would make a fascinating comparison in this respect to juxtapose Iris Murdoch's reflections on contingency with those of Milbank. For an attempt to develop these themes, see Charlie Pinches and Hauerwas, *Christians Among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

11. It is surely one of the most interesting moves, in a book of interesting moves, that Milbank sees the importance of Augustine's *De Musica* for the explication, not only of creation, but also of the doctrine of the Trinity. He notes the way Augustine sees in *De Musica* that all the elements of creation are not "things" but are inherently interconnected "qualities," which combine and recombine in an endless variety that reflects God's glory (pp. 424–425).

12. I confess. When I was working on the last chapter of *After Christendom?* I was worried about the use of "Columbus discovers America" as the central example in that chapter. Yet I became convinced, in spite of appearing "trendy," that there is no better example that challenges current educational practices.

13. Rufus D. Bowman, *Church of the Brethren and War, 1708–1941* (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Publishing House, 1944), pp. 74–75. I am indebted to the Reverend Jeff Bach for calling my attention to Bowman's narrative.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., pp. 75–76.