

Postmodern Theology and Modern Liberalism

Reconsidering the Relationship

Abstract: In recent forms of postmodern theology, especially in what has become known as “radical orthodoxy,” there has been a concerted effort deliberately to reject liberalism, both in its modern secular and in its theological manifestations. In the historical and theological genealogies they construct, liberalism is portrayed as the enemy of true theology, the Trojan horse through which theology secures its own demise. This essay questions these assumptions and argues that postmodern theology and modern liberalism are not as antithetical as has often been claimed; rather, the relationship between them should be seen as fluid, dynamic, and perhaps dialectical. Furthermore, postmodern theology has something positive to learn from modern liberalism.

The last few decades have witnessed the proliferation of various forms of “postmodern theology” and, as the years have passed, the earlier forms of pioneering deconstructive theology have given way to a radical reconstruction of a theological neo-orthodoxy sometimes known as “radical orthodoxy.” The latter has engaged in a deliberately concerted effort to distance itself from liberalism, both in its modern secular and in its theological manifestations. In the historical and theological genealogies radical orthodoxy constructs, liberalism is portrayed as the enemy of true theology, the Trojan horse through which theology secures its own demise. This is because liberalism is conceived as being fundamentally a *secular* phenomenon, a product of a philosophical epistemology that refuses to grant an a priori authority to any form of tradition, whether theological or otherwise. One of the earliest and most explicit manifestations of such an epistemology was, of course, that of Descartes, in whose work it is clear that

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the locus of authority has shifted from tradition to reason. For many theologians, to concede such a shift is already to admit defeat, for now theology will always be subordinate to some external criterion of truth. Liberalism, as a direct descendent of this epistemological forebear, is therefore already indicted. As John Milbank puts it, "Once theology surrenders its claim to be a metadiscourse, it cannot any longer articulate the word of the creator God, but is bound to turn into the oracular voice of some finite idol, such as historical scholarship, humanist psychology or transcendental philosophy."¹ For theology to accommodate itself to liberalism in any form can only constitute a betrayal.

To some extent, of course, such virulent antiliberalism is an inheritance from Karl Barth, and there are clearly Barthian echoes in the sentences just unfolded. But such an explicit opposition to liberalism may have served an important tactical purpose. As theologians labored to show how postmodernism could be used to recover and reconstruct theology rather than simply to deconstruct it, it was important to distinguish this program from the methodology of *both* deconstructive theology *and* the modern liberal theology out of which it emerged. In forging a new path, it was important to emphasize the difference and distance from the path that was being forsaken.

But now that postmodern orthodox theology has become well established, perhaps the time has come to ask whether this genealogical narrative is not, to a large extent, misleading. Is postmodern theological orthodoxy really as antithetical to liberalism as its proponents claim? My thoughts on this question have been prompted by a recent review of my own book, written by a venerable liberal theologian, the late Maurice Wiles. In it, Wiles finds in postmodern theology much that would be congenial to those, like himself, who are primarily products (rather than critics) of modernity and who are of a liberal theological temperament. He asks whether the contrast between postmodern theological orthodoxy on the one hand and modern liberalism on the other has been overplayed, and whether there may not be as many continuities between them as there are differences. He concludes by asking, "Does postmodern theology wish to insist on its incommensurability with the modernity it believes itself to have already superceded, or is it prepared to see itself as having a contribution to make to a wider stream of theological thought that may not be quite as dead as it believes?"² It is this question that I want to take up and

1. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 1.

2. Maurice Wiles, review of *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* by Gavin Hyman, *Theology Today* 60 (2003): 118.

explore in this article, by asking whether the relationship between postmodern theology and modern liberalism is quite as sharply opposed as has often been presented. C. S. Lewis once remarked that “humanity does not pass through phases as a train passes through stations: being alive, it has the privilege of always moving yet never leaving anything behind. Whatever we have been, in some sort we are still.”³ In line with this insight, I suggest that the relationship between postmodern theological orthodoxy and modern liberalism should be seen as fluid, dynamic, and perhaps dialectical, rather than one pertaining to a straightforward opposition.

The Liberal Legacy within Postmodern Theology

In order to do this, I shall look at some key themes in the work of postmodern orthodox theologians, particularly John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Gerard Loughlin. The first key theme to consider is that of radical orthodoxy’s talk of anti-representationalism and the “overcoming of metaphysics.” John Milbank, for instance, has long resisted talk of theology being “representational” or “metaphysical,” both of which he understands as being creations of an ultimately secular modernity. Rather, theology should be understood as a creative narrative response to the living God. He sees this move as being an attempt to overcome modernity and its liberalism and as being in some sense a return to a premodern theological order innocent of modern representationalism. Yet as Milbank would be the first to admit, one cannot simply restore the past; this return is at the same time the creation of something new. This heady mixture of old and new is exemplified when Milbank says of his theology, “Once the epistemological approach from the subject is shown to be as foundational as pre-modern metaphysics, the latter makes a strange kind of return: but as a necessary ‘fiction’ concerning the unseen relation of time to eternity, not as a record of ‘observation’ of this relationship.”⁴

So on the one hand, we have the strange return of premodern metaphysics, while on the other hand, this is no longer “an organised spatial realm of substances, genera and species” of the kind that Aquinas would have recognized.⁵ So if this is a return of the premodern, it is at the same time a qualified return; the specific qualification invoked here is that the theological metanarrative

3. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 1.

4. John Milbank, “‘Postmodern Critical Augustinianism’: A Short *Summa* in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions,” *Modern Theology* 7 (1991): 226.

5. *Ibid.*

should not be regarded as a “record of ‘observation’” of the relationship between time and eternity. But whence this qualification? Possibly from secular postmodernism, although Milbank is careful to clarify that for him theology is *not* just a fiction that refers to nothing beyond itself in the manner of more relativistic forms of postmodernism. Could it be said that this qualification derives from modern liberalism? As with all such discussions, much depends on how one defines the phrase “modern liberalism,” and there is, of course, more than one way of so doing. In particular, as Mark D. Chapman has pointed out, “alongside triumphalist rationalism there were also those strands which aimed to set *limits* to human reason.”⁶ Milbank is certainly here distancing himself from a particular species of liberalism that carries with it a modern representational or “mirroring” epistemology, deriving from a foundationalism of the subject. But, it has to be said, so too do many forms of modern liberal theology, including some of the most influential.⁷ As Chapman has intimated, they would appeal to an alternative strand of the tradition of modern liberalism, one that acknowledges the opacity of truth and emphasizes the necessity of a certain epistemological modesty. They too would wish to claim that theology in some way expresses and refers to reality, albeit not in a straightforward representational subject-object sense. When understood in this way, modern liberalism would seem to hover closer to what Milbank refers to as “a necessary ‘fiction’ concerning the unseen relation of time to eternity.” So it is by no means clear that there is a sharp antithetical disjunction between postmodern theology and modern liberalism at this point—significant differences, certainly, but not a straightforward opposition.

This leads to the second key theme, which has been developed particularly by Graham Ward. Much of Ward’s theology has been written through an extensive engagement with contemporary critical theory and cultural analysis. Indeed, he sees his theology as being itself a part of and an exemplification of wider cultural trends. For instance, he sees a resistance to an economic “commodification” of life and reality being enacted through a return to what Manuel Castells calls “resistant identities”—a return to “theological traditions

6. Mark D. Chapman, “Why the Enlightenment Project Doesn’t Have to Fail,” *Heythrop Journal* 39 (1998): 380.

7. To give one example, one could invoke again the name of Maurice Wiles, who, in a well-known discussion of the role of myth in theology, says that “there must be some ontological truth corresponding to the central characteristic of the structure of the myth. But such a criterion is not at all easy to apply. For one thing if the ontological truth were one that could be expressed with full clarity and precision, there would be less need for the myth.” Wiles, “Myth in Theology,” in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (London: SCM Press, 1977), 161.

and tradition-based forms of reasoning,” a move that is in itself a reaction against what he believes to be the failed project of liberalism.⁸ Yet Ward recognizes that this move will be enacted not just within Christianity but across a multiplicity of traditions. He acknowledges that the concomitant danger of this is the potential emergence of what he calls “culture wars.”⁹ Initially, such wars will be between the faith traditions and liberalism itself, but then, as liberalism declines, the danger is that these faith traditions will turn upon each other. In order to avert this danger, Ward says that the theological traditions must resist “the pressure to fetishize their faith”; they must resist the temptation to reify the particularity of their traditions by turning them into idols. Once again, the postmodern return to tradition appears to be qualified by a quasi-liberal cautionary injunction against doing so without reserve. It is not the case that the faith traditions will have to subscribe to an overarching transcendental liberal framework (it is clearly the collapse of such that has motivated the very return to tradition), but it does seem that the return to tradition is accompanied by a healthy injection of liberal caution. The injunction against the “fetishization” of particular traditions leads to the third key theme I want to consider, namely, the question of the relationship (ontological and epistemological as well as practical) between these different faith traditions.

On this deeply pertinent contemporary question, both Graham Ward and Gerard Loughlin have made very clear that their reaffirmation of Christian orthodoxy does not entail a return to absolutism or exclusivism with respect to the Christian disposition toward other faith traditions.¹⁰ Loughlin, for instance, has resisted conceiving of a plurality of religious systems, each seeking to devour and engulf the others. He has emphasized that that to which the faith traditions gesture cannot be *equated* with the faith traditions themselves: “Religious systems are always the abstractions of systematisers, who, like all such, construct the object of their discourse in and through their discourse. In this sense all religions are fictions, but fictions we can use to gesture to that we name as ‘religion.’ But that which we thus name is always more ragged than the system by which it comes into view, more indeterminate and unstable.”¹¹ Con-

8. Graham Ward, *True Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), ix.

9. *Ibid.*, 138ff.

10. There is a difference to be noted in this regard between the approaches of Graham Ward and Gerard Loughlin on the one hand and John Milbank on the other. For the somewhat different (and perhaps less “liberal”) approach of the latter, see John Milbank, “The End of Dialogue,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, ed. Gavin D’Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 174–91.

11. Gerard Loughlin, “The Body in the Text: Realism and Non-Realism, Revelation and Writing-Experience,” in *New Directions in Philosophical Theology: Essays in Honour of Don Cupitt*, ed. Gavin Hyman (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 156.

sequently, it cannot automatically be assumed that those who gesture to that reality differently are thereby mired in falsehood. Indeed, Ward and Loughlin have claimed that the only possible position to take here is a hospitable suspension of judgment. Ward puts it this way:

As Christians we have to suspend judgement concerning other faiths. In this middle place (as Christians interpret time between the Ascension of Christ and the eschaton), we must necessarily make judgements with regards to all sorts of things, and we must, with equal necessity, confess our ignorance. We must suspend our judgement about those who pursue love, mercy, justice, and righteousness in other practices, in other communities, with other liturgies and symbolic exchanges.¹²

Certainly this falls short of the strong claim found in a certain species of theological liberalism, namely, that all traditions are equally true or equally valid; I have no desire here to gloss over genuine differences. But we should be equally concerned not to obscure points of overlap, and we see again here that the postmodern return to tradition is being qualified by a liberal hesitance and epistemological modesty that rules out a Barthian exclusivism. Insofar as this represents a liberal “incursion” into the Christian metanarrative, this may well be an example of the intertextual movement Loughlin goes on to commend.

The themes of intertextuality, fluidity, and the crossing of boundaries are also central to the final key area I wish to consider, namely, sexuality and, in particular, the question of homosexuality. Once again, in their approach to this question, John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Gerard Loughlin have all made clear that their recovery of a radical “orthodoxy” does not carry with it an endorsement of orthodox teaching on same-sex unions. Indeed, their approach to this question is startlingly “liberal,” and they undertake a trenchant critique of orthodox teaching on the normativity of heterosexuality. Such teaching is well entrenched, running as it does from Thomas Aquinas’s teaching on natural law to the official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church as currently affirmed by Pope Benedict XVI. This whole tradition, deriving, of course, from the teleological principles of natural law, depends upon a justification of sexual union through the possibility, in principle, of reproduction. It is precisely this reductivism that Ward and others seek to challenge. They see the biological naturalism that underlies such accounts as being at odds

12. Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 257.

with a theological account of desire that gets its sense, first, from the interrelations between trinitarian difference; second, from the ontological difference between the divine and human; and third, from the sexual difference between human beings themselves. The biological naturalism of the “orthodox” accounts depends, Ward argues, upon an eradication of genuine difference, since the complementary roles of male and female in heterosexual unions are conceived within the context of an unambiguously male (the same, the one) economy. Same-sex unions are to be affirmed precisely because they displace the sameness, unity, and eradication of differences that “orthodox” heterosexist symbolics entail.¹³ As Ward puts it, “Same-sex relationships displace . . . heterosexist symbolics, revealing a love which exceeds biological reproduction.”¹⁴

We see here an unequivocal affirmation of same-sex relationships and a trenchant critique of received orthodoxy. Nonetheless, this very critique itself proceeds on the basis of theological orthodoxy; as we have just observed, it is rooted in orthodox teachings on trinitarian difference and the ontological difference between the divine and the human. But if this is so, why has orthodoxy historically been interpreted differently? A form of this question is raised and begins to be answered by Loughlin:

The Christian tradition has always imagined same-sex marriage—at least for men. Men have always been able—if not required—to play the bride to Christ’s groom, for “all human beings—both women and men—are called through the Church to be the ‘Bride’ of Christ” (John Paul II). Why then should same-sex marriage be so troubling for the Christian churches, when it is what Christian men have been doing all along? The answer is contained in the latter clause of the question. It has to do with (men) falling for a male deity, and is in this sense a christological problem.¹⁵

But what gives rise to this displacement of one reading of orthodoxy by another? Is it plausible to see it as being generated purely from within? Could it be the case that secular liberalism, which has been in the vanguard of the affirmation of homosexuality, may have had a part to play in calling theological orthodoxy to a new self-understanding?

13. For a detailed exposition of this analysis, see *ibid.*, chap. 7.

14. *Ibid.*, 200.

15. Gerard Loughlin, “Introduction: The End of Sex,” in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, ed. Gerard Loughlin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 5.

The Significance of This Liberal Legacy

This leads on to the main point, which is not so much simply to identify these examples of a certain liberal legacy but, more importantly, to discuss its significance. My purpose here is not the trivial one of identifying a supposed internal inconsistency within radical orthodoxy—namely, between the virulent rejection of liberalism on the one hand and the apparent adoption of key liberal principles on the other. Rather, it is to ask about the significance of this adopted legacy and what this may mean for a postmodern theological reevaluation of liberalism itself. In doing this, I shall discuss two alternative accounts of these overlaps and points of convergence between modern liberalism and postmodern neo-orthodox theology.

The first such account derives from the very thinkers thus far discussed. It may well be argued against my analysis that the supposedly liberal principles I have identified are not in fact derived from liberalism at all but are, on the contrary, explications of insights that have always been at the heart of the Christian tradition. This was the line of analysis proffered by John Milbank in particular. On this reading, any overlaps between these theological principles and those of liberalism are to be explained by the “fact” that the values of liberalism are themselves secularized distortions of Christian insights. So, for instance, the liberal commitment to human equality is a secular distortion of the theological truth that all human beings are created in the image of God and, as such, are equal in the sight of God. Likewise, the liberal commitment to the toleration of plurality and difference is a secular distortion of Christian universalism, which subsumed but did not abolish difference. As Milbank puts it, “Christians could remain in their many different cities, languages and cultures, yet still belong to one eternal city ruled by Christ in whom all ‘humanity’ was fulfilled.”¹⁶ Furthermore, these liberal values are themselves unsustainable without the Christian underpinnings from which they were originally derived. So, for instance, to what extent are the commitments to human equality and human rights sustainable without the doctrine of *creatio imago Dei* that originally underpinned them? And has not this instability been graphically illustrated by liberalism’s dissolution philosophically into nihilism, with its displacement of equality by will-to-power and by its dissolution economically into free capitalism, with its displacement of equality by the profit motive? One corollary of this, however, is that if liberal values are parodies of Christian

16. Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” 227.

ones, then, as Milbank says, Christianity “appears as a ‘precursor’ of enlightenment, and any claim of outright opposition to enlightenment is bound to be an over-simplification.”¹⁷ Although such a comment undoubtedly qualifies much of postmodern theology’s antiliberal rhetoric, the relationship here is still conceived in such a way as to cast liberalism in a negative light in relation to theology. Liberal values are parodies that are unsustainable and that lose the meaning of the original Christian values from which they were derived.

But even if it is assumed that this analysis is correct (and critically evaluating this claim would, admittedly, entail the development of a major project of intellectual history), we are still faced with the question of why these values were not self-evident in the premodern Christian era. Why were the values of, for instance, equality, tolerance, respect for differences, and epistemological modesty not more apparent in the premodern Christian era if these very principles are indeed explications of fundamentally Christian insights? Why did it take a fundamentally secular Enlightenment to bring them explicitly to light? At the very least, it seems that one would be compelled to admit that modern liberalism has played a positive role in the unfolding of Christian truth in bringing to light elements of the Christian ethical tradition that had previously, for whatever reason, been obscured. Indeed, most recently, it seems that Milbank himself has come to acknowledge this. In the preface to the second edition of *Theology and Social Theory*, he says:

The careful reader will realize that throughout the book the attitude towards “secular reason” is never as negative as it appears to be on the surface. For it is viewed not as what it primarily proclaims itself to be, namely the secular, but rather as disguised heterodoxy of various stripes, as a revived paganism and as a religious nihilism. In each case my attitude cannot be simply oppositional, since I regard Catholic Christianity as fulfilling the best pagan impulses. . . . It follows that there remains truth in all these distortions.¹⁸

So far, this is consistent with what we have already seen to be Milbank’s evaluation of liberalism: it contains some truth inasmuch as it is derivative from its Christian origins, but it falls short of Christian truth insofar as it is a parody or distortion. But then, Milbank takes a step further or, perhaps, makes more explicit what he had always previously thought when he says that it may even

17. Ibid.

18. John Milbank, “Preface to the Second Edition: Between Liberalism and Positivism,” in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), xiv–xv.

be the case that “just as Irenaeus learned much from Valentinus, the [liberal] distortions develop *better* certain aspects of orthodoxy which orthodoxy must then later recoup.”¹⁹ This is a significant concession, for it is to admit that liberalism is not just, negatively, a distortion of Christian truth, but that, positively, it articulates certain aspects of Christian truth better than did Christianity itself. If this is the case, then clearly more needs to be said here in terms of a fully developed theology of history. But modern liberalism is thus accorded a positive role in the unfolding or explication of Christian truth itself. This is a long way from the theological denunciations of liberalism from which we began.

Reconsidering the Relationship: The Role of Dialectics

In order to make better sense of this less oppositional relationship to liberalism, I want to suggest that we should look to forms of postmodern theology other than that of radical orthodoxy. For what counts as postmodern theology is not, of course, wholly constituted by the radical orthodoxy enterprise. In my own work, for example, through a detailed engagement with radical orthodoxy, I have developed an alternative methodology.²⁰ Put very briefly, my starting point here was that the postmodern disposition has given rise to two antithetical impulses: one theological (a recovery of theological orthodoxy) and one nihilistic (a deconstruction of theological orthodoxy). This gives rise to a predicament, the predicament of postmodern theology, whereby one is confronted with a false choice between these two extremes. I suggested that to adopt unequivocally either one or the other gives rise to a false resolution of a predicament that should remain unresolved and that ignores the very real ways in which each is implicated in the other. Through a detailed reading of both, I argued that theology is haunted by a nihilistic supplement that it can never entirely repress and that resists theological closure and stability. Contrariwise, I argued that nihilism is haunted by a theological obverse that makes its endless dissemination to be forever unrealizable. The operative structural logic is well illustrated by the contentious postmodern question of the metanarrative. Nihilistic or deconstructive postmodernism proclaims the “end of the metanarrative” and draws attention to the way in which every supposed metanarrative is ultimately incomplete and unsustainable. Theological postmodernism, on the other hand, suggests that the idea that one can do without a metanarrative

19. *Ibid.*, xv; my emphasis.

20. See Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

is itself illusory. Every supposed attempt to do without one always ends up by unwittingly reinstating one. In light of this, the question before us is not *whether* there can be a metanarrative but, rather, *which* one we inhabit. My own response to this argument was to suggest that each provides us with a false—forced and fantasized—resolution.²¹ Through a reading of both, I suggested that we inhabit a certain aporia wherein a metanarrative is as unavoidable as it is impossible. Rather than attempting to “resolve” this predicament, our task should be to embrace and dwell within it.

But how does such a disposition relate to liberalism? And how was Maurice Wiles able to see in such a disposition much that would be congenial to liberals? In answer, I can do little more here than venture a tentative suggestion that liberalism and the disposition I have outlined here are both—in very different ways—attempting to negotiate between the extremes of an absolutist theology on the one hand and a relativistic nihilism on the other. Liberalism attempts to do this by means of the classic modernist strategy of *mediation*, through the articulation of a specifiable third position beyond and between these two extremes. In contrast, the disposition I have outlined pursues such a negotiation by means of another modernist strategy, namely, that of *dialectics*. Unlike mediation, the dialectical tradition operates on the basis of the conviction that truth is never articulable as such but can only be gestured toward by means of the dialectically opposed modes of thought through which it is expressed. Although this tradition finds its origins in Hegel, it has been perpetuated in contemporary thought by such thinkers as Gillian Rose and Slavoj Žižek. The differences between such a version of postmodern theology and modern liberalism should not be underestimated, and there is much at stake in this difference, particularly in terms of the questions of metaphysics and ontology. But the possibility that they are both trying to negotiate positions or dispositions between an exclusivist theology and a relativistic nihilism may help to explain why the two are not as far apart as may initially be supposed or as I myself previously suggested.

But there is more that a dialectical approach may be able to offer, and specifically to the issues at the heart of this essay. For if we are to take seriously Milbank’s claim that liberalism developed better certain aspects of orthodoxy than did that orthodoxy itself, then a dialectical disposition may help us to make sense of this insight. In the words of Gillian Rose, the dialectic-

21. My terminology here echoes that of Gillian Rose in *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

tical way is the reflexive resumption of that which “we always do: to know, to misknow and yet to grow.”²² The dialectical interplay between knowing and misknowing is what enables growth, and, if this is so, then it is perhaps to be expected that the thesis of theological orthodoxy would require the antithesis of secular liberalism to bring its inner meaning to light. And perhaps against Milbank we should be cautious of thinking that when orthodoxy “recoups” that which liberalism illuminated, this dialectical process, this movement of knowing and unknowing, comes to an end. For as Rose again says, “Self-knowing spirit is a relation and this knowing whether presented in the historical shapes of consciousness or as science is perpetual and never-ending. Absolute knowledge is a path which must be continually traversed, re-collecting the forms of consciousness and the forms of science. This idea of a whole which cannot be grasped in one moment or one statement for it must be experienced is the idea of the system.”²³ Commenting on this, Rowan Williams has observed that, for Rose, “every moment of recognition is a new moment of salutary error to the extent that it is the taking of a *position*. The truth lies in the ‘system,’ which is *not* the theory that the mind can possess at one moment, but the entirety of the path, the project, of critical dissolution of the positional and partial definition.”²⁴

A dialectical disposition offers a way of proceeding that itself allows us to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, it cautions us against the supposition that any one of the particular and positioned configurations of thought could itself embody the truth of the whole. On the other hand, it cautions against a move to the opposite extreme, namely, the supposition that all such configurations are arbitrary fictions. It may well be said that orthodox theology has itself, at times, fallen into the former error, while secular liberalism, especially in its more postmodern guises, has sometimes fallen into the latter. The truth, on the contrary, is articulated in this very process or movement. If this is so, then it would be a mistake to view the relationship between the theology of radical orthodoxy and secular liberalism as being straightforwardly oppositional. On the contrary, we should expect each to expose the truth of the other, as well as expecting each to expose the error of the other. This process of dialectical and mutual criticism is brought out well by Williams again when he says, albeit in a quite different context, that

22. *Ibid.*, 310.

23. Gillian Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology* (London: Athlone, 1981), 182.

24. Rowan Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose,” *Modern Theology* 11 (1995): 10.

without certain themes consistently and strongly emphasised by the “Abrahamic” faiths, themes to do with the unconditional possibility for every human subject to live in conscious relation with God and in free and constructive collaboration with others, there is no guarantee that a “universalist” account of human dignity would ever have seemed plausible or even emerged with clarity. Slave societies and assumptions about innate racial superiority are as widespread a feature as any in human history (and they have persistently infected even Abrahamic communities, which is perhaps why the Enlightenment was a necessary wake-up call to religion . . .).²⁵

In other words, perhaps secular liberalism was needed, both to recall theology to its own inner meaning and to expose its truths and its errors.

Conclusion

Perhaps the time has come for postmodern theology—in its various guises—to qualify its earlier antiliberal rhetoric. Such antithetical opposition is unhelpful and misleading. This is not to suggest that we should diminish the very real differences between modern liberal approaches to theology and postmodern ones. These undoubtedly exist, and much is to be gained by exploring them. But if we are to guard against a forgetting of these differences, we should equally guard against an exaggeration of them. If we conduct our disagreement against the background of the sort of issues I am raising, then we can move some way toward fulfilling Maurice Wiles’s wish that postmodern theology be “prepared to see itself as having a contribution to a wider stream of theological thought that may not be quite as dead as it believes.”²⁶

25. Rowan Williams, “Civil and Religious Law in England: a Religious Perspective,” lecture delivered at the Royal Courts of Justice, February 7, 2008, <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1575>.

26. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Diego, November 18, 2007. I am grateful to participants, especially Friedrich Wilhelm Graf and Christine Helmer, for comments and discussion.