



Analogy, Synergy, Revelation: Divine-Humanity in John Milbank's Poetic Theology

Oliver Tromans 

Abstract

This article builds upon the analogical reflections of John Milbank – taking his work in a distinctly “projectionist” direction. It is argued that analogy (as Milbank understands it) allows us to talk of “projection” in theology without succumbing to Feuerbach’s anthropological reductionism. In my discussion of Milbank’s work, what is emphasized is the “poetic” nature of theological analogy, in which the divine and human creations intersect. God is revealed *in and through* the human, through the things we make. In its development of projectionist themes, Milbank’s work, it is shown, demonstrates several potentials for feminist theology and philosophy of religion. In particular, his analogical vision helps to overcome any sort of dichotomy between human and divine, “projection” and “truth”. Crucially in this regard, Milbank’s analogy stresses the importance, not only of our “makings”, but also of the divine initiative.

Keywords

Poesis, metaphysics, non-competitive, participation, projection

Introduction: From Projection to Analogy

Ludwig Feuerbach’s incontrovertible influence on theology since the publication of *The Essence of Christianity* takes myriad forms. While those who admit Feuerbach’s constructivism typically conclude that religion is a “fiction”, and that we can walk away from it, safely to become atheists, a considerable number of feminist theologians and philosophers of religion have held up the notion of “projection” as a way of magnifying the exclusively “male” concept of God in classical

theism.¹ In theorizing about religion, they have adopted Feuerbach's projectionist theory, which understands theology to be, at bottom, anthropology. What is in question for these thinkers is a notion of divinity that mirrors female desire and that facilitates the flourishing of female subjects. Such admission of projection *need not necessarily* entail dissolving God into human attributes without remainder. The divine may still be in some sense transcendent, always ahead of present actuality, and one chooses to enact the divine consciously in an effort "to become", not "awaiting the god passively but bringing the god to life through us".² There are, of course, many types of feminist thinking about the divine, yet the differing camps of feminist theology and philosophy of religion often seem to come together precisely through this common Feuerbachian point of interest.

Whilst feminist thinkers have proposed radically re-fashioned forms of divinity and have clearly explained the actual changes in real women's lives that they want such alternative "Gods" to effect, they have been less interested in grounding their reformulations ontologically.³ "Pragmatism" is the great temptation. If our theology makes no fundamental metaphysical claims – so the argument goes – we are free to take up the "more important"⁴ question of which images of deity are more likely to foster human becoming. This, though, evidently raises difficulties. For the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic view of the world as "creation" – as original gift and grace – the word "God" does not function within language to fulfil human demands. How, then, might one get a more *theological* view of projection in which its affirmation is not concomitant with reductionist assumptions? It is my argument that this is only possible through a proper understanding of the analogical way. Because of the way language (as well as the relation of our being to God's being) is understood, the power of our "makings" or (in my own terms) "projections" is not merely a human one; it is the power of God's Word in the world.

My discussion of projection in this article draws heavily on the analogical reflections of John Milbank and the Radical Orthodox

¹ Kathryn Greene-McCreight states that "probably the most significant of modern influences on feminist theologies is Feuerbach's projectionist theory" (K. Greene-McCreight, "Feminist Theology and a Generous Orthodoxy", in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57:1 (2004), p. 100).

² L. Irigaray, *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*; cited in G. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 275.

³ A point well-made by Nancy Frankenberry, "Feminist Approaches: Philosophy of Religion in Different Voices", in P. S. Anderson & B. Clack (eds.), *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 23.

⁴ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 191.

“movement”.⁵ Radical Orthodoxy betokens a theological project for which the truth of being is strongly poetic and liturgical. This follows from Radical Orthodoxy’s penchant for the ontology of participation. The grace of participation affirms the infinite dependency of creation upon creator, but it is firmly convinced of analogy’s dynamic, rhythmic opening to transcendence, which inexorably leads us, as human knowers, to share in the divine creative activity. Milbank extends participation into the whole realm of human making, the realm of *poesis*. He casts God’s connection with human beings in terms of language. Language is, as it were, “like God”. This does not assume that language has a divine origin. Language has a human origin. However, God is revealed *in and through* the human, through the things we make.

Milbank holds promise for addressing the topic of projection because of his refusal to recognise any sort of dualism between faith and reason, divine and human creativity. Although Milbank has so far been rather quiet about gender issues, his theology is certainly capable of realignment to face more explicitly the issues of gender raised by feminists. Moreover, it is possible to see in Milbank’s work how an emphasis on projection need not necessarily result in an anti-metaphysical stance.⁶ Cornelius Ernst was right to insist that, for theologians at all times and places, it is imperative that their interpretations “exhibit the ontological priority of God, God as the ultimately real”.⁷ Indeed, as many leading contemporary philosophical theologians maintain, concrete solutions to the problems of modernity are not to be found in the “liberal” subordination of ontology to ethical or pragmatist alternatives, but by attending to questions of *being*.

The “Modern” Shift to Univocity

Milbank’s analogical account of “being-in-the-world” has provoked a great deal of commentary. A sizeable literature now exists – including review symposiums, introductory surveys, published proceedings of ecumenical conferences, and critical responses – provoking both “rapt celebration” and “indignant vilification”.⁸ Milbank turns to the

⁵ It should be emphasised that Radical Orthodoxy is by no means a totalising vision. It is better described as a “certain theological sensibility” (G. Ward, “In the Economy of the Divine”, *PNEUMA* 25 (2003), p. 115).

⁶ Of course, the attitude of scepticism amongst feminists towards questions of ontology is perfectly reasonable, to some extent. After all, traditional arguments for the truth or falsity of fundamental metaphysical claims have sometimes excluded the desires of women and other “Others”.

⁷ C. Ernst, *Multiple Echo: Explorations in Theology*, ed. by F. Kerr & T. Radcliffe (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), p. 73.

⁸ D. B. Hart, “Review Essay: After Writing”, in *Pro Ecclesia* IX:3 (2000), p. 367.

resources of the pre-modern, classical tradition of Christian theology (and to its Greek patristic forebears) – the Neoplatonic heritage of Augustine and Aquinas, in particular – and more ambiguously to the work of postmodern epigones of Nietzsche. Recovering the analogical relationship as a topic in philosophical theology is seen by Milbank as necessary to healing the sicknesses of modernity – in particular, the predominance of nihilism (“secular reason” and the bracketing of transcendence), which is, he claims, a form of necrophilia, a philosophy of meaninglessness and death.

The central villain in Milbank’s jeremiad is Duns Scotus. In the “Scotist way” earlier modes of theological thought were abandoned, making possible a view of reality as existing apart from God. The contrast between Aquinas and Scotus, which Milbank considers the fateful “turn” towards nihilism in Western metaphysics (“the turning point in the destiny of the West”),⁹ resides in their different conceptions of being. In Aquinas’s ontology, created being exists *analogically*, because being is predicated in its truest sense of God, who is being *per essentiam*; by contrast, in the case of finite entities, being is “attributed” *per participationem*. We are thereby prevented – so the argument goes – from thinking that ontology can operate as an autonomous, secular discipline, for we cannot specify the proper subject of metaphysics, the *ens commune* (“being in common”) of creatures, without referring ourselves to the primary analogate, God, which “is the subject of another, higher science, namely, God’s own, only accessible to us *via revelation*”.¹⁰

Scotus, by contrast, teaches the univocity of being.¹¹ For him, there is no infinite qualitative difference or disproportion between the to-be of God and the to-be of creatures. As such, God is reduced to a being alongside other beings, a “higher” divine cause *competing* with “lower” finite causes. As a result of this shift, by the time of Suárez (d. 1619), God is no longer “most being”, but rather a different type of being, infinite *as opposed* to finite.¹² There are pebbles, daises, donkeys, human beings – and God, who transcends the finite entities only in “intensity of being”.¹³ For Milbank, this marks the advent of the ontotheological error – the time when theology itself became idolatrous. The result is that the immanent is unhooked from, set in opposition to, its transcendent source. Further, because it is possible to determine being in separation from God, the world is

⁹ J. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ C. Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 128–129.

¹² Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, p. 41.

¹³ Pickstock, *After Writing*, pp. 122–123.

freed to be a wholly self-contained and autonomous realm (the realm of the “secular”).

One important point for our purposes is that the univocal view does not increase God’s intimacy to the world as creator. For, if the distinction between God and creatures is merely a quantitative distinction, a distinction of degree, then, in order to maintain God’s ontic supremacy, one must emphasise the creator’s infinite metaphysical distance from all creatures. The move from Thomistic analogy to Scotistic univocity results in a radical *separation* of the creation from God.¹⁴ No *via eminentiae*, no ladder of ascent, can lead us from our place “in the midst” of being to the One who freely gives being to beings (“being beyond being”). God becomes unreachable, beyond the compass of any sort of metaphysical speculation. “God”, which now refers to an agent of absolute power amongst other agents (*potentia absoluta*), becomes for us an object of fear and trepidation. Such a One is always in competition with other beings – controlling or dominating them. As a consequence, it is not surprising that many view the condition of creatures as one of absolute slavery to an infinitely powerful and potentially malign creature. In the face of which, not unreasonably, they rebel.

It is Milbank’s contention that the God “out there”, “dominating”,¹⁵ in whom Western secularists – and, indeed, many feminist thinkers – refuse to believe today, is this God of modern philosophy and theology. This strongly suggests that Augustine, Dionysius, and Aquinas do not believe in him either.

Nature “Engraced”

Underpinning Radical Orthodoxy’s theological vision is an attempt to counter nihilism by conceiving of the world not simply as “nature”, but as “grace”. For Milbank, *every* sphere of reality and human life participates in the gratuity of God’s *gift* of being. For, while Aquinas’s *analogia entis* qualitatively differentiates God from creation (“God above us”), it equally stresses the radical immanence of God in all things (“God in us”). At the same time, however, this graced giftedness of creation in no way negates the freedom and integrity proper to finite beings. On the contrary, even this is “given to be”.¹⁶ According to Milbank, by rejecting Aquinas’s understanding of the analogy of being, Scotus and subsequent thinkers attempt to define a zone apart from God. The theological is “privatised”, relegated to the realm of the “supernatural”, where only the revelation of the extraordinary is

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁵ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, pp. 153, 66.

¹⁶ J. Milbank & C. Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 47.

thought to secure its status. By contrast, Radical Orthodoxy suggests that there is no disjunction between the “natural” and the “supernatural”. Human existence, then, is defined paradoxically as the natural desire for the supernatural. All our knowledge – including our knowledge of God – is at once *natural* (human) and *revelatory* (divine).¹⁷

Milbank’s approach to the doctrine of creation is heavily indebted to Henri de Lubac. His view attempts to avoid a residually extrinsicist/dualistic understanding of the natural-supernatural relationship, while retaining grace as the *methexis* of divine donation. There is, he claims, “no gratuity in addition to the gratuity of creation”.¹⁸ What God’s revelation brings is not the inauguration of something new, but that “God’s gift of himself [from creation onwards] remains gratuitous in itself, such that [we] must continue to enjoy it as a gift”.¹⁹ This way of putting things leads us in the direction of a “synergic drama between God and humanity”,²⁰ rather than to the questionable piety of a revelatory actualism wherein the (utterly) depraved creature is but the passive receptor of God’s revelation “from above”. Since God is not “a” being, but being itself, and since there can be no competition between human and divine wills, the reception of the divine gift is always an “active reception”.²¹ As Milbank puts it, the “logic” of grace is one of “*no contrast*”.²² In the view of Radical Orthodoxy, the supernatural interpenetrates everywhere. Not only does it descend from above, but it also rises up from below. As such, Milbank moves from anthropology to theology, showing how – by the use of analogy – the alternative between projection and revelation, invention and discovery, the human and the divine, need not be a straightforward dichotomy.

Theology does not have its own specialist subject matter, so it must always speak about God by speaking about something else – attempting to say something about everything in relation to God. For Milbank, if theology *did* have a proper subject matter of its own, it would be idolatrous; for theology concerns not a partial sphere of reality, not an *ens*, but *esse* as such, and all in relation to this source and goal. Theology is a science which attempts to speak truthfully *of God*. However, since God is not any kind of thing, and is not immediately available in our experience, theology must also speak about the creation in this attempt – always using what is natural to

¹⁷ J. Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (London: SCM Press, 2005).

¹⁸ J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford, UK & Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1990), p. 221.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

²⁰ J. Milbank, “On ‘Thomistic Kabbalah’”, in *Modern Theology* 27:1 (2011), p. 151.

²¹ Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, p. 95.

²² Milbank, *Suspended Middle*, pp. 31, 46.

creatures (being, desire, society, senses, language, culture, and so forth), yet all the while assuming that these creaturely sources also extend to that which exceeds the natural, namely, the “supernatural”.²³ It is this *also* that distances Radical Orthodoxy from Protestant neo-orthodoxy. For Milbank, the less compromising Barthians ended up culturally irrelevant, isolated in a self-enclosed fideism.

The “Linguistic Turn” as a “Theological Turn”

Seeking to restate classical Christian theology using the language of postmodern philosophy, Milbank undertakes to interpret the so-called “linguistic turn” in philosophy, “not as a secular phenomenon, but rather as the delayed achievement of the Christian critique of both the *antique form* of materialism, and the antique metaphysics of substance”.²⁴ Contrary to what is often implied, he argues that theology is in no way incompatible with the postmodern sense of language as play, *différance*, and deferral. For Milbank, reality, including the reality of God, is linguistic. Indeed, according to him, although both Christian theology and “sceptical postmodernism” have been able “to think unlimited *semiosis*”,²⁵ it is for theology, and theology alone, that “difference remains real difference”,²⁶ since it is “a peaceful affirmation of the other, consummated in a transcendent infinity”.²⁷ The Christian ontology of “harmonious difference” (in other words, the Trinity),²⁸ not only overcomes the critique of a metaphysics of presence, but also avoids the nihilistic, postmodern acquiescence to an ultimate ontological violence. Theology, Milbank argues, is precisely “*not* deconstructible to difference”,²⁹ for it is “open to difference – to a series of infinitely new additions, insights, progressions towards God”.³⁰ Hence, language is set free in its endless pursuit of the divine. The “pressure” or “power” of God “upon the finite reality of our representations of his glory” results in a kind of poetic *epektasis*. God’s self-expression releases a continuous concatenation of spoken words, moving from image to image, each modifying the other and rendering the other provisional.³¹

²³ D. S. Long, *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), pp. 83–84.

²⁴ Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, p. 97; his emphasis.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 434.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 331; his emphasis.

³⁰ J. Milbank, *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2009), p. 340.

³¹ Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, p. 133.

Most importantly, that divine being is linguistic being does not lose the insuperable ontological difference between creation and God. Understood as groundless and of itself “nothing”,³² creaturely being must constantly be related back to the source of being, subsistent being *per se*. Creation flows outward from God as an endless sequence of utterances. Milbank interprets God’s connection to the creation in terms of *language*, the peaceful rhetoric of God. Language is not an instrument by which we negotiate the world, but is itself the point of contact between the Infinite and the finite, the Creator and the creature, the Divine and the human. Finite being does not lie “outside” God. Rather, the universe *is* the divine language. This is strongly panentheistic. Just as we are “in God” and God “in us”, so also all human “making” is a participation in the divine creative and “linguistic” capacity.³³ It is by virtue of the “conscious, co-creative work” of creatures that the divine creation is fulfilled and completed in time, for it is always “a speaking to the creature through the creature”.³⁴ Here, again, we note the emphasis on synergy. Even though Milbank says that language is “like God”,³⁵ this does not assume that language has a divine origin. For Milbank, language has a human origin.³⁶ Rather than being addressed by God, Milbank argues that we have to create our linguistic world through a participation in the Word God speaks. Hence, Milbank can argue that “man as the original creator” participates “in some measure in creation *ex nihilo*”.³⁷

Platonic Poesis

Milbank’s focus upon the “*real* involvement of the finite with the infinite”³⁸ is also evident in his central notion of humanity as “fundamentally ‘poetic’ being”.³⁹ For Radical Orthodoxy, the truth of being is strongly poetic and liturgical. This follows from Milbank’s distinctive ontology, presented as “a new way” of understanding participation.⁴⁰ He underscores that participation spills over into the sphere of

³² J. Milbank, “The Double Glory, or Paradox Versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek”, in S. Žižek, & J. Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), p. 167.

³³ Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, p. 29.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74. Here, Milbank is quoting J. G. Hamann.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

³⁸ Milbank, “Paradox Versus Dialectics”, p. 172; his emphasis

³⁹ Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, p. 4.

⁴⁰ J. Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), ix.

human making, the sphere of *poesis*: “Not only do being and knowledge participate in a God who is and who comprehends; also, human making participates in a God who is infinite poetic utterance”.⁴¹ Unlike Aristotelian *praxis* (“doing”) – actions in which the end stays within the action itself (action and end are identical) – Platonic *poesis* (“making”) has no element of repetition, but generates codes/artifacts which exceed the reach of the agent’s intention (action and end are differentiated).⁴² We *make* signs (analogies, metaphors, etc.), and our makings then, as poetic productions, make and remake us: a “true fiction”,⁴³ or the “poetic cunning of reason”.⁴⁴ Milbank supports his argument by reference to Maurice Blondel’s theory of “supernatural action”.⁴⁵ When creatures engage in poetic activity – when they make things – they are participating in God’s creative power.⁴⁶ Milbank states that our analogizing capacity is itself “like God”. Precisely in poeticity, or analogical poetics, we are “surprised” or “overtaken” by something that comes to us unexpectedly from our own attempts to create meaningful products. There is an excess which always stands “ahead of us”, *drawing us forward*.⁴⁷ It is from this address to us from within our own makings that the “revelatory” is born.

Radical Orthodoxy: Non-realists in Disguise?

One important question to ask is whether Milbank is actually quite close to the “non-realist” account of Christian theology offered by (for example) Don Cupitt. In other words, is God “merely” a human projection? Are we just “making it up as we go along”?⁴⁸ In a brief 1998 essay entitled, “My Postmodern Witch”, Cupitt himself accused Radical Orthodoxy – many of whom were once Cupitt’s pupils – of “active non-realism”.⁴⁹

We need to remember that “truth”, for Milbank, is not a “representation” of things: a simple correspondence between our words and an extralinguistic reality.⁵⁰ Truth is a dynamic event, a relation, wherein language participates in an unfolding divine discourse. He argues that to be “in the truth” is to be “in God”.⁵¹ As he writes,

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, pp. 124–125.

⁴³ Milbank, “On ‘Thomistic Kabbalah’”, p. 163.

⁴⁴ Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, pp. 125–126.

⁴⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 210–219.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 304–306.

⁴⁷ Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, p. 130.

⁴⁸ D. Cupitt, *What is a Story?* (London: SCM Press, 1991), p. 154.

⁴⁹ D. Cupitt, “My Postmodern Witch”, *Modern Believing* 39:4 (1998), pp. 5–10.

⁵⁰ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 426.

⁵¹ Milbank & Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, p. 23.

“Truth, for Christianity, is not correspondence, but rather *participation* of the beautiful in the beauty of God”.⁵² With regard to his view of our share in the divine creativity, Milbank is happy to speak of a theological realism, but he does not think that his position “supports or requires a philosophical realism”.⁵³ At the epistemological level, philosophical realism assumes a kind of neutral access to reality as it is in itself; at the ontological level, it assumes that reality is made up of things with solid identifiable essences. Milbank rejects the notion of definably fixed substances in favour of concepts such as “transition” and “differential flux”.⁵⁴ Reality itself is composed of “shifting identities”,⁵⁵ a realm of “temporary relational networks”.⁵⁶ From within the play of differences, we have to create a world of meanings. Humanity is always trying to make meaningful objects, but the meaning those objects have is never wholly definable and determinable, never yet fixed or complete. Moreover, as we are overtaken by our products, we come to recognise ourselves as “co-creators” of the “revelatory”. The “poetic encounter with God”, in which the fact that “our cultural products confront us and are not truly ‘in our control’ or even ‘our gift’”, allows that “somewhere among them God of his own free will finds the space to confront us”.⁵⁷

Our language about God is, of course, language about ourselves. For our purposes, however, perhaps the most significant point about Milbank’s development of this notion is that it acknowledges the role of deliberate conscious projection and imagination. For Milbank, the activity of the Church is to be understood as a *poesis*. Theology is “co-creation”, and the Christian community is the *concentus musicus*. He emphasises that the Church (“the second difference”) reveals the divine nature:

The response to God is response to the pressure of the unknown, and if Christians ask what is God like, then they can only point to our “response” to God in the formation of community. God’s self-disclosure does not precede liturgy. The community partially shows what God is like, and he is even more like the ideal, the goal of community implicit in its practices. Hence, he is also unlike the community, and it is this inexpressible reality that the community continues to try to respond to.⁵⁸

God, then, is both like and unlike the community. Conceived as such, God provides a goal of human endeavour (what the feminist philosopher of religion, Grace Jantzen, calls a “divine horizon”).

⁵² Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 427; his emphasis.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

⁵⁴ Milbank, *Future of Love*, p. 339.

⁵⁵ Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, p. 111.

⁵⁶ Milbank, *Future of Love*, p. 338.

⁵⁷ Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, p. 130.

⁵⁸ Milbank, *Future of Love*, p. 341.

Moreover, if theology is, at bottom, “response”, then it is necessary to say that the community exists in a relation *given* hitherward from God, and not constructed thitherward from creatures.

Still, rather than being passive before God’s self-disclosure, we “have to discover the content of the infinite through labour and creative effort”.⁵⁹ Thus, in an early essay, addressing critics who characterise his view of the Church as utopian, Milbank writes that, “Fortunately, the Church is first and foremost neither a programme nor a ‘real’ society, but instead an enacted, serious fiction”.⁶⁰ This is not a *façon de parler*. The Church is, indeed, a “fiction” which “invents” its doctrines (there is, in the doctrines of the Church, a “radically ‘inventive’ and ‘ungrounded’ addition”).⁶¹ Whatever justification they have must come from their “attractiveness”, the “pleasing character” of the picture of God thereby provided. Theology’s poetic task is to be charitable, and to give in *poesis* endlessly new analogical depictions of the God who is love. In liturgical action, “‘God’ is both imaginatively projected by us and known, though with the negative reserve which allows that our initiative, precisely *as* an initiative, is a response, and a radical dependency”.⁶²

Conclusion: Analogy, Synergy, Revelation

In this article, it has been my intention to explain how Milbank’s use of analogy allows him to talk of projection without conceding the Feuerbachian claim that theology is ultimately reducible to anthropology. Over-against the *Offenbarungspositivismus* of Barth, Milbank offers a non-competitive account of the relationship between divine and human creativity. Revelation is, as it were, a *Divine-human* activity. For the God who is utterly other than creation (*superior summo meo*) is simultaneously within it, revealing himself as *interior intimo meo*. Revelation is not the disclosure of “supernatural knowledge”, telling us something radically different from what we already know; but nor is it merely, and without remainder, a projection of human desire beyond the world. Rather, God meets us in and through our projections, so to speak. As a “synergic gift”,⁶³ revelation may be understood as the “intersection of the divine and human creations”.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 306.

⁶⁰ J. Milbank, “Enclaves, or Where is the Church?”, *New Blackfriars* 73:861 (1992), p. 342.

⁶¹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 384.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 426; his emphasis.

⁶³ Milbank, “On ‘Thomistic Kabbalah’”, p. 160.

⁶⁴ Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, p. 130.

The Radically Orthodox “school” of theology has been criticised for being too Church dominated, too confessional (an in-house discourse).⁶⁵ Many commentators point to its problematic propensity to speak in a way that claims to be, in and of itself, final.⁶⁶ At the same time, feminist agendas are too often underplayed.⁶⁷ Rowan Williams, for example, finds fault with Milbank’s vision of theology because it seems to remove all the messy and ambiguous ways the Church exists in temporal relationship to a “genuinely contingent world”.⁶⁸ He adds, moreover: “how might a woman tell this story as a story of peace and promise?”⁶⁹ Williams reminds us of the (continuing) problem of “masculinism” in Christian thought and practice. Many modern critics, and not just feminist modern critics, point out that the denial to women of sacramental roles within the Church has been combined with strong elements of patriarchy and misogyny. From this perspective, Christianity has been complicit in perpetuating injustice.

It is most interesting and yet seldom acknowledged the extent to which Milbank’s poetic theology shares affinities with certain feminist ideas about self and subjectivity. For Milbank, as we have seen, the poetic is related to the creation of meaning in human life, wherein the things we make escape our original intentions. Significant objects are humanly constructed, yet poetically *exceed our grasp*. Milbank can speak of “projection”. As a form of human making, our God-talk helps to “draw us forwards”. Milbank would agree, for example, that what is taken to be divine provides, as Grace Jantzen puts it, a “goal of human endeavour, that against which human thought and conduct must be measured”.⁷⁰ There is a sense in which transcendence is a mirror for humanity, the horizon for human becoming. Both thinkers want to emphasise transcendence as future, transcendence (as Mary Daly would say) as the Unfolding Verb⁷¹ – a dynamic, becoming process (a “*projection-without-return*”, as Milbank says, a process

⁶⁵ See P. O’Grady, “Anti-Foundationalism and Radical Orthodoxy”, *New Blackfriars* 81:951 (2000), p. 175.

⁶⁶ Theological discourse, says Rowan Williams, “lacks integrity” when “it sets out to foreclose the possibility of genuine response” (R. Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 5). For Williams, having “integrity” is being able to speak in a way which allows of answers” (ibid.).

⁶⁷ “As to feminism, it is crucial that liturgical processions be led by women carrying flowers” (*Radical Orthodoxy Manifesto*, Thesis 22; emphasis in original).

⁶⁸ R. Williams, “Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience, and Vision”, in *New Blackfriars* 73:861 (1992), p. 323.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 12.

⁷¹ M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), pp. 33–40.

we are not “in charge of”).⁷² Even so, it is important to note that Milbank eschews the glorification of human projection *in itself* by arguing that spiritual beings, in creating things, do not produce anything *metaphysically new*: “in creating things, creatures do not assist God”.⁷³ All the power and being is supplied by divine being. The activity of the human being is always a created creativity, a participation in God’s continuous creation.

Revelation is a controversial word in feminist theology/philosophy of religion. Many feminists see revelation as the concomitant of oppression. The very idea of revealed religion is often rejected because it reduces religious truth to the status of a thing which arrives *von oben*, making the receiver of revelation merely a passive recipient before God. One of the motivating concerns here is an attempt to overcome that way of thinking which understands God’s otherness from human beings as an otherness in “sharp separation” from them. As Daniel Whistler rightly says, “post-Barthian theology”, with its celebration of the infinite chasm between God and the (created) human person, regularly “retraces the very logic by which women have historically been oppressed”.⁷⁴ Significantly in this regard, many contemporary feminist theologians and philosophers of religion consider orthodox Christian theology as promoting a contrastive understanding of God’s transcendence. As Patricia Haynes comments, “The transcendent God of monotheism presents serious worries to feminists. As radically other . . . God stands in *complete contradistinction* to the world”.⁷⁵ Traditional theism, it is argued, *separates* God from the creation. Further, as to the idea of revelation, it would follow from such a dialectical approach that the creature is but the receiver of a sort of “supernatural” intervention from above, to which it contributes nothing. By revelation, however, Milbank means something different. If one properly understands the “rule” of non-competition, then one must recognise that history is always a synergism between the divine and the human. Creatures are called to be creators themselves, and to involve themselves as projectors of revelatory truth.

In its development of projectionist themes, Milbank’s work demonstrates several potentials for feminist theology and philosophy of religion. To be sure, Milbank does not want to reject Feuerbach outright. Instead, he senses a strong element of truth in the projectionist

⁷² Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 181; his emphasis.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 425.

⁷⁴ D. Whistler, “The Abandoned Fiancée, or Against Subjection”, in P. S. Anderson (ed.), *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate* (London & New York: Springer, 2010), p. 127.

⁷⁵ P. Haynes, “Transcendence, Materialism, and the Re-Enchantment of Nature”, in G. Howie & J. Jobling (eds.), *Women and the Divine: Touching Transcendence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 56; my emphasis.

position. For him, to say that God “reveals himself” is to say that God speaks *to* the creature *through* the creature. God meets us in and through our projections, so to speak. As such, revelation is a *Divine-human* activity. As Milbank puts it, the “transcendental possibility of revelation is the decision of God to create poetic being, humankind, and with this realisation one can, at once, overcome a liberal, merely ‘ethical’ reading of religion, and also an (equally modern and deviant) positivistic notion of revelation as something in history ‘other’ to the normal processes of historicity”.⁷⁶ This is not Jantzen’s pure pragmatism, nor is it Barth’s revelatory positivism. Instead, such projection is a sharing in the eternal Word that God speaks.

Again, it should be recognised that Milbank strongly maintains the priority of the divine initiative in the act of projection. For him, God’s communication of *esse* precedes linguistic expression.⁷⁷ At the same time, we see how large the distance is that separates Milbank from Cupitt and the non-realist account of Christian theology. Milbank is a “fictionalist” yet (unlike Cupitt) *theologically* realist.⁷⁸ While our language about God involves human making, Milbank resists the idea that such an admission of projection capitulates to reductive humanism. Instead, such human making is a sharing in God’s “continuously generated *ex nihilo*” creative act.⁷⁹ Our co-creation is not grounded in a freedom to make God as we choose, but in the analogical participation of our human words in the divine Word. Just as Mary births God, so also our own projections can be seen as making God present to the world in and through the Church.⁸⁰ Here, projection is not mere falsity (as distinguished from truth). Rather, it is the way we manifest Beauty and confront God’s creative power. Most importantly, however, God and creatures do not confront each other as two separate “things”.

In a discussion of Hamann’s position, Milbank says, “Since God is genuinely transcendent and *not* a mere higher transcendental reality within the same order as us, he never confronts the creature in an ‘I-thou’ relation, but always addresses the creature (from the beginning and always) *as* the expressive self of this and other creatures”.⁸¹ The conviction underlying this argument is that the opposition between identity and alterity must be overcome. Contrary to most realisms, it is precisely that which comes out of us through our communal projection which is most “un-possessable”, and thus most “absolutely *a*

⁷⁶ Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, p. 130.

⁷⁷ Milbank, “On ‘Thomistic Kabbalah’”, pp. 157–158.

⁷⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 425.

⁸⁰ Long, *Speaking of God*, p. 309.

⁸¹ Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, p. 74; his emphasis.

gift".⁸² Insofar as God is beyond the opposition between the transcendent and the immanent, revelation is always a speaking *to* the creature *through* the creature. The Christian "names of God", for example, are not just passively received by us. Instead, the divine names should be viewed as both humanly created *and* divinely revealed.⁸³ On Milbank's view, our freedom and creativity are not in competition with his. Following Hamann, Milbank develops a *Chalcedonian* theology in which the origin of our God-talk is both human and divine. Expressed otherwise, theology is anthropology when anthropology is understood as Christology, as Rahner stated.⁸⁴

For Milbank, transcendence as "God above us" is imperative to any non-idolatrous doctrine of God. Yet Milbank's own way of envisioning the relation between divinity and humanity does not fit the ontotheological model of "classical theism" against which many post-Heideggerian philosophers take their stand. He works from the conviction that there is no competition or rivalry between divine and human activity. The process of revelation is a process effected internally to spiritual beings, rather than one that relies on the operation of a voluntarist Dictator God, who is utterly different and separate. God is not a "one-way giver", still less a "bestowing tyrant".⁸⁵ Rather, in Milbank's view, it is "the made" that is "the opening to transcendence".⁸⁶ Human language becomes a participation in God's infinity. As Milbank says, language is "simultaneously humanly produced and divinely revealed. The latter, indeed . . . has priority insofar as the world itself already constitutes language – a divine speaking".⁸⁷ Indeed, in Milbank's conception of the divine-human relation, "it is vital to realise that contingent 'making' should naturally be conceived by Christianity as the site of our participation in the divine understanding".⁸⁸ Freed from Feuerbach's dialectical dogma, Christian theology can quite happily accept the idea that religion arises through some form of projection. The crucial question, then, is: Where, why, and how does sexual difference make a difference?

I have argued that analogy (as Milbank understands it) is in no way concomitant with static notions of theological truth. Indeed, I would suggest – here going beyond Milbank – that the way of analogy leaves abundant room for women to recognise their own (hidden) qualities, attributes, and perfections in order to reach towards

⁸² Ibid., p. 142.

⁸³ Milbank, "On 'Thomistic Kabbalah'", p. 158.

⁸⁴ K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations IV* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1966), pp. 105–120.

⁸⁵ Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, pp. 77–78.

⁸⁶ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 218.

⁸⁷ Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, p. 74.

⁸⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 425.

infinity, the “horizon” of their gendered becoming. On this view, theological language is essentially a *playful* response to the Word that God speaks. As such, *new* ways of speaking of God come into being precisely (and only) through *human cooperation*. I do not consider it my place to say what these “new ways” of speaking about the divine might be and how they might be empowering for a woman. Suffice it to say that speaking of God “metaxologically” (to borrow William Desmond’s phrase) entails speaking of God imaginatively and indirectly, with names and images that open (rather than close down) horizons to the divine. Analogy is that language activity that allows words to signify such that their meaning is at once preserved and superseded, as the words of being strive towards the “whole infinity” of God. It is not so much a totalising discourse as one that refuses to allow our human terms to gain a metaphysical “hold” on God. Instead of pinning them down, the analogical opens-up divine horizons, inviting women and men to “become divine”.

Oliver Tromans
ortromans@hotmail.com