

WHAT IS RADICAL ORTHODOXY? by John Milbank

John Milbank is one of the founders of the movement “Radical Orthodoxy”. He presents this movement in seven theses:

Radical Orthodoxy is an informal movement within current Christian theology. It embraces people who offer many different emphases and often disagree, but nonetheless share certain broad aims and assumptions. It began amongst lecturers and students in the Cambridge Divinity Faculty in the summer of 1997, and is especially associated with Emmanuel College, Peterhouse and Little Saint Mary’s. Since then its influence has spread to many different countries.

It can be characterised in seven main ways:

1. First of all, it denies that there is a sharp division between reason and faith or reason and revelation, and regards any such notion as a modern deviation from earlier views. It believes that human nature can only be fully understood with reference to our supernatural destiny, and human knowledge with reference to divine illumination.
2. It also considers that the world can only be fully understood as a participation in divine being, truth, goodness and unity. Inversely it believes that the world as partially restored through grace gradually discloses to us the nature of the Godhead, without ever allowing us to comprehend it.
3. To this traditional understanding it adds a specifically more modern view that the realm of culture, language, history and our technological interactions with nature also belongs to this participatory ascent. The realm created by human beings is not incidental to the truth, nor is it a barrier against it. Human *poesis* participates in the divine *verbum*, the Son of God. Likewise human social exchanges participate in the divine *donum*, the Holy Spirit. Through both these processes nature also comes more fully to herself.
4. As for Dionysius the Areopagite, Modern Russian theology, and even the puritan divine William Ames, this means that theology issues in theurgy, a co-operation between human and divine work, which is nonetheless entirely the work of God. Attempts to think about God are superseded in the supreme work of human making and exchange which is the liturgy. Here a collective human action invites the divine descent.

-
5. Radical Orthodoxy is influenced by Post-modern thought, but at the same time contests it. Postmodernity tends to conclude that since we cannot ground truth in an absolutely certain intuitive presence, nor in discursivity, (which is either tautologous or else goes on for ever and never vanquishes uncertainty), that in consequence there is no such thing as truth at all. Often this lack of truth is seen as the only truth, and so as disclosing a nullity at the heart of things. Radical Orthodoxy accepts that there are no foundations and that there can be no finite certainty, but concludes that this situation can be read as the need to refer time to eternity. Only in the infinite Godhead can there be an entire intuition which is also an infinitely concluded exposition. Truth is possible for us because we participate by an act of faith in this infinite truth. At the Fall, humans tried to erect truth for themselves: this is why rationalism is evil. But God himself descended to us and became the truth for us in time. Echoes of this resound through everything ever since, but are concentrated in the Church.
 6. Without God, people see a nullity at the heart of things. They regard death as more real than life. This means that body gets hollowed out and abstraction becomes the true permanent reality, as in 'all is decay'. Only a belief in transcendence and participation in transcendence actually secures the reality of matter and the body. God transcends body, but is, as it were, even more body than body. So Radical Orthodoxy insists on a valuation of the body, sexuality, the sensory and the aesthetic; while affirming also that an ascesis which seeks always to rise from body to the source of body is necessary to preserve this valuation.
 7. For Radical Orthodoxy, vertical participation in God implies also a participation between humans and nature and between humans and humans. It therefore regards salvation as both cosmic and communal. Theology encourages a theurgy which aims at a liberation of nature from terror and distress and at a fully harmonious and beautiful interaction between humans and the natural world. Equally it encourages a theurgy which is a social work of maximising democratic participation and socialist sharing on the basis of a common recognition of true virtue and excellence and an educatively hierarchic transmission of these qualities. It regards the Church as the foreshadowing of the Kingdom and the place of the most fully realised human and cosmic society.
-