John Milbank's Attack on Liberation Theologies: A Reply

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Some philosophers and theologians feel that in the postmodern setting they no longer have to be ashamed of going for 'religion' (Christianity, in this case) since the ban which modern rationality had placed on it has been lifted. This is the case with the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo who recently acknowledged that his hermeneutical reflections on finitude and temporality are themselves part of the transmission process of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Yet, while admitting that he stands within this tradition, he is quick to add that the verities of that tradition which reach us through the mediation of hermeneutics are also deeply influenced and modified by this process. As a postmodern thinker he is convinced that the encounter with the uncanny, instead of engaging one in a flight from finitude, plunges one even deeper into it. If the doctrine of the Trinity has any meaning it would consist in this: that the Word of God – the kenotic Son incarnate - would interpret the depths of the deity by heeding and deciphering the signs of the time. Plurality in the Trinity is the beginning of God's self-emptying into the fluidity of time. Trinity conceived this way sets us free from the constraints of a unifying center, thus allowing us to take delight in a world of dwindling images whose changing appearance reminds us of our mortality and the need for prayer and forgiveness. In short, Vattimo's return to religion makes his thinking more radically than before, a 'weak thinking' (*pensiero debole*) that understands itself "as an indefinite process of reduction, diminution, weakening".[1]

The postmodern mood shows openness to victims, to strangers, to the 'others' who are not given a place in all-encompassing theories and ideologies. The voice of postmodern thinkers is perhaps softer than that of earlier modern leftist critics of western capitalism. But they are, at least, still concerned with a liberation project.[2] Contrasting them is the robust voice of the British Anglican theologian John Milbank (°1952), who not only abandons the liberation project, but vehe-

1. Gianni Vattimo, "The Trace of the Trace" in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, *Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 93.

2. Jacques Derrida, for instance, opts for not abiding by the law in case the law oppresses defenseless people. See Mark Taylor's rendering of Derrida's essay "Force of Law. The Mystical Foundation of Authority Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice", *Cardozo Law Review*, 11, nos 5-6 (July-August 1990): 919-1045, in Mark Taylor, *Nots* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 72-94.

mently attacks it. In 1990 he wrote a work that made him at once famous in Europe and the United States: *Theology & Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason*.[3] In this work he rejects the whole legacy of modernity as being too rational, too much involved in planning and calculation, and not sufficiently open to religious values. In short, he plays off radical Christianity against modern paganism and indifferentism. In doing so, he inclines towards fundamentalism, preferring aestheticized religious interiority over commitment to the humanization of the world. For him, such commitment is a betrayal of one's Christian identity – a waste of energy spent on things non-religious. From this background he criticizes the Latin American liberation theologians and the political theologians of the First World. In his eyes these theologians have stopped doing theology, and are instead engaged in legitimating the use of leftist social analysis. Their undertaking is the opposite of what he himself pursues with his 'radical orthodoxy'[4]: a revival of the Christian confession in the midst of a world that has become forgetful of religion.

In this article I will lay bare some ambiguities in Milbank's thought. For one, he places himself in the climate of postmodernity; whereas his aversion to the streamlining rationality of modernity makes him return to premodernity – to a retrieval of the theology of St. Augustine. John Milbank perfectly feels at home in the postmodern fragmentation with its ever shifting combinations and its lack of a unifying center. He will start from there to debunk the logocentrism of modernity. For it is only, he thinks, when freed from this streamlining rationality that we can come in contact with the God who makes us aware of the worth of the 'different' that resists all-encompassing structures. But, as we will see in further detail below, Milbank's self-styled postmodernism tends to lock itself up in one big fragment: the Christian life-world as handed down in its medieval form. From this fragment he critiques the whole of modernity and the various forms of nihilism that ensue from it.

Milbank's' Repudiation of Modern Theologies

For Milbank, theologians who use elements of modern sociology as a mediation in their theologizing or who give an a posteriori blessing to certain 'emancipatory' elements of modernity, are apparently naive, not realizing that what they are doing boils down to concluding a pact with the devil. Such a straightforward attack

3. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990.

4. It was the book *Radical Orthodoxy: a New Theology* (Routledge: London), edited by John Milbank, Catharine Pickstock and Graham Ward in 1999 that was to launch the movement (a movement which the authors advertise as "the most talked-about development in contemporary theology").

– on Rahner, Metz, Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians – is reminiscent of the vehement tone with which Karl Barth condemned liberal theology. But the arguments Milbank puts forward stem from Nietzsche. From Nietzsche, Milbank has learned that all grand models of rational organization and planning are in fact steered by the 'will to power'. As such, they are violent systems secreting their own mythologies and lacking any real foundation because of their contingent character.

Milbank wages a battle against sociology, especially sociology of religion, because it dictates what limited space is left for religion in modern societies and clothes itself with a religious aura when telling this. He fulminates against a growing trend among sociologists to isolate religion from the rest of social formations, thus robbing religion of its overall social function of cementing the social strata together through a bond of harmony and peace and confining religion and religiosity to the private sphere. This confinement goes hand in hand with the sociological model of differentiation of functions: "In the Parsonian view, society evolves through a process of gradual differentiation into separate social sub-systems: gradually art is distinguished from religion, religion from politics, economics from private ethical behavior and so forth."[5]

Understandably, Milbank reacts against the privatization of religion. He does not stand alone in this. Political theologians in Germany in the 1960s had already perceived this danger and therefore engaged in public discourse to awaken the conscience of Christians to societal problems at large: Metz by calling attention to the 'memory of the slain'; Sölle by engaging in a criticism of capitalism, armament races, etc. In scholarly reflections on political theologies, one even witnesses a (critical) appropriation of insights developed by Habermas, who, with his 'theory of communicative action', wanted to curb the dominance of instrumental reason as the root-cause of 'power politics. Charles Davis, for example, called upon believers to inject the formal procedures of Habermas' Diskursethik with the mystical élan of their narrative tradition; whereas Francis Schüssler-Fiorenza spoke up for a "church as community of interpretation." For Milbank, however, this 'hermeneutic concern' of the Christian community' is trapped in the illusion that modernity, even in its humanistic project, has something valuable to offer. For him modernity must not be rescued with the help of a Christian input. Modernity is simply a heresy and ought to be dismantled. If there is a solid social theory worthy of commitment, then this theory must come from the church herself and her tradition of social commitment. Ecclesiology contains within itself all the elements of a 'social theory'.

5. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 126.

Towards a Postmodern Narrativity

As far as interpretation is concerned, Milbank echoes Nietzsche for whom 'there is no truth, but only interpretations'. This means that the explanatory models of sociology (Parsons, Habermas) are but narrated interpretations of reality. He hereby tends to reduce scientific explanation to linguistic signs meant to rhetorically persuade an audience.[6] He states this as follows:

1. The end of modernity….means the end of a single system of truth based on universal reason, which tells us what reality is like.
2. With this ending, there ends also the modern predicament of theology. It has no longer to measure up to accepted secular standards of scientific truth or normative rationality.
3. In postmodernity there are infinitely many possible versions of truth, inseparable from particular narratives.[7]

This use of 'narrative' is, of course, different from what Davis and Schüssler-Fiorenza had in mind when wishing that the Church should become a community of interpreters. For these authors try to 'read' the Christian narrative (gospel) in such a way that the insights discovered in it can be presented as food for thought to a forum of discussion partners that respect the procedural rules of argumentation and their type of normative rationality. The new Nietzschean meaning of narrative is rather a 'fictional' perspective to live by in a world that lacks rational foundation. The narration flows from a poetic vision one tries to rhetorically communicate. Milbank, thus, subscribes to Lyotard's dictum that today people no longer believe in an all-encompassing rationality ('the grand narratives'); one rather prefers to live "within structural relations, which constantly shift" and to which the subjects react as "points of potent 'intensity' which can rearrange given structural patterns".[8]

For theology this new intellectual milieu is promising but it also contains some manifest dangers such as relativism and nihilism. So Christianity can only make a selective use of postmodern trends. In order to 'justify' this selection Milbank starts by summing up what he dislikes in certain postmodern schools: (i) The postmodern scene is populated with many different voices, each having its own rhetorical strategies resulting in a perpetual contest for influence; (ii) Christianity, by contrast, celebrates peacefulness. So why not 'bring it on the market'? (iii) The

6. Ibid., 269: "As the phrase 'natural history' suggests, natural science does not rid itself from narrative".

7. John Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Agustinianism: A Short Summa in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions", *Modern Theology* 7, no. 3 (April 1991): 225.

8 Ibid.

postmodern nihilists imprison themselves in an endless fluidity of time; but is this any better than Christianity's option to let the fluidity of time be rescued by transcendence? (iv) Postmodern people are rather pluralistic; yet they should realize that what they understand as 'the different' is always defined "as oppositional difference, a difference which enters the existing common cultural space to compete, displace or expel." Christianity, on the contrary, has a 'harmonious ontology of difference'. "Christianity starts to appear… as not just different, but as the difference from all other cultural systems, which it exposes as threatened by incipient nihilism".[9] For Milbank, it is clear: there exists an irreconcilable antagonism between the 'secular city' and the 'heavenly city' (St. Augustine).

Milbank's Postmodern Augustinianism

What does Milbank understand by 'heavenly city'? His starting point is a concrete community that is practicing its faith, for only from this nucleus will the theologian be able to start a creative, artistic reflection on the faith. This is a sound principle but it will not prevent Milbank from becoming idealistic in his reworking of the dogma. Basic for him is the 'creation from nothing', a counter-vision to the antagonistic strivings philosophers tend to project unto history. Negativity cannot be a central principle since evil is only a privation of the good. Becoming and growth must rather be seen as 'emanating' from God's affirmation 'in the beginning', an affirmation which continues to resonate whenever 'new things' eventfully come into existence. Becoming involves novelty, yet the emergence of novelty is never inimical to what has been. This brings him to Augustine's *De Musica*, a work that has both mystical and ethical implications. It celebrates the created realm as an "emanation of harmonious difference".[10] But this also has ethical bearings: "the soul is defined as a 'number' (a 'ratio') that must be correctly positioned in a series". Depending on this correct positioning the soul acquires her "power of freedom commensurate with the series" and also the capacity to "alter and revise the series".[11] But all this reveals that an option for disharmony also belongs to the capacity of human freedom. The soul can decide to jump out of the harmony through an undue concentration on one's own individual life (*incurvatio super seipsum*). This is the moment of sin which is, however, not an ontological necessity, but a disordered 'no' to the sweet constraints of the harmonious whole. For this reason the 'no' can be removed through repentance and reconciliation.

9. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 381.
10. Ibid., 434.
11. Ibid., 404.

Having explained the importance of harmonious difference, Milbank delves into its deeper foundations, the gracious participation of human beings (and of the whole of creation) in the internal life-stream of the Triune God. Here he retrieves insights developed by Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus Confessor, Augustine and Scotus Erigena and concludes: "God is the one who differentiates" (who allows the different to be different).[12] As the internally creative power, God can 'afford' to posit difference and respectfully embrace it in amity. Indeed, within the Trinity the source-deity (Father) gives birth to its difference, its 'vis à vis' (Son) who is distinct from yet lives in perfect harmony with the Origin. This 'birthing' gives rise to reciprocity. Between the 'Genitor' and the 'Generated' a circulation of love emerges which is so intense that it calls forth the figure of the Spirit, whose role it is to 'communicate/disseminate' outside the deity the inner-Trinitarian circulation of love of which she is part.

From Ecclesiology to Theology as Social Theory

Milbank's ecclesiology can be summarized in the Augustinian image of 'the city of God'. Christian communities are (and are becoming) God's city on earth because of their readiness to enact, in words and deeds, the 'peaceful differentiated harmony' of the Trinitarian God who sustains the working of the world. The church is made up of communities of love: "a sittlich society of friends" held together by bonds of "conviviality"[13] in every day life. Models he thinks of are the medieval guilds and the associations in 19th century France which became known as 'Christian socialists', a "proliferation of self-managing, egalitarian and cooperative groups".[14] They are kept together by a *concertus musicus*, by 'musical laws' coming down from heaven. Milbank repudiates modern sociologies because for them "the social order is a totality which is prior to the creative activities of human beings".[15] For him only an existential ecclesiology offers the key for properly doing sociology. This type of sociology will have to pass a judgment on the defects of members of the church (the 'heavenly city') as well as on those who want to remain outside the church in the 'earthly city'. I treat these aspects separately.

(i) At the intra-ecclesial level, it is obvious that 'sin' can occur by 'separating oneself from the harmonious whole' or by refusing to put one's talents (one's capacity of love) at the service of the good of the community. But here the sinner

12. Ibid., 423.
13. Ibid., 422.
14. Ibid., 408.
15. Fergus Kerr, "Milbank's Thesis" in Robert Gill, *Theology and Sociology. A Reader*, (London: Cassell,1996), 433.

can be saved (brought home again) not by using coercion but by granting him/her forgiveness. When the church looks for the enactment of her mission, she must acknowledge that primarily she is "a community of charity and forgiveness".[16]

(ii) At the extra-ecclesial level the pastoral option is different. Here, forgiveness might, in some cases, be offered to individuals in so far as they are themselves victims of the violent structures of the 'earthly city'. But the 'earthly system' as such must be repudiated and put to shame by the Christian testimony to ontological peace. Two different 'worlds' are pitted against each other. Either one refuses to 'un-think' the necessity of violence and lives accordingly or one un-thinks it by showing, first, that a ruthless option for self-affirmation must necessarily generate more violence (the ethics of antiquity and its resuscitation in modern dialectical visions of history); and, second, by adopting a Christian life-style of peacefulness which must shock the feelings of the violent surrounding. Between this 'either/or' there is no reconciliation possible. At this juncture one may ask whether Milbank is not obsessed by this mutual exclusiveness so much so that his account of the development of Western civilization "runs the risk of slipping into a picture of history as the battlefield of ideal types" (ideal types of good and bad societies and social systems).[17] Milbank's program of replacing current sociologies with an ecclesiology that is at the same time normative makes his enterprise extremely speculative (if not idealistic, in the Marxist sense of the term).

Limits' to the 'Openness' of the Church

In this section I will occasionally refer to Vattimo with a view to addressing critical questions to Milbank.

(i) *The question of time and eternity*. As a postmodern thinker, Vattimo develops a religiosity of 'being in the world', of realizing one's createdness, one's confrontation with 'pain' and the 'enigma of death'. He highlights the importance of friendliness and the 'need for prayer' and 'forgiveness'. These experiences prepare one to listen to the voice of Being *(das Sein*) which, far from putting an end to our historicity, plunges us ever deeper into it. Milbank, in turn, uses terms like 'conviviality', peacefulness, harmonious embracing of difference, readiness to forgive and carry each other's burden. But these values are viewed as catapulted from above. The practical attitudes here testify to the descent of the 'heavenly city' on earth and to participation in God's life. The temporal fluidity of time is, from the

[16] Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism," 232.
[17] Rowan Williams, "A Theological Critique of Milbank" in Robert Gill, *Theology and Sociology: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1996), 437.

outset, seen as being drawn above itself into God's plenitude. But while for Augustine participation in God's infinitude happens through rapturous moments that interrupt our ordinary temporality, Milbank tends to read the rapturous moments as a permanent condition. For Augustine, 'participation' in the eternal One is seen as something toward which we are under way in a 'state of pilgrimage'. Milbank, however, seems to celebrate an already present 'eschatological fulfillment' and this accounts for the fact that he "sets the life of the Church dramatically apart from the temporal ways in which the good is realized in a genuinely contingent world".[18]

(ii) *The Trinity.* Milbank's interpretation of the trinity smacks of a 'high Christology' (or a 'high trinity', for that matter). The intra-trinitarian differentiations call forth a harmonious circulation of love among the divine persons and this circulation of love will be communicated to the created realm. This means that in finitude a variety of creative impulses will also be communicated to different actors but always in such a way that the twisting of differences is overruled by confluence into unanimity. All the differences are drawn back into the unity of an evolving harmony. This model now precludes an open-ended interpretation in the style of Vattimo. Indeed, the vision of 'plural existence' in God allows the interpretations to 'drift away' from the origin without being forcefully called back into it. Vattimo also seems to have understood that this 'drifting away' goes hand in hand with the self-emptying of God (of God's logos) into the temporality of the world. For Milbank, on the contrary, the contingent temporal happenings are always already drawn into the harmonious whole that, time and again, reaffirms itself in new circumstances. Such 'a priori' of harmony does not admit of a self-emptying into the unpredictable fluidity of time.

The priority of harmony, also present in Augustine's theory of music, leads to an aesthetical justification of the world in the same manner that the occurrence of sin may contribute to an even greater triumph of the harmonious whole. The sinner's fall serves to highlight the power of God's saving grace. Yet, looking at things from real life, Augustine calls attention to two antagonistic lifestyles: those who give in to self-love and greed – the 'earthly city' – and those who activate their new capacity of love – the 'heavenly city'. The separation of the ways is hardly compatible with the aesthetic harmony in which the dissonant still serves the purpose of building up a higher harmony. This incompatibility is even reinforced now by Milbank when he states that the new city must reject the very structures of the

18. Ibid., 440. This bracketing of contingency has far-reaching consequences. It allegedly elevates the elected into a state of 'perfection' which makes them superior to other human beings. This superiority comes to the fore in the notion of forgiveness. When Vattimo, for example, stressed the need for forgiveness, this was mainly because he himself felt the need for 'being forgiven' (by "that" which is fore-given, i.e., prior to our own initiative). With Milbank, on the contrary, it is the 'community of love' that forgives the sinners.

old. The celebration of ultimate harmony is apparently only workable from within an intra-ecclesial perspective; what fails to tune in with this must be condemned as deviant, a heretical refusal to enter the harmony.

Milbank's Rejection of Political and Liberation Theologies

Milbank says that what we require is a new ecclesiology that is also a post-political theology since real social concern is an offspring of Christianity and not of politics. Hence, all theologians err when they try to bring that concern up to date with the help of secular mediations taken from the 'earthly city': "Theology does not require the mediation of social science."[19]

From this basis he attacks liberation theologians. Their attempts at reducing poverty are immediately tied to the Promethean ideology of steady progress[20] whereas efforts to make the poor realize that they are the authors of their own history are immediately decried as Enlightenment emancipation. From the outset, a 'theology of the political' in which the poor are given a voice is branded as Machiavellian: the art of wielding power and stifling counter-forces.[21] Milbank is apparently insensitive to the project of a counter-modernity from below ('second Enlightenment'). He cannot appreciate that the poor feel encouraged to stand up for their rights and human dignity. He fears the fact that the 'irruption of the poor' in history is, in fact, preparing them to play the power game of modern societies. But one may ask with Nicholas Lash whether the categories of 'emancipation' and 'autonomy' have "just the same configuration for the weak" as they do "for the strong who suppress the weak through the structures we maintain?"[22] Would it not have been helpful for Milbank to have a closer look at the Christian base communities? Indeed, what he fails to understand is that 'the preferential option for the poor' is their contemporary form of discipleship" and 'faith and love' remain operative for them through the struggle for social justice.

He rather prefers to give a misrepresentation of the liberation theologians. Their faith-concept, he argues, is purely private (only motivating action) without

19. Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism," 248.

20. Ibid., 229. "In Latin America what has been sought for is the elusive goal of 'development'..."

21. Ibid., 242. "For Gutiérrez, secularization results in the total *politicization* of everything, meaning by this that a Weberian formality of power – bureaucratic, positive, instrumental rationality – dominates all human transactions in the modern age...and Clodovis Boff (urges acceptance of) a Machiavellian ethics related to the preservation of sovereign power, and the balancing of forces within the modern state".

22. Nicholas Lash, "Not Exactly Politics or Power?", *Modern Theology* 8 (4 October 1992): 357.

being able to imagine any social program of their own. So they will have to look for a program elsewhere; in this case, Marxist revolutionary praxis. Just as Western Christians engaged in secular jobs find in religion a motivation to do their job better, so too, will Latin American Christians, inspired by their faith, struggle harder for liberation (and more ruthlessly perhaps) than non-believers.

The Question of Mediations

Milbank makes a caricature of liberation theology. He does so by giving a biased interpretation of Rahner's 'supernatural existential' and Clodovis Boff's reflection on the status of theology. I limit myself to his overkill of Boff.

Milbank starts by stressing the importance of developing a theological gaze upon history and society and refers to Aquinas and his definition of theology. For Aquinas, theology is "formally about God and materially about everything else, in so far as it relates to God."[23] Boff does the same but refuses to direct this gaze upon "an unprepared text."[24] For him, one must already know what are the burning issues and the solutions proposed to structurally resolve them before one can begin to relate this panorama to how things should look like from the perspective of God. The theologian must take into account certain data offered by the social sciences. If not, one threatens to develop a totally a-historical theology that flattens out all conflicting tensions and to reconcile them in God. To avoid this, Boff draws a distinction between 'first theology' (which gives a special emphasis to the world's primal and final completion in God) and a 'second theology' (which is a 'theology of the political'). Such a 'second theology' will be more realistic, because here the theological gaze allows itself to be cross-fertilized by a sociological gaze.

Nonetheless his concern is with giving 'primacy' to the theological gaze. In order to uphold this 'primacy' he makes use of insights developed by Althusser to reach a higher synthesis in interdisciplinary research – the results of one discipline can be received as material for reflection in another. Data which have been processed and clarified by discipline 'A' will be offered to discipline 'B' not just as a result that is going to flatly determine the reflection in 'B' but as a 'raw material' upon which discipline 'B' is going to reflect in accordance with its own methodological gaze. The 'gaze' of a theology of the political reworks what sociology has to offer as a 'food for thought'.

23. Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism," 235. See Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis*: *Epistemological Foundations* (New York: Orbis, 1987), 90.
24. Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism," 247.

Aquinas made use of the 'results of philosophy' to crown them with a theological gaze. But when one replaces philosophy with sociology, the 'reworking' carried out by theology is forced to take a practical stance under the pressure of sociological data brought to its attention. This procedure echoes the prophetic rather than the wisdom-tradition and therefore dares to declare: in this concrete case 'human liberation is God's salvation'. Milbank does not even mention Boff's distinction between first and second theology. For him the statement 'human liberation is God's salvation' is tautological and reduces theology to the most vacuous of tasks: announcing the empty, algebraic equation liberation = (equals) salvation".[25] He comes to this equation because he regards sociology as having the pretension of giving a full account of things. So then, when it comes to pit two 'perfect' systems – theology and sociology – against each other, it is clear that theology must repudiate, as an usurpation, any input from sociology.

Here again he does not give justice to Boff for whom sociology is never 'once and for all' in its description but calls attention to ever-new facts other sciences tend to forget. In Latin America such a new fact is the plight of the exploited masses; to examine this then he takes as his heuristic tool the class analysis of historical materialism. But at the same time he calls for vigilance. For no sociological school whatsoever that tends to absolutize its findings and dismiss the test of reality can have serious credit. What seems not to alter in Boff, however, is the 'option from below'. For the rest he insists on being alert to the changing results of (even leftist) sociologies.[26]

If social analysis – also the one conducted 'from below' – is not static, then neither is the theological production that builds upon it static. This becomes evident in Boff's model of "correspondence of relationships" which he uses when doing hermeneutics. Here he rejects a 'once and for all' identification of the 'sinful' and 'saving' constellations. Such a static identification is to be found in the hermeneutics of "correspondence of terms" which operates with simple equations between 'then' and 'now'. Yet, Boff seeks to go beyond the literal application of texts and works toward incarnating the spirit of the old texts and practices within the new circumstances. Concern about the suffering destitute, then, must now translate itself not in terms of almsgiving but in terms of empowerment: to make them stand up for their human dignity. This way the term 'human liberation' retains

25. Ibid., 248.

26. From Marxism, Boff wants to retain the 'methodological indications' or guidelines that help us better understand the vital needs of the poor masses. Key-guidelines are "the importance of economic factors, attention given to class struggle, and the mystifying power of ideologies, religious ideologies included.

'organic homosemy' with soteriological themes from the past. This is so because the actual inhuman conditions, to which social analysis sensitizes us, have become a genuine *locus theologicus*. The theological gaze perceives these situations and the aspirations towards liberation emerging from it "as charged with an objective salvific signification of grace or sin".[27] It does not just apply ideas of salvation to reality but purifies them from too spiritual connotations and anchors them in the down-to-earth reality of social suffering and pain.

All this makes it clear what we really have to do with a theological reworking of the 'text' offered by social sciences. The result of this reworking is a theological gaze that is not restricted to the confines of the church but goes beyond it so as to venture itself in the vicissitudes of human temporality – two aspects that are regrettably missing in Milbank's project.

Conclusion

Modern theology is at stake in this discussion and the way it succeeded in creating an openness towards the world, as well as in theologizing from a particular *locus theologicus* in the secular milieu. Indeed, nowadays it has become fashionable to theologize in opposition to modernity and by the same token, to minimize, if not to reject, the achievements of theologians who critically dialogued with modernity. In terms of mediations, this means that 'modern ways of thinking' can no longer be viewed as valid or relevant instruments to reflect on revelation in accordance with the needs of the time. Yet, I am convinced that some basic patterns of 'modern theology' must be continued and transmitted to the next generations. For to do this is better and more promising than to engage in so called postmodern theologies that covertly or overtly turn back to pre-modern thinking and opt for a ghettoising type of church life.

What are the good things in modern theology that should be kept alive? I list a few of them: (i) the view that human beings are actors of their histories and this collectively shared responsible autonomy is part of their being created into the image of God; (ii) that religiosity is not just a matter of 'churchy-ness' but also demands that the deep concerns religion stands for be extended to the whole of our 'being in the world'. The most deeply secular concerns are also the most deeply religious concerns. To try to stop the growth of abject poverty and illiteracy among the weakest sectors of the global village is an act of religiosity and not just of humanism; (iii) that modern theology possesses the instruments to perceive and to denounce the derailments and atrocities of modernity's calculating, instrumental

27. Boff, 88.

reason (a calculation which constitutes the backbone of economic globalisation today); (iv) that modern theology is not a monolithic bloc but a basic way of thinking which can take on various forms in various continents. Latin American liberation theology is an offspring of modern theology (cross-fertilised by Marxism) but an offspring having its own character. And so is Dalit-theology with its struggle against casteism in the name of liberty, equality and fraternity; (v) that God's offer of grace has a universal ambit and cannot be seen as confined to the solely baptized C*hristo-fideles*. God's spirit also works elsewhere, outside the confines of the church, in the hearts and minds of peoples of other religions and of those having no affiliation to any religion at all.

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