Radical Orthodoxy: An Overview
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PART ONE: AN INTRODUCTION

A Brief Overview of the Radical Orthodoxy Movement

In 1990, John Milbank, then reader in the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge University and a fellow of Peterhouse, published his seminal text, *Theology and Social Theory*. This work is generally considered to be the first text in the nascent “Radical Orthodoxy” movement.¹ From this point onward, the mindset that went to create Radical Orthodoxy (hereafter abbreviated RO) has garnered much attention both from within the academic theological world and from without the academic theological world.²

Radical Orthodoxy as a Non-School of Theology

RO is a primarily Anglophone theological movement, arising out of Cambridge University.³ Joining Milbank in his rejection of what he perceives as the secular standards set upon the Church and theology today are other Cambridge faculty and students, primary among them Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock.

It is not a school of theology in the traditional sense of the term. There are no hard and certain rules to which a theologian must subscribe to be part of RO. The three authors mentioned above (Milbank, Pickstock and Ward) all have very different interests in theology and all have very different concepts of how RO needs to operate. They all do, however, have one main concept that dominates their theology: that there should not be an autonomous secular sphere and that there should be an alternative theology to the correlationist theology that seems to dominate in most theological schools.⁴ Catherine Pickstock writes, concerning the relationship between most contemporary theology and RO: “It seems to me that there are no sharp boundaries between radical orthodoxy and other identifiable tendencies within what one might generally call post-secular theology: One can mention, for example, the Yale School,

¹ Graham Ward, in a response to James K.A. Smith argues that *TST* did not define the later project of Radical Orthodoxy and that he and others were already presenting similar themes. See Graham Ward, “In the Economy of the Divine: A Response to James K.A. Smith,” *PNEUMA: Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 25 (2003): 115-116, as well as James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 34, footnote 34.
³ In *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, edited by Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, the editors acknowledge the Cambridge origins of the volume in a two-fold manner: first, in the fact that the majority of the contributors are past or present Cambridge faculty or students and second, in their positive usage of the great philosophers and theologians of the past, they hope to be in line with the Cambridge Platonists like Christopher Smart and Ralph Cudworth. (See Acknowledgements)
⁴ James K.A. Smith posits a sharp contrast between RO and the Tübingen school, among others (*IRO*, 34-42).
Radical Traditions at Duke University, and Scriptural Reasoning, associated with Peter Ochs at the University of Virginia.”

Perhaps it might be best to say that RO is a “school of theology” to the extent that its three main protagonists serve as editors to a series of books entitled the Radical Orthodoxy series. If one were to say what it is that unites such diverse thinkers as Milbank, Pickstock, Ward, William T. Cavanaugh, Frederick Bauerschmidt and Phillip Blond, it might be best expressed in a quote from the introduction to Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology (1999):

The present collection of essays attempts to reclaim the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological framework. Not simply returning in nostalgia to the premodern, it visits sites in which secularism has invested heavily—aesthetics, politics, sex, the body, personhood, visibility, space— and resituates them from a Christian standpoint; that is, in terms of the Trinity, Christology, the Church and the Eucharist. What emerges is a contemporary theological project made possible by the self-conscious superficiality of today’s secularism. For this new project regards the nihilistic drift of postmodernism (which nonetheless has roots in the outset of modernity) as a supreme opportunity. It does not, like liberal theology, transcendentalist theology and even certain styles of neo-orthodoxy, seek in the face of this drift to shore up universal accounts of immanent human value (humanism) nor defences of supposedly objective reason. But nor does it indulge, like so many, in the pretence of a baptism of nihilism in the name of a misconstrued ‘negative theology’. Instead, in the face of the secular demise of truth, it seeks to reconfigure theological truth.

Catholic or Anglican?

Seven of the twelve contributors to Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology (1999) are Anglicans. They are described by Fergus Kerr as “all of a High Church persuasion.” However, five are Roman Catholics. As Kerr notes, “This is not simply a High Anglican project. As we shall see, the project is easy enough to locate, historically and textually, in terms of a controversy internal to Roman Catholic theology throughout most of the twentieth century.” In terms of a strict affiliation to either (or any) denomination of Christianity, Gavin D’Costa writes: “neither of these ecclesial communities ever make their real presence felt…it is a church theology, with no ‘accountability’ to any real church.”

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6 Published by Routledge, these texts are described as follows: “Radical orthodoxy combines sophisticated understanding of contemporary thought, modern and postmodern, with a theological perspective that looks back to the origins of the Church, It is the most talked-about development in contemporary theology.” (See frontispiece of John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, Truth in Aquinas (London/New York: Routledge, 2001).


9 Ibid.

Laurence Paul Hemming declares it “wrong to diagnose there is no ecclesiology at work in the movement.” 11 R. R. Reno posits that a RO ecclesiology is where “predominant Anglican practice could not provide an adequately rich catholic tradition, and the Roman Church, as currently constituted, could not provide an adequate institutional basis for faithfulness to the catholic tradition. Therefore a tradition had to be invented, Of course, the invention was denied.” 12 It is sufficient to state along with Reno that “(T)he three leading figures of Radical Orthodoxy, Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward are Anglican, deeply influenced by the piety and practice of Anglo-Catholicism, and this encourages them to replace particularity with theory, identity with ideality.” 13 It is sufficient to say, for the sake of this brief introduction, that RO is firmly rooted in a British, Cambridge, Anglo-Catholic mentality, but that it holds a bond of loose affiliation with all who which to reject the terms imposed on theology and the Church by secular post-modernity and with those who wish to reclaim an archaeology and application of patristic and medieval texts to the post-modern context. Catherine Pickstock, in describing RO, states: “Radical Orthodoxy can be taken as potentially embracing all those who espouse a basically orthodox theology, but do not regard themselves simply as ecclesiastical or political traditionalists.” 14 She further sums up RO in a very simple manner: “(r)adical orthodoxy has never seen itself as an exclusive movement, but rather as a loose tendency.” 15 John Milbank holds to the catholicity of RO, despite its non-ecclesiastical affiliations: “Radical Orthodoxy, if catholic, is not a specifically Roman Catholic theology; although it can be espoused by Roman Catholics, it can equally be espoused by those who are formally ‘protestant,’ yet whose theory and practice essentially accords with the catholic vision of the Patristic period to the high middle ages.” 16

PART TWO: RADICAL ORTHODOXY AS POSTMODERN CRITICAL AUGUSTINIANISM

Diagnosing the Problem

Radical Orthodoxy seeks to offer an alternative to the postmodern, secular mindset of the work. While engaging in the language of postmodernity, “it rests on a different foundational assumption about what we might call the glue that holds the world together.” 17 R. R. Reno comments:

It is Augustine’s vision of heavenly peace, made effective in the dynamic and binding power of dving purpose, that shapes Radical Orthodoxy’s reflections, not Nietzsche’s violence wrought by an omnipotent will-to-power. This difference allows Radical Orthodoxy to interpret postmodern thought without being drawn into its

13 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Milbank, “The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy,” In RO?- CE, 36.
17 Reno, 37.
orbit, giving Milbank & Co. the perspective from which to expose the nakedness of postmodern nihilism.\(^\text{18}\)

RO has diagnosed the situation of the modern world and it feels it is in grave difficulty. The “endeavors of Radical Orthodoxy are characterized by four crucial claims”\(^\text{19}\):

1. secular modernity is the creation of a perverse theology.
2. the opposition of reason to revelation is a modern corruption.
3. all thought which brackets out God is ultimately nihilistic.
4. the material and temporal realms of bodies, sex, art and sociality, which modernity claims to value, can truly be upheld only by acknowledgement of their participation in the transcendent.

The prime phrase, the mantra, if you will, of RO can be found in the first chapter of Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory* (1991). Milbank writes: “Once, there was no ‘secular’.\(^\text{20}\) Everything for Milbank has a history. Everything has grown and developed within a particular culture and time period. The secular, “which in the Western European tradition is the world interpreted as separated from the stories and practices of the Christian faith- is not a given.”\(^\text{21}\) There is no reason objectively why secular reasoning is the norm. Milbank looks back to the notion of Christendom and speaks of its dual aspects, the *sacerdotium* and the *regnum*.\(^\text{22}\) He contrasts the secular with the *saeculum* and states: “The *saeculum*, in the medieval era, was not a space, a domain, but a time- the interval between fall and eschaton where coercive justice, private property and impaired natural reason must make shift to cope with the unredeemed effects of sinful humanity.”\(^\text{23}\)

These very Augustinian thoughts are one reason why Milbank originally envisioned RO as “Postmodern critical Augustinianism.”\(^\text{24}\) His brief *summa*, with its 42 “unasked questions,” in many ways, is a perfect summary for the main ideas of RO. Milbank writes: “Explication of Christian practice, the task of theology, tries to pinpoint the peculiarity, the difference, of this practice by “making it strange,” finding a new language for this difference less tainted by the overfamiliarity of too many Christian words which tend to obscure Christian singularity.”\(^\text{25}\) It is precisely this “making it strange” that I believe is one of the prime contributions of RO in the age of postmodernity. RO sees all knowledge through the lens of divine illumination, transcending the duality of faith and reason and grace and nature.\(^\text{26}\)

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\(^{18}\) Ibid., 38.

\(^{19}\) *RONT*, frontispiece.


\(^{22}\) Milbank, *TST*, 9.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.

\(^{24}\) Milbank credits Dr. Richard Roberts for the description. See Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” 278.

\(^{25}\) Milbank, “PCA,” 268.

The situation of the contemporary world also lends itself to application of an Augustinian worldview, according to James K. A. Smith.27 Graham Ward comments:

It seems to me we stand, culturally, in a certain relation to Augustine’s thinking. Poised as he was on the threshold between radical pluralism (which he called paganism) and the rise of Christendom, we stand on the other side of that history: at the end of Christendom and the reemergence of radical (as distinct from liberal) pluralism.28

R. R. Reno explains RO as Augustinian with the following:

This ambition to see all creation as matter for redemption explains Radical Orthodoxy’s self-designation as “Augustinian.” The proponents of Radical Orthodoxy do not simply use the heavenly city as a gesture by which to escape from the dead-ends of postmodernism. They want to substitute a Christian and participatory account of the glue that holds the world together for the postmodern and violent one. Only then can theology escape the gravitational pull of the postmodern commitment to power and violence. Once Radical Orthodoxy escapes, under the guidance of a metaphysic of participation, its proponents can show how the diverse features of human life find fulfillment in God’s consummating purposes. The way is open to recover and reconstitute a comprehensive Christian vision.29

How Is It Radical and How Is It Orthodox?

In what sense is RO “radical” and in what sense is it “orthodox”? Milbank, Pickstock and Ward answer this in the introduction to their volume, Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology (1999). It is “radical,” according to these three authors, in the sense of a return to patristic and medieval roots and insofar as attempting to bring an Augustinian vision of all knowledge as illumination to the postmodern world “with an unprecedented boldness.”30 It is “orthodox” insofar as it holds a “straightforward sense of commitment to credal Christianity and the exemplarity of its patristic matrix.”31 It holds a strong attachment to the Christian thought seemingly lost, according to these authors, in the late Middle Ages. Against both strict Protestant fundamentalism and Biblicism, as well as against “post-Tridentine Catholic positivism,”32 RO, in line with nouvelle théologie, wishes to delve into “recovering and extending a fully Christianised ontology and practical philosophy consonant with authentic Christian doctrine.”33 John Montag succinctly analyzes the pitfalls of RO:

Both words- radical and orthodox- have different receptions among different audiences, and their juxtapositions elicits all sorts of reactions. Some who champion ‘orthodoxy’ may bristle at the connotations of ‘radical’; others, priding themselves on their fashionable politics, may run away from ‘orthodoxy.’ Catholics hear a range of

27 Smith, IRO, 46.
29 Reno, 40.
30 Milbank, Ward and Pickstock, RONT, 2.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
tonalities in both words to which even High Church Anglicans often remain deaf; Americans often embrace what the British eschew; and none of these groups cuts cleanly on anything. If Radical Orthodoxy is to find its places, it must avoid becoming a hostage to a variety of political, ecclesial and academic fortunes in an increasingly polarized, postmodern world.34

PART THREE: RADICAL ORTHODOXY AS A NARRATIVE, NON-FOUNDATIONAL AND NON-APoloGETIC THEOLOGY

At the essence, RO is telling a story about the decline of modern Western culture and is searching for a remedy for the problems of modernity. The overall approach taken by RO can be described as “narrative,” “non-foundational” and “non-apologetic.”35 RO is “narrative” in the sense that it is trying to tell a story, the Christian story. This narrative is not shackled by postmodernity’s skeptical relativism but is actually freed to tell the Christian story. If, according to Milbank in Theology and Social Theory, modern secular social theory’s prime governing assumption is “the modification or the rejection of orthodox Christian positions,”36 and that traditional Christian orthodoxy is not justifiable by reason, we can conclude that “(T)here simply are no universally recognized foundations for truth.”37 Thus, RO is “non-apologetic.” This “non-foundational” freedom to posit the Christian story is described by Steven Shakespeare:

Once we accept this, however, we start to understand that the way is opened for particular world-views to tell their story of reality without embarrassment. If secularism is just one more story, it can’t have the last word, So the Christian story can once more be told and heard. Postmodern skepticism clears away the prejudices of the Enlightenment against anything which is not a self-evident, almost mathematical truth.38

Radical Orthodoxy is not a theology of compromise. Acknowledging the myth promulgated by secularism, a myth which states that the cultural and intellectual heritage of the West has nothing to do with Christianity, Milbank writes: “The secular episteme is a post-Christian paganism, something that in the last analysis only to be defined negatively, as a refusal of Christianity and the invention of an “anti-Christianity.”39 Secular liberalism is not value-neutral; it is not a scientifically based objective view of reality and has, in fact, established itself as an alternate religion, opposed to Christianity. RO recognizes the myth of the secular as, in the larger sense, just one more story, a truly malignant and violent one, striving not for tolerance and

35 The roots of this section date back to discussion from a second cycle seminar in Dogmatic Theology on Radical Orthodoxy at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, (The Angelicum), Rome, Italy, in Fall 2012. I am indebted to the professor, Dr. Carsten Barwasser, OP and my classmates, clergy, religious, and laity, for lively discussions and many insights on this topic.
36 Milbank, TST, 1.
37 Shakespeare, 55.
38 Ibid. Smith describes the role of Christian theologian in RO as “empowered to call into question the foundational metaphysical, epistemological, and anthropological assumptions- or faith commitments- that undergird modernity.” In Smith, IRO, 71.
39 Milbank, TST, 280.
reason, but of domination, authoritarianism and conquest. It seeks to reclaim the place of the Christian Church as a viable alternate reality.

The Christian story, by its very nature, according to Milbank, simply has to recommend itself to the world as a story.40 No amount of apologetics can persuade. It should stand by itself as something that is an attractive, compelling world-view. Christianity is a story, but it is one that “encompasses all others,” “a metadiscourse,”41 “the plain unfounded narrative of Christianity which is the only ‘universal’ for those who situate themselves within it.”42

RO claims that Christianity “must seek to master and defeat all other stories, because it is the only story which is able to renounce mastery and domination. In the end, only Christianity can tell a story about everything which is at the same time a story of peace. And it can do this because those who tell the Christian story participate in the mind of God.”43 Going “beyond secular reason,” to use the subtitle of Milbank’s text, the Christian narrative, ultimately consisting of Christ, present in scripture and Church:

Theology purports to give an ultimate narrative, to provide some ultimate depth of description, because the situation of oneself within such a narrative is what it means to belong to the Church, to be a Christian. However, the claim is made by faith, not a reason which seeks foundations.44

“A Nihilistic, Pagan Perversion”

It has been expressed that one of the weakness within the structure of RO is the categorical refusal to engage in any form of correlative theology. There can be no dialogue of any sort with secularity or with anything that is not explicitly Christian. Steven Shakespeare describes this notion as RO’s characterization of “all non-Christian discourse as nihilistic, pagan perversion.”45 He further states that, for RO, “(W)hat is not Christian must be pagan and therefore evil.”46 This lacuna in the thinking of RO is expressed bluntly:

By setting up the terms of engagement in this way, it refuses all dialogue and so refuses any accountability to standards other than those internal to itself. The irony is that the picture of the world that is created is one of incompatible, competing discourses, locked in a war to the death—precisely the kind of agonistic account of reality for which secularism is condemned. Whilst celebrating the participation of time in eternity, infinite in finite, radical orthodoxy cannot extend the logic of this sacramental view beyond its own barriers. Outside the Christian language and field of vision, there is only war and death.47

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40 Smith, *IRO*, 71.
41 Ibid.
42 Milbank, *TST*, 173.
43 Shakespeare, 57.
44 Milbank, *TST*, 249.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
Shakespeare wonders why RO consistently refuses to acknowledge any idea derived from the secular sciences as anything less than evil. He writes: “Radical orthodoxy runs the risk of positing an idealized creation accessible only to the elect (those who can ‘see’) - its own gnostic fantasy of perfection.” 48 This inability to perceive anything of value arising from non-Christian sources will play an important part in the interpretation of Derrida by Catherine Pickstock in the formation of her own theology of Eucharistic Presence.

PART FOUR: REINTERPRETING THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION IN RADICAL ORTHODOXY

Reengaging Tradition

One of the key factors in RO is the sense that the modern world has neglected tradition. RO seeks to engage with thinkers from the past, primarily Plato, Augustine, Aquinas and Duns Scotus. 49 This dialogue is also being carried out with nouvelle théologie. It needs to be mentioned that much of RO’s interpretation of these thinkers has been challenged. “The grand nature of Radical Orthodoxy’s vision, it is said, has led it to play fast and loose with careful readings of its forebears.” 50 For instance, James K.A. Smith holds that RO is placing Plato in too much of a prominent role in the creation of its theology. 51 According to Steven Shakespeare, critics of the positive place afforded to Plato by RO “worry that his philosophy is too world-denying, too hostile to time and the body.” 52 Likewise, Neoplatonism also shapes the thought of RO. According to Smith, RO avoids the “more Gnostic strains of ‘henological’ Neoplatonism that one would find in Plotinus and the Valentinian tradition.” 53 Reno opines: “The Neoplatonic framework so warmly recommended by Radical Orthodoxy offers a theory of identity and meaning based on unity and peace.” 54

It has already been mentioned in this introduction the key place that Augustine of Hippo holds for RO. His thought permeates much of RO’s worldview. This can have exemplified by the use of the phrase “Postmodern critical Augustinianism” to describe the basic tenets of RO according to Milbank 55, as well as recognizing the strong Augustinian elements which permeate all of Milbank’s writings, most especially in Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reasoning (1990). James K. A. Smith comments:

…the substance of Augustine’s thought- in particular his epistemology, his cultural analysis, and his theological vision- resonates with the postfoundationalist project that rejects the autonomy of reason and hence also the autonomy of the sociopolitical

48 Ibid., 169.
49 Shakespeare, RO:CI, 32.
50 Ibid.
52 Shakespeare, RO:CI, 32.
53 Smith, IRO, 48.
54 Reno, 39.
sphere. In short, for Augustine there is no secular, non-religious sphere as construed by modernity; there is only paganism or true worship.\footnote{Smith, IRO, 47.}

**A Platonnic Saint Thomas?**

Thomas Aquinas is a seminal figure for RO and the interpretation of Aquinas by RO, most especially for Milbank and Pickstock. Many disagree with their interpretation of Aquinas, most especially in their understanding of the doctrine of participation and feel that “Radical Orthodoxy imposes the idea of participation on the texts for its own purposes (prime among them which is to deny any role for philosophy independent of theology).”\footnote{Shakespeare, RO:CI, 32. Others who voice strong opposition to RO’s Thomas include Laurence Paul Hemming, “Quod Impossible Est! Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy,” In In Radical Orthodoxy?: A Catholic Enquiry, edited by Laurence Paul Hemming (Burlington, VT/Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000), 75-93; Lawrence Dewan, “On Milbank and Pickstock’s Truth in Aquinas,” Nova et Vetera (English Edition) 1, no. 1 (2003): 199-212; Michael M. Waddell. “Faith and Reason in the Wake of Milbank and Pickstock,” International Philosophical Quarterly 48, no.3 (2008): 381-396; and Wayne J. Hankey, “Why Philosophy Abides for Aquinas,” Heythrop Journal 42 (2001): 329-348.} Smith argues that the Aquinas of RO is “mediated through the lens of the nouvelle théologie and thus a very Augustinian Aquinas who rejects the notion of a ‘universal, natural, unaided human reason.’”\footnote{Smith, IRO, 48.} In this study, we shall examine how Pickstock uses key elements from Thomas Aquinas to construct her Eucharistic theology of substantial presence and evaluate how her use compares to Aquinas’ own concepts. David B. Burrell in his piece, “Radical Orthodoxy: An Appreciation,” summarizes Olivier-Thomas Vénard’s assessment of RO’s understanding of Saint Thomas Aquinas.\footnote{Burrell published “Radical Orthodoxy: an Appreciation,” in Philosophy and Theology 16, No. 1 (2004): 73-76. He uses part of this brief assessment to analyze “Radical Orthodoxy: une première impression,” Revue Thomiste 101 (2001): 409-444.} Burrell points out some of the main aspects of RO’s use of Aquinas: first, theology must be seen as sacra doctrina and second, exactly what sort of Thomism is RO positing. In the first analysis, theology as sacra doctrina, Vénard writes:

> It could sound redundant to present Christian theology as sacra doctrina, were the situation not as I have just described it from the American scene. Certain key factors constitute this description, redolent of the *Summa Theologiae* of Aquinas: creation and participation, faith as a mode of knowing, and reliance on the sources of the Christian faith-tradition for guidance in assessing current preoccupations. The inclusion of creation, with participation, signals a deconstruction of the neo-Thomist separation of philosophy from theology, presaged by Josef Pieper’s prescient remark that creation is the “hidden element” in the philosophy of Aquinas (Pieper 1957). For if Aquinas’s own appropriation of Hellenic philosophies turned on the axial asseveration of free creation, then we ought at least be way of appropriating enlightenment philosophies predicated on removing that obstacle to autonomous human freedom.\footnote{Burrell, 74.}

As for an assessment of Thomism in RO, Burrell points to *Truth in Aquinas* by Milbank and Pickstock as a prime example of a RO Thomism. He notes that TA features “a trenchant argument relating faith to reason intrinsically, thereby elevating
faith to an operative presupposition of knowing, so articulating the manner in which theology is understood as *sacra doctrina*.“

Burrell describes the Aquinas of RO as a “decidedly ‘neo-Platonic’ Aquinas, beholden to Augustine’s proposal of divine illumination to secure our knowing as a quest for truth, and so incorporating a dialectic between *reason* and *faith* redolent of John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio*.“

**The Villain of the Piece: Duns Scotus**

John Duns Scotus is considered by RO, to phrase it rather bluntly, to be the “villain of this piece”, according to RO. His concepts of univocity is believed by RO to be the primary factor in the loss of an analogical sense of reality, which, in turn leads to a distortion of an authentically Christian understanding of God. The effects of Scotus’ denial of the analogy and promotion of univocity and nominalism leads to the Enlightenment, which in turn, leads to modernity, which in turn leads to the secular state of postmodernity. This pejorative interpretation of Scotus by RO is perhaps the most controversial piece of RO’s theological and philosophical genealogy. Shakespeare writes: “Whether or not it is an accurate interpretation of his work, however, its role in Radical Orthodoxy’s story of how we got where we are today is undeniable.“

**Henri de Lubac and nouvelle théologie**

Authors associated with the Roman Catholic nouvelle théologie movement, who themselves went back to the patristic and medieval periods and reinterpreted the tradition, are now themselves also being reinterpreted by RO for its own reading of the Christian tradition. Among the fathers of *ressourcement* who plays a huge role in the formation of the thought of RO is Henri de Lubac. He is a prime inspiration to both John Milbank and to Catherine Pickstock. Milbank writes: “Radical Orthodoxy considers that Henri de Lubac was a greater theological revolutionary than Karl Barth, because in questioning a hierarchical duality of grace and nature as discrete stages he transcended, unlike Barth, the shared background assumption of all modern theology. In this way one could say, anachronistically, that he inaugurated a postmodern theology.”

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61 Ibid., 75.
62 Ibid.
65 See especially John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005). Milbank contents that de Lubac was about to reject any natural knowledge of God as well as pure reason without participation in the Divine.
“Tradition Within the Tradition”

Laurence Paul Hemming, by way of a final assessment of RO writes: “Radical orthodoxy does not lead us into how to ‘re-think the tradition’; rather it presents us with a vision of what the tradition looks like as rethought.”67 It is precisely reading a “tradition within the tradition”68 which makes RO such a fascinating aspect of contemporary Anglo-American theology.

PART FIVE: THREE PRIMARY PHILOSOPHICAL THEMES OF RADICAL ORTHODOXY

Participation

Were one to pinpoint what philosophical themes primarily inform RO, one would have to give participation pride of place. Olivier-Thomas Venard states: “La maître mot de la métaphysique radicale-orthodoxe est participation. Pour elle, tout ce qui n’est que d’être plus ce qu’il est. La densité des choses réelles est soutenue par une densité plus grande, au-delà de toute dialectique entre le dense et e léger celle de leur Créateur.”69

The Platonic notion of participation (methexis) has been described by the architects behind RO as its “central theological framework.”70 Milbank, Pickstock and Ward state “any alternative configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God,”71 that will, ultimately lead to nihilism. Participation permits the finite its own natural integrity without encroaching on the territory of the Divine. The editors of Radical Orthodoxy (1999) believe that participation extends to all aspects of life, including each academic discipline.

Underpinning the present essays, therefore, is the idea that every discipline must be framed by a theological perspective; otherwise these disciplines will define a zone apart from God, grounded literally in nothing. Although it might seem that to treat of diverse worldly phenomena such as language, knowledge, the body, aesthetic experience, political community, friendship, etc., apart from God is to safeguard their worldliness, in fact, to the contrary, it is to make even this worldliness disappear.72

Steven Shakespeare, in his text, Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction (2007), summarizes RO’s use of the doctrine of participation in two simple rules:

**Rule One** Participation is not identity. The being of the world (or our own human being) is not the same as God’s. Only by keeping to this rule do we stop ourselves

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67 Laurence Paul Hemming, “Radical Orthodoxy’s Appeal to Catholic Scholarship.” In RO?–CE, 13.
69 Olivier-Thomas Venard, “Radical Orthodoxy- une première impression,” Revue Thomiste 101 (2001): 410. Translation mine: “The main word of radical orthodoxy metaphysics is participation. For it, everything is just being what it is. The density of real things is supported by a greater density, beyond all dialectic between the dense and the light of their Creator.”
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
taking a part of the world and turning it into an object of unlimited worship. This is our protection against idolatry, and all the domination and cruelty which flow from it. 

Rule Two Participation does not assume a genuine relationship. We can only understand the being of the world in relation to God. It is God’s creative act which gives being to the world. It is the same creative act which makes it possible for us to become like God. The infinite is revealed in and through the finite, limited, worldly, time-bound, material world.\(^73\)

**Analogy**

Analogy, likewise, is a key philosophical notion for RO in general. RO’s rejection of Duns Scotus is based on his rejection of analogy and promotion of univocity. According to RO, Scotus’ univocity, posited in an attempt to preserve the uniqueness of God actually distances the Divine from us. Steven Shakespeare writes:

> A further consequence is that, as God is no longer related to us by a living chain of analogy, God becomes ever more hidden and dark to us. God retreats into the heavens, exercising his will from afar. And God’s will becomes the arbitrary exercise of power. It has no inner relationship to human worth and fulfilment. God becomes the Law, imposed upon an essentially godless world.\(^74\)

RO understands the relationship of analogy between the God and the human being as a dynamic one, “best expressed in Christian life and worship. Analogy leads us to participation in the life of God.”\(^75\)

**Gift**

The last major philosophical theme that RO in general focuses upon is that of gift. John Milbank writes “for theology, there are no ‘givens’ only ‘gifts.’”\(^76\) All created reality, including thought and concepts, are relational, and thanks to participation, all is situated within our relationship with God. “Both matter and time are made up by relationships, and rooted in an original relationship with God.”\(^77\)

As mentioned, all is seen within the relational aspect of gift. Tradition, Church, Eucharist, reconciliation, indeed life itself is gift. In contrast to Derrida, RO argues for the possibility of “pure gift,” one of reciprocity and mutuality.\(^78\) This theme of gift is essential for the establishment of RO’s theology and, in particular, in establishing Catherine Pickstock’s Eucharistic theology of presence. Steven Long offers in summary the following:

> An autonomous human freedom cannot provide the basis for tradition because tradition is an inheritance and gift. As gift it always includes more than can be

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\(^73\) Shakespeare, *RO:CI*, 22-23.

\(^74\) Ibid., 11.

\(^75\) Ibid., 23.


\(^78\) Milbank, *BR*, 44-60.
All three prime philosophical themes emphasized by RO are intrinsically connected. *Analogia entis*, the doctrine of participation and gift are all tied together within the thought of RO. Milbank, in a response to James K. A. Smith, writes:

…so long as Christian theology retained a somewhat Neoplatonic approach to causality, in which every higher level until that of Godhead not only caused but also “gave to be” the lower levels, it was possible to combine the idea that God is “the total cause” of everything, including the free decisions of spiritual beings, with the equal stress that finite causes are also “total” at their own level. Within this outlook, the higher cause is not “one factor” at the lower level; rather, it “gives” in its integrity the entire lower level with its own self-sufficient (in one sense) modes of operation. This Proclean understanding of cause reaches its apogee within Aquinas’s Christian translation, for which what is participated is being as such. Hence that which belongs to a thing- its very existence- is yet that which is most received as a gift. All the same, this giftedness of created being by no means cancels the integrity and the autonomy proper to existence as such. Rather, the point is that even this is a gift.

**CONCLUSION**

RO has been accused as being too narrowly-focused, yet at the same time, lacking in precision. It has been described as ecclesiastically rootless but, similarly, as too rooted in the Anglo-Catholic tradition. It has been said of RO that it is too indebted to the patristic-medieval period and dismissive of all theology since the early modern period, while at the same time being accused of almost being too contemporary in its concerns. It has been described as too academic and too esoteric, while suffering from charges of imprecision, generality and a lack of sufficient scholarliness. Yet, few can deny the major impact on Anglo-American Christian theology that it has had over the past 25 years. The impact of RO on theology is massive. James K. A. Smith comments concerning *Theology and Social Theory* (but I believe that this could be applied to the entire RO movement): “For most, Milbank’s unapologetic claims regarding the Christian metanarrative sounded a clarion call to stop doing theory according to ‘the rudiments of this world, rather than according to Christ’ (Col. 2:8).”

In summary, Graham Ward describes RO as follows: “Employing the tools of critical reflexivity honed by continental thinking, taking on board the full implications of what has been termed the linguistic turn, Radical Orthodoxy reads the contemporary world through the Christian tradition, weaving it into the narrative of that tradition.” Terms are used, thinkers are appropriated, sometimes in new and surprising ways. R. R. Reno writes:

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81 Catherine Pickstock addresses each of these charges in her essay, “Reply to David Ford and Guy Collins,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54.3 (2001): 405-422.
83 Ward, “Radical Orthodoxy and/as Cultural Politics,” in *RO- CE?*, 106.
It would be a great mistake, however, to write off the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy because of their jargon-filled postmodernism. It may invite silliness, but more often it loosens the grip of Derrida and Foucault on the intellectual and moral imaginations of the lost souls drifting through contemporary universities. Milbank et al. use the prevailing vocabulary and verbal techniques of cultural and literary studies to expose the dark emptiness of secular post-modernism, hoisting it on its own petard. If Radical Orthodoxy is any sign of the future, tomorrow’s academy will see countless theses on the subversive power, not of transsexuality, but of the Eucharist—in all, a welcome development.\textsuperscript{84}

Perhaps David Burrell describe the importance of RO the best:

Yet in part these features must be seen in context of what I would assess to be their greatest asset: a thoroughly post-modern, in the sense of non-foundational theology, which is exciting precisely to the extent that it is \textit{not} “revisionist” or “correlationist.” In those modes, theology is always “catching up” with the vanguard of contemporary thought; whereas Radical Orthodoxy puts theologizing ahead of the pack, with its uncompromising critique of post-modern idioms, while translating their non-foundational intent by showing how faith itself can be a mode of knowing. That may explain why I find \textit{Modern Theology} more exciting than \textit{Theological Studies}, though hardly why anyone should be forced to choose between the two.\textsuperscript{85}

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\textsuperscript{84} Reno, 37.
\textsuperscript{85} Burrell, 76.