Radical Orthodoxy, Political Ecclesiologies, and the Secular State

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Introduction

Most people recognize the separation of Church and State to be one of the fundamental values of America. This view can be characterized as Secular Modernity, where the public sphere is seen as a religiously neutral ground. Those who oppose this separation are usually Christian Evangelicals (and sometimes Roman Catholics) who are a part of a conservative movement that began in the 1970's with the goal of creating greater influence over politics. Even so, most Evangelicals would still recognize that the U.S. Government should not establish its own church, but should rather be influenced by their own brand of conservative Christian values. Thus, most Americans will agree that some level of separation between the Church and the State is warranted, the disagreement is instead over just how much separation there ought to be. The historical precedent is certainly in favor of a separation in America. Thomas Jefferson famously interprets (in a letter to a worried Baptist minister) the First Amendment to be a "wall of separation between church and State" which the supreme court has used in a number of court cases (Wiecek). Article II of the English version of the Treaty of Tripoli went so far as to state that the U.S. Government is in no way founded on the Christian religion.

There is, however, another position besides those of the Religious Right and that of Secular Modernity. Radical Orthodoxy is a theological disposition that draws from post-modern philosophy in order to critique modernism.

They are heavily influenced by the pre-modern philosophical lineage of Aquinas-Augustine-Aristotle-Plato and argue that the opposition of faith and reason is a corruption of the Christian position (Doak).

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They argue that this opposition is the cause of Secular Modernity, and thus it is in truth a theological heresy. Instead, they offer a number of political ecclesiologies (accounts of the socio-political mission of the Church) that ought to replace notions of a secular public space. They also hold that without belief in God, nihilism is inevitable. Thus they seek to return theology to the position of being Queen of the Sciences (by having all fields understood through a theological ontology) because science without a theological ontology is inherently atheistic and thus nihilistic. In fact, all efforts to find value will fail without belief in God (Doak) according to this view. Their positions do not fit well with the Religious Right either, since the Radical Orthodox generally see the Church and government both having a role in promoting the common good (often in the form of Christian Socialism) that the Right would oppose. Likewise, the Radical Orthodox see Fundamentalism as a product of the separation of faith from reason (and thus a corruption) and that the Religious Right in general depend too much (ironically) on modernist philosophical assumptions particularly in regards to economics.

While there are a variety of political ecclesiologies offered by Radical Orthodoxy they all see some role for the Church in public life. I will highlight three of those views: Remnant Christianity, Anarchic Oppositionalism, and Critical Engagement. Using these three perspectives I will critically engage secular modernity by investigating the philosophical assumptions it is based on beginning with Duns Scotus and continuing with Hobbes and Locke. Finally, I will demonstrate that the appropriate role for the Church is to be critically engaged with public life as argued by Graham Ward.

Duns Scotus

For the Radical Orthodox, it is the medieval philosopher and theologian Duns Scotus who began the separation of reason and revelation and influenced modern philosophy (Pickstock). The fundamental shift was Scotus' rejection of analogy in favor of a univocity of being. For Scotus, the language we use means the same thing regardless of what kind of thing we are talking about. When I say John is good, it means the same thing as when I say God is good. The difference is merely one of degree. In contrast, the analogical view holds that when I say God is good, I can only understand what that means as an analogy to when I say John is good.

This is because the relationship God has to goodness is fundamentally different from the relationship John has to goodness.

The change from analogy to univocity means that being itself is now common to both God and creatures. This allows for existence without God to be imaginable. Likewise, mankind is no longer seen as participating in God's perfection and the continuity of reason and revelation is lost. "[In the analogical view] reason itself was drawn upwards by divine light, while, inversely, revelation involved the conjunction of radiant being and further illuminated mind"(Pickstock). For the univocal view, our fallen reason ought to be focused on the finite; in a closed system separated from revelation. Along with this division of faith and reason, there are a number of other consequences to the univocity of being. Scotus tries to maintain God's transcendence by saying the degree of difference between Creator and creature is huge. But even so, we are left with a God who is of the same kind as his creations and thus is not truly transcendent. We also see a proto-liberalism where humans are not seen as social animals with an extrinsic teleology but instead are autonomous individuals gifted with freedom by God.

Now, it may be argued that univocity of being adheres closest to an easily understandable logic and so we are simply stuck with the consequences of such a view. It does indeed seem to be the case that our language implies a univocity of being. The problem is that this fails to take into account the intellectual context that Scotus was writing in. There was already an established tradition in Oxford to recognize univocity within the field of logic but not within metaphysics/physics (Pini). This even helps to explain Scotus' own views as written in *Questions on the Metaphysics* where he seems to move away from what would be obvious metaphysical conclusions to his logical univocity. This is because to argue that ontology is bound to this logic is to "have already assumed an ontological priority of rational possibility over actuality"(Pickstock). For the Radical Orthodox, a priori assumptions such as these put modernity on a level field with Christianity. For Radical Orthodoxy, Christianity simply holds to a different set of a priori assumptions. For example, our existence is dependent on our participating in God's existence (who is unlike us by having existence as his essence).

Thomas Hobbes

While Duns Scotus had laid the groundwork for secular thought it would be later philosophers who would actually institute the secular. The most influential of these philosophers is Thomas Hobbes.

With the separation of faith and reason it became the natural world that was the realm of reason. So, in this context Hobbes set about to understand the psychology of mankind as a natural creature as well as develop a political science. It should be noted however, that Hobbes' project is not merely the rolling back of theological presuppositions in order to arrive at some sort of neutral territory. Rather, certain theological ideas are being replaced with new ones, ideas about creation, teleology, and God (Oliver).

Following Augustine, Christianity saw the natural state as a peaceful one. Violence is an intrusion into what is originally peaceful (Oliver). Evil itself was understood to be the absence of good and not a force in its own right. In contrast, Hobbes introduces an 'ontology of violence' wherein violence is seen as the natural state of mankind and of nature (Milbank). Hobbes describes this natural state as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Forces (including God) are now seen as competing agents battling for power. Likewise, evil becomes a force of its own, a thing in its own right that is a part of reality.

Society is now viewed as being made up of competing expressions of power, in which differences become a threat to social order. The individualism of capitalist politics is an example of this, wherein society itself is seen as a mere construct, a conglomerate of individuals (Oliver). It is for this reason that Hobbes proscribes an absolute monarch to be in everyone's best interests. If a will to power is the 'basic state,' then give all the power to a single entity who can flatten differences and maintain peace through the monopoly of violence.

Radical Orthodoxy

This change over of theological ideas by Hobbes are then adopted and defended within the field of modern social theory (Milbank). In response, conservative theologians have attempted to build up the boundaries of theology within the realm of revelation in an attempt to protect it from the heresy implicit within secular modernity.

Likewise, liberal theologians have tried to integrate theology into various fields of thought without consideration to the incompatibility of Christian theology with the ontology of violence that modernity is built upon (Oliver). But, both the conservative and the liberal reaction position theology as a marginal and merely partial discourse.

This is why Radical Orthodoxy seeks to provide its own metadiscourse and refuses to adopt the presumption of Modernity that reason is separate from God.

Milbanks in particular is critical of the notion that a Christian peace can be built upon the ontology of violence that is implicit in modern social theory. The nominalist Christianity of today can only provide a sense of motivation for behavior, but even that is informed by violent and individualist notions inherited by Secular Modernity. Instead, Christianity must return to an ontology of peace built on mutual participation that relies on unity in differences.

This mutual participation and unity in difference comes out of Thomas Aquinas' analogia entis, or the analogy of being (Oliver). In this view, God is the only thing that exists in himself. His essence *is* existence. In contrast, our own existence is only in relation to God. God is the only true substance and we are merely accidents. It should be noted however that this should not be taken as a pantheism nor as theological idealism. The universe is not only God's body nor is it just an idea in God's mind. This is due to the neoplatonic concept of participation. In the Platonic sense of participation 'being' is a gift from God to Creation, wherein substantial entities participate in God's existence. This of course differs from Plato himself because creation for Christians is a continual gift from God (as opposed to an ordering will upon a chaotic universe). At every moment God creates from nothing. This is why notions of a secular space are a theological heresy. It is the distortion of the Christian understanding of God. This is also why theology ought to be queen of the sciences, "every discipline must be framed by a theological perspective; otherwise these disciplines will define a zone apart from God, grounded literally in nothing"(Milbank). This should be tempered however, by saying that Radical Orthodoxy is not seeking to collapse every discipline into theology. Rather, every discipline should be participating with theology just as creation itself participates with the being of God. Anything else suggests that God is irrelevant to truth (Oliver).

Remnant Christianity

For Milbank, the mission of Christian theology ought to be defending the Christian-narrated practice of peace so as to demonstrate the mistake of presuming an ontology of violence. Christianity, with it's story of "a redemptive reunion in a harmony amid differences made possible by God"(Doak) offers the better story.

This will allow the Church's practice of repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and the Eucharist itself to be reclaimed as the political practices that they are. True justice is only possible within the Church, where salvation is offered through Christ by being incorporated into the community he founded. A community that practices forgiveness and reconciliation based on their understanding and commitment to God. The secular state can thus never attain true justice because it is built upon assumptions of violence that prevent a shared commitment to a common goal.

However, the Church for Milbank should not replace the State. The State is seen as necessary for continuing to exert a coercive and violent rule over those who are not members of a community that maintains a unity-in-difference. The Church as such a community is to be built up and offer a non-coercive witness to the world. The State itself can even be influenced and brought in line by politically active Christians so long as it does not contradict the coercive nature of the state. Christendom should seek to subsume society peacefully through the practice of reconciliation.

The danger, then, of Milbank's political ecclesiology is the lack of religious freedom it offers. Non-Christians in a Christian majority would be marginalized as societies socio-economic systems are absorbed into the Church (Doak). The goal of increasing Christian influence over the State also seems too similar to the goal of the Religious Right that the Radical Orthodox would criticize. The bleakest of all conclusions from this political ecclesiology is that it would appear no peace and justice are possible outside those in shared Christian communities. This seems to directly contradict the notion of unity-in-difference because no peace is possible between those of different religions.

Anarchic Oppositionalism

Cavanaugh draws on Milbank's understanding of the State (but leads to different conclusions) in the development of his own political ecclesiology.

He sees the State as inherently violent but differs with Milbank because he does not believe that the State exists to keep order. Rather, the State developed by seizing power from local communities for the interests of an elite few that were benefitting from the emerging capitalist system (Doak). Because of the nature of the State, it is only able to create unity through the development of a common enemy and with periodic wars.

The State and Church then, are actively against each other. Christianity preaches peace while "violence [is] the state's religio, its habitual discipline for binding us one to another" (Cavanaugh). Thus the secular state itself, it turns out, is not actually secular at all. It is instead, a civic religion complete with a liturgy. A number of patriotic rituals for inducing memories and a sense of community have been developed including symbols, flags, music, and even elections themselves. Where people once felt loyalty to their local communities, the late nineteenth century saw the invention of rituals intended to develop a sense of national identity. Where the state has mostly superseded local loyalties it also competes with the church on these same religious grounds. The Secular State, of course, cannot identify itself outright as sacred. Rather, it continues to use secular language while acting as if it is sacred. Cavanaugh points out that it is rather telling that:

"among those who identify themselves as Christians in the United States, there are very few who would be willing to kill in the name of the Christian God, whereas the willingness under certain circumstance, to kill and die for the nation in war is generally taken for granted."

For Cavanaugh, the role of the Church is to act in opposition to the State by developing it's own political communities built on Christian practices of peace and reconciliation. Instead of centralized authority, the Church would be a part of and foster local 'overlapping communities' which would serve as a decentralized government (Doak). The Church, while being in opposition to the violence of the State should not cloister itself. Rather, it could work with the State and larger community in service of combating another particular evil but Christians should still avoid acting as the State does.

This political ecclesiology ends up with similar concerns as Milbank's Remnant Christianity. If peace can only be found in Christian communities then we are again left with little hope for relations between Christians and non-Christians. This undermines the very concept of unity-in-difference which is central to the Radical Orthodox view (Doak). The outlook is perhaps even bleaker for Anarchic Oppositionalism, because now the Church is actively opposed to the State, which seems to be the only protection offered to non-Christians. Indeed, the great risk of condemning any government with a central authority is the lack of recourse minorities would have (Doak).

Each local community would have free reign to oppress any minorities within it's lands. Finally, we are left with questions of what exactly the Church as an alternative political community is suppose to look like. Remnant Christianity suffers from this same problem but it is much more central to the view of Anarchic Oppositionalism and we are left without any clear answers.

Critical Engagement

For Ward, it is the city which is the most relevant political organization in our globalized world. So it is in relation to the city that Ward examines the secular and the Church. For him our current, postmodern cities can be characterized by desire, overconsumption, and hyper individualism (Doak). It is in this individualism that faith became a private affair and the goals and aspirations of modernism fell into a kind of nihilism. This further lead to alienation and a lack of any sense of mutual participation which can be characterized by support and care of one another.

The Church then, should live out its 'Eucharistic faith' characterized by peace, care, and reconciliation. Because we do live in mutual participation with God and Creation (as understood by neoplatonists) the Church will have an influence on society as a whole simply by living out its faith. Christians then should seek to build up their communities instead of trying to use the Church to oppose or be an alternative to the community. The goal is an Augustianian one, wherein Christians build up a City of God within their secular societies that can only be separated by divine judgement (Ward). Theologians then, are able to critically engage with their societies by offering a critique of their foundational symbols and myths. In other words, the secular governments, and all social bodies (including the Church) should be engaged with in order to escape nihilistic consumerism.

While Critical Engagement does take the Christian perspective to be of particular relevance it still leaves room for non-Christians in a way the other political ecclesiologies do not (Doak). Ward recognizes that peace and justice can be found outside of the Church, and that the Church can be united with non-Christian communities. He certainly still holds that the secular as a space independent from God is a myth, but he does hold to the secular as a space for non-Christians which affirms the sort of religious freedom that would suggest that peace is the ontologically basic state. Furthermore, Critical Engagement recognizes that non-Christians also have some truths and can critique the Church in order to correct Christianity's blindnesses (Doak).

Conclusion

Our current notions of the secular are built upon a priori assumptions developed largely by Duns Scotus and Thomas Hobbes. Our current social theories build on and defend these assumptions. Even conservative Christians rely on the ontology of violence and the individualism that develops out of that belief. Radical Orthodoxy on the other hand offers an alternative set of a priori assumptions that suggest an ontology of peace and a platonic participation in God. Radical Orthodox thinkers suggest that either position could be defended but that the Christian one avoids the nihilism and violence inherent in Secular Modernity. Instead, communities could live in a peaceful unity-in-difference based on forgiveness and reconciliation. Therefore, the Christian narrative as laid out by Radical Orthodoxy offers the better metanarrative and should be adopted.

These thinkers do however, differ in what political ecclesiology best lives out this Christian metanarrative. I have laid out three of the views: Remnant Christianity, Anarchic Oppositionalism, and Critical Engagement. Critical Engagement is the only one of the three options that is able to successfully proscribe a socio-political mission for the Church that does not interfere with the Christian goal of a just and peaceable society. It does so by allowing religious freedom within a secular society while recognizing the Churches role in redeeming and giving meaning to social institutions without taking them over and marginalizing non-Christians. Remnant Christianity is unable to avoid this problem because the functions of the State would be taken over wherever possible by the Church.

Anarchic Oppositionalism likewise would be unable to avoid this problem because the absence of any form of central authority would leave minority non-Christians outside of the Church's political community. Given these facts, Christian theology should reassert its role in human discourse and argue for an ontology of peace. Likewise, the Church should strive to build up and redeem it's communities in order to save them from consumerism and to be engaged with (and corrected by) non-Christians.

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