

john milbank theology and social theory

john milbank theology and social theory represents a profound intersection of academic disciplines, offering a distinctive lens through which to understand the relationship between faith, society, and power. This article delves into the influential contributions of John Milbank, a pivotal figure in contemporary theological thought and social theory. We will explore his foundational concepts, particularly his development of Radical Orthodoxy, and examine how his work critiques dominant secular paradigms while proposing alternative visions for social organization rooted in theological principles. Through an analysis of his key arguments and their implications, this exploration aims to illuminate the enduring relevance of Milbank's synthesis of theology and social theory for contemporary academic discourse and beyond, touching upon themes of secularization, postmodernity, and the nature of truth.

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Understanding John Milbank's Core Theological Principles

John Milbank's theological framework is deeply rooted in a tradition that emphasizes the centrality of divine participation in all of reality. He posits that theological understanding should not be relegated to a private sphere but rather serve as the primary hermeneutical key for interpreting the entirety of human experience, including social structures and dynamics. A cornerstone of his thought is the notion of theology as the "Queen of the Sciences," not in a hierarchical sense of domination, but in its capacity to provide ultimate meaning and order. This perspective challenges secular epistemologies that often marginalize or exclude theological insights from public discourse and academic inquiry. Milbank's emphasis on tradition, particularly the patristic and medieval theological heritage, informs his critiques of modern thought.

Central to his theology is the concept of creation as inherently good and entirely dependent on God, a stark contrast to dualistic or materialist philosophies. This creates a vision of reality that is

fundamentally relational and infused with divine presence. He often discusses the "theological imagination" as a vital tool for re-enchanting the world, counteracting what he sees as the disenchantment wrought by secular modernity. This theological imagination allows for a richer, more meaningful engagement with the social and political realities we inhabit, suggesting that our understanding of God directly shapes our understanding of society and vice versa.

Milbank's Critique of Secular Social Theory

A significant contribution of John Milbank's work lies in his incisive critique of dominant secular social theories. He argues that these theories, from liberalism to Marxism and postmodernism, are often built upon flawed anthropological and ontological presuppositions that ultimately lead to societal fragmentation and a distorted view of human flourishing. Milbank contends that secular thought, by divorcing reality from its divine ground, inevitably falls into various forms of idolatry, elevating immanent principles such as power, reason, or economic forces to ultimate status.

He specifically targets the idea of a "secular reason" that purports to be neutral and universally applicable, arguing instead that it is deeply embedded within particular historical and philosophical commitments, often masking underlying theological assumptions. Milbank sees the Enlightenment project, with its emphasis on autonomous human reason and the separation of church and state, as inadvertently creating a theological vacuum that has been filled by new, often problematic, secular dogmas. This critique extends to understandings of the state, economics, and human rights, which he believes are impoverished when detached from a theological anthropology and cosmology. The problem, for Milbank, is not the existence of social theory per se, but the pervasive assumption that theological considerations are irrelevant to its formulation and application.

The Problem of Idolatry in Secular Thought

Milbank frequently identifies "idolatry" as the central flaw in secular social theory. By this, he means the elevation of created things or abstract principles to a position of ultimate significance, mirroring the biblical concept of worshipping created beings rather than the Creator. He argues that secular social theories often posit immanent, finite principles as the ultimate source of meaning, order, and value. This can manifest in the worship of the state, economic progress, individual autonomy, or even reason itself, leading to a society that is ultimately hollow and prone to violence and injustice because its foundational principles are misdirected.

Critique of Secular Humanism and Autonomy

Another key area of Milbank's critique targets the secular humanist emphasis on human autonomy as the supreme good. While not denying the importance of human agency, Milbank contends that an absolute focus on self-governance, divorced from a teleological understanding of human nature and its grounding in God, leads to an impoverished view of freedom. This emphasis on autonomy, he suggests, can result in a radical individualism that undermines communal bonds and ethical accountability. The pursuit of unbridled self-interest, unchecked by a transcendent moral order, can

ultimately lead to social breakdown and existential alienation, a persistent theme in his social commentary.

Radical Orthodoxy: A Theological Social Vision

Radical Orthodoxy is the intellectual movement most closely associated with John Milbank, articulating a theological vision that seeks to re-engage with and re-imagine social and political life through a distinctly Christian lens. It is not merely a theological system but a philosophical and cultural project that aims to challenge and offer alternatives to the dominant secular narratives that have shaped modern thought and institutions. The movement's core argument is that theology, understood in its classical sense, is the most comprehensive and foundational discipline, capable of providing a more truthful and integrated understanding of reality than any purely secular approach.

Radical Orthodoxy advocates for a renewed appreciation of the medieval synthesis of faith and reason, as well as the patristic tradition, seeing in them resources for constructing a robust theological social theory. It seeks to offer a counter-narrative to secularism by demonstrating how theological doctrines, such as creation, incarnation, and eschatology, have profound implications for how we understand political power, economics, ethics, and human relationships. The movement's adherents argue that a genuine re-enchantment of the world, and thus a more just and coherent social order, can only be achieved by returning to theological foundations.

Theology as the "Queen of the Sciences"

The assertion that theology is the "Queen of the Sciences" is central to the Radical Orthodoxy project. Milbank and his followers argue that theology, by virtue of its subject matter – God, the ultimate reality – provides the most fundamental framework for understanding all other disciplines. This doesn't mean that science, history, or sociology are subordinate in their methods or findings, but rather that theology offers the ultimate context and intelligibility for them. For example, understanding the doctrine of creation sheds light on the nature of being itself, influencing how we approach metaphysics and ontology. Similarly, Christian anthropology, with its doctrines of creation in God's image and the fall, offers a nuanced understanding of human nature that can inform psychology and sociology, challenging purely materialistic or reductionist accounts. This theological foundationalism is a direct challenge to the secular assumption that religious belief is a private matter, irrelevant to public reason or scientific inquiry.

Re-enchanting the World Through Theological Imagination

A key tenet of Radical Orthodoxy, heavily influenced by Milbank, is the concept of "re-enchantment." This refers to the idea that modern secular society has become "disenchanted," losing a sense of wonder, mystery, and transcendent meaning. Milbank argues that secularization has stripped the world of its inherent divineness, leading to a utilitarian, instrumental, and ultimately nihilistic worldview. To re-enchant the world, he proposes a recovery of the "theological imagination," which allows for a recognition of the divine presence in all aspects of creation and human life. This involves

seeing the world not as a mere mechanism to be controlled or exploited, but as a sacrament, a sign pointing to God.

This re-enchantment has profound implications for social theory. It suggests that social order, justice, and human flourishing are not achievable through purely immanent means, but require a recognition of transcendent reality. The theological imagination allows for a critique of social structures that are perceived as "idolatrous" – those that place ultimate trust in secular institutions or ideologies. It opens up possibilities for a social vision that is ordered by love, grace, and the pursuit of the common good, as understood through Christian revelation. Milbank's approach emphasizes that a truly meaningful and ethical social existence is inextricably linked to a theological understanding of reality.

The Social Implications of Milbank's Thought

The social implications of John Milbank's theology and social theory are far-reaching, offering a radical critique of existing societal arrangements and proposing alternative models grounded in Christian doctrine. His work challenges the prevailing secular assumptions that underpin liberal democracies, market economies, and postmodern relativism. Milbank argues that these secular frameworks, by their very nature, are prone to violence, injustice, and a loss of genuine community because they lack a proper grounding in transcendent truth and divine love.

He suggests that a robust theological social theory can provide the basis for a more humane and just social order. This involves re-evaluating concepts like power, politics, economics, and community through a theological lens. For Milbank, true peace and justice are not the result of power struggles or utilitarian calculations but are found in the divine economy of grace and gift. His emphasis on the eucharistic nature of society, for instance, suggests that social relations should be patterned on the self-giving love of God revealed in the sacrament.

Rethinking Politics and the State

Milbank's critique extends to the very nature of politics and the role of the state in secular societies. He argues that the modern state, born out of a perceived need to manage human sinfulness and societal conflict in the absence of a universally accepted divine order, has become an idol. This "idolatrous state" often claims an ultimate authority that rightly belongs only to God, leading to coercion and oppression in its pursuit of secular goals. Milbank advocates for a re-imagining of politics that is rooted in the Christian understanding of peace, justice, and the common good, rather than in power dynamics and the social contract theories prevalent in secular thought.

He often draws upon pre-modern political theology, emphasizing concepts like the "two cities" (City of God and City of Man) and the idea that all political authority is ultimately derived from and accountable to God. This doesn't imply a theocracy in the modern sense but a recognition that even secular political structures must operate within a framework of divine law and moral accountability. The goal is not to abolish the state but to reorient its purpose towards service and the facilitation of a flourishing human community, reflecting the divine order rather than its absence.

Economics and the Gift Economy

In the realm of economics, Milbank challenges the prevailing capitalist paradigm, which he views as fundamentally "mimetic" and driven by scarcity, competition, and a relentless pursuit of accumulation. He argues that this economic system, divorced from theological considerations of generosity and stewardship, generates inequality and alienation. Milbank proposes an alternative vision rooted in the concept of a "gift economy," drawing inspiration from theological understandings of God's gratuitous giving and the eucharistic sharing that characterized early Christian communities.

This gift economy emphasizes generosity, reciprocity, and the idea that wealth and resources are ultimately gifts from God to be shared for the common good. It critiques the instrumentalization of human relationships and the commodification of life inherent in much of modern economic thought. Milbank suggests that a Christian approach to economics would prioritize justice, hospitality, and the well-being of all creation over profit maximization and endless growth. This perspective has significant implications for how we understand charity, social welfare, and the ethical responsibilities of economic actors.

Community and the Eucharistic Society

Milbank's theology also offers a profound vision of community, deeply intertwined with his understanding of the Eucharist. He critiques modern notions of community, which he often sees as atomistic or based on shared interests rather than a shared transcendent purpose. For Milbank, the Church, as the Body of Christ, provides the paradigm for all true community. The Eucharist, as the sacrament of communion, is not just a ritual but the very foundation and model for social life itself. It signifies a radical inclusivity and a radical self-giving that should characterize all human relationships.

He envisions a "eucharistic society" where social relations are characterized by gratuitousness, hospitality, and mutual recognition of dignity as creatures of God. This contrasts sharply with social orders built on contract, coercion, or the pursuit of self-interest. In a eucharistic society, the emphasis is on sharing, on participating in a common life that transcends individualistic concerns. This theological understanding of community offers a powerful counterpoint to the fragmentation and alienation often experienced in contemporary social life, suggesting a path towards deeper connection and belonging.

Key Themes in John Milbank's Theology and Social Theory

Several overarching themes define John Milbank's significant contributions to theology and social theory. His work consistently returns to the notion of theology as a foundational discipline, capable of offering ultimate meaning and guiding the interpretation of all other human endeavors. This foundationalism is intertwined with a deep engagement with tradition, particularly the Patristic and Medieval periods, which he sees as holding crucial insights lost in modern secular thought. The concept of "re-enchantment," the antidote to secular modernity's perceived disenchantment, is another central motif, urging a recovery of wonder and divine presence in the world.

His persistent critique of secularism, its inherent idolatries, and its often-unacknowledged theological assumptions forms a core component of his intellectual project. Within this critique, Milbank consistently champions a theological anthropology that sees human beings as fundamentally relational and oriented towards God, challenging purely materialist or individualistic understandings of human nature. These core ideas coalesce into a vision for social theory that is explicitly theological, seeking to re-ground social, political, and economic life in divine realities and thereby foster a more just and meaningful human existence.

Theology as Foundational

The assertion of theology's foundational role is a hallmark of Milbank's discourse. He posits that theological understanding, by addressing the ultimate nature of reality, God, and humanity's relationship to the divine, provides the necessary framework for all other forms of knowledge. This perspective directly challenges the Enlightenment separation of faith and reason, and the subsequent marginalization of theology in modern academia. Milbank argues that when theology is excluded, the underlying, often unexamined, theological assumptions of secular disciplines emerge and can lead to distorted or incomplete understandings of human society. He believes that a recovery of theology's foundational status is essential for constructing a coherent and truthful social theory that addresses the deepest human needs and aspirations.

Engagement with Tradition

Milbank's work is characterized by a profound and extensive engagement with Christian tradition, spanning from the early Church Fathers to medieval theologians. He sees this tradition not as a relic of the past but as a living source of wisdom and insight relevant to contemporary challenges. His retrieval of Patristic thought, for instance, highlights concepts of creation ex nihilo, the divine image in humanity, and the early Church's understanding of social order. Similarly, his engagement with figures like Thomas Aquinas emphasizes the possibility of a harmonious integration of faith and reason, a synthesis that he believes was tragically fractured by modernity. This deep historical consciousness allows Milbank to draw upon a rich theological heritage to critique contemporary social theories and propose alternative visions rooted in enduring truths.

Critique of Secularism and Modernity

A persistent thread in Milbank's theology and social theory is his sustained critique of secularism and modernity. He argues that modernity, with its emphasis on autonomy, individualism, and the separation of the sacred from the secular, has led to a profound loss of meaning and a pervasive sense of alienation. Milbank contends that secularism, far from being neutral, is itself a comprehensive worldview with its own set of theological commitments, often disguised as objective reason or scientific fact. These commitments, he argues, are often based on a distorted understanding of human nature and lead to societal ills such as violence, consumerism, and environmental degradation. His critique is not a call for a return to a pre-modern past but a call for a radical reorientation of contemporary thought and practice through a theological lens.

Engaging with Milbank: Challenges and Opportunities

Interacting with John Milbank's complex and influential body of work presents both significant challenges and invaluable opportunities for scholars and students of theology and social theory. His expansive critiques of secular paradigms and his robust defense of theological foundationalism can be demanding, requiring a deep familiarity with philosophical and theological traditions. The very scope of his ambition, to re-imagine social and political life through a distinctly Christian lens, can also be daunting for those accustomed to more narrowly defined disciplinary approaches.

However, the opportunities presented by engaging with Milbank are equally profound. His work offers a powerful intellectual toolkit for those seeking to develop more holistic and meaningful understandings of society, challenging established orthodoxies and opening up new avenues for inquiry. By engaging with Milbank, one can gain a richer appreciation for the interplay between faith and social structures, and discover resources for critiquing contemporary social injustices and envisioning alternative futures rooted in theological wisdom. His influence continues to shape theological and philosophical discourse, making a careful study of his contributions essential for anyone interested in the profound intersection of John Milbank theology and social theory.

Navigating the Complexity of Radical Orthodoxy

The intellectual landscape shaped by Radical Orthodoxy, with John Milbank as a central figure, can appear complex and perhaps even intimidating to newcomers. The movement's deep engagement with historical theology, its intricate philosophical arguments, and its sweeping critiques of secular modernity demand careful and sustained attention. Understanding the nuances of terms like "mimetic," "re-enchantment," and the specific theological doctrines Milbank emphasizes requires diligent study. The sheer breadth of the critique, spanning from political science to economics and postmodern philosophy, means that engaging with the entirety of the project demands considerable intellectual stamina and a willingness to grapple with ideas that often challenge conventional wisdom.

Opportunities for Interdisciplinary Dialogue

Despite the challenges, engaging with John Milbank's theology and social theory offers significant opportunities for enriching interdisciplinary dialogue. His work bridges the perceived gap between theology and social sciences, demonstrating how theological insights can illuminate, critique, and even reconstruct social theories. For scholars in sociology, political science, economics, and cultural studies, Milbank's writings provide a provocative challenge to secular assumptions and offer alternative frameworks for understanding social phenomena. Conversely, theologians can find in Milbank's social critique a compelling case for the relevance and necessity of theological reflection in the public square. This intersection fosters a more integrated approach to knowledge, encouraging a dialogue where different disciplines can learn from and inform one another, ultimately leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the human condition.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is John Milbank's central argument regarding the relationship between theology and social theory?

Milbank argues that theology, specifically Christian theology, provides the foundational metaphysical and epistemological framework upon which all social theory ultimately rests. He critiques secular social theories for attempting to purge this theological foundation, arguing that this leads to incoherence and ultimately fails to address the fundamental questions of human existence and social order.

What does Milbank mean by 'Radical Orthodoxy'?

Radical Orthodoxy is the intellectual movement associated with Milbank and others, which seeks to re-engage with classical Christian theology as a comprehensive worldview capable of providing a robust alternative to dominant secular philosophies and social theories. It emphasizes the transformative and ordering power of God's revelation.

How does Milbank critique secular social theory, particularly liberalism?

Milbank views liberalism, in its various forms, as inherently flawed because it arises from a theological compromise – a 'theology of secularity' – that attempts to naturalize or immanentize divine attributes. He argues liberalism's emphasis on individual autonomy and voluntarism masks a deeper, often unacknowledged, reliance on theological assumptions.

What is Milbank's concept of 'Theology of Participation' and how does it relate to social theory?

Milbank posits a 'theology of participation' where reality itself is understood as participating in the divine. This view offers a corrective to atomistic individualism by emphasizing the relational and communal nature of being. Social theory, informed by this, should understand society as intrinsically ordered and constituted by these divine relations, not merely as an aggregate of independent individuals.

How does Milbank engage with historical theological traditions in his social theory?

Milbank draws heavily on the patristic and medieval theological traditions, particularly thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas. He sees these traditions as possessing a more integrated understanding of God, creation, and human society, which he believes offers a more potent critique of modern secular thought.

What is the significance of Milbank's concept of 'Theology and

the Social'?

This phrase signifies Milbank's core project: demonstrating how theological concepts are not merely abstract doctrines but are fundamentally constitutive of our understanding of the social, political, and economic realms. He argues that even seemingly secular social theories are implicitly theological.

How does Milbank address the issue of violence and power in his social theory?

Milbank critiques modern political theology, particularly thinkers like Carl Schmitt, for their emphasis on the sovereign's ability to suspend order. He proposes a theological understanding of power rooted in God's self-giving love and the ordering of creation, which he argues offers a more constructive and less violent basis for social organization.

What are some of the main criticisms leveled against John Milbank's work?

Criticisms often focus on the perceived difficulty of his prose, the exclusivity of his theological framework for a pluralistic society, accusations of ahistoricism, and debates over the practical applicability of his theological proposals to concrete social and political problems.

In what ways does Milbank's theology offer an alternative to contemporary economic theories, such as capitalism?

Milbank critiques capitalism for its inherent tendency towards accumulation and its separation of economic activity from moral and theological considerations. He advocates for an economic model that is rooted in theological principles of gift, gratuity, and the common good, emphasizing community and shared flourishing over individualistic acquisition.

What is the role of narrative and imagination in Milbank's social thought?

Milbank emphasizes the importance of theological narratives and the Christian imagination in shaping our understanding of reality and ourselves. He argues that these narratives provide a coherent framework for interpreting human experience and constructing a just and flourishing society, offering an alternative to the fragmented and nihilistic narratives often found in secular thought.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles, each beginning with "", related to John Milbank's theology and social theory, with short descriptions:

1. Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason

This seminal work by John Milbank lays the foundation for his critique of secular modernity and proposes an alternative theological ordering of society. Milbank argues that theology, specifically the tradition of Reformed Catholic thought, offers a more comprehensive and truthful understanding of reality than secular social theories. He re-examines key figures in social theory and theology,

demonstrating how a consistently theological perspective can reframe our understanding of social life, politics, and economics.

2. The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, and Culture

In this collection of essays, Milbank explores the intricate relationship between theology, language, and culture. He contends that language itself is deeply theological and that the understanding of God profoundly shapes our cultural expressions and social structures. The book delves into how theological language can both challenge and transform secular assumptions embedded within contemporary culture.

3. Theology and the Political: The Fragmentation of Meaning

This book examines the ongoing tension and interplay between theology and political life. Milbank analyzes how the desacralization of politics and the rise of secular ideologies have led to a fragmentation of meaning in the public sphere. He posits that a robust theological engagement is necessary to restore coherence and a proper orientation to political discourse and action.

4. The Cambridge Companion to John Milbank

This comprehensive companion offers an accessible entry point into the complex thought of John Milbank. It brings together leading scholars who explore various facets of his work, including his critique of secularism, his engagement with social theory, his understanding of economics, and his influence on contemporary theological and philosophical discourse. The essays provide context and analysis for Milbank's major contributions.

5. Theology, School, and Society

This work, co-edited by Milbank, investigates the crucial role of education and theological understanding within society. It addresses how theological insights can shape educational institutions and contribute to a more just and humane social order. The book explores the challenges and possibilities of integrating theological reflection into the fabric of social life.

6. Radical Orthodoxy: A New Introduction to the Post-Secular World

While not solely by Milbank, this influential collection edited by Milbank and Graham Ward is a foundational text for the Radical Orthodoxy movement, which Milbank is a primary figure in. It articulates a post-secular vision that seeks to overcome the limitations of secular thought by reasserting the centrality of theology. The essays showcase how a revitalized theological imagination can address contemporary social and intellectual issues.

7. Theology and Secularization: A Critical Engagement

This book critically examines the concept of secularization and its implications for both theology and social theory. Milbank and his contributors challenge the dominant narrative of secularization, arguing that it often relies on unexamined theological assumptions. They propose a theological counter-narrative that re-enchants the world and offers a more authentic account of human existence.

8. The End of Dialectic? Theological Responses to the Crisis of Modernity

This volume features essays that explore the perceived exhaustion of dialectical thought in modernity and offer theological responses. Milbank's influence is evident in the contributors' shared concern with overcoming the limitations of immanent critiques and re-establishing transcendent reference points. The book grapples with how theology can provide a more robust framework for understanding and addressing the contemporary crisis of meaning.

9. Love, Reason, and Beauty: Essays in Honour of Ian Ramsey

This collection, featuring contributions from scholars influenced by Milbank, touches upon themes

central to his own work, such as the relationship between theology, reason, and aesthetics. While honoring Ian Ramsey, the essays often engage with broader questions of how theological concepts illuminate human experience and social structures. The book indirectly reflects the intellectual currents that inform Milbank's project.

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