

## **A Contemporary Platonic-Christianity?– On Radical Orthodoxy**

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*An Extended Review of the 'The Grandeur of Reason: Religion, Tradition and Universalism' conference, Rome, Italy, September 1-4, 2008*

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### **1. The Opening Remit – Visions and Principles**

Jacques Derrida, in one of his later essays, spoke to the theme of 'On An Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy'. It is clear that this apocalypticism has now become a more generalised phenomenon across the humanities and social studies areas, and theology (and specifically British theology) has become its latest purveyor. The movement (or 'shared sensibility') of Radical Orthodoxy, originating in Cambridge but at this point more associated with Nottingham Theology department, is focused on the work of John Milbank, but also extends to several other thinkers associated with Milbank, most but not all his ex-students; Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward, Gerard Loughlin, Phillip Blond, Conor Cunningham. This well-publicised Rome conference was the second global gathering of the Radical Orthodoxy group, but was also notable for its invitations to thinkers who, on first inspection, might appear radically opposed to the tenets of Radical Orthodoxy and indeed theology per se, such as Giorgio Agamben, Francois Laruelle, James Williams, and the new face of 'speculative realism', Quentin Meillassoux. Additionally, other speakers at this plenary-laden conference came from theological backgrounds which might have more intra-theological reasons for opposing or at least questioning Milbank's approach to theological thinking – Oliver O'Donovan, Fergus Kerr, Stanley Hauerwas and Cyril O'Regan, amongst others. Alongside this rich seam of plenary speakers, more than a hundred papers were given at parallel sessions, again demonstrating the depth and openness of the proceedings, for which the organisers are to be highly commended. With sessions extending from 9am until 9pm, and with some plenary sessions including three extended presentations, the conference was one of immense intensity and excitement, giving credence to the idea of there being a

certain kind of ‘apocalypticism’ at work, albeit only within the confines of the conference hall and dining rooms.

The remit of the conference gave a signal of its ambitious intentions, theologically, but also philosophically and politico-culturally. Entitled ‘The Grandeur of Reason: Religion, Tradition and Universalism’, the conference called for a response to the ‘grave incertitude’ faced by twenty first century humanity, whether such a crisis relates to technological overdetermination and the resultant problems in bioethics, the intercultural clash of ‘Islam and the West’ or the intra-Western crisis in values based on the problematic relationship between secularism and religion. The vision of the conference was taken from Pope Benedict XVI’s Regensburg September 2006 address, which might be surprising to some, given the preponderant high Anglican ethos of Radical Orthodoxy. Indeed, the attendance and presentation at the conference of the Archbishop of Granada, as well as the keynote from the Archbishop of Venice (alongside Benedict’s recent citing of Radical Orthodoxy in Vatican documents), points to a fascinating inter-church dimension to the theology. In the Regensburg address, Benedict points to the ‘dangers arising from new possibilities ...’, and states that ‘we must ask ourselves how we can overcome them’. The proposed solution demonstrates the key theological and philosophical allegiance between Radical Orthodoxy and the Pope: ‘we will succeed in doing so only if reason and faith come together *in a new way*’ (my emphasis). The reference to a ‘new’ way points to the ‘radical’ aspects of both Benedict’s vision and that of Radical Orthodoxy – as Milbank has observed, ‘we *do* have also to rethink the tradition’.

This new way of understanding the relationship between faith and reason, while it undertakes to critique certain aspects of the premodern tradition, has however as its key target the edifice of modernity and most especially the paradigm of modernist reason which has culminated in what might be referred to as a hegemony, not simply of science, but of ‘scientism’. What brings this reductionism to pass, it is claimed by both Benedict and Radical Orthodoxy, is the ‘self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable’. This would seem to refer most accurately to only a particular version of modernist reason, associated initially with empirical method in science,

which in more recent times has come to also be identified with a certain critique of God and religion, emanating most especially from biologists such as Richard Dawkins. In Philosophy, the reach of this paradigm of ‘empirical falsification’ has always been much more restricted (even within analytic philosophy). However, implicitly what is being claimed here is that the self-limitation of reason is a problem not simply for the empirical sciences or such localised philosophies as Logical Positivism but also for the whole of modern thinking itself. Indeed, for Milbank, the problem goes back even prior to modernity (as Scotus is the precursor of modern decline). What is thus crucial to realise here is that the central issue concerns the ‘self-limitation of reason’; the empirical sciences are *just one example* (albeit a particularly important example) of this problematic phenomenon. Significantly, this is a view shared by several key recent philosophical thinkers (Derrida, Heidegger, Levinas, amongst others). Even more recently, the philosophical ‘movement’ known as Speculative Realism (Messailoux, Brassier, Toscano etc.) has developed such an ‘anti-Kantianism’ (for Kant becomes the paradigmatic enemy in this context) in a singularly more vehement direction. Ray Brassier’s text *Nihil Unbound* is exemplary here. It is thus no coincidence then that several figures associated with Speculative Realism were invited to the conference and were also namechecked by Milbank in his keynote paper as (at least to a certain extent) allies of the Radical Orthodoxy project. The key allegiance here is to a methodological ‘anti-Kantianism’, although the conclusions reached by the method differ acutely in the respective cases. Once we agree that reason has been limited by ‘self-imposed’ demarcations and reductionism and once we identify the current metaphysical and political crises in our societies as a direct result of such a limitation, it is clear that what is required in a general sense is that we, as Benedict observes, ‘must disclose it’s (i.e. reason’s) vast horizons’. On this, as a general methodological principle not simply Benedict and Radical Orthodoxy, but also Speculative Realism (and most Contemporary philosophy of whatever persuasion) can agree. It is what draws much postmodern and premodern philosophy together in their differentiation from modernity.

But this is not simply an intra-philosophical problematic, at least as defined by Benedict in his Regensburg address. Rather the horizon of the discussion extends out

to include political and social contexts of living as citizens in increasingly pluralistic societies. 'Only thus do we become capable of that genuine dialogue of cultures and religions so urgently needed today... A reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures'. As well as a diagnosis of philosophical provenance then, we also have a clear political and social philosophy being outlined at Regensburg, or at least the principles of method by which such a political philosophy might be evolved and implemented. The key move here is to identify 'religion' and the 'divine' as integral to an enriched reason; the 'expanse' of reason thus must depend upon a certain kind of theological resource or sustenance; it is precisely modernist reason's preclusion of religion and the divine which causes the current malaise. And such theological resources also broaden the remit of reason beyond intra-technical problems within philosophy; they allow the scope for a political and social philosophy which can address the current crisis in the 'dialogue of cultures'. As Conor Cunningham observed in his vision of the conference: 'this conference will seek to begin thinking through the *re-hellenization of Christian faith*'. In other words, the challenge works both ways – for reason to be enriched it must open up to the divine, but at the same time faith must also avoid fundamentalism and irrationalist tendencies. The concept of 're-hellenization' is fascinating but also highly problematic. In Cunningham's terms, it seems to point to a certain failure in traditional religious thinking to properly engage the philosophical dimension of faith. The key philosophical figure here is undoubtedly Plato – as Milbank et al observe in their introduction to the Radical Orthodoxy anthology (a key statement of purpose), 'the central theological framework of radical orthodoxy is 'participation' as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity, because any alternative configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God... Curiously, perhaps, it is immanence that is dualistic and tends to remove the mysterious diversity of matter in assuming that appearances do not exceed themselves ...'. If this is the paradigm instance of philosophy and religion fusing their horizons, it leaves a lot of questions unanswered. 'Participation' is obviously a pre-Christian philosophical framework. In being 'reworked' by Christianity, to what extent does it leave Christian philosophy open to the charge of dependence on paganism? Might a notion of

participation not potentially undermine the specificity of Christ? What of Plato's own critique of participation is his later dialogues (the *Philebus* amongst others, where he seems to outline what one commentator has referred to as a philosophy of 'ontological homogeneity')? And how exactly does this constitute a 'rehellenization' of faith? It would rather seem to be a 're-Christianisation' of Platonic thought; and the Hellenic motif is also rather bizarre in that it leaves the question of the relation between Christianity and Aristotle unresolved, not to mention the relation between Presocratic metaphysics and Christianity. Might it just be there as a kind of exhibitionism? If so, it appears (to say the least) counter-productive.

Aside from a certain intra-philosophical problematicity, in political and social terms the visionary remit of the conference is also certainly heady stuff – the enrichment of reason must be tied to the religious vision of life and in so doing we can overcome the pitfalls of a dry and worn out secularism: Christianity and Christian philosophy as the foundation of a new global interculturalism. Once again, however, this would seem to flatter only to deceive. It is of course true that some of the most innovative and enriched readings of the intercultural problematic have developed from an inter-religious perspective or context. But in what measure can a 're-hellenization of Christian faith' (even if taken at its own word) constitute an inter-religious horizon? This would seem to be more a dialogue or fusion between paganism and Christianity, and if as already suggested, it is more in reality a 're-Christianisation' than a 'rehellenization', the problem seems even more acute for the possibilities of an authentic interculturalism. Where might Islam, for example, fit into this picture? Again, there are real positive potentialities here. One only needs to look at the relation between Avicenna and Aquinas (or indeed Aquinas and Averroes; not to mention the Latin Averroists) to see within the premodern philosophical and theological context a real resource for intercultural harmony. The key influential figures for *all* religious philosophy within the medieval period were of course Plato and Aristotle – thus one has the Islamic Aristotelianism of Averroes and the Islamic Platonism of Al Farabi, while Avicenna is a kind of Islamic Platonic-Aristotelian; equivalent examples abound in Christian and Jewish medieval thought respectively. When one adds in the extraordinary dependence on translations and interpretations of the original Hellenic

texts across the three traditions especially (Muslim, Christian, Jewish), one has a clear example of a genuinely *intercultural* theoretical milieu. Of course, this is not very often acknowledged within the specific traditions themselves (not very often then, even less so now) but the facts nonetheless remain. Politically and socially, one might look to the history of a medieval city like Cordoba, embracing Christian, Jew and atheist alike within an Islamic empire (although one should obviously beware of idealisation here too). However, although at least one panel at the conference addressed some of the possibilities for Christian-Islamic dialogue, it is clear that the overarching theological framework of Radical Orthodoxy is grounded in the specificity of Christian truth. Indeed, not just any Christian truth, but the truth of Radical Orthodoxy – for example, there was a good deal more spleen directed at Christian adversaries at the conference than at nonChristians (at one point, in all seriousness, Milbank accused Oliver O’Donovan of ‘not knowing his Augustine’). But this seems to me to be less to do with a genuine intercultural commitment and more to do with that which puts the ‘radical’ in Radical Orthodoxy. In other words, I cannot see how politically and socially this vision is anything other than divisive and exclusive (no less, if not more so, than the liberalism it eschews so vehemently).

## **2. Analysing the Content of the Conference – Keynotes, Panels and Papers**

With over 180 papers in less than four days, and extended plenary sessions which involved sometimes two or three plenary speakers, an exhaustive survey of the conference presentations would be obviously impossible, not least because I could not be in more than one place at any one time. To this extent, my analysis and foregrounding of specific issues will be selective. This is thus hardly meant as the final word on the conference content but rather as an admittedly individual intervention. Before looking more specifically at papers, some general points are worth making. There was a terrific atmosphere at the conference, a strong critical commitment to ideas and discussion amongst the participants which was also accompanied by a genuine respect for speakers and for differences in viewpoint (however this was sometimes *despite* rather than because of the conference structure; see my Concluding Remarks below). More than any conference I can remember, there was a sense of urgency to the proceedings, a feeling that *something was*

*happening*, that what was being discussed at each and every panel was relevant and important in practical-political as well as more philosophical terms. The plenary speakers were highly impressive, each and every one of them taking the event very seriously and being very gracious in questions. The organisers are to be highly commended for choosing such a diversity of plenary speakers, which again shows how thinkers who come together in their so-called anti-Kantian methodology can differ so radically in their conclusions and respective findings.

A significant number of the panel presentations focused on discussions within philosophical theology, concerning themselves with key figures from the tradition such as Augustine, Aquinas or more recent thinkers such as Chesterton, Balthasar and De Lubac. From a philosopher's perspective, the apparently unproblematic referencing of God was initially quite a culture shock, but probing deeper in each case, I found the presenters to be rigorously and impressively engaging with philosophical issues from a more avowedly theological perspective. The student session which I chaired on the opening day (with contributions from Jackson, Jacobs and Cheung) demonstrated both the terrific variety but also the interconnection between different approaches and topics. Jackson's work on the gift in Paul and Aquinas opted for a subtle analytic development of the notion that 'God gives giving', with the subsequent implications for the question of the relationality between God and humanity. Although itself a de-historicised analysis, it was clear that Jackson's approach could be related indirectly to Cheung's intercultural interpretation of West-East dynamics in theology and the question of the relation between narrative and doctrine. For Cheung, the boundary between narrative and doctrine is not clear cut and I related this in a question back to Jackson about the interconnections between Aquinas and Islamic thought, as well as the issue of 'narrative' in Aquinas and Paul. Jacob's paper added a more contemporary dimension, seeking to link Kant and Badiou in a 'situationism' in ethics which did not preclude universalism. In a sense, this encapsulated the tension at the very heart of the conference more generally; the relationship between contemporary change and crisis, today's *situation*, and its possible contextualisation by a living tradition which can still lay claim to an unproblematic universalism.

This question by taken up in a more sustained way by one of the plenary speakers, James Williams, when he addressed the paradigm shift from ‘reason’ to ‘thought’ in more recent Continentalist thought (most especially in Michel Henry and Gilles Deleuze) but also extending back to Kant and Nietzsche. This move from reason to thought also importantly involves a change in the status of the universal, from being originally a universal truth to being a ‘universal individual ... where the universal is no longer a matter of content but of process and limitless connection’. To the extent then that the universal becomes connected to ‘flesh’, for example in Henry, or ‘event’, for example in Deleuze, Williams posed the question: can the universal individual truly claim to be universal in the traditional sense? In a different key, this is also one of the themes of Question Meillassoux’s work (Meillassoux unfortunately had to cancel his appearance due to a bereavement). His ‘absolutization of contingency’ was referred to in Dustin Mc Wherter’s paper on ‘Indifference and Irreligion’. Mc Wherter, one of Brassier’s PhD students at Middlessex, developed the position of Speculative Realism at the conference, invoking Schelling’s notion of *Gleichgultigkeit* and his conception of a ‘universality of non-relationality’ to seek to undermine the status of a religious God as the Absolute underlying the system. Rather, for Mc Wherter, the invocation or positing of God becomes some kind of arbitrary and unjustifiable move, but what is also significant (referring back to Williams’ paper) is that Mc Wherter and Speculative Realism still lay claim to some kind of ‘universality’, albeit not a universality of ‘content’. The question remains – what kind of universal is this exactly or, more importantly, why do such supposedly ‘nihilist’ thinkers remain seduced by a residual Kantianism? Francois Laruelle’s plenary presentation was on the same panel as Mc Wherter’s and was entitled ‘the Science of Christ’. If I understood this correctly, Laruelle seemed to be doing to theology what he has already tried to do to the philosophical tradition, that is, to look at the decisional structure of a discipline from outside the discipline’s ambit. Here, then Laruelle was presenting a kind of ‘nontheology’ (rather than ‘nonphilosophy’) of theology, and specifically of Christology. Christology would remain blind to its constitutive decisional underpinning. To this listener, Laruelle’s approach (despite all protestations to the contrary) itself seems to involve some form of ‘transcendental



decision’, which means that for me his supposed move from an early transcendental (Philosophy I) to a later nontranscendental (Philosophy II-IV) phase masks a fundamental continuity in his work. I found myself (for once) agreeing with the Christologists, *contra* Laruelle.

Perhaps the most exciting plenary session of the conference was on Wednesday afternoon and entitled ‘Politics and Theology’. Here, the audience was treated to three very specific but related papers, from the big intellectual heavyweights of the conference, Oliver O’Donovan (‘Deliberation, Reflection and Responsibility’), Stanley Hauerwas (‘A Worldly Church: Politics, Theology and the Common Good’) and John Milbank (‘Transcendence and the Scope of Reason’). O’Donovan has long been one of the leading thinkers in British theology, an Augustinian with a special interest in political theology. The son of the late Irish writer Frank O’Connor, O’Donovan presented a paper of near-exquisite precision and poise, guiding the audience through the thicket of Aristotle’s conception of moral practice in the *Ethics* with ease. Criticisms of O’Donovan’s approach as overly-epistemological seem misguided to the extent that the recourse to Aristotelianism already allows for a grounding of ethics in an ‘ontological’ everyday being-in the-world. However, the tensions between Aristotle and O’Donovan’s usually more Augustinian method would be interesting to look at, as indeed would the tensions more generally between Radical Orthodoxy and the extraordinary Aristotelian bias in Thomism. Hauerwas’s spirited defence of the ‘worldly church’ drawing on Aristotle, MacIntyre and O’Donovan, also elided this problematic issue. When one questioner commented that Hauerwas’ analysis ‘needed more Plato’ (i.e. ‘and less Aristotle’), Hauerwas heroically riposted: ‘no, my friend, I think you need more Jesus’!

Speaking to an already mesmerised audience, John Milbank’s presentation showed why he is the most extraordinary figure to appear on the theological/philosophical scene in quite some time. With a shotgun delivery, Milbank proceeded to declare to the audience how our time was a time of ‘anti-Kantianism’, citing the movement of Speculative Realism as a fiery example (Brassier, Toscano, Meillassoux!) within philosophical circles. But it is Radical Orthodoxy, Milbank claimed, who take this

‘anti-Kantianism’ to its zenith, demonstrating the poverty of rationalism and secularism, but also the poverty of a great deal of what passes for Christian theology but which fails to live up to the ‘radical’ responsibility of an authentic Christianity (Milbank was here vehement about the ‘travesty’ of Karl Barth’s endeavours). The key concepts for Milbank here are ‘transcendence’ and an ‘enlarged reason’ and what he has called elsewhere a ‘theological critique of philosophy’. The heroes of Milbank’s story are the ‘radical pietists’ of the end of the eighteenth century: Hamann, Jacobi, Wizenmann and, to a lesser extent, Herder, but this was a critique of philosophy which was occluded by Barth’s distorted re-telling of the story. Within the premoderns, Scotus lays the foundations for Kantianism by allowing for the ‘autonomy of philosophy’. Against Scotus, Radical Orthodoxy looks back to Augustine (and to a lesser extent Aquinas) as the true source for the evolution of a contemporary ‘post-liberal’ theology. Milbank’s presentation (even for the nonbeliever) was intoxicating and also philosophically precocious. It is clear that he gets up the noses of more traditional theologians who see his work as ‘too philosophical’, but in O’Donovan and Hauerwas, for all their differences, he had two worthy interlocutors, who recognise the inter-dependence between philosophy and theology.

Two other notable plenaries were given by Cyril O’Regan<sup>1</sup> and Fergus Kerr respectively. O’Regan delivered a magnificent analysis of the complex relationship between Balthasar and Heidegger, citing both a ‘welcoming’ and an ‘unwelcoming’ of the latter in Balthasar’s theology. It was the unwelcoming which O’Regan was especially interested in, citing evocatively Balthasar’s conception of a ‘gigantic misremembering’ on Heidegger’s part which distorted the relationship between Heidegger and Christian thought. Kerr’s presentation, while very different in tone, was no less engaging. Introduced as the ‘Sean Connery of British theology’ by the chair Conor Cunningham, Kerr gave a lunchtime plenary while supping from a beer glass (most impressive!). He gave a wonderful reading of the enigmatic relation between Wittgenstein and Marx, full of hilarious and sarcastic asides, which had the audience doubled up. He also outlined an unrelenting critique of the rationalistic hegemony within British philosophy which has had such a terrible effect on British

philosophy *per se*, but also on such philosophy's wider impact (or consequent lack of impact and alienation from) wider society and culture. Listening to Kerr was a chastening experience for those of us who have experienced the worst excesses of Anglo-American philosophy first hand. This critique of British society and culture was also present in Phillip Blond's paper, 'Red Tory: A New Type of Politics'. A stalwart of Radical Orthodoxy from the beginning, Blond is an engaging figure who combines a radical economic egalitarianism with a conservatism about values. His position seeks to restore notions of the common good alongside 'populist consensus' (a nod to Laclau) and individual liberty. His references to Chesterton and Belloc would also seem to signify the evolution of a new kind of Catholic social thought.

Cardinal Angelo Scola's (the Patriarch of Venice) presentation began with a citation from the great Italian poet, philosopher and film-maker Pier Paolo Pasolini: 'I am filled with a question that I don't know how to respond to ... It's impossible to say what type of yell this is ...'. This connected with my own paper, 'A NonMisologist Platonism: Sketching Pasolini's Roman Truths', where I focused on Pasolini's satire on Christ's passion in his film *La Ricotta* to exemplify how Pasolini's work complicates the relationship between Christology and Platonism. In *La Ricotta*, orthodox Christology finds itself undermined by a more plebeian (Platonic/Socratic) 'participation' in the divine, in the figure of the 'good thief', Stracci. Stracci's death by indigestion on the cross next to Christ parodies the death of Christ, but Pasolini's work also testifies to a serious interrogation of the possibilities of a Platonic-Christian metaphysic, and indeed of a Christian Marxism (as was pointed out to me perceptively in questions by Julian Coman). His work, as Scola's comments testify, has much to say to the contemporary era. One of my co-presenters on the panel, a Romanian theologian Corneliu Simut, invoked a similar interrogation of Christology, but this time from within an apparently intra-Christian framework (the third paper on the panel was Darrell Lackey's passionate eulogy to the Christian church, *If*). Simut's extraordinary presentation outlined the complex theology of Edward Schillebeeckx. Starting with the moderate assertion of the historicity of the Church and of Christ, Schillebeeckx moves (speaking through Simut) to a much more provocative claim: *Jesus is dead*. Moreover, in effect, and as Simut brought out engagingly and

provocatively, for Schillebeeckx, the Church is also by implication dying or almost dead. For Schillebeeckx, it would seem, *Christianity is itself now dead or in its death throes*. In a Kierkegaardian key, the Church must die to itself. Against all expectations, our panel turned out to be a harmonious one, from Pasolini to Schillebeeckx, with the irony (not lost on the audience) that the latter appeared the more radical figure.

Certainly the most enigmatic plenary of the conference was left until the very last, that of the distinguished Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben. Agamben's presentation, based around his new text *Il Regno e La Gloria*<sup>2</sup> ('The Kingdom and the Glory') was, for all its subtlety and politeness, reminiscent of a kind of intellectual guerrilla attack within enemy territory. Ostensibly hospitable, Agamben's work on the hierarchical relation between power and glory and 'the secret centre of power' would appear to be highly detrimental to the Radical Orthodoxy project (Milbank's politeness as chair may have been less motivated by a naïvety and more by a complementary faux-hospitality). Developing what amounts to a neo-Foucauldian analysis of the 'governmental machine', Agamben delineated how what he translated as 'inoperativity' is the description most proper to God and humanity alike. After the Last Judgement, all that will be left to do for the chosen ones will be 'glorification of God'. But, more importantly, so Agamben claims, this 'inoperativity' or void (Agamben also referred to a passage in Aristotle *Ethics* where humanity is defined as *anergos* or 'without function') is at the heart of the messianic community, here and now, and is thus constitutive of God's being God per se and of the whole eschatological project of orthodox religion. For (invoking St Paul), 'eternal life is not only a future condition but the special quality of life in messianic time... or now time.' (Kotsko's translation) This would seem to amount to what Adam Kotsko has cited as the 'messianic nihilist' interpretation of Agamben's work. Having delivered this stunning intervention, Agamben left the conference without further ado. I was tempted to see his brief appearance as a kind of enactment of the very 'inoperativity' he was theorising in his work. I also couldn't help thinking of the symbolism of Agamben's role (in playing one of the Apostles) in Pasolini's extraordinary film, *The Gospel According to St Matthew*.

### 3. Some Concluding Remarks

After Graham Ward's rather disappointing presentation on 'Hegel and the Messianic' (I am a great fan of Ward's writings and was expecting more), I asked a rather provocative question. In the context of the supposed remit of the conference as a 're-hellenization' of reason and a new engagement between philosophy and theology, in what measure had anything really changed for Radical Orthodoxy with regard to its methodology? Despite Ward's claims to be offering an 'immanent critique' of Hegel (i.e. demonstrating the internal contradictions of Hegel's theology and logic), all that was audible to these ears was an externalist critique of Hegel from a Radical Orthodoxy standpoint; 'the problem with Hegel is...'; 'what Hegel needed to do was this...'. Underlying this approach, of course, is a stultified and patronising relationship between theology and philosophy which, to be fair to Ward, is not as obviously apparent in his written work. The answer to my question was defensive – simply the reiteration of the claim that the critique was 'immanent' rather than externalist, with some rhetoric about the fact that Radical Orthodoxy was simply a 'shared sensibility' rather than a 'movement'.

This, while understandable in the context (my question was itself wholly rhetorical), was, it seems to me, a missed opportunity to say something more significant about the much vaunted 're-hellenization' of reason and the philosophical (as well as theological) status of the concept of 'transcendence'. For all the bravado of the conference, as well as the genuine excitement and energy, there was a feeling amongst a considerable number of delegates that *this question of the fundamental relationship between philosophy and theology* had not been addressed adequately. Part of the problem stemmed from their simply being far too many papers and not enough time for discussion. This marginalisation of discussion in favour of presentation sits uneasily with the continual referencing of Plato and Platonism. 'Participation' may be an ontological category in Plato's dialogues but it is also tied to the process of *elenchus* (refutation) and irreducible dialogue which grounds the Platonic vision of *philosophia*. Without this dialogical element *constituting* the space of theoretical

speculation and consideration, there is always a danger that what passes for philosophy may simply be mere eristic, or sophistry. The relationship between theology and dialogue may not be so straightforward, but if a new engagement between philosophy and theology is to be an authentic event rather than a simulacrum, then such methodological issues need to be addressed.

Nonetheless, after such an extraordinary event in Rome, my final word should be positive. ‘The Grandeur of Reason: Religion, Tradition and Universalism’ as a conference has set a new and provocative standard for contemporary thinking and practice. There is no doubt that Radical Orthodoxy is redefining the parameters of philosophical and social and political thought. It would seem to be a matter of ignoring this contemporary Platonic-Christian ‘shared sensibility’ at your own theologico-metaphysical peril.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Given this is an Irish-based philosophy journal, it seems appropriate to comment on the significant number of presentations from Irish philosophers and theologians – O’Regan, Mc Donnell, Mullarkey, O’Murchadha, O’Reilly, Ryan, Irwin. The absence of a discourse in the Irish context to articulate the same metaphysical and political problematics evinced by Radical Orthodoxy is, in many respects, a tragic reality. The reasons for such an absence, both at civic level but also at university level, would be interesting to investigate. Perhaps the various presentations here (and other related thinkers working in an Irish context) are the first stirrings of a more complementary approach in Ireland?

<sup>2</sup> In my analysis of Agamben’s Italian text, I would like to acknowledge Adam Kotsko’s excellent work of translation and interpretation, which I have found very helpful in my reading. Cf <http://itself.wordpress.com/>

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