

The church as a human construction in the theology of John Milbank

In my phd-research, I am investigating the phenomenon of the last decennia in which the church and ecclesiology have recurred as a fundamental theme in theological writing. I focus on three authors: John Milbank, Stanley Hauerwas and Nicholas Healy, and furthermore compare this movement to the revival of ecclesiology in the early twentieth century in Roman Catholic theology.

In this presentation I would like to focus on one of the more important sources in my research. It is John Milbank's work *Theology and Social Theory*, which has been very influential in this recent turn to the church. Specifically, I would like to focus on one very interesting ecclesiological consequence of the viewpoints Milbank develops in this book: the conviction that the church is essentially *man made*. This aspect is, I think, of eminent importance to properly value its contribution to ecclesiology.

Therefore, after briefly introducing *Theology and Social Theory*, I will discuss Milbank's elaboration on what it means to 'make', an argument which plays a fundamental part throughout his thesis. Furthermore, I will explain how this concept of 'making' influences Milbank's ecclesiology. Finally, I will sketch some lines that I think are worth taking note of.

I look forward your contributions, questions and corrections in the plenary discussion.

Brief introduction to Milbank and *Theology and Social Theory*

Currently research professor of religion at the University of Nottingham, Milbank wrote the work I just mentioned, 'Theology and Social Theory', in 1989. *Theology and Social Theory* is a full-frontal attack against a certain type of reason to which modernity, claims Milbank, has far too often fallen victim. Milbank labels this 'secular reason'. Secular reason is a dangerous problem for theology, he says, because it falsely appears as neutral and objective but is in fact in its most fundamental propositions directly contradicting the Christian worldview.

One of the most fundamental errors from a Christian perspective is the way secular reason views the world as being closed in itself. This rationality thinks of itself as a method of strictly describing the immanent without needing any reference to any transcendent realm. And even though secular reason does not necessarily deny transcendence, it renders it superfluous for our understanding of the finite world. What is left is an immanent world empty of transcendental values, a world in which there is nothing but arbitrary competing forces and powers at war. Secular reason, says Milbank, is essentially a nihilistic worldview.

However, not the whole of modern thought has been victim of this secular, nihilistic, worldview. Milbank does not want to equate the whole of modernity to secular reason. He points to certain humanists and later philosophers who developed or at least hinted at a 'counter-modernity': Nicholas of Cusa, Giambattista Vico, Hamann, Herder, Maurice Blondel. They were able to view the world in relationship with God, not by restoring medieval thought, but from a typical modern perspective.

We might say that this is Milbank's project: he wants to search for clues in modernity that help to relate this world to God again, clues that show that the boundary between the immanent and the transcendent are less clear than secular reason wants us to believe. Milbank wants to 'heal' modernity from the violent nihilism which it suffers.

The transcendental aspect of making

One of these clues found by Milbank is the renaissance obsession with human making. During the renaissance, human beings were placed in the center of attention. Early humanists were fascinated by the ability of people to create and act, to make new things, to come up with new ideas, to change the world around them.

In secular reason, this has been seamlessly translated into the notion of the sovereignty of human beings. When things are made by human beings, there is no need whatsoever to explain them in terms of the divine. Culture becomes the realm where human beings are independent of the infinite.

However, says Milbank, equally there have been humanist thinkers who interpreted this human ability precisely as something that relates us to the divine. These humanists - Nicholas of Cusa or Giambattista Vico to name a few- were full-fledged humanist but not in any sense 'secularists'. They may point us to a countermodernism, says Milbank, where modernism relates us to the transcendent, rather than cutting us off from it.

Secular making

In secular reason, the world is seen as a finite realm which can be manipulated by autonomous human agents. Let's take the example of a potter. From a secular perspective, a potter is a man with in his mind an idea of a vessel. He is free to think of any vessel, he is autonomous after all. Now, when he creates the vessel, he imposes his idea to the clay.

This example shows how in the secular conception of making the maker is the cause and the product is the effect.¹ Also, transcendental notions of 'beauty' or 'goodness' are irrelevant. Of course, it may be important that the vessel can be sold in order for the man to make a living, so it has to be beautiful in the sense that it accords to a certain taste, but that is still an immanent notion and need not be seen as referring to God or celestial beauty.²

Countermodern making

From the humanist Vico, but also from later philosophers like Blondel, Milbank learns another conception. These philosophers start not with distinguishing and then causally relating the maker and the product, but by focussing on the creative process itself. In this 'countermodern' view, emphasis is laid on the uncertainty of the process. Making is by trial and error, an uncertain process with unintended outcomes. If we make something, says Milbank, it 'proceeds from us': the result is out of our control.

From this perspective, it makes no sense to talk about the 'original' idea of the artist. Ideas, concepts, theory: they are only possible stages in the process of making. It is only *in the making* that we reflect on the product, that we are able to criticize the product and say for example: 'this is not what I intended', which then means 'now that I see it, I am beginning to see more clearly what my initial dim idea *should have been*.' Also, we do not have a preliminary conception of beauty or goodness which we then simply 'actualize' by creating.

¹ In fact, the view of imposing an idea on matter is discussed in the context of Aristotelian thought on page 355. However, for our purpose, it is fitting for a description of secular making in general, cf. 40-42.

² John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Cambridge, Mass., USA: B. Blackwell, 1991, 34. (In the following, all page numbers without further reference point to this work)

Rather, says Milbank, by creating we try to find out what it means to be beautiful, we try to grasp towards something that we do not know yet.

An idea that slowly dawns upon us, grasping towards the unknown: here, the concept of the maker is 'intruded' by the notion of transcendence. It is in making something, says Milbank, that the autonomous human being creatively surrenders itself to the infinite,³ by a intuition of beauty or goodness or a sense of meaning. In this 'countermodernist' view, human making is not at all a celebration of immanent human autonomy, but rather a blurry interplay between human beings and the transcendent, in such a way that one can no longer distinguish between the two: the natural has been taken up in a supernatural process of creativity.

In this light, we might understand how Milbank says that human agents do not assist, but *participate* in Gods creativity through the process of making, just as medieval mystics sought to participate in God by contemplating him.⁴ Creative making now is the modern equivalent of mystic contemplation.

Ecclesiology: or the church as human construction

Just as making is open to the infinite, so too, says Milbank, is *doing*.⁵ In doing, just as in making, someone changes the world around him according to a certain dim intention, of which the implications are always unknown and always exceed it. In this context, Milbank quotes Maurice Blondel saying: "God acts in this action, and that is why the thought that follows the act is richer by an infinity than that which precedes it."⁶

We must remember this, whenever Milbank speaks of practices. With this, he does not simply use the late Wittgensteinian concept of practice - where practices are performances which give our words meaning-, but he explicitly opens up the perspective towards the supernatural. The church, according to Milbank, is a certain practice, a way of life or a "mode of action"⁷, performed by people, but through which God acts and speaks to us.

Now this could seem to mean that there is on the one hand a way of life, and on the other hand people who perform this way of life. With the metaphor of the potter and the clay, we may now see how this is *not* Milbank's view. Just as the making of the vessel is fundamental for the forming of the idea of the vessel, the performance is fundamental to conceptualize the way of life.

This is an important difference between Milbank and other contemporary theologians who also in some ways want to stress that Christianity is first and foremost a *praxis*. Take for example George Lindbeck. He is known for his view on the gospels as paradigmatic narratives for Christian living, and his view on doctrine which is an *explication* of these

³ See also 251.

⁴ Wolter Huttinga, "Participation and Communicability. Herman Bavinck and John Milbank on the relation between God and the world", diss. Theologische Universiteit Kampen, 2014, 164.

⁵ On the identity of making and doing, see 356.

⁶ 210.

⁷ 380.

paradigmatic narratives. Christian praxis then comes first, and doctrine points out which practices are misperformed by better explicating what the gospel narrative in fact means.⁸

Or take liberation theology, with its practical emphasis.⁹ Its adherents, says Milbank, read the gospel as exemplifying how Christ's intentions were forming a certain praxis, fitting for that time and place. With the gospel as major example, then, they say, it is the duty of every age to find the most fitting praxis for that time which leads to Christ's intention.¹⁰

Although both Lindbeck and liberation theologians seem to prioritize the praxis, they do so in a way fundamentally different from Milbank's. In fact they prioritize a *concept* of a specific praxis, which still is measured by a logically prior idea. They do not recognize the fact that formation of doctrine and of praxis, just as formation of the potter's idea, is creative in nature. Against Lindbeck, Milbank wants to hold that the formulation of doctrine always changed church practice, and not simply by reaffirming something that was present already implicitly,¹¹ for it was creative in nature. Against liberation theology, he holds that finding the right praxis is not a clear matter of 'scientific exegesis' but of creative imagination through which we may hope that the spirit of God acts.

Milbank's perspective thus rests on the interesting claim that Christian praxis is *not* fully anticipated by the gospels. Christian praxis is always again a creative and new interpretation of the historical (bound by time and space) life of Jesus, not a weak copy of an ahistorical idea.¹² This reinterpretation is not carried out merely theoretically, but equally in praxis. Just as it is mistaken to imagine a potter with an idea in his head, which then is imposed on the clay,; so too is it mistaken to imagine the church having a clear conception of the kingdom of God, trying to impose this on its contemporary circumstances. It is *through creative praxis* that we, says Milbank, develop the Church.

According to Milbank, this does not mean that it is completely arbitrary in which way Church tradition develops (or 'unfolds'). But the standards with which we should evaluate the Church praxis are not simply available to us, they belong to the realm of God which we can only imaginatively grasp, and its true essence can be "only seen in the course of its unfolding."¹³

Conclusion

If Milbank is right, 'Thinking the church today' - the theme of our present conference - is already by its very essence a direct negation of the secular worldview which views the world as fundamentally chaotic and closed off towards transcendence. By creatively imagining the shape of Christ, in speculative theology like that of today, just as in the daily actions of charity that we as church perform, we already participate in the most fundamental peaceful reality of infinite divine love.

'Thinking the church today' must therefore first of all be an appeal to the imagination, to our creativity. The church needs creative praxis, and it should never be content to stick

⁸ Milbank counters this view by saying: "We do not relate to the story of Christ by schematically applying its categories to the empirical content of whatever we encounter. Instead, we interpret this narrative in a response which inserts us in a narrative relation to the 'original' story." 387.

⁹ 237.

¹⁰ This could also be said of the calvinist theologian Tim Keller, cf. his *Center Church*.

¹¹ On doctrine of incarnation as a radical innovative moment, see 384.

¹² Milbank labels this idea the "ahistorical, gnostic Christ", 387.

¹³ 430.