

Radical Orthodoxy in a Pluralistic World

Radical Orthodoxy remains an important movement within Christian theology, but does it relate effectively with an increasingly pluralist and secular Western society? Can it authentically communicate the beauty and desire of the divine to such a diverse collection of theological accounts of meaning?

This book re-assesses the viability of the social model given by John Milbank, before attempting an out-narration of this vision with a more convincing account of the link between the example of the Trinitarian divine and the created world. It also touches on areas such as interreligious dialogue, particularly between Christianity and Islam, as well as social issues such as marginalisation, integration, and community relations in order to chart a practical way forward for the living of a Christian life within contemporary plurality.

This is a vital resource for any Theology academic with an interest in Radical Orthodoxy and conservative post-modern Christian theology. It will also appeal to scholars involved in Islamic Studies and studying inter-religious dialogues.

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Desire, Beauty, and the Divine
Angus M. Slater

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Radical Orthodoxy in a Pluralistic World

Desire, Beauty, and the Divine

Angus M. Slater

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Introduction

In our contemporary world, we tend to take for granted the bewildering array of diversity and difference that creates each aspect of our social existence. From the political and philosophical realm, to the more mundane matters of food and leisure activities, we take for granted not only the existence of a plurality of options, but also our ability to freely choose between them. Walk down any road, in any town, in much of the modern West and one will come across a fusion of cultural, religious, and social traditions that together form a tapestry of difference, whether that difference is minor, in the form of a restaurant selling food originally from half the world away, or more major, in the form of a religious building of an unfamiliar faith. Symbols, beliefs, practices, and cultures form a swirling tapestry of inter-connection which, when placed together and imbued with the Brownian motion of individual lives lived within it, becomes a self-sustaining organism of social, historical, and religious exchange. Take my own locale, where historical overtones of Christian monastic orders seep into more recent history of Christian non-conformists, shaping and moulding the relationship between the civic town and the University. Where two small mosques sit divided by a theological rivalry imported from a different continent, dividing the community in worship but not in practice. Where a modern faith from Latin America conflicts with secular drug legislation and meets in private – retelling anew the same story of persecution that breathed life into the early Christian Church, into the story of Judaism in medieval Europe, into the story of Chinese house churches today. Where an individual's faith, and the courage and steadfastness born from it, leads him to be an outcast from his country, exiled abroad yet sharing food and faith with strangers. Where the very land owes its identity to the mystical union between the Crown, the divine, and the country, steeped in the blood of those judged as sinners on behalf of God centuries ago. This combination of history, religion, and symbolism imbues our contemporary society and its diversity and difference with profound meaning – yet another stage in the unfolding of the story of the inter-relationship between the individual, the divine, and the people around them.

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Regardless of the extent of this difference, its presence and easy acceptance within our societies represent a significant change in the way that we think about our communities, the way we think about ourselves, and the way we choose to try and live our lives. It is to this question that this book responds – given the characteristics of modern contemporary life in the West, how best might the Christian engage with and respond to such variety? It is tempting to dismiss the contemporary flourishing of diversity and difference as either a passing phase, one that will decline and fade away if only the Christian community can outlast it, or as something inimically hostile to the Christian community, something to be shunned and rejected as contradictory to the living of a truly Christian life. Yet, while this temptation is comforting, it fails to understand the extent to which this diversity has reshaped the totality of our social lives and denies central aspects of the calling to the Christian life. Our societies, as they are structured now, are formed by unfeeling patterns of change, whether those such as globalisation which interconnects geographically separate communities and allows for the mingling of diverse and different cultures, those broader trends of modernisation, both technological and sociological, or the smaller-scale patterns of migration and immigration which bring our established communities into contact with new traditions and cultures. These flows of change, whether they result in a wholesale relocation of our notion of national identity, or whether they merely herald the appearance of a new culturally different form of cuisine on our highstreets, shape not only societies, but also the way in which we construct our notion of ourselves and our everyday interactions with the other.

As our societies experience and live through this constant flux of exchange and difference, our religious traditions, situated and embodied by communities of believers, do so too. The close connection between individuals, faith communities, and the established historically and doctrinally defined traditions of faiths cannot be denied; as such, the effects of diversity and difference experienced by the individual lead to profound effects on the tradition of the individual's faith.¹ We can see this clearly in the reaction of religious traditions and communities to changing patterns of social structuring, having an impact on every part of the tradition and its embodied communities – from patterns of mission activity changing from a focus on the developing world to efforts to re-Christianise the secular West,² attempts by some churches to rethink their approaches to changing understandings of human sexuality and the sociological and cultural changes driven by them,³ or to a flourishing of engagement between differing religious groups in small-scale, community-level, practical projects to improve communities together.⁴ This is not simply a matter of changing culture changing religious traditions, but the impact of changes in experience on the interpretation and narration of the religious stories that instil those traditions with life. The experience of the individual, living amongst a super-diverse community, informs and has been changing the reaction of the community level Church to aspects of difference, and in turn, changing the reaction to and conceptualisation of

the other in the dogmatic thought of the wider tradition.⁵ This connection only serves to reinforce the necessity of thinking through what the characteristic qualities of our contemporary societies mean for the Christian tradition, how the Christian tradition and its communities might respond, and how the individual might come to live their life in a more Christian manner towards neighbours who, except their shared humanity, share little cultural, religious, or social markers of identity.

As is clear, given the preceding paragraphs, it is this facet of plurality that characterises a shift in our contemporary societies from those that went before. That is not to say that previous social forms did not contain within them forms of plurality or different accounts of the world, but rather that the emergence, acceptance, and extent of the pluralities to be found in our contemporary societies represents a qualitative and quantitative change from those that went before.⁶ It is not the aim of this book to provide an account of the full gamut of plurality to be found within the societies of the contemporary West, nor to provide a taxonomy of the difference now apparent within our communities. However, the pluralities we now live with are apparent across the whole of society, and have gone on to shape our interaction with our societies on a variety of different levels. This includes religious plurality, the presence of multiple religious faiths in one society, as seen in the relatively recent presence of significant numbers of believers of non-Christian traditions within what was known as Christendom, that heartland of the Christian faith. Within contemporary society in the United Kingdom, even in those geographic areas somewhat left behind by the processes of modernisation and globalisation, large communities of differing religious faith can be found, stemming either from flows of refugees, as in the historic case of East African Hindu's or the more recent cases of Yazidi, Druze, Alawite, and other Syrian refugee groups, historic patterns of migration related to the structure of empire and conquest such as the strong presence of Sikhism and Islam in some British towns, the increasingly normalised movement of people due to globalisation bringing forms of alternative evangelical and charismatic Christianity into increased prominence in areas of the capital, or just the pattern of the individual, exposed to variety and difference, exploring religiously in ways not apparent or even possible previously. Of course, intimately connected with this plurality of religious belief to be found in nearly every town, is a concomitant plurality of ethnic and cultural background. Society has seen some decline in the correlation between ethnic and cultural background and religious faith, a strong marker of identity for many,⁷ and rather than undermining the plurality of religious belief expressed, it seems that this decline in correspondence can better be assigned to the increasing choice that this religious, and non-religious, plurality offers. Indeed, it would be remiss to discuss the prevalence of religious plurality within our contemporary societies without also pointing to the presence, and inner diversity, of non-religious world views, varying from the strictly atheistic to the uncaring agnostic.⁸

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That the modern world experiences all this religious plurality cannot be denied, nor can the changing shape of that religious plurality. While often, religious diversity is encapsulated solely through examining the percentages of the population who tick a census box marking them as non-Christian, this approach fails to appreciate the granular level on which religious plurality, both its existence and the potential it points to, has opened up.⁹ Indeed, the plurality we experience extends beyond the confines of competing monolithic religious traditions to include a bewildering variety of faith positions, whether they are relatively recently founded and new to the country, such as Scientology, Rastafarianism, or Baha'i, long established but only now in the UK in significant numbers, such as forms of Salafi or Sufi Islam or Orthodox and Chalcedonian Christianity, or the supposed retrieval, though in a very modern form, of ancient druidic and pagan practices. This aspect highlights not only the presence of new religious traditions, whether new entirely or just relatively new to the social and religious history of the UK, but the increasing inner diversity apparent within the cultural and religious streams of thought and practice we term 'traditions'. Christianity in the UK is no longer dominated by that imagined remembrance of Church of England vicars drinking tea at a village fete. Rather, Christianity, to say nothing of all the other religious traditions now firmly settled in our town and cities, is itself made up of an astonishing variety of practices, beliefs, and traditions. New Pentecostal and Charismatic churches from Nigeria flourish in mixed communities across London, with the prosperity gospel and spiritualist healing attracting thousands to hotel ballrooms across the capital, in a pattern of dizzying religious growth.¹⁰ Older, but fringe, Christian groups, like the Quakers, the Unitarians, and other groups with a deep commitment to social action, see new interest from a socially conscious generation put off by the strictures of established denominations, while on the opposite side we see growth and vitality from socially conservative evangelicalism imported from the USA. Even within those staid bastions of establishment, the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, new forms of religious practice and belief are adding to the plurality of religious possibility experienced by the individual, such as the establishment of the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham offering space within Catholicism for those estranged from Anglicanism, or the increasing presence of alternative practices and beliefs within Anglicanism whether over the place of women, issues of human sexuality, or social and political engagement. The religious diversity to be found in our contemporary societies is therefore not just between being a Christian and being a Muslim, or a Sikh, or a Jew. Rather, it is about which religious faith one chooses, or not, from a bewildering variety of different faiths, old and new, and, just as importantly, what type of denomination or type of believer one chooses to be.

However, even this appreciation for denominational plurality disguises another level of diversity and difference that has come to form a significant aspect of our societies. As has already been alluded to, the religious

plurality apparent must consider increasingly socially prominent varieties and forms of non-religious behaviour and belief. The increasingly secular nature of much of our society has made the choice of no religion, or at least non-identification with religion, an increasingly common feature of the individual's interaction with event in their life and others in their community.¹¹ Whether this is expressed through contact with expressly atheistic formulations of politics or through a detachment from traditional forms of religion in favour of an attachment to an amorphous, pick-and-mix, spirituality, both of these positions, and the myriad in between, offer up new forms of interconnection and exchange between individuals immersed in the patterns of difference which form our societies. Indeed, as strong identification with any faith generally declines in the West, these alternative forms of spirituality seem to be increasingly important in conceiving of how society as a whole engages with matters of belief.¹² As the Kendal Project, and more recent sociological research has shown, this 'spiritual but not religious' category bears serious attention as an increasingly important and common marker of religious identity, and while this book does not seek to explore why it has become so, it seems churlish and outdated to ignore it entirely in any survey of the contemporary religious landscape.¹³ Religious diversity in contemporary society is therefore formed not just by differences between established religious traditions, but also by differences within those traditions, differences between newer forms of religion and older ones, and, of course, between religious and non-religious perspectives. The extent of this diversity is a critical point of difference between contemporary society and those that have gone before it, which, although containing within themselves forms of plurality and difference, did not bring together these levels of plurality simultaneously or for significant amounts of time.¹⁴

This demonstration of the possibility of an alternative is a critical factor in analysing various other forms of diversity that have come to characterise our contemporary societies. While religious diversity may be a relatively apparent form of social plurality, the pluralisation of positions available has come to be a characteristic of many other forms of social identification. This includes aspects like cultural and ethnic plurality, social and material plurality, and political and ideological plurality. Hand in hand with religious plurality brought about through flows of migration and globalisation is the integration of diaspora ethnic and cultural groups within Western societies, with cultural and ethnic plurality being particularly apparent in large urban areas where the extent of the cultural and ethnic plurality cannot be underestimated. Of course, religious identity and cultural identities are often closely connected, with most Sikhs being ethnically Punjabi or most Zoroastrians being ethnically Persian or Indian; however, the increasing prominence of non-religion and religious conversion has made this connection a weaker analytical tool. In addition to the cultural and ethnic plurality seen in contemporary society, we have seen greater attention being paid to the disparities in social integration and disparities in material wealth, with

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recent economic events throwing focus on matters of wealth gaps, social and educational expectations, and effective levels of taxation.¹⁵ These aspects of difference, creating differentiation within societies and the increasing discussion surrounding them, mirrors the aspects of religious diversity previously discussed as characteristic of contemporary society. Not in a way that people choose their material circumstance, but in the way in which an individual's material circumstances, and their awareness and understanding of them, depends on the relationship between the material circumstances of the individual and their perception of the material circumstances of others in society.

In addition to these factors of economic disparity evident within contemporary Western society, one must also be aware of the extent to which social change has driven the pluralisation of differing social attitudes. This change in recent social attitudes, whether towards divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, or single-parent households, has led to a concomitant flourish of differing social structures regarding family life, and in turn, a flourishing of different attitudes towards alternative structures. All these aspects of diversity, however, do not exist without having an impact on society. The presence of these pluralities exerts a pluralising effect on wider society, by demonstrating the existence and functioning of an alternative to the religious, or non-religious, faith of the individual, or to the socially constructed norm of family relationship or sexual partner. This is true not only in a purely descriptive manner, but also in a predictive manner, in that the array of pluralities to be found in contemporary society seems to have no likelihood of declining. In this sense, not only is contemporary society not like those that have gone before it, but given the changes that it has undergone, it seems exceedingly unlikely that the trends of pluralisation can ever be reversed. Society is not like it was, and it seems like it never will be again. For this reason, the critical aspect of contemporary society is not only the existence of plurality in religious, social, and economic areas, but also the way in which this rise of pluralisation has fundamentally changed our societies forever. Once the genie of pluralised liberation from strict social structures and prevailing connections of identity, nationality, religious faith, and social behaviour have been broken, it remains very difficult to express just how society is ever likely to return to the imagined, and to the lesser real but still significant, homogeneity of previous societies. The characteristics of modern society and its relationship to pluralism is therefore one of increasing tolerance for pluralisation and, in turn, an allowed, encouraged, and unstoppable increase in the diversity of religion, opinion, or socially normative actions.

As has perhaps been alluded to above, another characteristic quality of contemporary society I wish to place into focus is its increasingly secularised nature in the West in comparison to those forms of society that have gone before. What is meant by secularisation is a topic of intense academic debate, and, of course, its extent varies by both regional difference and by

which level of society is being examined. However, largely the influence and authority of religious belief has declined in citizen's personal lives, their social interaction with others in their communities, and in their relationship with, and understanding of, the place of the state itself.¹⁶ The secularisation experienced in Western societies, whether stemming from governmental action, as has been the case in France, or from a more laissez-faire approach which has gradually de-emphasised the public role of religion in any aspect of the political arena beyond flummery and ceremony as has occurred in the UK, varies according to the specific social and historical patterns of the state in which it can be found.¹⁷ Yet, broadly, the influence of religion on the personal and public lives of western societies appears to have undergone a precipitous decline – as John Milbank once noted, 'once there was no secular',¹⁸ and yet, now, the secular is inescapable.

The secular, that we are now enmeshed in, takes on a variety of forms in our contemporary societies; although the scope of its impact can be largely divided into private effects on the individual and public effects on the formation of political and social structures. Privately, the impact of secularisation has been a sea change of individuals' practices, beliefs, and relationships.¹⁹ Previously, the meta-narrative of a religious tradition, largely Christianity within the West, formed the driving and underlying logical of the organisation of society, which accorded meaning and importance onto the actions of the individual. Within contemporary, largely secularised, societies the impingement of religious faith on the personal life of the individuals has largely broken down, as can be seen not only in declining identification with faith traditions and declining attendance at regular religious practices,²⁰ but also in the symptomatic liberalisation of social positions on issues on which mainstream religious traditions have tended to be opposed – whether this is the increasing prominence of women in societies, divorce and remarriage, or more recent discussions around homosexuality and equal access to marriage.²¹ While statistical evidence for a steady decline in religious identification and practice is abundant, this does somewhat mask areas of change within the broader trend of personal secularisation, specifically aspects of growth in identification as 'spiritual but not religious' and attendance at religious ceremonies which celebrate large events such as Christmas or Easter.²² Some research suggests this is part of the continued cultural, rather than religious, pull of traditions which have previously been closely identified with national identity, and yet, even taking this into account, one is irrevocably led to acknowledge that the impact of religious faith on the average individual within our societies has declined in recent times.²³ Rather than seeing this occurrence as the impact of a deliberate ideology of secularism, which does not appear to be borne out by government policy in the UK, or a deliberate and conscious rejection of religious faith, which does not appear to be borne out by the lack of major growth in numbers identifying as explicitly atheist, it seems most convincingly to be a gradual decline of importance of religious faith to the individual in the process of living their

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life and a gradual decline of the interconnectedness of the individual's life with the explanatory and meaning-producing tradition of the religion. The individual no longer requires a broader, over-arching whole within which to anchor their experience of reality and is instead capable of producing their own meaning and significance or this form of meaning is being provided from outside the established forms of religious tradition. This form of secularisation is therefore one of disinterest and failing in the functioning of the narrative of religious traditions as explanatory meta-narratives for society. Individuals in contemporary society no longer require the guidance or meaning making function of a religious narrative to engage with others.²⁴ While the replacement of religion is, again, an area of debate, personal identification with a religious faith is now a minority position in some Western societies where previously, even the notion of being opt out of a religious construction of one's society and world was unthinkable.

This aspect of secularisation has not just impinged on the lives of individuals but has, in turn, had an impact on the political and social structure of society. First, this can be seen in aspects of political and social liberalisation from religious norms which do not conform to secular accounts of rationalism and secondly the increasingly diminished social and political place of religious organisations and communities. The largely secular political nature of the contemporary West feeds into the preservation of a position of dominance and power for the broader secularising account of modernity that seeks to emphasise the notion that religious faith is a purely private matter that cannot be legitimately expressed within a public arena as an attempt to influence the collective whole. This is an aspect that can be clearly seen in recent legal and government moves towards social equality that have been opposed by religious traditions in both the UK and the USA but is also apparent in the declining ability of religious communities to influence government policy, religious individuals to express their beliefs in religious terms in political fora, and the decline of religious political parties in anything but name. This movement has not been solely an imposition from outside, with religious traditions often withdrawing from significant aspects of their previous social and political involvement, both in the face of hostility towards their continued presence or due to a divergence between secular legal and religious forms of behaviour. Examples of this include the withdrawal of church organisations from the process of adoption in the UK and the USA²⁵ or the decline in the influence of church communities and religious theological thinking in welfare provision in the UK.²⁶

The secular has come to define almost every aspect of the life of the individual in contemporary society, in the same way as the Christian story once did. Nearly every action undertaken, which was once given meaning by its relevance to the unfolding narrative of the Kingdom of God on Earth, is now positioned as stripped of connection to the divine in the name of acceptance into a secular political and social sphere. Just as there was 'once no secular' with non-religion being an unthinkable possibility,²⁷ we are, in

the mind of some religiously identified individuals approaching its inverse – a position where religious faith and valid religious reasoning or speculation on the meaning life is an unthinkable possibility in our political spaces, or at least is able to be dismissed as the eccentric musings of a few.²⁸ This is the secular structuring of our society, shaping and fixing the current position of religious narratives, the communities formed by them, and the individuals who accord those narratives value, as non-normative. As a characteristic of our society, its secular nature holds a pervasive place of importance, influencing almost all levels and areas of our society. In much the same way as the previously discussed characteristic of plurality has come to shape almost every aspect of our interaction with the other within our societies, so has the declining relevance of religious stories to the creation of our own individual and community stories.

Therefore, these two characteristics of contemporary society – plurality and secularity – are both defining aspects of the current structure of our lives. It is difficult to analyse any aspect of our current world without reference to either the existence of different opinions on, accounts of, or experiences of, social reality or to the absence of a religious meta-narrative tying all of it together. Perhaps more importantly for the subject of this book, these two characteristics form the experience of society for many people, structuring the way in which they engage with religious traditions and stories. This is a challenge to the place, purpose, and importance of the Christian narrative and because of this, the Christian narrative must come to talk specifically to the issues raised by the ongoing processes of pluralisation and secularisation if it is ever to convince individuals of its relevance or necessity. The current existence of cultural and ethnic pluralities, social and material pluralities, and political and religious pluralities means that our contemporary society is fundamentally different from previous incarnations of social organisation, and the concomitant trends of pluralisation, diversification, and hybridisation brought about by the existence of plurality means that the pluralisation of contemporary society has become a self-reinforcing system, where the presence of plurality leads to an increased level of the process of pluralisation.²⁹ This process, of plurality causing pluralisation, means that contemporary society, already fundamentally different to previous social formations, is unlikely to ever return to the characteristic religious, social, and cultural homogeneity of our imagined Christendom. While members of the Christian community, Christian theologians, and the institutional body of the Church may long for a situation where the entirety of society has at least passing familiarity with the Christian story and where society, even for those non-believers, is largely structured by and adherent to Christian norms, this remains nothing more than an impossible fantasy which ultimately seems to hold back the engagement of the contemporary world by the story of Christ. The two characteristics identified pose a significant challenge not only to the preceding accounts of Christian society, but also to contemporary forms of the Christian narrative, and require, in turn, a

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significantly new response from the Christian tradition. To make sense to individuals enmeshed within the experience of plurality and secularisation, the Christian narrative must come to speak not only about these situations in a descriptive manner, but also to these situations, seeking to coherently involve their existence and meaning within the broader meta-narrative outline of the Christian story.

Of course, to some extent, this challenge has been risen to, with Christian theology attempting to explicate the role of the Christian narrative and Christian community in the contemporary world. The internal vitality of the Christian community seems to be in good health, even as its external size and influence may decline, and yet, given internal Christian beliefs regarding the universal nature of the narrative and the good news carried within it, this restricted and self-referencing position cannot be a sustainable one. The Christian narrative, because of its content and self-understanding, requires the spreading of its message to the furthest reaches of any society – given the understanding of the Christian narrative as important and relevant to all aspects of human relationships and social constructions, it is a necessity for its full flourishing and embodiment that it comes to have impact on all aspects of society. It is not for nothing that the papal blessing is addressed to both ‘*Urbi*’, the Christian city of Rome, and ‘*Orbi*’, the fullness of the world. This stems not only from its attempt at providing a meta-narrative rationalisation of a certain social construction, with its internal structure of norms, assumptions, and ideological positions, but also from the aesthetic and literary connection of this social construction to a mythos of origin, existence, and eventual destruction embodied in the Christian trope of Creation, Incarnation, and Eschaton. The story, found in the actual explanatory narrative of the scripture and in the ongoing social narrative of the Christian tradition in society, both seek to describe and explain the totality of experience, whether this is done in a descriptive manner regarding historical events such as the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, or in the explanations given by the Christian tradition for social constructions and mechanism which come to favour certain actions over others. This then is the challenge of theology; to speak the story of Christianity in a coherent fashion that binds together its literary content with its social performance, explaining and developing the practical and theoretical aspects of the Christian tradition beyond the pure story contained within it; to speak the story of Christianity in a coherent fashion, in a way that considers the challenges of the contemporary world.

Contemporary forms of theology have attempted to do just this, rising to the challenge of explaining the Christian story anew in changed circumstances. Obviously, this task has been approached in different ways, by different thinkers, in different places, at different times. Yet the necessity of renewing the engagement of contemporary society by the Christian narrative is one factor which binds together both liberal reimagining’s of the tradition in the face of changed circumstances and conservative approaches that aim

to re-tell the Christian narrative more forcefully or more persuasively than before. As we have seen so far, the characteristics of contemporary society in the West, namely the presence and increase in importance of plurality, spanning religious, social, and cultural spheres, and the dominance of a secularised social and political space which assumes a normative non-religious character for public interactions and social structures, have posed, and continue to pose, a significant challenge to the ongoing position and relevance of the Christian narrative. Contemporary approaches to theology have sought to grapple with the dual issues of plurality and secularity in different ways. It is against this background that the theological movement of Radical Orthodoxy has set itself, promising an attempt at the out-narration of the currently pervasive grand narrative of the secular modern based on the retrieval of a pre-modern form of the Christian tradition.³⁰ Stemming from the publications of a group of British and American theologians working within a broadly Anglo-Catholic sphere,³¹ Radical Orthodoxy has sought to provide theology with a distinct approach to questions raised by the interaction between Christian belief and secular, social, and cultural theory since its inception in 1990.³² Pursuing for theology a way out of its construction and structuring by the currently dominant secular form of reason, Radical Orthodoxy returns to what has been described as ‘a post-modern critical Augustinianism’,³³ arguing that modernity itself should be understood as a heretical offshoot and counterpart to the religious meta-narrative of Christianity. This narrative derives from, but is now significantly different to, the Christian narrative itself, and seeks to re-claim the pre-eminent position of the ‘queen of sciences’³⁴ that theology had previously held within the socio-cultural framework of Christendom.

In attempting this, Radical Orthodoxy has disrupted the simplistic division of modern theology between conservative and liberal approaches by rejecting both as fatally compromised by secular and ultimately nihilistic thinking. In response, and acting according to the universal impulse of the Christian narrative discussed above, Radical Orthodoxy has presented a grand theological challenge that involves the rewriting not only of our secular societies, including presenting new accounts of meaning for the existence of plurality within them, but also our understanding of the Christian narrative itself, the historical, social, and cultural story of the Christian community, its impact on the wider community, and the interaction between it and other storied communities or traditions. The publication of *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* in 1990 sealed John Milbank’s place as a central figure of this movement, being described as ‘stunning in scope as well as harmonics’,³⁵ but this has been extended by a wide selection of thinkers who either identify with the movement, or whose thought draws on and responds to the attempted project.

Radical Orthodoxy’s broad argument, beyond the very brief summary given above, relies on several key concepts that shape its theological scaffolding, allowing for the project of out-narrating the current meta-narrative

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of secular modernity to progress.³⁶ Based largely within a traditionalist reading of the Christian narrative, Radical Orthodoxy draws from a number of denominational streams including Anglicanism, Catholicism, and Orthodox Christianity. Within this historical space, there is also an attachment to the conceptualisation of society as fundamentally formed by narratives and the communities that come into existence around these narratives. By expressing in action the commitments expressed by the stories that they hold dear, these communities form institutions and groupings that develop and narrate their particular stories in competition or co-operation with others. It is not only communities that are seen to be formed in this way, but, in a post-modern understanding redolent of Lyotard's 'grand narratives',³⁷ the whole of our epistemology is also shaped by our place between and among these varied narrative conceptions of reality.³⁸ Indeed, for Radical Orthodoxy, there is nothing beyond narrative with which to engage – the only possibility left is to tell a story, literally and figuratively, to one another, again and again in a ceaseless cycle of narration.³⁹ For this reason, Radical Orthodoxy's project rejects the modernist grounds of rationality for its out-narration rather attempting to tell a more beautiful story of a possible world that is harmonically peaceful and tinged by an ever-present divine.

While this narrative view of the world has strong antecedents within atheistic and religious philosophy, other aspects of the Radical Orthodoxy world view are more unique. These include an attachment to the Platonic notion of Truth as possessing Beauty, the more truthful naturally being the more attractive to a rational mind, which is central to the Radical Orthodoxy attachment to a notion of divine and human *eros*.⁴⁰ The desire of the divine for creation and the desire of the created for the divine are intrinsic parts of the main narrative presented by Radical Orthodoxy, allowing for the narrative told to be presented as truthful because of its wide, sweeping, and ultimately beautiful rendering of a world lacquered by the grace of God. This omnipresence of the beauty of the divine is a running thread within the work of Radical Orthodoxy, chiming with much recent scholarship on the re-enchantment of society,⁴¹ but also offering the opportunity to further the narration of the Christian narrative against the non-transcendent rendering of the secular modern.

Each of these aspects plays itself out into a deep attachment to the wonder and mystery of the established church tradition, a connection to the ways of the past prior to modernisation, but not in an atavistic or necessarily conservative way. While Radical Orthodoxy does have a connection to the established norms of orthodox Christianity, the desire that can be seen towards the pre-modern is generally, although not always and perhaps increasing less so, a desire for the aesthetics of the wonder and glory of the world rather than a desire for any particular doctrinal points.⁴² This separates Radical Orthodoxy from more commonly conservative projects of renewal, as the relationship to the content of the pre-modern Christian narrative is more flexible than might first be expected on the part of some

thinkers involved in the movement. However, there are significant shades of difference within the movement over this aspect of social conservatism.⁴³ The notion of retrieval in Radical Orthodoxy is therefore complicated, both by its relationship to the changes the world has undergone with the rise of modernity, but also by the privileging in some contexts of the aesthetic feeling of the tradition over the specific content.

This approach by Radical Orthodoxy allows for a distinction to be drawn between its positions and the position of more widely accepted conservative or liberal approaches in Christian theology to the question of how to engage with modernity. Indeed, Radical Orthodoxy explicitly rejects the ground upon which both liberal and conservative approaches to theology now base themselves, undermining the epistemological and ontological assumptions of modernity that undergird both apparently different theological groupings. While both liberal and conservative approaches largely attempt to work within the strictures of modernity, accept its reframing of discourse around the idolisation of scientific rationality and the circumscribing of theology's role within a now broadly secularised society, this approach runs counter to the nature of Radical Orthodoxy's challenge to modernity itself. Radical Orthodoxy's relationship to contemporary forms of theology, is therefore one of contradiction – a rejection of liberal attempts to rework theology in the light of, and for the benefit of, the meta-narrative of modernity,⁴⁴ but also a rejection of conservatism's fight to hold onto a place for theological speculation within the space left for it within the framework of modernity.⁴⁵ Radical Orthodoxy sees both as fatally undermined by their underlying acceptance of the need for compromise or co-habitation with the narrative of modernity, a rival meta-narrative to the meta-narrative of Christ. This is because, in the view of Radical Orthodoxy, it is the job of theology to promulgate beyond the purely social or academic realm set aside for it within the contemporary construction of society. In contrast, Radical Orthodoxy seeks to overturn the meta-narrative construction of modernity not through convincing within the limitations constructed by modernity, but rather through the presentation of a convincing, and beautiful, rendering of an alternative meta-narrative structure for society – one that delivers beauty on its own terms, rather than through the medium of modernism. This has led to a situation whereby Radical Orthodoxy is sometimes misunderstood as a uniformly socially conservative position,⁴⁶ stemming from its rejection of modernity and the influence of some of its more prominent figures and their positions on cultural issues, such as John Milbank and his arguments against the recognition of same-sex marriage or the extension of recognition to same-sex partnerships.⁴⁷ While the socially conservative positions of some of its members are undoubtedly apparent, this does not describe either the totality of opinion within the Radical Orthodoxy movement, for example, the divergence in responses to issues surrounding the social recognition and theological validation of homosexuality and homosexual relationships between John Milbank on one side and Gerard Loughlin or Graham Ward

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on the other, nor does Radical Orthodoxy's reputation for social conservatism adequately convey the reasons behind the rejection of contemporarily prevalent social norms. Each of the thinkers involved in the movement, despite how they may stand on various social issues, share a deeper epistemological and ontological foundation on which they jointly agree and on which they disagree with most contemporary liberal and conservative theologians. This criticism of Radical Orthodoxy solely as a form of reactionary conservatism is therefore not only a conflation of theological position with social position, but also a misunderstanding of the priorities held dear by Radical Orthodoxy itself and the extent of its attempted challenge to both the social assumptions of modernity and its ontological underpinnings.

This reaction to Radical Orthodoxy's challenge to modernity is understandable, particularly given the prominence of some of its members and their tendency to comment more frequently on social matters. This is particularly true of John Milbank, perhaps the most central figure of the movement, stemming from his early publication of *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, in which he first delineated the type of critique of secular modernity from a narrative standpoint that has become a hallmark of much Radical Orthodoxy inclined thinking since.⁴⁸ John Milbank undoubtedly occupies an important role within Radical Orthodoxy, especially on the kind of grand and socially engaged scale that attracts academic and theological interest. Since the publication of *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank has continued publishing important texts for the movement, such as his own *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*,⁴⁹ *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, and Culture*,⁵⁰ and *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology*⁵¹ which develop his thinking beyond the more polemical challenge of *Theology and Social Theory* into the field of language, politics, and ontological speculation. In addition, he has also edited the eponymous *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* collection,⁵² which brought together a variety of thinkers working in similar fields under the Radical Orthodoxy moniker for the first time, and edited, with Simon Oliver, *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*,⁵³ which aimed to bring together central arguments of the movement in an accessible style for study.

Milbank's more recent work has seen him focus largely on the interaction of theology with politics and ethics, which can be seen clearly in his extension of the theological challenge to secular modernity into the realm of political action and organisation in *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People*,⁵⁴ and in his collaborative work with Slavoj Žižek in *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*⁵⁵ which deals with the interaction of political theology of the kind espoused by Milbank and the critical-materialist viewpoint of Žižek. His most recent publication, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future*,⁵⁶ with Adrian Pabst extends his previous work on the interaction of theology and secular politics, analysing the place and importance for theology for the construction of a shared post-liberal political space.

Each of these publications represent a significant addition to the literary scope of Radical Orthodoxy, fleshing out areas of importance and interconnection, while also driving forward the central contention of the original publication – that theology can only challenge secular modernity through proposing and narrating an opposing meta-narrative system, a story that constructs and encapsulates all areas of human existence. Milbank's central place within Radical Orthodoxy stems from this close attention to the task of developing and fleshing out this narrative challenge and although his focus has largely been in the field of political theology, his desire to present the Radical Orthodoxy understanding of the Christian narrative as an alternative meta-narrative has led to a prodigious output of important works. While other members, particularly Graham Ward, have also taken this challenge seriously and produced significant works of theo-political narration within the sphere of Radical Orthodoxy, Milbank remains the figure who is mostly commonly taken as representing the locus around which Radical Orthodoxy as a movement encompassing diversity and difference of opinion revolves.

However, this diversity and difference of opinion seen between the various members of the Radical Orthodoxy collective throws up interesting difficulties for anyone attempting to summarise the views of Radical Orthodoxy. As has already been discussed, opinions between those who self-identify as working within the frame of reference of Radical Orthodoxy differ significantly not only over issues of social practice, particularly homosexuality, but also over the nature of the theological challenge presented to secular modernity, how this challenge is to be developed, and what the ultimate outcome of a re-theologising of society would be. This differentiation within the movement is one that defies easy categorisation into liberal or conservative wings or into theologically or socially inclined thinkers and there are several thinkers influenced and engaged with Radical Orthodoxy who have either refused a solid identification with it as a movement, or have distanced themselves from it over time.

This diversity within the movement makes it difficult to generalise towards a 'Radical Orthodoxy position' on many issues, beyond a shared understanding of the post-modern narrative nature of social construction and the need for a theological challenge to the meta-narrative of secular modernity.⁵⁷ Instead, and in a position I wish to maintain throughout the rest of this work, I wish to highlight the differences between the various thinkers within Radical Orthodoxy by utilising the term 'Milbankianism' as a distinguisher for the arguments and proposals put forward by John Milbank specifically, and 'Radical Orthodoxy' as a term describing the broader, shared assumptions that drive the movement. Obviously, the overlap between these two is sizable, with Milbank being responsible for the publication of much of the architecture of the Radical Orthodoxy movement, yet having a separate term for those aspects of his work which differ significantly from others within the Radical Orthodoxy sphere will provide

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further clarity and definition to the progression and development of Radical Orthodoxy as a movement. This Milbankianism, I would suggest, can be characterised broadly as representing a focus on the political aspect of the theological challenge to modernity, focusing on the targeting and deconstruction of the secular modern meta-narrative, and the constant narration into the public sphere of theological constructions of reality. In doing so, Milbank has developed a distinct, and sometimes inflammatory, literary style, while his project is characterised by a particular understanding of the nature of the current Christian narrative. This distinction will perhaps become more apparent throughout the course of this book, but already, having delineated the extent to which diversity and difference have come to shape our contemporary society, the reaction to this diversification and differentiation exposes an area of disagreement between the proponents of the Milbankian tendency, and those other thinkers more loosely associated with the movement that Radical Orthodoxy describes, such as Graham Ward, Rowan Williams, or Gerard Loughlin.

It is this reaction to the pluralities of contemporary society that forms the core of this book. Given that our societies are largely characterised by the existence of plurality and the prominence of secularity, the Christian narrative and those thinkers attempting to promulgate it must choose in what manner they react. While Radical Orthodoxy, and its Milbankian strand in particular, has engaged thoroughly with aspects of secularity, secularism, and secularisation this book aims to demonstrate that there is a distinct lack in addressing the vitally important characteristic of social, religious, and political plurality present in our lives. This lack of address, and weakness where it has been addressed, is a significant problem for Radical Orthodoxy's claim to represent the Christian tradition in the modern world and, concomitantly, a significant problem for Christian communities looking for the theological scaffolding by which to understand the meaning, purpose, and Christian way of interacting with the multiple forms of plurality that exist.

This book aims to offer, through a close examination of Radical Orthodoxy's approach to matters of narrative, an alternative formulation of the Christian narrative to that offered by Milbank. This narrative better accounts for, explains, and develops greater space for engagement with, the pluralities that define the experience of society for so many individuals today. In doing so, a new form of narration can come into being, focused on a re-imagining and re-inscription of central aspects of the Christian narrative as having a great deal of import in shaping the way that the Christian individual, community, and tradition interact with the other. By revisiting aspects of the tradition in the light of changed circumstances, the relevance of doctrinal beliefs in the nature of God, the functioning of Christian desire, and the imbuing of the created order with divine grace, can be explicated anew in a way that delivers meaning not only to the Christian tradition in contemporary circumstances, but also to the features and characteristics that have come to make up our current world.

Notes

- 1 Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, 183–214.
- 2 Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora*, XI; Adogame and Shankar eds., *Religion on the Move*, 81–98.
- 3 Timothy, “Moral Welfare and Social Wellbeing”, 41–53; Hopkins, “Sacralizing Queerness: LGBT Faith Movements and Identity Deployment”, 159–178.
- 4 Grefe, *Encounters for Change: Interreligious Cooperation in the Care of Individuals and Communities*, 48–70.
- 5 Vertovec, *Super-Diversity*, 40; Arnaut et al. eds., *Engaging Superdiversity*, 25–46.
- 6 Dawson, *The Politics and Practice of Religious Diversity*, 1–12.
- 7 See, as one example among many, the connection between Kyrgyz ethnic and religious identity in the context of conversion. Radford, *Religious Identity and Social Change*, 140–166.
- 8 Cotter, “Without God Yet Not Without Nuance”, 171–194.
- 9 Davie, *Religion in Modern Britain*, 41–68.
- 10 Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora*, 79–101.
- 11 Woodhead, “The Rise of ‘No Religion’ in Britain”, 245–261.
- 12 Madge and Hemming, “Young British Religious ‘Nones’”, 872–888.
- 13 Davie, “From Believing Without Belonging to Vicarious Religion”, 165–176.
- 14 Berger and Luckmann, *Modernity, Pluralism, and the Crisis of Meaning*, 37–38.
- 15 Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 247–259.
- 16 Chaves, “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority”, 749–774.
- 17 McLeod, *Religion and Society in England, 1850–1914*, 40.
- 18 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9.
- 19 Dobbelaere, *Secularization*, 38–44.
- 20 Bruce, *God Is Dead*, 60–74.
- 21 See, as an example of this, Herbert’s investigation into the role that the media has played in forming religious attitudes towards matters of social liberalisation in the Netherlands and Poland. Herbert, “Theorising Religious Republicisation and Public Controversy”, 67–68.
- 22 Kenneson, “What’s in a Name?”, 3.
- 23 Warner, “Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm in the Sociology of Religion”, 1066–1067.
- 24 Chaves, “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority”, 751.
- 25 O’Halloran, *Religion, Charity and Human Rights*, 220.
- 26 Jawad, *Religion and Faith-Based Welfare*, 106.
- 27 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9.
- 28 Wallis, *Salvation and Protest*, 95; Wald, Owen and Hill, “Evangelical Politics and Status Issues”, 3–4.
- 29 Yang, “Oligopoly Is Not Pluralism”, 52–54.
- 30 Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism”, 225–226.
- 31 Although Radical Orthodoxy is not defined by an Anglo-Catholic sensibility, its origins among a specific group of Anglo-Catholic theologians and its living within the world of Anglo-Catholicism has made this connection rather strong. Individual thinkers associated with it may come from, and respond to Radical Orthodoxy from, a variety of traditions including, so far, Roman Catholicism, the Reform Tradition, and Eastern Orthodoxy. See: Pabst, *Encounter Between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy*, 1–2; Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 244; DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy*, 3.
- 32 Although the term appears in 1998 in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, a foundational text was John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* published in 1990.
- 33 Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism”, 225–237.

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- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Burrell, "An Introduction to Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason", 319.
- 36 DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy*, 3–5.
- 37 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 1–2.
- 38 Meretoja, "Narrative and Human Existence", 94–101.
- 39 Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology*, 91.
- 40 Milbank et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 10.
- 41 See, as an example: Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*.
- 42 Bauerschmidt, "Aesthetics", 216.
- 43 This is most apparent in the disagreements over gender and sexuality present within the movement from its inception. I would nominate Loughlin and Ward as some of the more socially 'liberal' thinkers, with Milbank and Smith being more socially 'conservative' on matters of reproductive rights, homosexual marriage, and gender roles. Milbank's socially conservative stance can be easily seen not only on his Twitter account, but also in his writing for a more popular audience on ABC.net.au.
- 44 Milbank et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 1.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 This will be engaged with further later on in this volume, but see: Hoezl and Ward, "Radical Orthodoxy Ten Years on", 159.
- 47 See, for example: Milbank, "The Impossibility of Gay Marriage and the Threat of Biopolitical Control"; Milbank, "Gay Marriage and the Future of Human Sexuality".
- 48 Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 7–48.
- 49 Milbank, *Being Reconciled*.
- 50 Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*.
- 51 Milbank, *The Future of Love*.
- 52 Milbank, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*.
- 53 Milbank and Oliver, *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*.
- 54 Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*.
- 55 Milbank and Zizek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*.
- 56 Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*.
- 57 Although throughout this book I will refer to the 'Radical Orthodoxy movement' or the 'Radical Orthodoxy project', there are two critical points to make. The first is that Radical Orthodoxy is itself massively internally diverse, with a broad variety of theological opinion cohabiting under the label. Beyond this there are a number of thinkers who, while sharing similar concerns to Radical Orthodoxy and deploying similar approaches, either explicitly resist a firm identification with the movement, are doing their work within a different field or religious traditions, or are situated on the periphery of the movement. The second point is that the term 'Radical Orthodoxy movement' has itself come under criticism, with its proponents putting it forwards as a way of doing theology, rather than a discrete patch of theological content. While this refusal has been identified by both Hedges and Hemming as a form of post-modernist obfuscation that allows for an impermeable air of impermanence around any criticised feature of the 'disposition' of Radical Orthodoxy, this refutation of the term 'movement' seems both stylistically and descriptively awkward. Having an identifiable corpus of related literature, self-identified members, and a broad, overarching narrative paradigm of the purpose of Radical Orthodoxy I believe qualifies Radical Orthodoxy for at least temporary and stylistic classification as a movement or project. (Hedges, "Is John Milbank's Radical Orthodoxy a Form of Liberal Theology?", 4; Hemming, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 7.

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1 Narrative

As we have seen, narrative in all its forms is a central component of the conceptualisation of society by the Radical Orthodoxy movement, forming the lens through which their theological engagement with the world interacts with both its physical realities of people, places, and things and with the narratives that give these things their structural relation to one another. Narrative is the glue which binds each thing within our reality to every other thing, explaining its epistemological relations, providing its ontological purpose, and ascribing a position within an ontological and epistemological hierarchy to each one.¹ This understanding of the nature of society naturally colours the way in which Radical Orthodoxy and specific thinkers associated with it attempts going about changing and moulding that society to better conform to what is seen as the Christian ideal. For this reason, if, as mentioned at the end of the introductory chapter, the goal is a renewal and reappraisal of the position of Radical Orthodoxy in order to better account for issues of secularity and plurality within the Christian narrative, then understanding the way which Radical Orthodoxy has gone about narrating its vision within society is a vital first step.

In this chapter, Radical Orthodoxy's approach to matters of narrative, and the formation of society by those narratives, is examined in order to allow for a better understanding of how Radical Orthodoxy's approach to issues facing contemporary society can be better formulated. As an example of Radical Orthodoxy's method of narration, its engagement with other religious faiths through inter-religious dialogue serves a useful marker of practice and theoretical modelling for Radical Orthodoxy's broader approach. In using inter-religious dialogue in this manner, the importance of the characteristics of secularity and plurality identified earlier are highlighted which allows for a better awareness of Radical Orthodoxy's current attempts at engaging with these key aspects of contemporary society. By engaging with this area, the nature of Radical Orthodoxy's narration can be ascertained, its problematic areas identified, and a renewal of theory and practice within the movement regarding contemporary society to begin.

The way that Radical Orthodoxy conceives of society as fundamentally formed by the struggle between meta-narrative conceptions of reality on a large scale, and between individually created social narratives on a smaller scale, is an understanding of reality that does not float free from any historical or sociological antecedents. Rather, and importantly, this conception of society draws upon aspects of post-modern philosophy, itself a reaction to the paradoxes thrown up by modernity's attempts at completing and encompassing the totality of reality within one coherent narrative.² Within this historical space, there is also an attachment to the conceptualisation of society as fundamentally formed by narratives and by those communities that come into existence around a shared attachment to those narratives. By expressing in action the commitments articulated by the stories that they hold dear, these communities form institutions and groupings that develop and narrate their particular stories in competition or co-operation with others.³ It is not only communities that are seen to be formed in this way, but in a post-modern understanding redolent of Lyotard's 'grand narratives', the whole of our epistemology is also seen to be shaped by our place between and among these varied narrative conceptions of reality.

For Lyotard, drawing on Foucault's work on the nature of power in society,⁴ and Wittgenstein's delineation of the nature of 'language games' and the incomprehensibility of much exchange between discourses constructed according to different patterns of legibility and comprehension,⁵ this leads to a focus on hesitancy with regard to the universality of any singular narrative and a suspicion towards the idea of there being a universal and totally explanatory narrative about the nature of society, particularly the one that forms the narrative bedrock of our contemporary, modern, period. This critique of the idea of the possibility of a meta-narrative function for the narrative of modernity is obviously connected to Radical Orthodoxy's later critique of modernity,⁶ although Lyotard's conclusion, that there can be no fully stable meta-narrative in society, is one that is conclusively rejected by the explicitly Christian focused Radical Orthodoxy. This, as Lyotard terms it, 'incredulity towards meta-narratives',⁷ pervades much of Radical Orthodoxy's critique of modernity, underlying the critiques of modernity's inability to adequately encapsulate aspects of our existence and its inability to maintain its meta-narrative dominance without a resort to a permanent cycle of nihilistic violence.

Post-modernity, and post-modern societies, are therefore seen by Lyotard as kaleidoscopic spaces formed by the interaction of a multitude of micronarratives, formed from the experiences of subcultures, individuals, and different groups, which exist in a permanent state of flux.⁸ While meta-narratives attempt to assert control and structure over this fluidity, causing epistemological violence to the conceptions offered by the subaltern discourses, this assertion of control is constantly in a state of being questioned, queered, and attempted to be out-narrated by micro-narratives

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which better serve to encapsulate and explain the nature of reality for those individuals who express them.⁹ This description of the nature of our societies provides the bedrock on which Radical Orthodoxy attempts to make its mark. Indeed, for Radical Orthodoxy, there is nothing beyond narrative with which to engage – the only possibility left is to tell a story, literally and figuratively, to one another, again and again in a ceaseless cycle of narration.¹⁰ There is no fixed or static point upon which to hang a structured account of the way reality really is, only attempts at telling stories which provide this structure for us.

This yearning for a settled and objectively available account of reality is not only a symptom of modernity's failure to fulfil its meta-narrative function or a desire to complete and fill the void that modernity's lack leaves unfilled. In struggling to adequately correlate our individual experiences of reality, formed by the social and physical characteristics which define us as individuals, within the grand narrative that modernity presents as the natural order of things, a gap opens up between our individual experiences and the experiences that the grand narrative constructs around us. This divorce between our reality and the hyper-reality constructed by the narrative of modernity drives a need and desire on our part to act out or rebel against the system with which we are presented, evidenced by our desire to engage in nihilistic acts of political, economic, and ecological self-destruction and, on the part of modernity as a meta-narrative, to seek to manifest ever tighter control over those aspects of the social system which modernity still has effective power over.¹¹ For Radical Orthodoxy, this breakdown in the ability of the meta-narrative of modernity to sustain its meta-narrative function represents, instead of the post-modern celebration of multitudinous diverse and different subaltern and fragmented mini narratives,¹² a potential space for the replacement of the faltering meta-narrative of modernity with the previous pre-eminence of the meta-narrative system offered by Christianity – an all-encompassing explanatory story for the nature of our lives, our experiences, and our social organisation.

In social terms, this means that the construction of our societies rests on the formation of coherent narrative explanations for the way that our reality is shaped and the way that our individual lives fit into the broader overarching whole of the meta-narrative. In this way, the religious conception of reality, whereby the individual is related religiously or theologically to a greater conception of reality, or a supreme being, or the divine, is perhaps the pre-eminent composition of meta-narrative form and function, as each religious narrative seeks to explain the true nature of the universe and the individual's place within it.¹³ This is particularly true for the Christian narrative, with the story of Creation, Fall, and Redemption through Christ being seen as not only explaining the totality of our lives, societies, and even our existence, but also encapsulating the totality of potentiality within our existence. For Christianity, there is, like modernity, nothing outside the bounds of the narrative, nothing that cannot be explained by, or related to,

the meta-narrative claims of the story itself.¹⁴ For Radical Orthodoxy this is particularly true, with the Christian narrative being seen as intimately involved in those aspects of society which have become largely secularised – whether this is aspects of social behaviour, politics, or the interaction of different faith groups. Radical Orthodoxy views the Christian narrative as intricately involved in varied socio-political fields such as education, biopolitics, political representation, and elements of economic policy. While the adoption and characterisation of the Christian narrative as a meta-narrative has been contested,¹⁵ notably on the grounds that it does not seek to ground itself in the legitimisation of reason, the use and formation of the Christian narrative within Radical Orthodoxy, and Milbank's approach in particular, ultimately presents the Christian narrative as an alternative meta-narrative form to our contemporary secular modern meta-narrative. This is not only delivered through the all-encompassing nature of the narrative proposed, with theology and the Christian tradition, it is seen to represent being applicable and able to construct the totality of our reality, but also through the presentation of an undergirding legitimisation of the meta-narrative status of the narrative through its representation of social harmony between difference.

For this reason, Radical Orthodoxy's adoption of the Lyotardian post-modern conception of society as fundamentally narrative in nature has an impact not only on the form of its reaction to modernity, but also to its own narrative formation. The centrality of narrative for Lyotard and his philosophical successors means that narrative is the only possible way in which society can be changed or moulded; there is no static power which can force a significant and long-lasting change the way that alternative stories about meaning can. For this reason, in Radical Orthodoxy's eyes, the only way in which one can attempt to challenge modernity is through challenging its current narrative dominance over our societies, highlighting the areas in which it lacks coherency, exploiting the resulting feeling of disconnection and powerlessness seen in contemporary society, and telling, again and again, the more complete, more beautiful, and less violent meta-narrative vision of Christianity.

This adoption naturally leads onto the question of how narration and out-narration occur within our societies. How does the current meta-narrative of modernity hold its position of dominance? How do narratives propagate themselves, re-tell themselves, and lead us to believe them? How might a process of out-narration, required for the disestablishment of the meta-narrative of modernity, occur? This question of how might one continue to ethically, politically, and religiously live during the contemporary system-spanning crash of modernity has undoubtedly preoccupied the attention of much post-modern thought, both philosophically and theologically, and spawned a variety of answers. Radical Orthodoxy is such an attempt, and yet for now, the issue of how narration and out-narration may occur at all is more pressing. If society, as demonstrated, is seen to be formed from

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the shifting mosaic of differing explanatory stories that aim to explain and make sense of various part of our existence, then the production and continuance of these stories must be related to their ability to convincingly and adequately account for the way that either individuals or societies encounter aspects of reality.

This explanatory power of narratives, and the way in which this explanatory power anchors them within the lives of groups or individuals, is a key aspect of any study that adopts this position. In explaining the interaction of reality with individual's experiences, narratives provide a coherence to the series of events that form an individual's life, structuring them within a broader story about what could, should, or might, have been. Narratives therefore provide structure to the relatively unconnected events that form someone's experiences, providing reasons for things to happen, providing goals to strive for, and providing linkages between the events of an individual's life and the broader social life of the community. In doing so, individual narratives require a connection to broader social or community narrative which fulfils the same function on a grander scale – moving from the events in an individual's life, to the events or situations which impact a community. This shift is mirrored in the relation between narratives adopted by a community within a society and by the meta-narrative that structures and constructs the placement of that society as a whole. In this way, the narrative to which the individual holds in their life, however it may shift and change depending on circumstances, rests within a broader construction of meaning offered to it by community narrative, describing the patterning of meaning of say a religious group within a particular national circumstance, and by a meta-narrative, which is largely within contemporary society a meta-narrative of modernity, secularism, liberalism, and their progeny.¹⁶ The identification of this connection between individual-, community-, and society-level narratives obviously relates to the way in which the meanings contained within each of these narrative is communicated, perpetuated, and used as an explanatory force within an individual's life and is mediated through its connection and place within a wider circle of influencing narratives.

The communication, perpetuation, and functioning of a narrative in life of individuals, communities, or societies therefore relies on the narrative adopted, consciously or subconsciously, being able to provide a coherent and convincing account of the variety of events that impact on their lives. Communicating a narrative involves both an internalisation of the narrative, providing structure to the way that than individual or community reacts to external stimulus by helping the individual or community to internally rationalise the occurrence, and the externalisation of that narrative coherence through the sharing of its explanatory power with others. Obviously, this sharing can take a variety of forms, whether vocal, literary, or performative in nature,¹⁷ as well as being demonstrated not necessarily through the individual's specific actions, but in how their lives are shaped by their attachment to the narrative which makes the most meaning of their

lives. On an individual level, therefore, narrative communication occurs in a bewildering variety of ways, but all share in the way in which the attachment of the individual to a particular narrative changes the way in which they act in, and conceive of, the world. This change in action and conception therefore retells to others effected by their changes the reasoning and narrative coherence behind them.

It is in this way that narratives within society perpetuate themselves through a constant performative patterning of individual lives according to the overarching and sense-making structure of the narrative.¹⁸ In so doing, the strength of the narrative is seen to grow with more and more people holding fast to its particular explanation of events and circumstances beyond their control. As the narrative strengthens its hold on a sufficiently large number of people, the dynamics of social groups ensures a re-inscription of that narrative through the group's actions onto the individuals, and, therefore, a greater identification with that narrative is produced.¹⁹ This can be seen in the formation of strong community identities within the broader individualisation of post-modernity – a forceful narration of difference which preserves and re-inscribes the difference of the sub-group identity.²⁰ However, as we have seen, the explanatory power of any narrative yet conceived, relies on, and is fundamentally limited by its ability to provide a coherent explanation for all events, whether as a meta-narrative itself, in the case of modernity or Christianity, or as a subsidiary narrative that feeds into and supports the structuring of the meta-narrative. For example, the narrative society provides us about technological progress and the way that this interconnects with the scientific, secular, rationalism of modernity. While the narrative, when weak, may prove useful in making sense out of events in the lives of individuals, the ability of a narrative to adequately explain the totality of reality is a formidable task, which provokes difficulties surrounding those aspects of reality where the narrative's coherence and structure break down.

The narrative therefore functions by attempting to provide a coherent structure for the patterning of events that impact on an individual, community, or society level. This structure provides meaning, and allows for meaning making on the part of those invested in the narrative, in order to explain the current structuring of society. Obviously, there are a variety of narratives that seek to perform this function, in a variety of different ways, and to a varying degree of success. While Christianity sees itself as performing a meta-narrative role, explaining and providing meaning for all possible events within reality, the narrative function performed by, say, belief in UFOs is more limited in scope – precluding, generally, questions about the nature of the soul or ethical actions, while performing an explanatory role for bright lights in the sky. The critical aspect of each narrative, whatever level it is functioning on, is that it provides a coherent and believable explanation for a particular event or series of events. While an individual may subscribe to a variety of differing smaller narratives – believing in UFOs in

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order to explain abductions or lights in the sky, believing in a conspiracy of lizard-aliens in order to explain the political and media machinations of contemporary society, and believing in a global Jewish conspiracy in order to bring coherence to their financial circumstances – this simultaneous identification becomes more and more difficult the more that the narrative seeks to explain, with each narrative providing a differing explanation for the same event. For this reason, the performance of narratives within society is seen by Milbank as one of competition, with each narrative seeking not only to provide an explanation of events, but also seeking to provide the best explanation of events, that makes the most sense to either the most number of people, or to those most committed to the rest of the narrative's content.²¹ In this way, for Radical Orthodoxy, society is a swirl of competing theories and counter-theories regarding our lives, and this is perhaps no more true than on the level of meta-narratives. As Milbank notes, the interaction of the meta-narrative forms in society can only be conceived of as one of total destruction through out-narration. At this level, there is no room for real compromise – whereas one can perhaps choose to believe that UFOs cause bright lights in the sky and, at the same time, believe in the control of the world's governments by lizard-aliens, because each narrative deals with a different area of experiences and events, it is more difficult to reconcile two narratives that, by their nature, attempt to explain and provide a coherent structure to the entirety of reality.

It is for this reason that modernity, that history-altering period of difference from the pre-modern that has redefined our knowledge of the world and our knowledge of ourselves, is seen not only as a narrative, but also as a competing meta-narrative formation. Modernity is a story which explains and positions, within a hierarchy of value, all the other stories which we as a species use to explain or make sense of the world around us. The meta-narrative of modernity attempts to explain every facet of our existence, incorporating within itself aspects of narratives which explain certain aspects of this new social change, narratives of science, technology, or liberal politics, but ultimately presiding over the limits and boundaries of each of these sub-narratives. Modernity has therefore constructed itself, like the Christendom narrative of old, as a total narrative – a story that, with its sense of history and inevitability, positions itself as the ultimate arbitrator of truth and reality. In doing so, the meta-narrative of modernity has come to shape our world and our experience of it. The difficulty emerges, for Radical Orthodoxy, because even this is not enough to ensure the continued dominance of the meta-narrative of modernity. So long as the possibility of an alternative to modernity exists, the system of dominance and positioning remains one that has within it the seed of doubt and the possibility of change. It is therefore in the interests of a narrative like modernity, which wishes to preserve and maintain itself, to crush the real possibility of an alternative from having narrative space in which to articulate itself, stifling the possibility of a reaction against its overwhelming construction of our lives. In doing so,

modernity presents itself with an air of inevitability, which is modernity as the logical culmination of historical progression which is measured almost solely, in a choice of modernity's own making, as a progression of technological and capitalistic advancement.²² There is, within the now gilded iron cage of the meta-narrative construction of modernity, no real alternative, only structural safety valves whose release poses no threat to the overall system.²³ This presentation of modernity, with its concomitant sub-narratives of liberal politics, secular rationalism, and technocratic capitalism, as the only possible way of arranging and constructing our societies can be seen most clearly in the reactions against it which have recently shaken our system of domestic and international politics to the core – the rise of populist outsiders as a political force,²⁴ the failure of the international system of politics to address crises of its own making whether at a global level in the UN or supra-nationally within the EU,²⁵ and the increasing disenchantment of the individual with any sense of communal belonging, whether expressed through democratic participation in elections or social and community level interactions with others in their societies.²⁶ These reactions express the difficulty that the meta-narrative of modernity has in maintaining its position as the only possible meta-narrative that can be imagined, a constant state of falling short, where the reality of our complex and difficult world intrudes on the fake simple reality as described by the meta-narrative. This intrusion exposes the frailty and weakness of modernity's grasp on reality, showing up the areas of elision between the way the world really is and the way it is presented to us. It is for this reason that the meta-narrative of modernity attempts to fully encompass the entirety of our reality, extending from its genesis within the industrialising West to form a global system of epistemological and economic hegemony that ingests even those deemed within the system to still be pre-modern.²⁷

In this sense, the hegemony of the meta-narrative of modernity is also an attempt at the conclusion of history as an ongoing story of change and experimentation on a meta-narrative scale. In seeking to absorb and codify the totality of reality, placing each aspect of reality into a fixed and organised narrative, the meta-narrative desire of modernity relies on the desire for a totalising perfection of coverage and explanation that denies the possibility of real change or disruption. In this way, even the aspects of change we see around us, the change in political parties or perturbations in global markets, are merely flickers of unreal change within the system, rather than structural challenges from outside. Modernity seeks to position our world entirely, and having done so, aims to keep our world there forever – permanently preserved safely within the confines of a created and unreal epistemological and ontological story. And yet, there is nothing now to which we can turn in order to struggle against this suffocating system of control and dominance except for the realm of competing narratives, no set or fixed values or shared reality to which we can appeal which has an existence beyond its place within the shifting structures of relation and interrelation. It is only

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narrative, the stories that we tell ourselves and those that are told to us, that hold the power to challenge the meta-narrative of modernity. Radical Orthodoxy's challenge to modernity must therefore take the form of a narrative challenge, an alternative meta-narrative formation that attempts to explain the ontological and epistemological bedrock of our reality in a new way, a way that breaks from, and disrupts, the inevitability and totality of modernity – to return to the non-existence of the secular, the impossibility of its existence, and the universal dominance of the social and historically expressed Christian narrative, Christendom. In this Radical Orthodoxy's work refuses the ultimately futile attempt of forming an internal challenge to modernity, rejecting the rules of discussion put forward as inherently biased. Rather, Radical Orthodoxy's response to modernity must take the form of an alternative, and fundamentally different, form of narrative that seeks to position not only various aspects of our societies, but also the position and prominence of modernity itself.

1.1 Milbankianism and dialogue

Radical Orthodoxy's approach to this narrative conception of the world and our social organisation is a critical factor in understanding its approach to the broader swathe of contexts under its consideration. This understanding of society must take into account those characteristics of contemporary modern societies in the West identified earlier, specifically the occurrence and prominence of both plurality and secularity as the ground of social and political discourse, and in doing so Radical Orthodoxy has chosen to narrate its vision of the Christian narrative in a certain way. While Radical Orthodoxy has developed its own understanding of the narrative nature of society and in response developed a form of narration that it hopes will be effective in challenging the meta-narrative dominance of modernity, the area in which Radical Orthodoxy's concerns with social, religious, and political out-narration most clearly work themselves out is in the context of inter-religious dialogue, the discussion and engagement with alternative religious (and non-religious) potential meta-narrative forms. It is for these reasons that I now wish to move forward with an examination of the way in which Radical Orthodoxy has chosen to engage with other narratives within the context of inter-religious dialogue. Drawing together the related aspects of methods of narration, content of narration, and the necessity of narrative interaction within a diverse and plural society, inter-religious dialogue provides an excellent framework for examining the particular impact that the adoption of a narrative understanding of society has had on Radical Orthodoxy's aim and for examining the way in which John Milbank in particular has gone about seeking to bring a narrative vision into reality.

Despite the increasing prominence of plurality in contemporary society, whether religious, social, or political in nature, Radical Orthodoxy as a

collective movement has failed to engage in much serious reflection on the nature of plurality, the Christian response to it, or the place of religious traditions other than Christianity in its meta-narrative proposals. This lack is particularly noticeable in the fleeting mentions that other religions receive in central Radical Orthodoxy works, such as Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*,²⁸ the edited collection *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*,²⁹ *The Politics of Virtue*,³⁰ and in the almost complete focus of social theory within the Radical Orthodoxy movement on the relationship between the Christian community and the largely secularised world around it.³¹ As we have seen in the preceding chapter, plurality has come to define our contemporary societies, and the lives of individuals within them, so the lack of an understanding of or reflection on plurality in all its forms is a significant issue for the attempt by Radical Orthodoxy to represent and promulgate the Christian narrative as a meta-narrative. In making this attempt, Radical Orthodoxy in general, and Milbank in particular, have focused on the characteristic secularity of modern societies, rather than their plural character. This is perhaps unsurprising given the theological, social, and cultural background of many of the thinkers involved. Yet, this focus has come to dominate even those areas where alternative religious traditions or inter-religious dialogue are present within works associated with Radical Orthodoxy and critically where this presence of plurality is a central feature of the context within which that narration is undertaken.

I wish to focus on this section on the way in which John Milbank has gone about the engagements with religious plurality that, while making up a tiny part of his oeuvre, form a significant part of Radical Orthodoxy's engagement with the matter. In doing so, the Milbankian approach becomes clearer, with its focus on the process of out-narration within a context of mutually hostile suspicion, yet with considerable scope for a re-envisioning of that form of practice within similar theoretical boundaries. The publication of John Milbank's essay 'The End of Dialogue'³² in D'Costa's collected volume *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religion* heralded what would become Radical Orthodoxy's first sustained engagement with inter-religious dialogue. In it, Milbank provides a critique of the more commonly developed pluralist models of dialogue while also beginning to present an alternative model that he sees as avoiding the weaknesses apparent in current formulations of religious engagement and contact. The 'End of Dialogue' represents the only sustained engagement with inter-religious dialogue and religious plurality within the Radical Orthodoxy movement, and, as such, it must play a central role in any discussion of the nature of inter-religious narration within Radical Orthodoxy. This specific, and short, piece of work is a vital consideration, as it establishes the context for the rest of Radical Orthodoxy's fleeting engagements with alternative religious traditions. While its main focus is criticism of the current liberal pluralist model of inter-religious dialogue, the nature and content of this critique shed light on Milbank's process of out-narration and

the areas in which he sees the liberal pluralist model of dialogue as intimately connected with his broader critique of the meta-narrative of modernity.

The 'End of Dialogue' was written as a deliberate response to the earlier publication of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religion*.³³ This volume, edited by John Hick and Paul Knitter, attempted to argue for a generally pluralist understanding of religions and for 'a move away from the insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity towards recognition of the independent validity of other ways'.³⁴ As a rebuttal, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* rejects the premise of the preceding book, containing a variety of diverse positions that all share a rejection of, or suspicion about, the pluralist model of dialogue and religious relation proposed in *The Myth*. This opposition between the two books, and the positions proposed by each of them, leads to a particular polemical relationship between the two that can most clearly be seen in the constant referencing between them, both book to book and also by individual authors engaging with the particular arguments contained in the opposing book, as can be seen in Milbank's reference and rebuttal of aspects of the arguments of Panikkar,³⁵ Reuther,³⁶ and Suchocki³⁷ in differing parts of his contribution to the volume. In particular, this relationship between the two books has had an impact on the rhetorical strategies employed by the various contributors to *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, leading towards a more aggressive and polarised discussion.

Hick, while providing a model of inter-religious relationship in *The Myth*, does not outline the exact way in which he would have the structuring of instances of dialogue occur or whether this dialogical approach is useful. Given the particular focus of the book, this is perhaps unsurprising; however, in the wider work of many of the contributors, it is possible to chart the relationship between their broadly shared pluralist outlook on the relationship between religious traditions and their approaches to instances of inter-religious dialogue. Looking at Hick as the exemplar of the pluralist approach to the plurality of religions, his approach to particular instances of dialogue is informed by his holding to the independent validity of the truth claims of the various religions, seen as reflecting a shared 'ultimate reality' or central meaning, that is, his engagement in inter-religious dialogue is shaped by his prior understanding of the relationship between the differing religions involved.³⁸ However, while Hick represents the most commonly held approach to inter-religious contact and dialogue, there are multiple positions contained within the first volume itself, with each representing a different take on a shared pluralistic approach to the issue of inter-religious relation and dialogue. While these differences of opinion within *The Myth* are apparent and have been picked up on in the immediate response to its publication and in later secondary literature, it is Hick's particular model of inter-religious relationship, and its concomitant model of inter-religious dialogue and narration, that holds the greatest sway in discussions of pluralistic dialogue, and it is Hick with whom Milbank most clearly engages

with in his critiques of pluralistic models of inter-religious relationship and dialogue. Broadly, Milbank's critique of the positions set out by the various contributors to *The Myth* takes three forms, each highlighting a particular aspect not only of Milbank's individual narration of the Christian narrative, but also the impact that his narrative understanding of society has had on his methodology of narration.

First, Milbank takes issue with the way in which the variety of religious traditions is viewed as fundamentally similar within the workings of the pluralistic model of inter-religious contact. The assumption of similarity works towards an obliteration or reduction of the very real differences Milbank sees between the differing religious traditions. This pluralistic model, Milbank argues, is based on a Western conception of what religion is which covertly Christianises other religious traditions by their being subsumed into the pluralist model of inter-religious contact.³⁹ The definition of religion within the pluralist model broadly held to by all of the contributors to *The Myth* is troublesome. As Milbank notes, the variety of cultural and social traditions prevalent in the world mean that:

no attempt to define such a genus (or even, perhaps, a delineation of an analogical field of "family resemblances") will succeed, because no proposed common features can be found, whether in terms of belief or practice (gods, the supernatural, worship, a sacred community, sacred/secular division, etc.) that are without exceptions.⁴⁰

In this attempt at a definition found within the pluralistic model's narration, there follows a necessary reduction of the varied forms of cultural and social traditions present to a specifically religious tradition. As D'Costa has noted, this model 'privileges liberal modernity as the master-code within which all the religions are positioned and neutered',⁴¹ an instance of the discourse of liberal modernity displacing religious narration from their inhabited spheres.

Milbank's critique of secularism in this area is particularly pertinent given the aims often espoused by those proposing a pluralist approach to the issues of inter-religious contact and dialogue. In attempting to engage in out-narration, Milbank targets the way in which the pluralist model itself serves to undermine the wider themes of social and inter-cultural justice that the contributors to *The Myth* propose is better represented by their own approach than that of the more classical exclusivist or inclusivist positions.⁴² This represents Milbank's second area of critique, a criticism of the inability of the pluralistic model, and as such, the meta-narrative of the secular modern, to adequately contain or adjust itself to the promulgation of 'real' difference. Milbank claims that 'justice and the Good are themselves the vehicles of western imperialism',⁴³ and that 'it must be sheerly illusory to associate evidently Western concerns with social justice, social equality, and the freedom of the Other with a tradition-transcending pluralism'.⁴⁴ In

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stating this, Milbank harks back to his exposition on the roots and backgrounds of key concepts of the liberal pluralistic model as being informed and influenced by the role of Christianity, as well as by the secular Enlightenment. By seeking to use this particular culturally specific modelling of a concept such as 'justice' as a universal, the proponents of the pluralist position are engaged in a process of domination and displacement of alternative understandings of these concepts. In doing so, their particular concerns, such as 'social justice, social equality, and the freedom of the Other',⁴⁵ have, for Milbank, come to have a greater importance in the pluralist discourse than the actual contents of the other religious traditions being engaged. This is a systematic outcome, for Milbank, of the connection between the pluralist position seen here within the context of inter-religious dialogue and the broader meta-narrative of secular modernity which reinforces and promotes this narration of pluralism with regard to differing religious narrative. In doing so, we see levels of out-narration occurring – the narration by the pluralist model out-narrating alternative inclusivist or exclusivist approaches, the attempted out-narration of religious narratives by the implicitly secular mischaracterisation of the content and validity of religious traditions, the narration of a falsely singular or inevitable connection between 'justice' or 'equality' and the broader narration of secular modernity, and the covert use of these various levels of narration to ensure the continued dominance of the secular modern meta-narrative.

Milbank's second critique, therefore, is an attempt to outline what he sees as the superficiality of the respect for otherness enshrined within the pluralist model espoused by the narrative of secular modernity, compared to what the contributors to *The Myth* say they want to do. This is a strategy of his goal of out-narration and can be examined as such. Milbank writes about the difference in respect that he finds within the Christian narrative when compared to the liberal pluralist model:

this does not mean merely, as for the liberal mode of dialogue, respect for the freedom of the other as abstractly identical with one's own freedom, but respect for the content of this otherness and its unique contributions to Being.⁴⁶

This notion of freedom for difference is perhaps the key point of this part in Milbank's critique of the pluralist model of dialogue in that, while the contributors to *The Myth* and other proponents of a pluralist model of dialogue set out to preserve the viable differences between religious traditions, in the end, the only difference preserved is that allowed for and controlled by the pluralist model's particular understanding of religion. This weakness of the pluralistic model of inter-religious relationship can be seen most clearly when it comes to a true assertion of fundamental difference by a religious narrative to the norms and mores of secular society, in Milbank's

view an assertion of a separate and distinctive meta-narrative alternative. As Milbank writes:

Agreement in the socio-political sphere nearly always betokens the triumph of Western attitudes and a general dilution of the force of traditional religious belief. Where, by contrast, as in the case of so-called Islamic fundamentalism (insofar as this is genuinely a revival of traditional Islam and not a reactive invention of an Islam made apparently safer than the tradition could ever have been against foreign and critical incursions), the full “difference” of a religious outlook is insisted upon, then there not only arise theoretical conflicts with Western understandings of economic, social and gender relations, but the claim to a space for the full exercise of Islamic practice tests the bounds of – and perhaps reveals the spuriousness of – the crucial Western commitment to religious toleration.⁴⁷

In this, Milbank underlines the tension he sees in the pluralistic attempt to preserve difference. This comes about because a thoroughgoing emphasis on difference precludes the possibility of real tolerance, because, as difference is emphasised, the ability to either bracket difference or subsume it within a wider agreement becomes more difficult. This mirrors the earlier examination of the difficulty of differing meta-narrative possibilities existing, falling instead into a ceaseless competitive cycle of out-narration.

The rejection of the liberal pluralistic understanding of religion, and the assertion of a more ‘authentic’ alternative by Milbank, disrupts the possibility of tolerance for the alternative religious traditions, exposing the reliance of the pluralist model on a particular conception of religion that only fits those religious traditions that are either already secularised or those that assent to the assault of the meta-narrative of secular modernity. Milbank notes that:

Western toleration for a diversity of religious beliefs and practices (so long as this means merely a practice of rites) assumes a concomitant secularization of law, politics, knowledge, and for the most part education, which often renders impossible a complete modern manifestation of religions in their guise as social projects.⁴⁸

This makes explicit the connection made between the pluralistic model of inter-religious dialogue Milbank is critiquing and the broader meta-narrative structure of secular modernity by which it is supported. In critiquing the particular working out of the logic of secular modernity within the context of inter-religious dialogue, pointing out its failure to adequately describe the reality of inter-religious interaction, Milbank undercuts and diminishes the extent of inevitability surrounding the broader construction of society by the meta-narrative of secular modernity.

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Milbank's third critique differs from the first two examined here, as it deals with whether the perceived similarities between differing religious traditions that are put forward within the pluralistic model are really markers of a wider similarity or only a consequence of the particular mode of inter-religious contact proposed. The contributors to *The Myth* that Milbank identifies – Knitter, Gilkey, Ruether, Suchocki, and Driver⁴⁹ – imply that social and political similarities or co-operation between religious traditions point to a possibility for inter-religious dialogue based on praxis, rather than theoretical reason. However, given Milbank's earlier critique of the assumptions under-girding the pluralistic model's, and secular society's more widely, conception of the definition of religion, it is unsurprising that in this context Milbank argues that the practical discourse that the contributors claim all religions share, is a 'contingent construction of reality'⁵⁰ brought about by the similar reactions of the religious traditions to the introduction of modernity and their classification within the pluralistic model of inter-religious contact, to which the contributors incorrectly assign the status of a 'universally valid logos'.⁵¹

Milbank's claim that the similarities evidenced by the pluralist model of inter-religious contact are representative not of deeper universal religious realities, but rather superficial reactions to modernity, or contortions brought about by the model itself, rests on Milbank's particular reading of Weber on modernity, holding that:

if there is a universal discourse in modernity, then it is that of formalized law and constitutional politics, which attempts to police and keep within their proper bounds all the other discourses.⁵²

Milbank's critique then continues to show that it is this acceptance of the fundamentally secular norms of constitutional politics and formalised law, critical to the performance of the meta-narrative function of secular modernity itself, that has created instances of concomitant social practice between religious traditions, rather than a 'multiply immanent convergence',⁵³ as is suggested by the proponents of the pluralistic model of inter-religious contact. The similarities and agreement between differing religious traditions in the social and political spheres picked up on by the contributors to *The Myth* instead:

nearly always betokens the triumph of Western attitudes and a general dilution of the force of traditional religious belief.⁵⁴

That is, the similarities are due to the cutting of religious traditions free from their social, cultural, and political ancillary traditions in order to make them fit into the pluralistic model's definition of a religion and within the social construction offered by the meta-narrative of secular modernity.

This problem of using a praxis-orientated model of inter-religious contact as identified by Milbank leads to a rejection of dialogue founded on this model, as similarities and agreement are seen to be due only to a divorce between the political, the social, the cultural, and the religious. Milbank writes:

How can a consensus about social justice, which is relatively independent of religion, possibly help to mediate the differences between religions? The religions may agree upon common action, but this will neither help nor hinder a process of dialogue.⁵⁵

This question about the extent to which a separation between the social and political formations of a religious tradition can be divorced from its fundamental beliefs is tied up with the earlier critique of the way in which the secular modern meta-narrative attempts to define religion. While many of the contributors to *The Myth* favour an easily individualised notion of religion, looking to diverge the political trends and social organisation brought about by religious traditions from the foundations of their faith, in Milbank's view, the inter-connectivity of the individual and the social within the scope of a religious tradition make it impossible to separate neatly the political realm from individual religious experience. Milbank's delineation of theological or theoretical agreement on the content of religious traditions and agreement on social aspects of relation to modernity is a critical aspect for the delineation of true agreement and the enforced agreement of circumstance.

1.2 Theoretical issues

In producing this form of critique of the currently dominant pluralist model of inter-religious dialogue, and by allowing it to be almost the only instance of sustained engagement with matters of inter-religious dialogue within the Radical Orthodoxy corpus, Milbank is exceptionally focused on the interaction of the Christian narrative with the current meta-narrative of secular modernity. In approaching the question of inter-religious dialogue in this way, the other religions fade into almost complete obscurity in his account, being reduced to merely the ground upon which Milbank attempts to make his out-narration of modernity. While this addresses the characteristic secularity of modern societies, it fails to address in any significant way the aspect of plurality identified as a key component of contemporary social experiences. This lack opens up Milbank's approach to a number of criticisms that revolve around the interaction of the proposed Christian meta-narrative with alternative and minority narratives within society. This includes both practical interactions in society, but also questions arising about the theoretical and envisioned space for alternative religious or non-religious narrative

within a wholly Christianised social construction. If Milbank is to make the claim that the meta-narrative of secular modernity must be out-narrated because of its reliance on a form of nihilistic violence in order to maintain its meta-narrative dominance, then there must be a demonstration that the narration and ultimate meta-narrative dominance of the Christian narrative supports itself in a qualitatively different manner. It is worth engaging with these specific criticisms in order to develop a further understanding of the specifics of the broader Milbankian approach to narration and out-narration in contemporary society and how this narration functions in regard to other religious individuals, communities, and traditions. Benjamin Sargent is one thinker who has engaged thoroughly with Milbank's thought from this perspective, drawing on Milbank's approach to matter of inter-religious dialogue in order to form a critique on the basis of practical implementation and a lack of connection between Radical Orthodoxy's theoretical vision of the Christian narrative and their actual engagement with non-Christian social forms. Sargent has put forward two primary critiques in this vein, looking at the issue of incomparability between competing religious meta-narratives, and the connection of peace to the narration of the Christian narrative and narrative choice.

The first of the criticisms offered by Sargent of Milbank's mode of inter-religious dialogue is that, through the rejection of an objective standpoint, inter-religious dialogue becomes the narration side-by-side of two different traditions, neither of which is commensurable with the other. While we can accede to at least entertaining Milbank's claim that religions are ultimately incommensurable with each other due to their differing accounts of fundamental aspects of reality, although this somewhat elides the justification for this assumption, this has also come under criticism, as it is not only liberal modernity, in the form of the pluralistic model of inter-religious relation previously examined, that has seen enough underlying similarity between the differing religious traditions to provide for a categorisation based on similarity,⁵⁶ but that this similarity has been observed by other narrative structures including the Christian tradition itself.⁵⁷ Milbank's assertion that the extent to which the cultural and social patterns of the societies in which religious traditions find themselves form and mediate the religious narrative means that any attempt to inhabit the worldview of the other fully must necessarily fail. Commenting on this issue, Sargent notes that:

Rather than an interactive exchange of beliefs progressing along various themes, interfaith encounter would be restricted to monologue.⁵⁸

However, this somewhat overstates Milbank's emphasis on the importance of cultural aspects of religion and the understanding that this cultural background brings to the performance of particular rituals or practices. While this conception of religion as culturally embedded allows for a strong defence of religious particularity in the face of pluralist accounts of religious

contact and secularised accounts of religion as purely a private matter of belief, Sargent sees it as hampering aspects of engagement and raising questions about the process of conversion as it situates the deeper meaning of differing religious traditions within their respective cultural traditions, rather than a shared experience or position.⁵⁹ However, Milbank's statements of religious incompatibility or cultural embeddedness are balanced by an account of the possibility of, to some degree, inhabiting or entertaining them without ascribing to them in their totality.⁶⁰

Further to this criticism, Milbank's proposal of inter-religious relation tends towards heightening the epistemic isolation of the various religious and non-religious traditions that make up our societies in a direct counterfactual to the increasing social plurality, hybridity, and exchange of our societies. Milbank's model of inter-religious relation closes down the possibility of dialogue producing answers to specific questions, rather than just the narration of a particular view on an issue, by emphasising the extent to which the differing narratives are isolated and separate from one another in both their aims and in their ways of understanding the world. As Sargent notes:

In an interfaith encounter designed around Milbank's reconstruction of discourse, a Muslim participant would not be permitted to challenge the authority of the Christian narrative but could only respond with another narrative. Such lack of accountability, even if meaningful accountability were not really possible due to epistemic isolation, would certainly be regrettable.⁶¹

This lack of accountability within Milbank's practice is linked to the issue of the incommensurable nature of differing religious discourses within Milbank's model. Due to the way in which Milbank sees religious traditions as embedded within complex cultural constructions of meaning, their narration is always a narration that expects no reply, other than the desire to convert. In this sense they are, to use D'Costa's phrase, only ever going to be 'talking past'⁶² one another, rather than with one another.

The second critique of Milbank offered by Sargent is a wider criticism of the relationship between violence, ontological peace, and the form of the Christian narrative that Milbank proposes. This difficulty is perhaps one of the most commonly made criticisms of Milbank's wider project and is seen presented differently in a number of places.⁶³ Milbank's characterisation of other non-Christian narratives as being fundamentally predicated towards violence to a greater or lesser extent leaves him open to the question of why it should be a peaceful narrative that more adequately explains our existence to those outside the Christian narrative. Further to this, one must question the extent to which theoretical peacefulness and openness to difference can be maintained when twinned with a violent or appropriative social practice. In this, Milbank's conception of inter-religious dialogue has become a war of narratives rather than an exchange, with each narrative seeking to reduce the

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other through the use of aggression and rhetoric. While the Christian narrative may have its foundations in an ontologically peaceful version of Creation, the significant role that performance, aggression, rhetoric, and argument play in the exchange between the competing narratives that Milbank is suggesting means that the possibility of a peaceful encounter has been reduced.⁶⁴

While Sargent's criticism on the issue of epistemic isolation is based on the earlier misreading of Milbank's promotion of incommensurability between religious narratives, it does highlight the extent to which Milbank, in attempting to out-narrate the Other, reduces and makes static the internal content of the Christian narrative. If the narration of the Christian narrative does not change in response to the narration of the alternative religious tradition, then Sargent is quite correct to describe this as a mono-logical (or, more accurately, duo-logical) encounter rather than the dialogical encounter supposedly desired and necessitated by the current sociological climate.⁶⁵ This tendency towards the impossibility of variety or change in the narration of the Christian narrative has been considered by a number of wider critics of Milbank that do not focus specifically on the workings of inter-religious contact. Cross, in his critique of Radical Orthodoxy's reading of Duns Scotus, makes a similar point in a different context when he writes that Radical Orthodoxy's engagement with the past, rather than alternative religions, is exasperating as it:

provokes no questions at all . . . [and the] . . . questions it asks simply provoked negative responses⁶⁶

in the same manner as Milbank's lack of answerability in the narration of inter-religious contact reduces the dialogical process to one of duo-logue. As Hemming has gone on to note:

Radical Orthodoxy does not lead us into how to "rethink the tradition", rather it presents us with a vision of what the tradition looks like once it has been re-thought.⁶⁷

This links the lack of answerability in Milbank's narration to the way in which this inflexibility reduces the relationality and change available to the model of inter-religious engagement. This represents a significant failure to engage with plurality and change not only in the context of inter-religious exchange, but also, and perhaps more worryingly, represents a vision of the Christian narrative that is itself static and unchanging. As we saw in Radical Orthodoxy's critique of the operation of the meta-narrative of modernity, it is this desire for a continuation of meta-narrative dominance that is often the cause of violent forms of suppression, oppression, and out-narration as the narrative seeks to hold onto the power to mould and shape its competitors.⁶⁸

This lack of answerability in the theoretical structuring of the kind of inter-religious dialogue Milbank leaves space for is ultimately inimical to

the emergence of any deeper resonance or meaning between the Christian narrative as envisioned by Radical Orthodoxy and the existent religious and cultural pluralities of contemporary society. By reducing the possibility of the initial interchange of positions developing further, Milbank's lack of willingness to be open to questioning forestalls the development and change brought about by the exchange of viewpoints, shared narration, or a 'living alongside' of one another.⁶⁹ Instead, the Christian narrative in Milbank's depiction remains static in conception, and static in its involvement with other religious traditions. In doing so, while being initially open to the moment of exchange, the narrative is foreclosed to the development of meaning or future dialogical possibility. Milbank's continuous use of out-narration as his approach to matters of inter-religious contact or relation has done damage to the Christian narrative; by attempting to insulate the tradition from the possible narrative exchange with alternatives the narrative has become artificially constructed and fore-shortened, while also finalising the content of the present narrative in a such a way that 'what the tradition looks like once it has been re-thought'⁷⁰ has become a static and singular account. Sargent's criticism is significant, because it strikes directly at the heart of Milbank's practice in the context of inter-religious contact in his work, exposing the damaging symptoms of his over-reliance on out-narration as his primary mode of conduct.

It is this second critique that poses the most significant questions for Milbank's model of inter-religious contact, especially in the context of the process of conversion. Sargent's argument, that even if the Christian narrative does symbolise and promote peacefulness in a way that other narratives do not, that there is no reason for an individual outside the Christian narrative to choose peacefulness as the criteria by which to judge between narratives, poses a problem for Milbank's focus on conversion in instances of dialogue or exchange. Milbank's response to this criticism, drawing on his understanding of the place of narrative, is that the Christian narrative, by explaining and positioning those narratives around it in a way that reflects its internal harmonic peace, presents a better and more persuasive account of an ideal society for humanity than those narratives that rely on a more violent conception.⁷¹ In doing so, Milbank relies on his earlier Platonic conception of the truth as intrinsically attractive. Christianity, because it is true, is inherently attractive even to those who do not recognise it as such.⁷²

Critically, for Milbank, the conception of peace within the Christian narrative is of a distinctly different kind to that found elsewhere. While the liberal secular polity may construe peace as a suspension of violence, through either minimal toleration or the imposition of peace through the monopolisation of violence by the state, the Christian polity is instead seen to provide peace through a mutual justice. As Milbank writes:

The reconciliation is possible because Christianity, as I shall show, more emphatically construes virtue as that which aims towards, and is possible within, a fundamental condition of peace. If the *polis* can adjudicate

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to all their roles, and assign a virtuous way of life, then justice must be possible. And a justice that is living together in agreement, rather than mere mutual toleration, implies a real peace that is more than just suspended warfare.⁷³

While Sargent is correct to recognise the necessity of identifying and adopting Milbank's Platonic assumption in order for his wider claim to make sense, his proposal refuses the provision of an alternative to allow us to discern between narratives. While aesthetics play a role in Milbank's schemata, it seems that this is all we are left with if Sargent's critique is taken to its logical conclusion, a position that does not seem to be borne out by Milbank's wider work.⁷⁴ While Sargent is correct that Milbank's practice has led to an increase in the epistemic isolation of the Christian narrative from alternative religious narratives within his wider project, this is due to the way in which Milbank has chosen to implement his model of non-pluralistic relation rather than a necessary or intrinsic feature of Radical Orthodoxy's broader approach. Milbank's constant resort to out-narration in his engagements with alternative religious traditions has led to an increasingly confrontational and appropriative mode of practice which denies the possibility of a meaningful reply or answer from the tradition which is to be out-narrated. If we accept Sargent's identification of violence at the heart of Milbank's practice of out-narration in the context of inter-religious engagement, this is not necessarily fatal to Milbank's or Radical Orthodoxy's broader identification of peace as the defining aspect of the Christian narrative. Rather, it is a failure to implement in a coherent fashion the demands of the Christian narrative or tradition in a new context. In this way, it is Milbank's overriding concern with the target of secularity that is the fundamental issue with his relationship with alternative religious narratives, in that it causes a deformation of the relationship between the differing religious narratives involved in contemporary societies.

The issue of peace and its representation within Milbank's narrative practice is a difficult one to resolve given that it is a critique of a fundamental characteristic of the Radical Orthodoxy vision. While Milbank's earlier work has a strong focus on pacifism and the rejection of violence, this is mellowed somewhat in his later work. For example, whilst in *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank draws a clear distinction between violence and non-violence, later, in *Being Reconciled*, he argues that violence is truly violent only when it is also evil.⁷⁵ Given that the process of conversion from the inherently violent potential meta-narratives of alternative faiths to the internally peaceful meta-narrative of Christianity is a broader conversion from violence to non-violence, then the use of violence in this case may be justified within Milbank's broader schema on account of its necessity. In his discussion of the 'double passivity' of violence, Milbank notes that 'evil and violence are convertible but not identical',⁷⁶ drawing a distinction between

the two. He continues to note that a complete withdrawal from violence ultimately produces a more complete form of violence. He writes:

It is also that pacifism, as looking at violence, is at least as violent, and probably more absolutely violent, than actual physically violent interventions. This then will confirm my more general conclusion which I have yet to argue – that gazing at violence is the greatest violence, indeed the very essence of violence.⁷⁷

Spectating on the cycle of violence Milbank sees as inherent within the meta-narrative of secular modernity or within alternative religious traditions is a greater violence than the intervention of out-narration and conversion. While this may provide justification for the level of violence in Milbank's own practice of out-narration, Sargent's point does drive forward the necessity of a redress in Milbank's model of practice towards a methodology that seeks the minimisation of this violence. An involvement in a shared and mutual form of dialogical engagement allows for a reduction in the violence necessary for the process of exchange to occur between the Christian meta-narrative and alternative religious narratives.

Sargent's critiques, outlined and expanded on here, showcase a difficult aspect of Milbank's thought. In approaching the matter of inter-religious dialogue as merely another space within which he can perform his out-narration of secular modernity, Milbank engenders a specific attitude and theoretical dissonance towards alternative religious traditions that fails to adequately mirror those aspects of the Christian narrative his own narration seeks to foreground. While the critiques offered above largely deal with the specifics of Milbank's thought on inter-religious dialogue, this issue of dissonance between expressed values and practical outworking raises further concerns in Milbank's proposals regarding the political and social place of the Christian community in contemporary religiously plural societies. If the focus of the Christian community is to be the out-narration of the currently dominant meta-narrative of modernity, and as we have seen, concerns are expressed regarding the way in which this out-narration occurs within Milbank's work in the context of dialogue, then questions naturally arise about the way in which the Church is seen to envision itself, its role in the out-narration of secular modernism, and, perhaps most importantly, about the place of narratives which are not Christian within the society structured by the metanarrative of Christianity proposed.

This interaction of the Christian community with the world around it, and its own internal recognition of its place within the wider world, are fundamentally questions of ecclesiology – how the church is, how it sees itself, and how the church should act. The importance of ecclesiology for the resolution of issues of inter-religious contact stems from the religiously plural nature of contemporary society. While in the past, ecclesiology may have revolved around broadly Christian societies, whether a majority or the

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totality of society was formed by a Christian ethos and its shared assumptions, this assumption can no longer be made about the plural societies found in the contemporary West. Significant minority religious communities demand a response from the Church, particularly in the way in which the Church as a communal body sees its relation to the wider communal body of society.

Given that ecclesiology aims to provide this account of the relationship between the Church and society, contemporary manifestations of an ecclesiological theology require an account of religious diversity and plurality in order to make sense within contemporary society. Further to this, Milbank's own project heavily focuses on this relationship, founded upon an account of the church as a participatory and peaceful community within the violent turmoil of secular society.⁷⁸ While Milbank focuses on ecclesiology within his wider work, there is little attention paid to how this relates to the religiously plural nature of contemporary society beyond the approach of out-narration. This feature makes an examination of the way in which the ecclesiology presented in his wider work relates to religious plurality a particularly important step as it deals with a significant area of his thought within an area of particular relevance to the composition of contemporary societies. In her essay, 'The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy: A Catholic Critique',⁷⁹ Doak critically analyses what she sees as the three different forms of political ecclesiology put forward by different members of the Radical Orthodoxy grouping – Milbank's 'remnant Christendom',⁸⁰ Cavanaugh and Bell's 'anarchic oppositionalism',⁸¹ and Ward's 'critical engagement'.⁸² Her examination of Milbank's model of political ecclesiology, and her conceptualisation of it as focusing on a 'remnant Christendom', is important, as it links to the way in which Milbank sees other religious narratives and how his engagement with other narratives has come to be structured by aspects of his wider project. The way that the Church envisions itself and its relationship with wider society and political processes provides an insight into the way in which the Church approaches its relationship with other religious traditions which are just as embedded within the individual experience of society.

Doak describes Milbank's model of political ecclesiology through examining the relation between the religious narrative of Christianity and Milbank's conception of the origins and workings of secular modernity. As she writes:

Indeed, Milbank maintains, true justice is possible only within a community united in adherence to the Christian narrative of our redemptive reunion in a harmony amid differences made possible by God,⁸³

and that this harmony is only to be found socially, that is, within the Church. Milbank emphasizes that the only alternative to the underlying violent meta-narrative of secular modernity, and the escalation of the violence

it engenders, is a resumption of the political action of Christianity. This resumption of the place of the Church, as a bulwark against secular modernity is, for Doak, a 'remnant Christendom' form of political ecclesiology; reusing the pre-modern notion of a politically and socially aware Christendom to challenge the secular power of the modern meta-narrative.

Milbank characterises the way in which the Christian community can begin to relate more properly to the institutions of the state through a blurring of boundaries between the secular and sacred realms.⁸⁴ This involves the incorporation of previously secular spaces into the redeemed framework of the Christian narrative, providing a way in which arenas that were previously enmeshed within the violence of secular modernity can be harmonized within the ontological peace envisioned by Christianity.⁸⁵ This move is one of the ways in which Milbank sees the Church and the Christian narrative beginning to reclaim a space for the workings of theology in secular modern society. As Doak observes, Milbank's model of the relationship between the Christian and modern narratives suggests that:

The remnant of Christendom should, therefore, strive to grow within a society it no longer seeks to conquer by force but rather to subsume peacefully into the church through the public witness of Christian reconciliation, our only alternative to and restraint against the catastrophic violence that Milbank apocalyptically predicts will otherwise destroy society.^{86,87}

This model that Doak identifies can result in the reduction of relations between narratives to pure oppositionalism, a reliance on forms of exclusionary violence towards those not within the Christian narrative and their subsequent marginalisation from an increasingly Christianised society. This out-narration and absorption of other narratives by the Christian narrative reduces the possibility of the internal difference Milbank is so keen to preserve. Each of these points made by Doak relates significantly to the process of inter-religious dialogue, as the conception of the Church's relation to wider society includes within it the Church's relation to those alternative religious narratives which are becoming an increasingly important part of our contemporary world.

This accusation of a reduction to oppositionalism comes from the way in which Milbank represents the interplay between the narratives of secular modernity and Christianity, which, while not wholly different, do have serious foundational differences between them. In arguing for a rejection of the secular framework of current society, with its foundations of instrumental reason and rationality, Milbank proposes that matters of truth can only be judged on the basis of their persuasiveness, with the 'true' naturally being more attractive.⁸⁸ This lack of referentiality between religious narratives reduces the scope of possible engagement to the very bare-bones of narration – narration that takes into account neither the listener nor the

other narrative. For Doak, this reduction of possibility closes the point of dialogue, as it closes any possibility of exchange occurring. However, as we have seen in the examination of Sargent's critique, this rests on an underappreciation of the extent to which Milbank allows for the entertaining and merging of meta-narrative accounts of reality in his wider work. Milbank, especially when dealing specifically with the process of inter-religious contact, moves away from the conception of meta-narratives as inherently and totally incomparable, allowing for a minimal sharing and understanding of differing meta-narratives in one person. As we saw in Sargent's criticism, Milbank's mode of practice, dominated by the desire to out-narrate the meta-narrative of secular modernity, does not always reflect the conceptual framework put forward in places in 'The End of Dialogue', often relying on a static understanding of the content of the Christian narrative that does indeed close down the relational character of inter-religious dialogue.

This description of the Christian narrative as a static and unitary account of the content of the Christian tradition is a recurring feature within Radical Orthodoxy, but is particularly true of the Milbankian approach to matters of narration against secular modernism. This has been criticised by Paul Hedges,⁸⁹ who provides further specific criticism of Milbank's static approach to inter-religious contact and relations from the standpoint of inter-cultural theology. These criticisms deal broadly with Radical Orthodoxy's prior indebtedness to Greek philosophical thought which undercuts the re-assertion of a pure Christian orthodoxy,⁹⁰ and as mentioned earlier in this chapter, a problematisation of the idea that religions are fundamentally incomparable.⁹¹ In a general sense, this characterisation of the Christian narrative by Milbank as a largely static account that can be 'deployed' against secular modernity is a tactical concern with the strength of his narration which has come to have an effect on the broader conceptualisation of the theoretical inter-relationship of the Christian narrative, the meta-narrative of secular modernity, and the narrative of other religious traditions.

It is in this way that Milbank's characterisation of other faiths also signals a failure to adequately deal with the internal plurality of religious faiths, whether this is the intra-Christian diversity that Milbank often obscures tactically in his narrative tussle with modernity, or the variety and plurality to be found within other religious traditions mentioned by Milbank which are occluded. Hedges picks up on this facet of Milbank's tactical prioritisation, by showing the reductive nature of the reading that Milbank offers of the Hindu practice of *bhakti* as 'mainly concerned with a systematic appeasement of, and seeking favours from, the various deities',⁹² instead presenting a wide range of Hindu scholarship to the contrary.⁹³ In doing this, Hedges begins questioning the validity of Milbank's accounts of alternative religious traditions, which in turn begins the undermining of the wider conceptual relations drawn out by Milbank between them. Hedges's proposals here weaken the persuasiveness of Milbank's categorisation of a 'pure' or 'uncorrupted' Christian narrative that stands isolated from interference or

interaction with alternative narratives, while also beginning to question the validity of Radical Orthodoxy's particular take on the Christian narrative, infused as it is by non-Christian Greek philosophy and typically Western post-modern philosophy. This problematisation of Milbank's view of the Christian narrative is a critical factor in assessing the reality of his narration, as it calls into question the extent to which his conceptualisation of the content of the narrative can in any way be seen to be solely Christian, or able to be defined in a way that does not rely on other non-Christian narratives for meaning or interpretation. This feature of Hedges's critique is difficult for Milbank's particular conception of the Christian narrative to overcome, as it relies to a large extent on the differentiation Milbank outlines between the meta-narrative natures of Christianity and secular modernity. However, this nature is not wholly different in Milbank's work, with the relationship formed from a dialectical process of exchange between the two rather than a pure oppositionalism. However, Hedges's critique does reinforce the need for a dynamic understanding of the nature of the Christian narrative that is presented in instances of inter-religious engagement, drawing on a variety of traditions and sources in its narration.

The oppositional nature of the competing narratives Milbank proposes also creates areas of difficulty for Milbank's 'remnant Christendom' ecclesiological approach. In arguing for the merging of boundaries between the functions of the state and the Church, Milbank is excluding those outside the Church from participation within the increasingly Christianised state. As Doak writes:

In Milbank's political ecclesiology, then, non-Christians in a majority-Christian society would be rendered socially and politically marginal, as the majority encourage the absorption of the socio-economy into the church.⁹⁴

In doing so, non-Christians are violently marginalised from spaces previously open to them. The desire for the absorption of every aspect of society into the narrative of Christianity, apart from having a questionable impact on the Christian narrative itself, is also a desire for the absorption of every individual into that narrative. Milbank's model reduces the possibility for a genuinely plural society, structuring and seeking to marginalise oppositional narratives, the same thing that Milbank accuses the secular modern narrative of having done to the Christian narrative in modernity. This connection between Milbank's approach and his critiques of both modernity and fundamentalist Christian reactions to it has been identified by Yazell as a critical foundation of the problematic aspect of Milbank's politico-religious vision.⁹⁵ While Milbank may see the inclusion of the alternative religious narratives within the Christian meta-narrative as preserving their distinct and individual character, it does raise the question concerning the extent to which Milbank is willing to endorse true and significant difference within

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the Christian meta-narrative, something he himself has raised as problematic within the pluralist model of dialogue.⁹⁶ This is a critical point of difference between the ecclesiological formation proposed by Milbank in the context of Radical Orthodoxy and that proposed by Graham Ward. Ward, in his vision of the future constructed community offered in his project is celebratory of the continued existence of non-Christian social construction and space and explicitly warns of the dangers of drifting into a state of oppositionalism. As he notes, 'my assertion of exclusivity debilitates us both'⁹⁷ in the context of social construction, while Milbank's insistence on the gradual Christianization of society and the concomitant Christianisation of the political sphere resists this approach. While Milbank may deny the coercive character of this Christianisation, it is difficult to picture the maintenance of religious freedom and alternative expression within a political and social space entirely defined by the Christian narrative. As Doak has noted, the ecclesiological goal of an all-encompassing Church and the proposed vision of overlapping social authorities proposed by Milbank are both practically incompatible and raise suspicions regarding the contradictory nature of the means proposed to reach the ends.⁹⁸

The nature of Milbank's oppositional, non-referential, view of narratives and the exclusion and marginalisation of non-Christians from the affairs of the increasingly 'Christian' state show that, for Milbank, true peace is only possible within the same homogeneously Christian community. Doak notes this when she writes:

Given his insistence that true peace and justice depend on a shared Christian meta-narrative and are possible only within the church, it follows that there can be no true peace between Christians and non-Christians.⁹⁹

While Milbank would undoubtedly object to the characterisation of other narratives as being wholly without peaceful aims, at this point, Milbank is falling into the same problems that he identifies within the secular modern narrative. It appears that peace is not possible in society where there are genuinely held differences between social groups, especially when those differences have their foundations in religious belief. Peace remains unobtainable within the meta-narrative construction of either the Christian narrative or the secular narrative because of their insistence on a social conformity and the inclusion of alternative communities within their meta-narrative totality. The attempt at unification produces a deadening effect on the plurality of society, and from Doak's criticism, it is clear that this social conformity can only be maintained through violence. This point is central to Doak's wider critique of Milbank and is something that requires a re-thinking of Milbank's particular, and Radical Orthodoxy's more general, conception of what the Christian *is* – is it to be a static, fixed, and unitary notion that draws on set aspects of the tradition in order to impose a social uniformity on the plurality of contemporary society or can the tradition,

when read delicately and with the prominent issues of the contemporary world in mind, offer up an alternative interpretative narrative?

1.3 Practical issues

This exploration of the minimal areas where Radical Orthodoxy has engaged with the characteristic plurality of contemporary society have shown a number of issues in both the theoretical conception of plurality within Radical Orthodoxy's form of the Christian narrative, but also a lack of development by Radical Orthodoxy of that Christian narrative form itself. This lack of development in areas such as ways of engaging with alternative religious traditions or the appropriate representation of alternative religious narratives within Radical Orthodoxy's narration suggests a lack of focus on the matter. This is a worrying facet given the prevalence of plurality currently encountered by individuals in contemporary Western society, its increasing importance in our everyday lives, and the unlikely reversal of this sociological and demographic trend. If the Christian narrative is to adequately speak to individuals and provide meaning for their lives, then it must come to have a deep awareness and consideration of critical aspects of their communal lives.

In engaging with the prospect of inter-religious dialogue in the way that he does, Milbank foreground and prioritises his attempt at out-narrating the meta-narrative of secular modernity. In doing so, problematic aspects of his practice of narration become more prominent in the tactical manoeuvres necessary for a forceful form of that narration. The identification of secular and heretical Christian underpinnings to the pluralist model of relationship, and the model of dialogue which rests upon it, serves as a point of linkage between Milbank's wider thought and the foundations of the particular critiques of the pluralistic model of religious engagement that we have considered. As noted throughout Radical Orthodoxy's critique of secular modernity, the formation of the secular is traced back to an explicitly theological turn, and as such, can be reversed by a renewed orthodox theology. As Oliver, discussing the process by which Radical Orthodoxy charts the creation of the 21st century secular, notes:

the secular is not simply the rolling back of a theological consensus to reveal a neutral territory where we all become equal players, but the replacement of a certain view of God and creation with a different view which still makes theological claims . . . claims about origins, purpose and transcendence.¹⁰⁰

Therefore, the context of Milbank's wider thought informs and is the foundation of his critique of the pluralist model. The individual criticisms identified above are only subsidiaries to his central argument against secular modernity from within a Christian perspective, which forms his attempt at

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out-narration. Milbank, when talking about the Christian narrative, but with characteristics applicable to alternative religious traditions, writes:

It is this lived narrative which itself both projects and “represents” the triune God, who is transcendental peace through differential relation. And the same narrative is also a continuous reading and positioning of other social realities. If truth is social, it can only be through a claim to offer the ultimate “social science” that theology can establish itself and give any content to the notion of “God”.¹⁰¹

It is this movement towards providing the ultimate social science that provides the background to Milbank’s critiques of both the secular underpinnings and assumptions of the pluralist model of religious relationship, as well as the non-Christian religious narratives that Milbank wishes to out-narrate, and in turn offers the core of his attempted out-narration of the secular, modern meta-narrative.

While Milbank does call for an end to the typically formed dialogue with other religious traditions, as is proposed by the pluralistic model of inter-religious relation, his desire to sound the death knell of dialogue as such in response to the model deployed in *The Myth* overshadows some of the more subtle points he makes in his attempt at out-narration. Milbank defines religions as sharing a consideration about ‘what there is’, writing that:

The commonness that pertains between the different religions is therefore not the commonness of a genus, or of a particular specified *mode* of human existence; instead it is the commonness of Being,¹⁰²

while in his criticism of Raimundo Panikkar, Milbank repeats this point more forcefully:

These theoretical and practical problems with the ontologically pluralist position reveal that while religions may be incommensurable, this does not mean that they can be envisaged as lying peacefully side by side, without mutual interference.¹⁰³

These caveats highlight the way in which his proposals maintain a form of relationship between religious traditions, even if this relationship is largely characterised by the process of out-narration and conversion. For Milbank, it is their shared attempt to ‘provide varying accounts of Being itself or of “what there is”’¹⁰⁴ that make up the communal features of religion. This shared feature opens a space for a type of exchange based on conversion or conversation rather than the assimilation that he has exposed is at work within the pluralistic model. While this feature does open greater space for the development of a conversational aspect of inter-religious dialogue that rejects the assimilatory project of secular modernity, this does not rule out

the need, in Milbank's schemata, for a concomitant possibility for conversion from one narrative to another.

Therefore, while Milbank sounds the end of dialogue in the fashion proposed by the contributors to *The Myth*, a fashion supported and developed by the meta-narrative of modernity, he also suggests that it is necessary for the Christian tradition to continue to converse with other religions in a purposeful manner. According to Milbank's understanding of the content of the Christian narrative, this conversation will not only respect the Other in a way that the pluralist model does not, driven by the nihilistic violence of the secular modern, but will also preserve the very apparent differences between religious traditions in the name of comparison. This, as well as pointing the way in which such an encounter can lead a Christian into a deeper understanding of the gospels, furthers Milbank's reference to the possibility of a dialogue between religious traditions based around 'coincidences of outlook'¹⁰⁵ in the desires of the differing discourses. These coincidences allow for the possibility of inter-religious engagement within Milbank's model around shared coincidences in outlook between religious traditions as they each struggle to narrate themselves within, and against, the dominant meta-narrative of secular modernity. As part of this, Milbank identifies a 'widespread opposition to usury'¹⁰⁶ in religious traditions as a specific example, but also the broader search for 'modes of cultural existence not under the aegis of liberal capitalism'¹⁰⁷ as a point of possible joint narration and engagement between differing religious traditions.

The possibility of a new kind of dialogue based on a tangential comparison of aims and themes rather than an attempted comparison of differing religious traditions within a specified constructed genus or type based on the particularities of the western, secularised experience of religion is made more apparent when Milbank writes that:

in certain circumstances, and in the context of a search for modes of cultural existence not under the aegis of liberal capitalism, and more respectful of religions as social projects than the sovereign liberal state can dare to be, these coincidences could indeed provide the religions with something useful to talk about.¹⁰⁸

Therefore, for Milbank, the joint experience of resistance to the meta-narrative dominance and violence of secular modernity is the starting point for the possibility of a new model of inter-religious relation. In turn, by seeking to use a shared experience as the grounds for dialogue, Milbank moves towards a model that is more open to the radical difference in alternative religious traditions than the sanitisation of difference which draws his critique of the pluralistic model. This break-out from the confines of liberal pluralistic dialogue opens the door to comparisons and evaluations of the way in which religious traditions can take a joint stand on certain issues. Critically, this is the use of a shared experience of modernity by religious

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traditions are a basis for the content of instances of dialogue, a gesture towards the shared basis that this shared experience provides for conversations about shared social responses, rather than the use of experience as a reading back onto the theoretical or theological content of the religious traditions themselves. Experience is the basis for shared social dialogue, not the basis for shared religious opinions or a shared religious objective reality.

The criticisms expressed of the pluralist model of inter-religious dialogue are, therefore, not heralding the end of all possibility of dialogue as may be inferred from Milbank's 'The End of Dialogue' title, but rather a hopeful statement of the end of a particular and, in Milbank's view, fatally flawed method of engaging in dialogue. His proposal ends up being a balance between the necessity of constructive dialogue around shared points of mutual interest, and a broader, more general system of out-narration and conflict over those issues on which religious traditions disagree. Between these two approaches floats a broader opposition to violence, whether violence Milbank identifies within alternative religious traditions or the form found within the meta-narrative of liberal, secular, capitalistic modernity. Given the emphasis on the rejection of the secular modern meta-narrative construction embedded within the pluralistic model, Milbank's model requires contact and dialogue to occur in a tentative fashion only between simultaneously narrating religious narratives. While the pluralist model may see agreement between religions as an example of a wider, meta-level agreement with a universalised notion of religion, the non-pluralistic model proposed by Milbank as an example of dialogue stemming from within the Christian narrative must be more aware of the situated and contextual background to any points of coincidence observed.¹⁰⁹ This attempt to restrict the impulse toward systematisation based on similarity also necessitates a place for difference within the model that is equally as significant for the understanding of the relationship as the points of similarity.¹¹⁰

There are therefore two strands to Milbank's attempt at engaging in inter-religious dialogue within the context of his broader goal of the out-narration of the meta-narrative of secular modernity. First, a stress on the difference between the religious traditions that requires a stance of mutual suspicion, while as a counter to this, there is also room for a shared narration by religious traditions against the discourse of secular modernity. This balancing between the two strands apparent in the model allows for Milbank to preserve his sense of Christian out-narration, while also allowing for the possibility for a certain form of dialogue to remain. While the creative tension between these two possibilities may prove fruitful, allowing for a flex between the out-narration of those aspects of alternative traditions seen to be harmful or antithetical to the Christian narrative and engagement with those aspects that are seen to be contributory, it is not the case that merely the act of shared narration necessarily leads onto the building of deeper understanding, trust, or anti-secular narrative power. While Milbank's modelling of narrative interaction in the context of inter-religious

dialogue described and examined above provides a framework for the way in which his narration of the Christian narrative theoretically functions in its goal of out-narration, this theoretical framework seems to be disconnected from the actuality of Milbank's practice. It is at this point where the drive to out-narrate an opposing narrative leads to a divergence between the ideals of the Christian narrative expressed by Milbank in his wider work and the lived embodiment of this model in examples of inter-religious interchange within his work.

While 'The End of Dialogue' lays the ground for two strands to a non-pluralistic approach to issues of religious plurality, out-narration, and joint narration, Milbank's actual engagement in instances of inter-religious contact has failed to mirror this dual approach. Throughout his practice, Milbank has relied purely on out-narration as his favoured approach to instances of inter-religious contact, with the out-narration of the meta-narrative of secular modernity largely taking precedence over any form of engagement with alternative religious traditions. In Milbank's more recent work, the issue of alternative religious traditions has remained a minor issue, usually only addressed in the context of a wider, and specifically Christian, narration.¹¹¹ Further to this, the engagement has tended to focus on Islam, rather than any sustained engagement with, or attempt at out-narration of, any other non-Christian religious narrative.¹¹² In those places in which alternative religious traditions do make an appearance, the interaction has not been dialogical in nature, rather forming part of a methodology of solely out-narration and appropriation that has come to characterise a Milbankian approach to the broader goals of the Radical Orthodoxy movement. This tendency is particularly clear in his recent attempts to engage with a more popular audience through the medium of the Australian Broadcasting Company, specifically in his article 'Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Islam',¹¹³ written in response to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, but can also be discerned in his discussion of *Shari'ah* law in 'Shari'a and the True Basis of Group Rights: Islam, the West, and Liberalism'¹¹⁴ and his discussion of the terror attacks of 9/11 in 'Sovereignty, Empire, Capital, and Terror'.¹¹⁵

It is in 'Christianity, the Enlightenment and Islam' that we begin to see damage that this Milbankian approach has come to have on the necessary connection between the form of Christian narrative that is theoretically described and the practical performance of its narration by Milbank. While it caused controversy for comments about the 'lamentably premature collapse of the Western colonial empires',¹¹⁶ in this context, I am much more interested in the way in which Milbank, drawing on Ayaan Hirsi Ali, uses the narratives of Islam and secular modernity as part of his wider, Christian, meta-narrative narration. This broadly tactical approach is particularly clear when he writes:

Yet in important ways Christianity has more in common with the Enlightenment legacy than it has with Islam. Both see the role of reason

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as central and both favour tolerance and open debate, whereas Islam, on the whole, is more equivocal about these values.¹¹⁷

At this point, Milbank has reversed his earlier positioning of the opposition between the Christian tradition and the meta-narrative of secular modernity, especially from his earlier position in the 'End of Dialogue' and *Theology & Social Theory*. He is drawing attention to those points of coincidence or shared outlooks between the narrative of Christianity and secular modernity in an attempt to build a more coherent argument for the primacy of specifically Christian narration. This aspect of out-narration is continued in Milbank's positioning of Islam in 'Shari'a and the True Basis of Group Rights' as oppositional not only to secular modernity in the way we have seen in his previous work, but also as representing a wholly other to Christianity. He writes:

Islam alone anachronistically sought to establish a rival universality to that of Christianity by way of the promulgation of an enforceable legal code. This is precisely why we cannot treat Islam in terms of full liberal pluralist equality without abandoning the principles of *both* Christianity *and* the Enlightenment. We can only accommodate Islam on our own terms – terms that require the secularization of *any* coercive religious law. . . . Something always rules, and this something is always substantive.¹¹⁸

By positioning Christianity and secular liberalism on the same side of the discussion in this way, Milbank is engaging in the same practice. This step is at odds with both his outlined opposition to what he sees as the fundamentally nihilistic violent narrative of secular modernity, as well as denying the dialogical-part model of practice he developed in 'The End of Dialogue'.

In turn, Milbank holds true to his pragmatic appropriation of alternative narratives for the purposes of out-narration, either Islam or secular modernity, when he attempts to chart a middle way for Christianity between these two alternative meta-narratives throughout this particular article. Milbank's appropriation of alternative narratives to Christianity is a strengthening and reinforcement of his form of the Christian narrative. Whenever the possibility of engagement becomes apparent between Christianity and another religious narrative, Milbank is willing to appropriate it within his broader Christian out-narration, even if this runs counter to his previous attempt at formulating an approach to a form of inter-religious engagement over shared social issues. Milbank's reliance on out-narration in his engagement with the religious Other has therefore become the overriding concern of his praxis.

In focusing on the process of out-narration in his interaction with alternative religious narratives to the exclusion of dialogical encounters, Milbank only reinforces in practice some of the theoretical issues for which his wider

project is more generally criticised. His tendency towards out-narration has led to an appropriative and reductive account of alternative religious traditions within his work, often presenting them as significantly different to contemporary academic understandings in order to further his argument, even while he critiques the meta-narrative of secular modernity for doing in the same thing in his narrative argument against it.¹¹⁹ This reductive tendency does violence to the self-understanding of those religious traditions, as well as providing Milbank with only a short term, tactical, advantage in the process of out-narration. While this may be useful in Milbank's eyes, the nature of his practice of out-narration itself reduces the possibility of dialogical engagement of the kind he proposes in 'The End of Dialogue', as, in adopting this approach, Milbank undermines the ability of alternative narratives to engage co-operatively with him even where coincidences of outlook do occur and through engaging in damaging practices damaging the development of the necessary trust for relationality to be built.

1.4 Narrative alternative

This exploration of Radical Orthodoxy's approach to matters of inter-religious dialogue highlights certain problematic aspects of both Radical Orthodoxy's general theoretical understanding of matters of plurality and Milbank's specific performative actions regarding non-Christian religious narratives. In each of these cases, a disconnect has developed between the way that the Christian narrative is described in Radical Orthodoxy works and the way that this form of the Christian narrative is seen to be enacted or performed in reality. This can be seen in the development of Milbank's critique of the liberal pluralistic model of inter-religious dialogue, where his desire to narrate against secular modernity opens up a lack of ethical practice towards the alternative religious traditions he deploys, while also being apparent in the critiques of his modelling by both Sargent and Doak. They and others who highlight the way in which Milbank's approach fails to adequately mirror the ethical aspects of the Christian tradition that Milbank has chosen to foreground in making his argument against the meta-narrative of secular modernity, namely the ability to provide a peace-in-difference.

All of this occurs within the context of an understanding of society as fundamentally shaped by narratives. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Radical Orthodoxy's adoption of this conceptualisation of contemporary society has a significant effect on the way in which Radical Orthodoxy's argument is presented and, of course, the ways in which it might be judged. The main aspect is that in order to effect change on society, narratives are required to present a coherent and relevant account of the meaning of social interaction for the individual or community they wish to influence. This narrative form of persuasion generally involves the out-narration of alternative formulations through the better reflection of reality by the 'winning' narrative. The only way, within Radical Orthodoxy's understanding

of the nature of social organisation, for the Christian narrative to advance is to better reflect in its narration a coherent account of reality. This has left Radical Orthodoxy in a somewhat difficult position. If we first accept the narrative nature of social reality as described by Milbank and others within the movement, in order to allow for theology to mount a challenge against its current social construction as irrelevant to political and social concerns, and, secondly, if we accept that the promulgation of some form of Christian narrative, stemming from the broad Christian tradition, is the desired outcome of a Christian engagement with society, then we must come to see the relevance of the critiques of Milbank's practice offered earlier as each focuses on ways in which the successful engagement of contemporary society by the Christian narrative has been failed by Milbank's chosen performative practice. Given this, there is only one option left. Just as modernity's meta-narrative dominance has meant that narration is the only option seen as useful for the Christian narrative within contemporary society, so, too, narration has become the only possible option here for the furtherance of the Christian tradition.

The only option is therefore the development of an alternative conceptualisation of the Christian narrative that better reflects the goal of describing contemporary reality as it is experienced by socially enmeshed individuals and communities. Just as Milbank chooses to tactically deploy or foreground certain aspects of the Christian tradition in certain circumstances, such as Christian Neo-Platonism, and minimise other aspects, such as the significant internal variation and plurality within the tradition, so too can an alternative radically orthodox formulation of the Christian tradition. This process is not one of abandoning the foundations of Radical Orthodoxy, drawing as we will see on a multitude of associated scholars, but it is, necessarily, a process of out-narrating aspects of the current formulation of the Christian narrative seen largely in the dominant work of Milbank and that have come to characterise the Milbankian approach to issues of religious and social plurality.

Developing this alternative narrative is the aim of the rest of this book. Drawing on established aspects of the Radical Orthodoxy position and the broader Christian tradition, it seeks to narrate a better, and more beautiful, account of the Christian story within contemporary society. This narration of an alternative radically orthodox form of the Christian narrative aims to out-narrate the aspects of Milbankianism that have engendered a disconnect between the theoretical commitments of the Christian tradition and its practical outworking, before engaging, from a stronger position due to sustained inner consistency, in the ongoing narration of the Christian narrative within, and against, its meta-narrative construction by the story of secular modernity. In doing so, it draws on foundational and recurring aspects of the Christian story, examining the conception of God as Trinitarian, desire as a fundamental feature of the divine inter-relationship, and beauty as an ethically determinative notion, in order to develop a form of the Christian

narrative which more adequately represents its central commitment to peace in its theoretical and practical treatment of difference.

Notes

- 1 Meretoja, "Narrative and Human Existence", 102–104.
- 2 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, 15.
- 3 This is obviously a complicated and contested area, with input from various disciplinary fronts on the way that identity is formed for individuals and groups. See: Holstein and Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World*; Rosenwald and Ochberg, *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self Understanding*; and Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*.
- 4 Foucault, "The Subject and Power", 219.
- 5 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 40.
- 6 This overlap is perhaps best explored in J. K. A. Smith's book, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, where the discussion revolves around the reasons for categorisation as a meta-narrative, and for Radical Orthodoxy's critique of the meta-narrative of modernity, Milbank's *Theology & Social Theory* seems most apposite. See: Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, 68–71; and Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 7–144.
- 7 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, XXIV.
- 8 Ibid., 66.
- 9 Ibid., 60–62.
- 10 Milbank's responses to Hyman's critiques of this 'unfounded' claim are enlightening on this point: Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, XVI–XVII.
- 11 See, for example, recent debates over impending catastrophic climate change, political populism and the breakdown of trust in established social and political order, and the increase in state monitoring and control of citizens, whether suspected of a crime or not.
- 12 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 81–82.
- 13 See Milbank's sketching out of this area: Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 382–384.
- 14 Ibid., 382.
- 15 Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 164.
- 16 Martin, "The Choices of Identity", 6–7; Seul, "Ours Is the Way of God", 568–569.
- 17 Verkuyten, "Religious Identity and Socio-Political Participation", 34–45.
- 18 Ibid., 36–37.
- 19 Ibid., 39.
- 20 See Woodhead and Heelas's example of 'religions of difference' within their typology as an example of oppositional group dynamics in post-modernity. Woodhead and Heelas, *Religion in Modern Times*, 49–61.
- 21 Cheetham, "The Right Tone of Voice", 85–86.
- 22 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 6–9.
- 23 The confluence of rationality with consumerist consumption has been highlighted elsewhere; however, the tightening restrictions of increasing rationalisation stem from Weber. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 108.
- 24 For contemporary forms see: Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist", 541–563. For older forms see: Betz, "The New Politics of Resentment", 413–427.
- 25 This has been well documented in the popular and academic press, but see: Zestos, *The Global Financial Crisis*; Patomaki, *The Great Eurozone Disaster*; and Schweiger, *The EU and the Global Financial Crisis*.

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- 26 See both: Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy*, 3–10; and Torcal and Montero, *Political Disaffection in Contemporary Democracies*, 3–20.
- 27 Paolini, *Navigating Modernity*, 6.
- 28 Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 90, 163, 262, 413.
- 29 Milbank and Oliver, *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, 342–345, 355–356, 395–397.
- 30 Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 309–384.
- 31 See the critiques of this focus offered by both Hedges and Newell: Hedges, “Radical Orthodoxy and the Closed Western Theological Mind”, 119–143; and Newell, “Communities of Faith, Desire, and Resistance”, 178–195.
- 32 Milbank, “The End of Dialogue”, 174–191.
- 33 Hick and Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*.
- 34 *Ibid.*, VIII.
- 35 Milbank, “The End of Dialogue”, 175.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 183.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 182.
- 38 See for example: Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 120.
- 39 Milbank, “The End of Dialogue”, 176.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 176.
- 41 D’Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, 91.
- 42 Hick and Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, VIII.
- 43 Milbank, “The End of Dialogue”, 187.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 187.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 187.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 188.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 184.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 184.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 181.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 179.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 181.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 181; Weber, “Politics as a Vocation”, 77–128; Weber, “Science as a Vocation”, 143–145.
- 53 Milbank, “The End of Dialogue”, 182.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 184.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 182.
- 56 Hedges, “Radical Orthodoxy and the Closed Western Theological Mind”, 130.
- 57 See, for example, the etymological and historical contours of the use of the term in the West and criticisms levelled at it in: Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”, 269–284; Fitzgerald, “A Critique of Religion as a Cross-Cultural Category”, 91–110.
- 58 Sargent, “Proceeding Beyond Isolation”, 822.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 822.
- 60 Slater, “The Comeback of Christendom or a Christian Cosmopolis”, 38–41.
- 61 Sargent, “Proceeding Beyond Isolation”, 822–823.
- 62 D’Costa et al., *Only One Way*, 213.
- 63 Cochrane, “At the same time blessed and lame”; Murphy, “Power, Politics, and Difference”; Lash, “Not Exactly Politics or Power”.
- 64 Hedges, “The Rhetoric and Reception of John Milbank’s Radical Orthodoxy”, 31–36; Cheetham, “Liberal Pluralism, Radical Orthodoxy, and the Right Tone of Voice”, 86.
- 65 Sargent, “Proceeding Beyond Isolation”, 822.
- 66 Cross, “Where Angels Fear to Tread”, 41.

- 67 Hemming, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 13.
- 68 See, for example: Loughlin, "Christianity at the End of the Story", 375; Coles, "Storied Others and Possibilities of Caritas", 334; Insole, "Against Radical Orthodoxy", 215ft.10.
- 69 Sargent, "Proceeding Beyond Isolation", 822–823.
- 70 Hemming, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 13.
- 71 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 331.
- 72 Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 8.
- 73 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 332.
- 74 Sargent, "Proceeding Beyond Isolation", 829.
- 75 Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 28–30.
- 76 Ibid., 28.
- 77 Ibid., 30.
- 78 See, for example: Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 105–137.
- 79 Doak, "The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy", 368–393.
- 80 Ibid., 368.
- 81 Ibid., 373.
- 82 Ibid., 377.
- 83 Ibid., 370.
- 84 This is outlined in Doak's critique of Milbank's Christendom-orientated approach, but is also easily seen in his more recent writing for a popular audience on ABC.net.au. See: Doak, "A Pragmatism Without Plurality", 125; Milbank, "Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Islam"; Milbank and Pabst, "Christian Cosmopolis, Bastion of All Believers"; Pabst, "Beyond Ukraine and Gaza".
- 85 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 422.
- 86 Doak, "The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy", 371.
- 87 As an example of this claim, see Milbank's apocalyptic vision of the consequences of equal marriage: Milbank, "The impossibility of gay marriage and the threat of biopolitical control".
- 88 Milbank et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 10.
- 89 Hedges, "Radical Orthodoxy and the Closed Western Theological Mind", 125.
- 90 Ibid., 125.
- 91 Ibid., 131.
- 92 Ibid., 133.
- 93 Ibid., 132.
- 94 Doak, "The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy", 372.
- 95 Yazell, "Radical Orthodoxy, Political Ecclesiologies, and the Secular State", 160.
- 96 Milbank, "The End of Dialogue", 184.
- 97 Ward, *Cities of God*, 258.
- 98 See Doak's footnote regarding the nature of Ward's ecclesiological proposals and their relation to the proposals of Milbank, Cavanaugh, and Bell: Doak, "The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy", 391.
- 99 Doak, "The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy", 372.
- 100 Milbank and Oliver, *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, 6.
- 101 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 8.
- 102 Milbank, "The End of Dialogue", 177.
- 103 Ibid., 189.
- 104 Ibid., 188.
- 105 Ibid., 185.
- 106 Ibid.
- 107 Ibid.
- 108 Ibid., 185.
- 109 Ibid.
- 110 Ibid., 177.

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- 111 As an example of this see his discussion of Islam in "Sovereignty, Empire, Capitalism, and Terror"; Milbank, "Sovereignty, Empire, Capital, and Terror", 306.
- 112 Note should be made of Milbank's identification of Christianity, Islam, and capitalist rationality, as forming the only three likely meta-narrative formations of contemporary society: Milbank, "The Grandeur of Reason and the Perversity of Rationalism".
- 113 Milbank, "Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Islam".
- 114 Milbank, "Shari'a and the True Basis of Group Rights", 135–158.
- 115 Milbank, "Sovereignty, Empire, Capital, and Terror", 306.
- 116 Milbank, "Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Islam".
- 117 Milbank, "Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Islam".
- 118 Milbank, "Shari'a and the True Basis of Group Rights", 146.
- 119 See, for example, Hedges's critique of Milbank's presentation of Hinduism in: Hedges, "Radical Orthodoxy and the Closed Western Theological Mind", 125.

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2 God

At the end of the last chapter, the general approach of Radical Orthodoxy to matters of plurality had been identified as problematic. As we saw in the introductory chapter, plurality has become a defining, and increasingly important, facet of contemporary Western societies. These include obvious aspects of religious plurality, both between and within established religious traditions and, just as importantly, over aspects of cultural, ethical, and social norms. In addition, this plurality appears to be a settled feature of contemporary society, with its importance only likely to increase with its increasing incidence. Given this, the lack of address that this has engendered on the part of the Radical Orthodoxy movement is a significant failing that counteracts its desire to present a relevant and coherent Christian account of current social reality. While Radical Orthodoxy in general has chosen not to engage with this aspect of social plurality, we saw that John Milbank has, developing a particularly Milbankian approach to the matter of inter-religious dialogue.

This Milbankian approach privileges the out-narration of secular modernity over engagement with alternative religious faiths, even in those situations where it appears that the religious faiths have quite significant shared interests. This aspect of Milbank's approach has attracted significant criticism from two main areas, from the perspective of Christian practice in Milbank's hands as firstly encouraging a lack of answerability on the part of the Christian narration, where it takes no account of the content of the alternative narratives involved in the instance of dialogue, and secondly, that Milbank's practical implementation of his focus on out-narration fails to adequately mirror the key characteristic of peace in the Christian narrative that he holds as its main point of difference from the meta-narrative of secular modernity. This issue raises its head in the further critique offered of Milbank's theoretical placement of alternative religious traditions within his broader schemata, with his proposal of a 'remnant Christendom' model of ecclesiological relation leading to a stance of reductive oppositionalism towards alternative religious narratives and communities and his focus on the necessity of a Christian out-narration of secular modernity leading to a false presentation of a uniformity and homogeneity within the Christian

narrative itself. These critiques expose the difficulties apparent within both Milbank's practical implementation of his model of dialogue and his theoretical engagement with religiously plural communities.

These issues raised in the previous chapters permeate Radical Orthodoxy's relevance to contemporary Christian communities and expose a weakness in Radical Orthodoxy's proposed narration of the Christian narrative. As the previous chapter noted, the narrative nature of our social construction requires a narrative form of response to the current dominance of the meta-narrative of secular modernity. This is Milbank's goal: working within the broader Radical Orthodoxy movement to create a narrative from the Christian tradition which can disrupt and overturn modernity's dominance. However, as we have seen, forming this narrative alternative has proved difficult to sustain given its lack of credible response to the existence of religious and social plurality and its failure to mirror in practice its central theoretical commitment to peace. These two factors lead to the necessity of a new form of narrative, drawing on the Christian narrative and choosing to prioritise different factors in response to issues of contemporary relevance, in order to provide a significant challenge to the meta-narrative of secular modernity and a better practical reflection of the Christian ethical mythos. It is this narrative I am to form here, a story about the Trinity and its relation to our reality that draws on the Rahnerian identification of the coherency of the economic and immanent trinities of the divine. In doing so, the narrative proposed is a narrative about the Trinity that must not be mistaken for an attempt at an account of how the Trinity really is, nor a singular account of the only way that the Trinity can or should be read.

This new narrative is not a disavowal of Radical Orthodoxy, nor is it an excuse for a liberalistic re-envisioning of the entirety of the Christian tradition. It is not a didactic or fixed account of the way the Christian tradition 'really is', nor is it an attempt to fully encapsulate the truth of the Christian story. Each of these approaches would skirt folly, combining true hubris with a mistaken understanding of the nature of the field. Rather, the alternative narrative I wish to sketch out in the next chapters of this volume is just one possible reading of the established Christian tradition, stemming from the fundamental building blocks of the Christian story, that attempts to better address the critical characteristics of the world in which many of us live, that is a world characterised by secularity and plurality. This is a world in which a variety of religious faiths, social perspectives, and political ideologies flourishes and hybridises in ways that have previously been unthinkable. It is not enough, in our contemporary societies, to simply ignore the existence of plurality, nor, if one is loyal to central ethical commitments of the Christian traditions, to engage in a practice of narration which deliberately de-legitimises and misrepresents the other. The narrative proposed in the next few chapters is instead an attempt to better narrate, both in content and practice, the key truths of the Christian narrative in a way that makes sense to contemporarily socially enmeshed individuals.

In making this alternative narrative a reality, certain choices must be made regarding which facets of the broader Christian story to prioritise. Just as Milbank, in his Milbankian approach to inter-religious dialogue, has placed stress on and chosen to prioritise the process of Christian out-narration of secular modernity during his encounters with alternative faiths or chosen to prioritise aspects of political theology within his broader project, so too the alternative narrative chooses, without disavowing or disavowing those aspects of the tradition not chosen, certain aspects of the Christian tradition that together form a coherent narrative embodying the central commitments of the Christian story that addresses both plurality and secularity. The characteristics of the Christian tradition re-examined as part of this narrative formation speak to the importance, the existence, and meaning of plurality within the Christian story. This begins with the conceptualisation and theorisation of the nature of the divine within the Christian tradition, through the understanding of the nature of desire, both human and godly, towards an ethical vision of an ongoing performance of narration that mirrors the internal beauty of the Christian mythos.

2.1 God as trinity

The question of what the divine is, what its relationship to our reality is, and what demands this relationship places on us, are the three central questions that require a theological answer. Indeed, the entire Christian story whether historical, allegorical, or educational in nature, is all part of an attempt to adequately describe the nature of God within the limits of our experience and language. In making this attempt, theology has naturally reached the limits of our frail abilities of comprehension and description. Within the established tradition of Christianity, the most prevailing description used for the nature of God has been the description of God as triune or Trinitarian, that is simultaneously formed of both one person and three persons.¹ This form of description, drawing on aspects of the biblical narrative but codified later, has come to dominate forms of dogmatic description of the divine in most forms of the Christian tradition. While at no point has it come to represent the totality of divine description, leaving room for non-Trinitarian forms of Christian belief, such as Quakerism or Unitarianism, which inform and seek guidance from the tradition even while being somewhat marginal historically and dogmatically, and non-Trinitarian metaphors of divine nature used widely even within dogmatically Trinitarian traditions, the Trinitarian description of God remains a significant aspect of the broader Christian narrative and, to a far larger extent, of the narrative proposed by Radical Orthodoxy and John Milbank. In this chapter, the argument for contemporary readings of the doctrine of the Trinity as being uniquely relevant to, and useful for, addressing the problematic areas identified within Radical Orthodoxy's and John Milbank's approach to matters of social and religious plurality must be made. In doing so, the attempt is not

to promulgate the Trinitarian understanding of the divine as the only true description, merely that its metaphorical and allegorical attraction proves a useful way of reflecting on appropriate Christian reactions to matters of community, relation, and plurality. In doing so, aspects of the Christian tradition which provide meaning for the current existence of plurality within our contemporary societies can come to the fore and speak about the way in which this plurality relates to the central truth of the Christian narrative, speaking to the lived realities of individuals and communities who are enmeshed within both society and Christianity.

The doctrine of the Trinity, the understanding of God as being made up of three consubstantial persons, distinct yet sharing one substance, is a central feature of the distinctly Christian monotheism as expressed in a number of creedal statements and generally used throughout orthodox Christian communities.² While the delineation of the precise inter-relationship and creedal formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is not the focus of this book, the Trinitarian nature of the divine informs the Christian narrative's understanding of the way the divine relates to, and interacts with, the whole of creation. In addition to this, the doctrine of the Trinity also provides the theological backdrop to the internal interaction of the divine as well as allowing for differentiated action within the divine. The doctrinal importance of the Trinity is a combination of a variety of factors, but the Trinity's central place within the content of the Christian narrative makes it a vital consideration for any project hoping to represent authentically the place and position of Christianity within society, while its relevance to issues of community and plurality make it particularly applicable to discussions over how the narrative of Radical Orthodoxy might better address these factors. Contemporary readings of the doctrine have played a prominent role in the negotiation of difference within conservative post-modern Christian theologies, such as Radical Orthodoxy, and while their application to issues of religious difference and plurality seems a logical outworking of their place within the broader theological oeuvre, the practical aspect of this work has, as we have seen, remained relatively lacking within the movement.

Fundamentally, the choice of the doctrine of the Trinity as the starting point for the formation of an alternative radically orthodox discourse on matters of plurality rests on three characteristics. First, the doctrine of the Trinity is particularly suited to a discussion of inter-religious relation and dialogue, as it presents an internally Christian way of examining difference, and the type of relation between differences that can be emulated by the Christian believer. As has become clear from Milbank's modelling of inter-religious relation, the foundational aspects of a response to religious plurality that represents the attitude of the Christian narrative must be formed from an internally Christian position, rather than the imposition of an outside construction of meaning whether by secular modernity or another meta-narrative construction. Concomitant with Milbank's rejection of pluralism as providing an authentic way of modelling inter-religious relation,

an internal response based on the integral content of the Christian narrative is the only way in which a Christian response to religious plurality can be formed.

This requirement is obviously fulfilled by looking to the doctrine of the Trinity for resources in dealing with issues of relation and difference from within the Christian perspective, forming, as it does, a cornerstone of orthodox Christian belief. This central position, and relevance to this particular discussion, is borne out by the increasing importance of Trinitarian theology in contemporary discussions on plurality,³ while also having an impact on our understanding of the whole of the Christian narrative. The broader resurgence of Trinitarian theology has drawn greater attention to the relationship between theoretical models of dialogue and relation in theology. While reception has been mixed,⁴ this theme is especially prominent within the trend of contemporary conservative post-modern theology as a return to aspects of pre-modernity, with the doctrine of the Trinity having had a significant impact on the way in which D'Costa,⁵ Heim,⁶ and Panikkar⁷ approach issues of religious plurality. The claim to universality by the Christian meta-narrative, through its relation to issues such as participation and creation, makes the internal provision of replies and answers to problematic areas of interaction a vital part of maintaining the theological meta-narrative character of the Christian narrative. The centrality of the Trinitarian metaphor to the Christian conception of reality cannot be over-stated, containing within itself not only a description of how the divine is, but also how this divine acts to create our reality, how the divine continues to work within it, and what our relationship with the divine is. While the use of this description within the work of theologians has come under criticism from thinkers such as Tonstad,⁸ this is not due to them being remiss in using it at all, but rather them being remiss in appreciating the various forms of theological baggage that come with its initial and continued use.

Beyond this Christian character of the metaphor of the Trinity, it also functions effectively as a Christian resource for thinking on aspects of unity, oneness, many-ness, and community. The characterisation of the divine as simultaneously formed of one person and three persons necessitates a deep theological reflection on matters of unity and plurality of the kind that has been expressed throughout the history of Christian theology. The Trinity functions as an example for instances of unity and oneness through its explanation of the aspect of monotheism embedded within the Christian story and its historical antecedents. This description of the nature of God necessarily has an impact on the way that these same factors are then recognised, interacted with, and narrated about both within the broader narrative of the Christian tradition as a whole, and in the actions of individuals who utilise the Christian narrative as an ordering and meaning producing system for their lives. For understanding the Christian idea of oneness, whether of the divine or the community, the doctrine of the Trinity offers a pool of reflective thinking and theologising as a resource.

In tune with this depth of background on the Trinity's relationship with Christian conceptions of oneness is the concomitant relation to Christian notions of many-ness and community also contained within the tradition of the Trinity. Obviously as a doctrine which holds to both the singular and plural nature of the divine, one and three, the doctrine of the Trinity has a critical part to play in the working through of ideas around the ideal nature of the Christian community, its relation with other forms of community like the state, and the relationship of individuals to one another within those communities. Due to the Trinity's dual functioning in these regards, relevant to both unity and plurality, it is a uniquely relevant and useful starting point for the process of developing an approach to the kind of plural and secularised societies common within the contemporary West that reflects the inner commitments required by the Christian story and the needs and desires of contemporary Christian communities within those societies. As the Trinity displays a form of unity and a divine kind of plurality, the nature of these two characteristics of the divine offers an exemplar for emulation by the reflection of the divine that the created order strives towards. In ordering unity and plurality in such a way, the Trinity is a point of possible mirroring for our own action in encountering and interacting with issues in these contexts.⁹ It must therefore come to be our example of communion; the Trinity is the divine example of how both unity and plurality can be held in that difficult but eternally abundant communal form, that overflowing with exchange and desire, has come to form the world in all of its diversity.

This notion of Trinitarian inspiration for the ordering of our world around us has a varied history within Christian theology. Commonly known as the *vestigia trinitatis*, it is perhaps most famously associated with the work on the nature of the Trinity by Augustine, although its roots go back further to the early Church Fathers, and it involves, as discussed above, the notion that the nature of God as tri-partite is mirrored in the formulation of nature, being apparent in form in the relationship between certain aspects of the natural ordering of things. Willing, remembering, and understanding or fountain, river, and stream are all examples of aspects of nature being described as expressing the Trinitarian nature of the divine as a metaphor. Each of these aspects is to be seen as the imprint of the divine nature on the created order, the vestigial traces of the divine action within the matter of creation. This notion of the *vestigia trinitatis* has, of course, also been the subject of criticism, mostly stemming from the Barthian tradition. This arises from a concern over the priority of the reflection of the divine nature and how the notion of a divine imprint on aspects of nature relates to issues of natural theology and the place of revelation. Barth's concern is that the impression of there being a notion of the divine within the created order allows space for a differing source for revelation beyond scripture, which naturally conflicts with his broader theological commitments. While the specifics of Barth's critique is not the focus of this chapter, nor is Barth's wider work always in alignment with the broader project of Radical Orthodoxy,¹⁰

his critique does offer further illumination on the ground on which this alternative narration of a radically orthodox form of the Christian narrative can successfully stand. Barth approaches this matter primarily through the metaphor of two roots of revelation regarding the Trinitarian doctrine that the concept of the *vestigia trinitatis* appears to demand. He writes:

we should then have to ask whether the development of the doctrine of the Trinity must not also, at least, be traced back to the insight into these traces of the Trinity that are present and perceptible in the created world quite apart from the biblical revelation. And if this question be admitted, then the further question can hardly be avoided: Which of the two roots of the doctrine that both call for consideration is the true and primary root, and which is a secondary “runner”?¹¹

This highlights the difficulty in relying on a natural theology approach to matters of Trinitarian theology, specifically that its emphasis on the occurrence of the Trinitarian image in nature allows for a separate source of revelation to that in scripture. This is obviously more of an issue within traditions more closely aligned to Barth’s thought than the largely Anglo-Catholic make up of Radical Orthodoxy, however the body of his critique, and the space that he allows for the continuation of Trinitarian theologising, are important considerations regarding the difficulties of utilising the Trinity as an example of either unity and/or plurality.

The danger of using nature and our own embodied experiences as a resource for our Trinitarian reflection is that the instances in nature come to be the sources of our reflections, rather than the revelatory aspect of scripture. This is therefore a matter of priority – where the origin of the metaphor and description is to be placed and where its nature is clearly to be appreciated. The possibility of Trinitarian knowledge must solely reside with God, settling the flow of revelation as originated solely there. Barth’s critique of the tradition of the *vestigia trinitatis* is therefore, much like Milbank’s critique of pluralistic forms of inter-religious dialogue discussed early, one of degree rather than absolutes with his concern being that the use of the *vestigia trinitatis* runs the risk of prioritising the natural instances of Trinitarian-esque appearance over the doctrinal, scriptural, and traditional support for it. Barth notes that:

When men wanted to talk about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or *unitas in trinitate* or *trinitas in unitate*, they opened their eyes and ears and found they could and should venture to refer, with this end in view, to spring, stream and lake, or weight, number and measure, or *mens*, *noitiia* and *amor*, not because these things were in and of themselves suitable for the purpose but because they were adapted to be appropriated, or, as it were, commandeered as images of the Trinity, as ways of speaking about the Trinity, because men who knew God’s revelation in

Scripture thought they might be given the power to say what in and of themselves they naturally do not want to say and cannot say.¹²

The use of the *vestigia* therefore must only occur as a way of explaining the doctrinal commitments of the Trinity, proceeding from those commitments in an attempt at explanation, not as a coherent copy or representation of the actuality of the Divine. We must be careful, when drawing on the Trinity and utilising it as an example in its inner relationship and its relationship to our created order, not to reverse this prioritisation and create a new form of the Trinity that fails, as any created facsimile must, to adequately and truly reflect the divine perfection. Noting this, Barth continues, writing that there is:

a true *vestigium trinitatis in creatura*, an illustration of revelation, but have neither to discover it nor bring it into force ourselves. As we have tried to understand it as the true and legitimate point of the *vestigia* doctrine, it consists in the form which God Himself in His revelation has assumed in our language, world and humanity. What we hear when with our human ears and concepts we listen to God's revelation, what we perceive (and can perceive as men) in Scripture, what proclamation of the Word of God actually is in our lives – is the thrice single voice of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. This is how God is present for us in his revelation. This is how He Himself obviously creates a *vestigium* of Himself and His triunity. We are not adding anything but simply saying the same thing when we point out that God is present for us in the threefold form of His word, in His revelation, in Holy Scripture, and in proclamation.¹³

The drawing on, and use of, the doctrine of the Trinity here attempts to follow the same process. Rather than reading from the cycles and permutations of our currently plural society onto aspects of the divine, the narrativisation of the Christian mythos undertaken prioritises the Trinitarian conception of the divine in its understanding of the social commitments and responsibilities of the Christian community, allowing the claims of Rahner and Moltmann to the fore.¹⁴ The Trinity maintains its priority within the cycle of parodic representation, eternally parodied but never fully encapsulated by the metaphors drawn from our created order that seek to explain, however imperfectly, the nature of the divine. The nature of God is shown to us through the involvement of the divine in our reality, a constant matching up of the internal divine nature with the eternal divine performance of itself within our reality, a constant showing of the possibility that we are called to emulate.

The Trinity is therefore available as a source of inspiration and emulation by the Christian community in determining the appropriate way of interacting with manifestations of plurality and community within contemporary

societies. The Trinity as internally Christian and containing within it divine examples of unity and plurality offers up a model of potential practice to the Christian community that can be communicated internally to the community and externally to wider society through the formation of a narrative focused on the example of the Trinity. However, the divinely perfect and coherent example of unity and plurality contained within Trinity is not one that could ever be fully displayed in the created order, with its fall to sin and human weakness. Rather, the nature of the Trinity, expressed through the theological narratives surrounding its inner aspects of relationality, difference, and exchange, provide the form on which an alternative Christian narration of practice can be formed. The Trinity is an ever-ungraspable target for attempted emulation, a receding point of perfection towards which society can always grow more fully aligned. This use of the Trinity as a source for social patterning and social renewal is not new, with a long line of Trinitarian theologians seeking to draw inspiration from the doctrine of the Trinity towards their particular social projects. This project is itself part of that wave of social Trinitarianism which attempts to bring the performance of the Christian narrative by individuals and communities more closely into alignment with the performances seen to be at the core of Christian belief, but differs in the nature and practice of this emulation.

It is worth engaging with recent critiques of the forms of social Trinitarianism commonly seen as delivered by Tonstad in her recent book, *God and Difference*. In doing so, the aim is to delineate more clearly the nature of the difference expressed between her critiques and positioning of the use of the Trinity within the narrative proposed here. Engaging fully with each of these critical areas is not the aim, nor is the interaction desired to be an oppositional one. Tonstad's critiques offer significant new ground for the development of the forms of theology commonly described as socially Trinitarian and raise valid criticisms of the practice of Trinitarian theology. Tonstad identifies four critical aspects of contemporary forms of Trinitarian theology which form an inter-related and comprehensive critique. These four begin with an identification of the difficulty for contemporary Trinitarian forms of theology with the notion of subordination within the relationality of the Trinitarian form, with its difficulty being evaded through the marginalisation of its centrality – '*even though* Jesus is subordinate'¹⁵ – this is not central. Further to this is the general reading of the presence and meaning of the relation of the Son's crucifixion and death to the broader Trinitarian dynamic as being overly focused on its meaning for the Trinitarian dynamic over the broader themes of atonement and finitude. This critique engages with the tendency toward Trinitarian revelation, which is the revelation of aspects of God's inner nature, over other aspects of importance within the narration of the Christian tradition by forms of Trinitarian theology. This aspect leads on to Tonstad's third critique, which is the reason for which Trinitarian theology chooses to invoke the Trinity at all. Tonstad identifies a tendency towards utilising the Trinity as a way of 'fixing' social issues which proves problematic for theology, both in theory and in practice. This

process, 'corrective projectionism',¹⁶ where the Trinity is used as a fix for problematic social issues has, of course, also been picked up by Trinitarian thinkers themselves, but Tonstad does question the assumed social import of the Trinitarian doctrine of the nature of the Divine in an effective manner and the gendered relationality that this dynamic encourages. Tonstad's fourth criticism revolves around this issue, with a focus on the way that the ordered relationality within the envisioning of the Trinitarian form re-inscribes problematic aspects of heterosexist logic.

While these critiques of forms of social Trinitarianism and the uses of the Trinity within theology are incisive, the particular narrative form presented here attempts, however unsuccessfully, to avoid repeating similar mistakes. As will become clearer in the following discussions of the nature of the relationship between the Trinity and the narrative proposed, the use of the Trinity within this project differs from more established form of social Trinitarianism, seen as a possible and aesthetically useful foundation for the emulation of practice by the narrative rather than as a substantive set form of interaction. In addition, the form of the Trinity employed is not to be seen as a final or set system of relationality that only encapsulates those aspects highlighted or depends solely upon the hierarchical forms of subordination and relation that form the doctrine. Rather, the use seen is one of exploration and vulnerability, which implores the contemporary performance of relationality to better mirror characteristics of non-appropriation, non-reduction, and non-finality through a reflection on the aesthetic and narrative possibility of the Trinity.

2.2 Relation and resistance

The Trinitarian conception of God involves a deep connection to both pluralities, in the diversity of the three aspects of the divine, and to a co-operative mode of interaction between them. This is not to say that the persons of the Trinity are in some kind of isolation and then only come to together in unity 'afterwards', but instead that the identity of the three is formed through their relationality to one another – to use O'Collins's example, and harking back to the previous discussion of the use of the *vestigia trinitatis*, as a new-born baby never exists without being in relation to its parents so too does no part of the Trinity exist in isolation.¹⁷ Further to this, as Thatamanil notes, it is the relationality within the divine that provides the adherence that holds together the Christian narration of the world as it is,¹⁸ providing for a place of exchange between the created order and the internal divine life. While the movement from the dynamics of the divine in the Trinity to models of human relation is one that is often poorly thought through, in this case, a drawing of an analogy between the internal dynamics of the Trinity and the possibility for a new model of inter-religious contact can be done in a such a way that the more commonly made criticisms can be avoided. Within this narrower context, the doctrine of the Trinity uniquely combines an explicitly Christian doctrine, with a dialogical and relational structure

that maps well onto the desire to both engage with alternative religious traditions and to preserve the particular character and content of the Christian narrative as is the desire of the broader Radical Orthodoxy project. This combination of an explicit relationality and an internally Christian position on difference has made the Trinity particularly attractive to Christian theologians seeking an authentically Christian approach to issues of religious plurality and inter-religious relation.

The doctrine of the Trinity provides an account of internal relation between its three constituent parts. D'Costa, perhaps the most prominent conservative post-modern Christian theologian engaging with the doctrine of the Trinity in the context of religious plurality, makes a particularly cogent argument that it is this internal-external, universal-particular relation that makes the doctrine of the Trinity particularly relevant to questions of religious plurality and the place of the Christian narrative within it. A fully formed exposition of D'Costa's project is not the intention here; rather his work is a useful framework for a discussion of the possibilities offered by a Trinitarian approach to issues of religious plurality in the context of Radical Orthodoxy, specifically as it relates to the functioning of the intra-Trinitarian relation. D'Costa utilises the doctrine of the Trinity to provide an explicitly Christian starting point for his discussions of religious plurality, in the same way as Milbank grounds his approach to matter of inter-religious interaction firmly within the context of his understanding of the conflict between the meta-narrative of secular modernity and Christianity. While D'Costa represents a specifically Roman Catholic approach, something that tends to be uncharacteristic of the conservative post-modern Christian theology that characterises the largely Anglo-Catholic Radical Orthodoxy,¹⁹ it remains an orthodox Christian approach to issues of religious plurality.

The aspects of relationality to be found within the doctrine of the Trinity, and specifically an active Christian engagement in that relation, informs a Trinitarian approach to religious plurality in multiple ways. As D'Costa notes, when talking about approaches within Christian theology to the difficulties of religious plurality:

a Trinitarian Christology guards against exclusivism and pluralism by dialectically relating the universal and the particular,²⁰

rejecting pluralism's false claim of universality for a specifically Western conception of the place and relation of religion. Rather than having a complete or totalising vision of the divine at its heart, the Christian narrative's Triune conception instead provides room for both the universal and particular aspects of God to co-exist in relation. In this space, each person is to be seen not only as a member of the physical community, but also of the divine community through their sharing in the created order.

This link between the triune divine and the notion of creation is most clearly to be seen in the doctrine of *imago Dei* as it ties together the

relationality of the divine with the created order and our own personal relationships. In his chapter in *'Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology'* entitled 'Desire: Augustine beyond Western Subjectivity',²¹ Hanby discusses the relationship between interiority and exteriority in Augustine and its position with regard to modern Western understandings of the self-hood of the individual utilises a deep account of the doctrine of the *imago Dei* to make the argument that the willing of the individual has an indissociable connection to the function of divine grace.²² By using the doctrine of the *imago Dei* to make his arguments, within a radically orthodox framework, Hanby is taking on the theological and ethical ramifications inherent in an acceptance of this doctrine. By arguing in accordance with the *imago Dei*, Hanby also affirms the way in which the self, not just the Christian-self, expresses the form of the divine, and that the incompleteness of the *imago Dei*, the fallen nature of humanity, requires the Other, whether human or divine, for its completeness.²³

Hanby goes on to pick up on the important points of contact between the concept of *imago Dei* and the area of religious and social plurality in contemporary societies. The provision of a divine mandate for the existence of the Other in creation is a key part to the continued valuation of not just the Other's existence, but also the valuation of the works of the Other as well. The doctrine of *imago Dei* stems from this doctrine of Creation, particularly as can be seen in the scriptural references of Genesis 1:26–27:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground". So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them,²⁴

and Genesis 9:6;

Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.²⁵

This investment of all of mankind with the divine image is a critical part of the underpinning of the relation of all mankind to God as seen in the relationality to be found between the created order and the divine in the conception of the Trinity. In a similar vein, Hanby's exploration of the ways in which the Trinity manifests itself allows space to develop within the narration of the Christian narrative for an openness towards the desire-necessity of the Other. As Hanby writes, Augustine in *De Trinitate*:

is less concerned to establish the resemblance of substantially sufficient man to God, and even less to argue by way of "self-awareness" to God, than he is to display how God is made manifest in and through the

creature and how, through God, the creature whose perfection, and thus true nature, awaits in the glorified Christ, is mediated and made manifest to himself.²⁶

The mediation of the divine nature through the created self, and its manifestation in both the image of the self and in the actions of the Other, is formed and shaped by their inclusion within the created order. As Hanby continues to note:

the creature exists as an effect, insufficient in herself, of that *plenitudo*. And it is this very unlikeness to God – or, better, this analogical likeness in unlikeness – that makes it possible for a creature to be an image of God at all, for it is in this unlikeness which opens the possibility of her doxological participation in the infinite doxology of the Trinitarian life,²⁷

showcasing the incomplete nature of the self in Augustine's thought. This incomplete nature is linked to the way in which the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of Creation both help the Christian narrative to resist a totalising perspective towards other individuals or religious traditions. By requiring something outside ourselves for completeness – either in the context of divine grace for salvation or of alternative perspectives for our own religious understanding – Hanby opens the door to viewing the created order itself as imbued with D'Costa's universal-particular dynamic of the Trinitarian life.

This sharing in the created order by all of creation serves as a further step in appreciating the existence of the Other within the swirling pluralities of our contemporary societies. Hanby argues that despite Augustine's definition of the self's love and knowledge as participatory in an outside form, this does not require a surrender to the typically modernist dualism of the Self and the Other, but instead preserves an intelligibility about the definition of the border between interiority and exteriority which Hanby sees as lacking within post-modern discussions of the Self and the Other. This tendency towards dualism between the divine and the created order is another aspect of criticisms that Tonstad identifies as problematic within the use of the Trinity by contemporary theologians and queer theologians, arguing that their destabilisation of the binary of sex does not necessarily result in the destabilisation of alternative forms of hierarchy such as those prefigured in the gendering of the Trinity or in the hierarchical form of subordination.²⁸ Hanby here mirrors the understanding of the Trinitarian person found in Cunningham,²⁹ in that it encloses the Self, the Other, and the relationality between them within a cohesive structural whole. Hanby's conception of the relationship between the self and the Other provides a model for the furthering of Radical Orthodoxy's engagement with alternative religious traditions by providing, through his exploration of Augustine's

conception of *amicitas*, grounds for regarding the Self-Other dynamic within our communities as expressing the intra-Trinitarian dynamics of the divine. This imaging rejects the dualistic binaries between Self and Other built up by post-modernist philosophy (and some forms of Christianity),³⁰ by placing a greater emphasis on the inter-connectedness and relationality of the relationship. This reduction in force of the Other, in turn reduces the epistemological threat posed to the Christian narrative by alternative religious narratives, and serves as further reinforcement of the conception of the wider community of creation. This understanding of a community of friendship between the Self and the Other validates the possibility and fruitfulness of cross-traditional learning and living, in that it is not only the sharing of understanding between friendship for which Hanby opens space, but also the way in which the full expression of love, either human or divine, in some sense requires that which is outside itself to be fully manifest as love. By admitting to an imperfect self, both individual and communal, and an imperfection of the *imago Dei* in that self, the self is opened to completion through and with the Other. As Hanby notes:

It is only within the intelligibility of the will's material, cultic participation in a charity which precedes it, in the confessional admission that we have been wrong about ourselves, that nihilism, not simply the "existence" of nothing outside subjectivity, but the desire for nothing as the subject's eternal home, can be staved off.³¹

For Hanby, and for an understanding of the Christian tradition that takes the doctrine of the *imago Dei* seriously, it is only through a serious, sustained, and equitable engagement with the Other that a reduction to the nothingness of the self can be held back. Indeed, if the Christian narrative is to hold back nihilism, as is Milbank's and Radical Orthodoxy's wider project, it needs the resources and completeness only to be found within the sharing of the created order among our wider communities.

In turn, this dialectical structure between the divine and creation provides for a deeper, less static account of the content of the Christian narrative itself by allowing for relationality and change within the conception of the divine and its relation to humanity. While the relationship between the universal action of God and the particular actions and person of Christ is the focus of D'Costa's wider thesis, it is the Holy Spirit as part of the triune conception of God that:

allows the particularity of Christ to be related to the universal activity of God in the history of humankind.³²

The interaction, and the difference, between the three parts of the Trinity allow God to 'move' between the universal and the particular aspects of reality in a way in which allows for the formation of relationality between

that difference. Among the three persons of the Trinity, the difference articulated between the particularity of the Son and the universality of the Father both requires and expresses the mediating position of the Holy Spirit, recreating the requirements identified as necessary for a true dialogical encounter between the Christian narrative and difference to occur.

In addition, we can see the action of the Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity within the world as not solely limited to those already within the Christian narrative.³³ This possibility of the Holy Spirit working within those of other faiths moves Christian faithfulness from a position of detached respect for the Other, to one of active engagement. This is because seeking the actions and out-workings of the Holy Spirit becomes a necessary part of exploring the actions of the divine in the created order. In a similar manner, the example of loving, non-antagonistic relationship as exemplified by the Trinity is given as the proper, divinely willed mode of being for Creation and emulating this pattern of relationship becomes an imperative part of the Christian narrative and of Christian practice. As D'Costa writes, Trinitarianism 'discloses loving relationship as the proper mode of being',³⁴ and '[t]he normativity of Christ implies the normativity of crucified self-giving love',³⁵ meaning that this model of self-giving, open, love is a central example for a mode of relationship between individual believers of differing faiths, and also between the institutional manifestations of those faiths. In recognising the requirement of dialogue, this pattern of Trinitarian inspired loving can provide a powerful witness in the Christian narrative to alternative traditions. In turn, by recognizing such practice in others, the Christian narrative must come to realise the presence of the same divine figuring of self-giving love and openness in cooperation and dialogue in the works of their neighbours from other religious traditions. A shared sense of belonging to a wider community, which embraces the inherent differences without seeking to impose a complete unity, can be brought about by a greater appreciation for the key role that contemporary readings of the Trinity can play as an example of the proper mode of practice in society for the Christian narrative.

Having this exemplary role for the doctrine of the Trinity within our exposition of an alternative form of the Radical Orthodoxy, and, by extension, Christian narrative is a critical part of the renewal of Christian community within broader society. As we saw before, the characteristics of the Trinity must take priority in this use of the Trinitarian example, with the doctrinal understanding of the aspects of relationality within the divine person, leading to a foregrounding of other aspects of the theological tradition which draw on this, such as Hanby's foregrounding of the importance and implications of the doctrine of the *imago Dei* in the context of social plurality. This process, a reading from the example of the Trinity towards a practice which mirrors its internal characteristics, makes the inner life of the Trinity foundational to the Christian life in our societies. The structure of the Trinity is therefore a vital factor in the structure of the Christian

tradition and therefore also critical to the structuring of the relationship between the Christian individual and others. However, we do run the risk of solely using the Trinity for our own ends, for the creation of some kind of magically tolerant and relational community that somehow solves all of the 'issues' if plurality delineated before. The Trinity, while being characterised by all of the aspects identified so far, contains within it impulses that could be seen as contradictory to the impulse fashioned as part of the narrative presented. For example, the Trinity, while offering a deep and convincing account of the way that difference can be held in harmony, also offers a strong defence of the unity and singularity of the divine and the particularity of its description within the Christian tradition. This is true, and the narrative expressed here makes no attempt to elide from this difficulty. However, this must be seen both within the context of a weighting of the centrality of these aspects to the doctrinal point around which the narrative is proposed and also within the context of the reason that the narrative has come to be necessary. As we shall come to see, the reason for the focus on the aspect of plurality within the divine is connected – the centrality of the divine plurality to the formation of the doctrine of the Trinity and the centrality of the need for a narrative to address the social plurality experienced in our reality. Both of these aspects stem from the place and priority of the Trinitarian divine within the cycle of relation and critically offer a place from which the beautiful narration of an alternative possibility can be made. Remember, the narrative offered here is one of rhetorical and theological persuasion, an attempt at offering a Christian understanding of the nature of the plurality experienced in contemporary reality, not an attempt at encapsulating either the totality of the Trinitarian form or the totality of the Christian tradition.

Raimundo Panikkar's concept of 'Christic action',³⁶ the postponement of the decision as to the finality of any particular narration of the Christian narrative in lieu of acting in a Christian manner towards the Other, provides the Christian narrative with another way of functioning coherently and relevantly within a context of social and religious plurality. The internal dynamism of the Trinity, never settled on one particular formation or person, works to impute a form of hesitancy on Christian attempts to claim definitive certainty for particular narrative forms as it de-stabilises the notion that we are able to identify with certainty the place or position of the divine in the created order. This is a form of humility, an acceptance of uncertainty about the accuracy of any particular telling of the Christian narrative, which leads, in Panikkar's reading, to a postponement of decision about the universal nature of any particular form of the Christian narrative.

Turning to Williams's exploration of this point proves fruitful, specifically his reading of the work of Panikkar on the dynamic nature of the divine life and its relation to a dynamic understanding of the Christian narrative itself. Williams³⁷ picks up on the work of Panikkar³⁸ to argue that the exposition of religious plurality given by Panikkar differs from that of the other contributors to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, the volume Milbank's

'End of Dialogue' responds to, as it rests squarely on a specifically Trinitarian conception of the divine. It also seeks to move towards a kind of social disposition that focuses on the ultimate harmony between the religious particularities within a plural understanding of being itself.³⁹ Indeed, as Williams writes:

For Panikkar, the Trinitarian structure is that of a source, inexhaustibly generative and *always* generative, from which arises form and determination, "being" in the sense of what can be concretely perceived and engaged with; that form itself is never exhausted, never limited by this or that specific realization, but is constantly being realized in the flux of active life that equally springs out from the source of all.⁴⁰

The generative structure envisioned by Panikkar in this passage emerges from the continuously changing interplay between the differing persons of the Trinity, in that the exchange between them produces new forms of relationality which in turn have an impact on the dynamic of exchange. This mirrors the kind of question and answer seen as a key factor in the life of the Trinity where the actions of one person are shown in the light of the others and prioritises the role of the Holy Spirit in facilitating and embodying that relationality within the conception of the Trinitarian divine. The Trinity, for Panikkar, is itself never static and never fully realised by any particular formulation or position, the form being produced is itself never finished, but is always in the process of becoming.

It is this continuous interplay that provides a model for the positioning of the Christian community within social plurality along the lines of the Trinity, one based on a less appropriative methodology for Christian engagement with other religious traditions than that seen in Milbankian forms of practice. The putting forward of an internally dynamic and generative model of the Christian tradition by Panikkar allows for the narrative to see itself as in the process of constant re-interpretation and re-imagining of the possibilities offered by a conversation with alternative religious traditions. This is not to say that religious doctrine is open to free and easy change, but some possibility of change or deepening of understanding is required whenever the 'established' tradition comes into a process of relation with alternative social formations. In this context, the interplay between Panikkar's conception of the Trinity and the practice of social dialogue is clear.

From this, Williams argues that we need a conception of God that demonstrates the unity in diversity, but one that also then 'grounds them in their plurality'.⁴¹ The relationality and diversity embodied within the doctrinal formulations of the Trinity serve to ground the plurality seen in the created order within the body and life of the divine by offering an example of community between difference, reflecting the internal workings seen in the actions of the divine both in creation and in the sustaining of that creation, while also allowing for the critical aspects of answerability seen

in Williams' account of theological integrity in practice. This 'grounding in plurality' represents a new way of thinking through the diversity of society, but still provides resources for a resistance to positioning by the modern meta-narrative. This is formed through building up of alternative networks of relation beyond those allowed or encouraged by the meta-narrative of modernity. Stressing the created nature of difference within the world, an enforced systematised similarity within the tradition or within the community as a whole is, as we saw in the critiques of Milbank's practice of instances of dialogue, a retrograde step. Not only does the attempted systematisation of the totality of reality lead to a static conception of whichever meta-narrative holds sway, it also undercuts the freedom of creation to contain within it created difference. The divine, in being seen as holding together both unity and plurality, presents a generative dialectic between similarity and difference that is mirrored in creation, and should be mirrored in Christian practices of engagement. Williams draws on Panikkar's conception of 'Christianness'⁴² to make this point, providing grounding for a Christian approach to plurality that:

involves resistance to the homogenization of human beings – cultural resistance, in other words, and political resistance, to the forces in our world that make for the reduction of persons and personal communities to units in large-scale, determined processes, resistance to the power of the universal market or the omnipotent state.⁴³

This sketching out of a possible social and political resistance available within Williams's reading of Panikkar in particular, and contemporary readings of the doctrine of the Trinity more generally, provides a platform for a narration against modernity without simultaneously reducing or narrating against alternative religious traditions. In practice, it allows for the simultaneous existence of a diversity of positions within the promulgation of a single narrative, without assuming any necessary deeper relationship or similarity between those groups involved. As an extension to this possibility for resistance, this model provides justification for the preservation of difference within creation, as well as for the preservation of instability in the relationships between the varying persons of the Trinity⁴⁴ and in relationships modelled after them. This conception of the place and function of the doctrine of the Trinity seeks to provide a way for religious traditions to engage in with the existence of social plurality within our societies in a way that is formed by the example of the Trinity. This is a narrative about the Trinity that attempts to reflect in its narration the characteristics of that Trinitarian form. This example is dynamic in relation, linking the way in which the Christian narrative can practice social interaction to the placement of difference and diversity in the very heart of the life of the divine triunity, and of our understanding of the plural, post-modern societies in which we live.⁴⁵

In addition to this religio-theological aspect of the adaptation of Panikkar's approach, the implementation of a dispositionally Trinitarian approach to issues of politics and society also offers resources for the effective narration of resistance to the contemporary hegemony of the secular modern from within the Christian tradition. By offering a model of exchange without reduction, the Trinity reflects in contrast the current systems of political socialisation and economic exchange which rely on the reduction to the same. A strategy of resistance to this process of the homogenisation of society provokes the alternate valuation of difference within the community, as well as providing scope for a patterning of individuation that is based not on the consumption of consumer corporatism, but rather on the continual patterning of negotiated flux between individuals living in a social communion.

Panikkar's 'Christianness' further feeds into the respect for difference that Williams is keen to preserve in practical instances of engagement by allowing for a postponement of finality with regards to the universal nature of the Christian narrative. This is not a rejection of the notion of a universally valid Christian narrative, but an acceptance that the Christian narrative as known or displayed in any particular situation can only attempt to situate itself within that position, rather than attempting to systematise the totality of society within one closed system. This confidence in the future sidesteps issues of possession and universality in narration by postponing the assertion of finality beyond the particular believer or situation represented. As Williams writes:

The Christian does not ask how he or she knows that the Christian religion is exclusively and universally true; he or she simply works on the basis of the 'Christic' vision for the human good, engaging with adherents of other traditions without anxiety, defensiveness or proselytism.⁴⁶

The concept of the Christian narrative as being self-aware of the need for a certain provisionality within the promulgations of particular interpretations of itself is fundamentally linked to the way in which Panikkar's model provides a Christian narration with a strong notion of generative flux – that is, the dynamic flux between the positions is not a reduction to similarity or sameness, or a reduction of the distinctiveness of each position; rather, the flux is itself both integral and useful to the narrative, allowing it to flex and engage in dialogical instances without imposition or defensiveness. If the narrative rests on an internally dynamic conception of the divine, then any attempt at finalising the definitive 'Christian' tradition for an instance of interaction, or for the formation of a set narrative form, is fraught with danger, as is seeking to delineate any particular approach by the narrative to a situation as representing the final or universal relation of Christian truth to the context. This demonstrates the priority of the divine within the cycles of parodic representation, always seeking to relate our attempts at emulation back to the eternal divine example. The relationality expressed in the

movement of the Trinity is a guide to the relationality required between the Christian narrative and those situations in which its teaching or example is to be invoked in instances of dialogue with the Other. This flux, a continual resistance to the systematising of the Christian narrative, is an anti-totalitarian force within the Christian tradition and a disrupting influence on authoritarian or oppressive engagements with the Other.

The generative flux of the Trinity provides the Christian narrative with a continual point of resistance to the systematising of the narrative which would in turn lead to a totalising view of the purpose of the Christian narrative. As Rowan Williams writes:

The Trinitarian insight is, at the very least, part of what prevents Christian witness finally and irrevocably turning into the mirror image of the monolithic empires of “the world”. Christianity has often been totalitarian or near-totalitarian in its history, but has not ever settled down for good and all in such a pattern; in spite of all, there remains an obstinately mobile and questioning force within its fundamental language.⁴⁷

While the doctrine of the Trinity provides this foundational aspect to the Christian narrative, this is not to say that the actual historical actions of the church have reflected this internal harmony well. However, this does not preclude the necessity of striving to emulate the practice of having loving relation as our most fundamental mode of being. Panikkar’s approach to this issue is significantly more focused on the practical implementation of a Trinitarian disposition within the theoretical conceptualisation of the relationship between differing religious traditions. This practicality is driven, in Panikkar’s words, by his reliance on the doctrine of the Trinity:

in reality the Trinity is not only the theoretical foundation-stone of Christianity but also the practical, concrete and existential basis of the Christian life.⁴⁸

The doctrine of the Trinity, specifically the way in which the triune conception of the divine provides for internal diversity, has a multidimensional relation to issues of social and religious plurality, as can be seen in the approaches examined here. The Trinity provides a lesson in the variety of dimensions and the fluidity of the divine, which in turn drives Christian engagement with the Other. As Panikkar has noted, this disturbs notions of Christian claims to know Christ fully or to fully encompass the variety of the Christian narrative.⁴⁹ This disturbing or queering function of the constant flux within the Trinitarian divine provides an impetus for the reflection of theological non-finality or uncertainty in both our particularised and contextual theological understandings of the narratives within the world, but also within the social implementation of any particular understanding of the narrative. Panikkar moves the resolution of the matter of theological finality

or definitive truth beyond our current circumstances, instead choosing to act within a postponed understanding of theological finality. Given the lack of finality or certainty expressed in Panikkar's reading of our contemporary understandings of the Christian narrative as a whole, this requires, for Williams, a transposition of this postponement into the social and political sphere, betokening a postponement of the finalisation of any 'Christianisation' of our society.

2.3 Difference and disposition

This aspect of relationality requires within the divine a notion of difference, which in the Trinitarian doctrinal formulation, comes about between the three differing persons that make up the totality of the divine family. To allow for the kind of exchange and flux delineated within Panikkar's understanding of the Trinity, there must be a distinction or level of difference between the aspects which are engaged in the process of exchange. This distinction is not solely confined to the inner workings of the Trinity, the difference/non-difference of the Son from the Father from the Holy Spirit, but is also apparent as we have seen in the discussion of the *imago Dei*, between the position of the Trinitarian divine and the created order. It is these shades of difference, embedded within the Christian tradition's understanding of the nature of the divine, that I now wish to examine for the possibility of developing a deeper, and more truly reflective, understanding of the kind of differences that are becoming ever more apparent within our diversifying societies. As we saw in the critique of Milbank's practice offered earlier, it is difference that poses the greatest problem to his conceptual understanding of the relationship between alternate religious traditions and the Christianised society. This difficulty with difference, clearly seen in Doak's criticism of Milbank's ecclesiological marginalisation of alternative meta-narrative communities, resonates throughout Milbank's wider claim that the Christian narrative allows for a 'harmonic' or 'peaceful' difference to be sustained. However, the double aspect of difference within the Trinity becomes particularly important when looking at the place of difference and similarity within certain wider aspects of the Christian narrative. The narratives of Creation and Incarnation, while both being central aspects of the wider Christian meta-narrative structure, deal with problematic issues of difference, and, when read through the lens of contemporary understandings of the Trinity, provide a grounding to the notions of exchange, mutuality, and fluidity seen within our earlier discussion.

The doctrine of Creation is a key marker for the beginning of existence, but also for the sustaining of the world by the divine in a constant flux of relation. As seen in biblical sources, such as the creation narratives in Genesis and in wider Church teaching, the narrative of Creation, has an impact far beyond the simple parameters of telling how the world came into being. Williams,⁵⁰ highlights how this universal nature of creation as seen within

the Christian narrative has an impact on the valuation of everything in that creation by the Christian believer. He writes:

But what creation emphatically isn't is any kind of imposition or manipulation: it is not God imposing on us divinely willed roles rather than the ones we "naturally" might have, or defining us out of our own systems into God's. Creation affirms that to be here at all, to be a part of this natural order and to be the sort of thing capable of being named – or of having a role – is "of God" it is because God wants it so,⁵¹

naturally relating the moment of creation to the continuous unfolding of the narrative of reality post-creation. This provides grounding for the existence of diversity within creation by showing the diversity that is apparent to be divinely allowed, if not divinely ordered, presenting, and re-affirming the divine will behind its existence.⁵²

In the same manner, the delineation of a sense of primordial unity within the Creation narrative has importance beyond merely a discussion about the beginning of things; rather the universal nature of created-ness imbues the whole of existence with meaning. The universal nature of Creation mentioned above also has meaning in this context, by providing an example of primordial unity, the doctrine of creation provides an image of a future, eschatological re-union. As Heim states:

the destiny of creation as a whole is not out of God's hands, for the universal salvific will remains a co-determiner of the ends of all creatures.⁵³

With shared creation providing the first impetus towards an appreciation of and respect for the Other,⁵⁴ the shared reconciliation after Creation only serves to reinforce the push towards a genuine engagement. This kairological ebbing and flowing of created union and re-union reflects in turn the dynamics of the Trinitarian divine, subsuming the differences in a particular chronological moment into a wider, amaranthine, narrative unity. In this sense the doctrine of the Trinity imbues the created reality with two key features: the first, a deep participatory connection to the life of the divine through the actions of the Holy Spirit within the created order; and second, with a configuring of the simultaneous unity and difference found in creation as transitory, a passing through, rather than a reflection of deeper ontological difference.

As can be seen in the discussion of the concept of the *imago Dei* by Hanby,⁵⁵ a sharing in Creation (and therefore the divine work) provides the Other not only with a sense of legitimacy within the Christian narrative, but also legitimises, to a certain extent, the particular practices and choices of the believer in a different religious tradition as expressions of diversity and difference within Creation. The configuring of the totality of being as a union, both in the beginning of creation and at the eschatological end of

creation, gives strength to the concept of a commonality and communion between differing parts of creation and between differing parts of humanity. The *imago Dei* is a more precise configuring of this concept, but the narrative of Creation provides workable foundations for a movement from distrust, conversion, and appropriation in Christian involvement with other religious traditions to one that is characterised by a valuation of the Other as a distinct but welcome part of divine creation. An appreciation of this shared communion, brought about by Creation and re-connected come the eschaton, constantly flowing in our day-to-day interaction with each other mirrors the relationality figured within the Trinitarian communality of the divine.⁵⁶ In a similar move, an appreciation of the value and legitimacy of the Other has an effect on the way in which the plural community must be seen by the Christian narrative as not only including those of the Christian faith, but also those of other faiths, sharing, as they do, a place within the sustained and relational Creation. This helps to guard against the outright rejection of relationality highlighted in Sargent's earlier reading of Milbank, by apportioning value and worth to the expression of non-Christian performances in creation, while also inscribing the shared humanity of all individuals more firmly in the context of engagement with those with whom we disagree. This openness links the doctrines of the Trinity and Creation and has consequences for the Christian narrative's relation with others in two significant ways. First, the possibility of signs of salvation being seen *extra muros ecclesiae* means that the Christian narrative is driven not only toward engagement and interaction with the Other, but also that the Other can form part of this relation between Creation and the Divine. This is a critical way in which the valuation of the Other, previously discussed as being consistent with the concept of universal creation and Trinitarian relationality, can showcase an echoing of the divine nature of all of creation.

The particular nature of the Christian narrative, and the specificity of the fundamental character in its narrative, Christ, has created a central issue for theology in that the affirmation of Christ's divinity, along with his particular situation, clashed with the wider concept of salvation regardless of time or geography. Hick is perhaps the most important proponent of this viewpoint, offering, along with others,⁵⁷ a de-construction of the possibility or necessity of the Incarnation to be taken as a literal or true representation of the life of Christ. In doing so, Hick makes the claim that the Incarnation forms a stumbling block to engagement with alternative religious faiths by arguing that its very particularity situates the story of Christ within a context and circumstance that means it can only apply to certain conditions. A literal understanding of the person of Jesus as the Son of God necessitates a restrictive view of the authentic religious life to that contained exclusively within the Christian tradition,⁵⁸ as, if the divine is embodied in one and only one context, then any other claims being made about the divine are necessarily based on falsehood. By retaining the sole or most important action of the divine in the world to the Incarnation, the divine becomes present only

within the particularity of the Christian narrative. In contrast to this position of incarnational exclusivism, Hick argues for understanding Christological language as a formation of myth, while mythological, the divine may be have been working in the person of Christ, this does not mean the divine was not also working within other religious or non-religious traditions.

This tension between the particularity of Christ and the universality of the salvation he offers is mediated by the impossibility of being wholly outside Christ but also within the created order.⁵⁹ Heim picks up on this problematic area of overlap between the doctrines of the Incarnation and Creation, noting that:

For God to be distinctively connected with historical particularity in this way, while also remaining the sole, transcendent, creator, obviously required diversity in the means, the economy, by which God related to the world,⁶⁰

furthering the way in which the particular nature of the Christ event is connected to the Trinitarian conception of the divine under discussion. Although the divinity of Jesus and his role in the salvation of humanity undoubtedly laid the foundations for a particularistic and exclusivist understanding of salvation for the Christian narrative, this is held in check by the requirement of the doctrine of the Trinity to explain the way in which the universal God of Creation relates to the particular Christ of the Incarnation through the intervention and medium of the Holy Spirit. As D'Costa detects, this tension within the Christian narrative provides for a dynamic conception of the divine person that:

safeguards against an exclusivist particularism (christo-monism) and a pluralist universalism (theocentrism) in that it stipulates against an exclusive identification of God and Jesus, as well as against a non-identification of God and Jesus.⁶¹

These dual points of doctrine, the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Incarnation of the Word in Christ, function as self-correcting tendencies within the wider Christian narrative that defends against Hick's claim as to the necessary exclusivity of the doctrine of the Incarnation. While the doctrine of the divinity of Christ pulls the Christian narrative towards the promulgation of the particularity of the life of Jesus, the doctrine of the Trinity corrects this tendency, by expanding the scope and possibility of divine working beyond the actions of the particular person of Jesus.

While the doctrine of the Incarnation has become a central position in claims of Christian exclusivism due to its particularity, the Incarnation only makes sense when held in creative tension with the doctrine of the Trinity. Moving in this way, Hick's contention⁶² that the particularity of Christ is an impediment to real inter-religious engagement is minimised by utilising

resources from within the Christian narrative to allow for the balancing of the exclusivism seemingly required by the doctrine of the Incarnation. The Christology displayed here is a crucial component of maintaining the tension necessary for this productive interplay between the doctrines of Christ's divinity and the Trinity, furthering the relationality seen as critical for a Christian response to plurality. As Heim notes, this is the key turning point for a genuinely Christian theology of other religions that does not see them, as Milbank appears to, as merely as false stories to be out-narrated. Instead the possibility of divine action outside of the particular circumstances of Jesus, or outside of a particular form of the Christian narrative, even if the chance of this occurring is 'gravely deficient',⁶³ are coded within the conception of a triune God, while the particularity of the narrative of Christ informs that wider divine action.

While Hick's identification of the exclusivity inherent within the particularity of the Incarnation is an important point for discussions of soteriology, further clarification is required. Hick sees the Incarnation as a stumbling block to meaningful dialogue because of the historical, geographical, and cultural specificity of the life of Christ, meaning that the action of the divine is limited to a certain set of unique circumstances regarding the salvation of those who have not encountered this specificity. From this, Hick reads into an avoidance of the Trinity as grounds for inter-religious dialogue due to its incorporation of the Incarnation as a central piece of its conceptual makeup. Two points must be made in response to this problematic: first, the use of the Trinity here depends on a differentiation between the conceptual and the practical that is lacking from Hick's reading; and second, that it is the incorporation of the Incarnation within the wider conceptual notion of the Trinity that allows for a move beyond the particularity Hick identifies.

While Hick is dealing with issues of salvation within his broader paradigm, the use of the Trinity here differs in that it relies on a practical rather than conceptual reading of the Trinity. What is meant by this is that the inspiration drawn from the Trinity here is not based on the conceptual relationship between its three parts in order to posit a form of inter-religious relation regarding the salvation of individuals within other faiths, but rather that the practicality of inter-relation between those three parts can be used as part of the narrative form for current Christian practice to emulate. Further to this, it is the dispositional aspect of the inter-relationship, the generosity, exchange, and non-appropriative nature, rather than a fixed rate of exchange or relation to which the proposal of an alternative radically orthodox narration looks. As Cheetham has developed in a different context, it is not only the noetic content of the instance of dialogue that is significant with regards to its practice, but also the cognitive practice involved – the ways in which we think about and react to the Other.⁶⁴ In developing the extent to which the proposed narrative relies on the Trinity in this way, rather than as a structured economy or mode of salvation for those outside the Christian narrative, the need to deal with the particularity of the Son is lessened, as the

particulars of each part are less important than the flux of exchange posited between them. As described above, the pull of the Incarnation towards a physical and historical particularity can be balanced through its relation to the universal and ongoing action of the Holy Spirit. The combination of these aspects within a dispositional rather than salvific framework, looking at the way they interact rather than 'assigning' them different 'forms' of salvation, grounds the expansion of the notion of Trinitarianism developed here within the context of the practical sphere, allowing for a move beyond recurring debates over the nature or place of salvation with regards to alternative religious forms.

Developed here is a narrative about the Trinity, that aims to bring into conversation the doctrine of the Trinity as held within the Christian tradition and those aspects of social and religious plurality that impinge on the everyday socialisation of members of our societies. It attempts to understand the nature of that plurality and ways of approaching it in light of the foundational nature of the divine form and the characteristic forms of relation that that form engenders. In doing so, we see a focus on the aspect of non-finality emerge, a commitment to the ongoing cycle of relationality that defines the Trinitarian communion, particularly the importance of the Holy Spirit in allowing for that constant flow of desirous movement between the divine. This relationality is, as we have seen, not an imposition of relation, a forcing into a static and fixed form of exchange between two positions in a hierarchical system, but rather a mutual indwelling that welcomes the engagement of the other within the shared action of the divine. This narrative both describes the pluralities we experience in a new way, gilding its form and content with a deeper meaning through its connection to the ongoing divine story, and imputes onto our patterns of behaviour certain practical and teleological goals. It is to these practical forms that our attention now shifts.

2.4 Practice and performance

The dispositionally Trinitarian narrative advocated and developed here both requires from, and imputes onto, the Christian narrative certain characteristics that must be emulated in practice if this connection is to be displayed and developed sufficiently. These characteristics include the adaptation of an approach to engagement and dialogue that mirrors the selfless, self-giving, love displayed between the persons of the Trinity, while also reflecting the methodology of exchange without reduction between difference. Emphasising the intrinsically relational quality of our living together showcases the extent to which our finite understandings of the nature of the grand meta-narrative conception of the Christian story do not ultimately show certainty or finality, but rather the need for a postponement of the finalising of the narrative to the eschaton. As a concomitant need, this postponement of theological finality seen in Panikkar's account of the Trinity also requires a

social postponement of the implementation of that theological finality in a static, or unitary, socialised reality of community.

The issue of practice is therefore critical as it deals with the interaction of the theological narrative presented here with the lived reality of community among and between members of various narrative groups within the broader multi-communal society. Practice, in this context, deals with the implementation of this dispositional attribution of the Trinity to the everyday interactions between believers in differing religious meta-narrative structures, whether the instance of dialogue is one that is formulated formally, such as the interaction between two religious institutions or corporate groups, or informally, such as the interactions between believers of different faiths that take place while daily living alongside each other. While explicating the theoretical relationship between differing religious traditions, whether over notions of soteriology or eschatology, may prove useful in furthering the academic study of religion, it is in the application to social issues and instances of engagement that forms the direct connection between the theoretical commitments of the Christian narrative presented and its social form.

In practice, a methodology which leads inexorably toward finality intrinsically involves the reduction of the claim to finality of other competing narratives, that is, in claiming finality for one particular rendering of a narrative conception, all other narrative conceptions are displaced from the position of describing the totality of being in an act of exclusion and marginalisation brought about by the claiming of authority by one particularity. This represents a serious challenge to the implementation of a mode of non-appropriative and non-reductive dialogue between religious traditions, as the claim to narrative finality and universality is one that is often made by forms of religious narrative. The key, however, to a practical implementation is the separation of the tradition as a whole from the particular presentation and representation of the narrative in a moment of dialogue, allowing a space for hesitancy and non-finality to emerge in the practice of narration.

A focus on the particular, and the postponement of ontological or epistemological finality that comes with it, is reinforced by Panikkar's call for 'Christic' action to come to be a characteristic of Christian engagement with the world.⁶⁵ As we saw, Christic action allows for the individual embedded within the narrative of Christianity to act without relying on an ontological primacy for their particular understanding of the narrative, but rather postponing the finality of any particular working out of the narrative to the future reconciliation of the world in the eschaton. This approach to practical action, specifically within the methodology attempted here, works itself out as a hesitant approach, self-aware and self-promoting of its own contingency in the specific context of the narrative engagement, but an approach that is no less engaged for being hesitant. In this way, participants can be aware of the individual and situational nature of their own narration, but instead of attempting to make this situational interpretation the only definitive interpretation allowed, rather embrace the situated-ness of their own

position. In this, the methodological process remains open even to internal correction, while practically; the engagement with aspects of social plurality can be done in a way that is less defensive about impingements or correction from the outside, while also being less concerned with the maintenance of systems of authority and finality within the tradition. It is the argument of this chapter that the doctrine of the Trinity, as developed and laid out here, offers up an alternative imagining of this embrace of hesitancy and situatedness as reflecting the hesitancy and situatedness expressed in the ongoing community of the divine – a Trinity that does less, through the loosening of the need for it to do more and the openness to change embodied within it.

As we saw in the theoretical models of Trinitarian relation offered earlier by, among others, D'Costa, Heim, and Panikkar, the example of relationship given in the intra-Trinitarian perichoresis, can and must be read from the characteristics that make this up into requirements for a Christian methodology of living and performance.⁶⁶ These obligations include, but are not limited to, a centring and preservation of integrity in the instances of interaction between the self and the other, a commitment to a non-reductive and non-appropriative mode of engagement, a sustained resistance to a finalisation of the particular form of a tradition or social structure into a universal, unitary, and final account of meaning, and a building up of a sustained disposition towards hesitancy in our practice. These obligations are the bedrock for our practice of Christian identity and our performance of the Christian story within and through our living in societies characterised by difference.

The ongoing and continuous nature of the interaction developed above, requires the creation and maintenance of integrity between the actions of the narrative and the theoretical underpinnings of it. This connection is obviously a contested area, where a variety of differing forms of practice interact. Rowan Williams, perhaps more of an interested observer of Radical Orthodoxy than a member, provides an interesting and useful proposal regarding the necessary place of integrity in this form of narration. He delineates the practical and attitudinal aspects of a successful engagement in dialogue including the involvement of the maintenance of similarity and coherency between the conceptual and theoretical beliefs of the religious tradition and the practical actions of those seeking to represent the tradition in society. In addition to this aspect, there is a further imputation of clarity and honesty regarding the motivation for engagement with the other and the preferred outcomes of both individual instances and their broader pattern. Within Williams's work, this aspect is addressed most significantly in his article entitled 'Theological Integrity',⁶⁷ within which he attempts to outline the way in which the Christian community can more adequately represent its narrative commitments with integrity in its practices of engagement. His model allows for a practical position that is aware of the connections between theoretical models of inter-religious relation and the actuality of practice in dialogue while being aware that the necessity of integrity in

our relations with others results from the destruction and ultimately violence caused by its lack. It is this lack which serves to close off the forms of engagement, dialogue, and exchange examined in this volume, as without a form of integrity the trust necessary for the true exchange of positions devolves into the Milbankian form of mutual suspicion.⁶⁸ For Williams, the maintenance of integrity within our narrative performance is sustained through the honesty with which those narrative performances convey their true goals, their true roots, or their true meaning within an instance of dialogue. This dishonesty as a factor in a lack of integrity may not always be the fault of the individual engaging with another in an instance of dialogue but can also be uncovered at a higher level of social construction and identity formation.

Beyond this aspect of honesty, Williams points the way toward four characteristics that a narrative performance that displays integrity in its narration will offer. These four, answerability, particularity, relevance to the community, and an awareness of the power dynamics inherent in an instance of engagement within the socially constructed space of society, help a theological discourse such as the one engaged in here to better display, emulate, and promote in practice those Trinitarian characteristics identified as central to the beautiful ordering of the Christian tradition and the pluralised societies within which our contemporary Christian communities exist. The first characteristic necessary for the preservation of integrity in narration identified by Williams is that of answerability, the way in which a narrative within an instance of dialogue or exchange is open to receiving answers from the dialogical partner and open to change and reformulation based on those answers given. As Williams notes:

Having integrity, then, is being able to speak in a way which allows of answers. Honest discourse permits response and continuation; it invites collaboration by showing that it does not claim to be, in and of itself, final.⁶⁹

This requires the performance of the Christian narrative by an individual or community is to be self-aware, even within its own narration, of the assumptions under-girding its position and the possibility for meaningful criticism from outside its foundational structure.⁷⁰ This is precisely the issue identified as problematic within the Milbankian approach, which seeks not only to engage in out-narration of the other, but also the maintenance of the power relationships between the Christian narrative and others which allow it to uphold a universalism on the part of its particular narration.

This aspect of answerability seems therefore to impute onto the instances of engagement brought about by the disposition towards desire of the other within the performance of the Christian narrative by individuals an obligation to engage in instances of engagement which include the other as an equal partner to the ongoing narration of identity and meaning. As part of

this, the other must be able to provide their own representation of their narrative commitments within the shard space of the instance of exchange and to be able to provide a response to the ongoing performance of the Christian narrative.

This facet of answerability obviously connects to the contemporary situation of pluralised communities where difference, and the negotiation of it, is an everyday occurrence that moves beyond a purely dyadic us and them. The provision of responses in answer to the performance of the other necessarily takes time, and an understanding of how that reaction then influences the ongoing relationality between the two. This obviously functions on a number of levels from individuals, who may have complex and multiple sources of identity, interacting with other individuals, to the necessarily more structured interrelationships between institutions or community organisations. While in this more structured arena, it makes sense to limit the diversity of ongoing participants to around two or three in order to preserve the depth of relationality built up,⁷¹ this structuring does not necessarily reflect an aspect that encourages or promotes answerability within the more complicated scope of individual identity and relation. We must seek to preserve in our actions space for this complexity that individuals provide, even when brought together through a communally shared identity, such as the individual's attachment to the Christian community.

This aspect of answerability connects with the second aspect identified by Williams as critical to a satisfactory display of integrity in narration. This second characteristic is a focus on the particular or specific nature of the narratives produced by individuals or communities engaged in dialogue or dialogical interactions. Without this awareness of the particular nature and context of the narrative held by the individual or the social grouping to which they belong, then there is a tendency towards presenting this particularity as being universal in nature, a violent and reductive approach to the existence of internal and ultimately external plurality. This is noted by Williams when he writes that:

A religious discourse with some chance of being honest will not move too far from the particular, with all its irresolution and resistance to systematizing; it will be trying to give shape to that response to the particular that is least evasive of its solid historical otherness *and* that is also rooted in the conviction that God is to be sought and listened for in all occasions.⁷²

This awareness of the particularity of a given narration of the Christian narrative is not meant to detract from the universal content or breadth of the Christian tradition as a whole, however through an awareness of our individual and communal roles in practicing, narrating, and performing the Christian tradition in specific circumstances can guard against both the inappropriate universalisation of the particular and the particularisation of

universally relevant aspects of the tradition being represented. This awareness of the role of particularity and its connection to relation has been more fully developed in its discussion within the context of scriptural reasoning, an attempt to learn together about the scriptural bases for religious traditions.⁷³

As part of this universalisation of particularity, we also see a default to a static understanding of the content of that narrative. An admittance of change necessarily invokes a lack on the part of the universal character of the narrative presented and therefore weakens that claim. In making this step, the narrative presented as universal in character denies the possibility of exchange occurring, by denying the possibility that the other may have anything to add to the narration of the particular viewpoint represented.⁷⁴ As we saw earlier, this destroys the possibility of the answerability required for integrity in our performance of Christian identity and of the Christian tradition and imputes onto our actions a requirement for self-awareness of the particular nature of our own context, understanding, and situated pronouncement of the meaning of the tradition as a whole. A focus on the particularity of the narrativisation of the tradition by a particular individual or group can be shown in practice through the inclusion of internal diversity within the narration of the Christian tradition, but also through a process of self-awareness in narration, the constant process of contextualising the statements made and commitments expressed within our performance. This form of particularity functions more fully as an attitudinal and dispositional adjustment. Through being more self-aware of the particular nature of one's own narration, practical outcomes in instances of engagement between particular positions can come about,⁷⁵ and through a positioning of the participant relative to the tradition they seek to represent, the actuality of each participant's particularity can be foregrounded.⁷⁶

Beyond this, an awareness of the nature of particularity within the context of engagement offers greater space for the development of adequate representation for the kind of multiple and complex identities that characterise individual attachment to traditions within cotemporary pluralised societies.⁷⁷ Practically, in developing this better representation of complex forms of identity and belonging, the presentation of traditions and communities as monolithic or homogenous blocks is disrupted and so too is the temptation to uphold narratives of power about them within a more complex reality. This is a form of granularity in the presentation of the connection between individuals and the traditions with which they identify, which not only pluralises the range of possible opinion within the presentation of the tradition in line with the plurality of relations between individuals and that tradition, but also helps to reject the pull towards a universalisation of any particular formation of the narrative. In combination with the inclusion of multiple viewpoints from within each tradition, the exchange formed contains a disposition in favour of a hesitant and particularised approach to practical and focused matters of concern.

This issue of the particularity of the form of narratives produced within instances of engagement is extended within Williams thought into the third characteristic he identifies – the needs for the discourses proposed within instances of engagement to be relevant to the everyday lives of the communities involved and relevant to their continuing attempt to better understand and practically mirror their theoretical commitments. For Williams, the connection between difference that results in fruitful engagement is one that is grounded within practical and ongoing social concerns. Discourses produced by the Christian community in these engagements must take this further; as Williams writes, they must:

live with the constant possibility of its own relativizing, interruption, silencing; it will not regard its conclusions as having authority independently of their relation to the critical, penitent community it seeks to help to be itself.⁷⁸

In proposing this aspect of theological integrity, Williams is focused on attempting to avoid the systematising reduction of only broader scale engagement, while also keeping particular instances focused on the key task of improving understanding and shared living within pluralised society. As Lochhead notes, the relationship that is formed through this shared living creates a form of dialogue,⁷⁹ with the lived experience of exchange and negotiation between groups in a plural society forming a continuing backdrop to instances of focused dialogue about the particular. This relates back to the importance of creating and maintaining integrity within the ongoing performance of the Christian narrative, as its focus in particular instances of engagement reinforces the necessity of integrity in promoting and maintaining long term relationships between differing individuals and communities.

This promotion of engagement between communities of difference over issues relevant to their shared social positions, such as their interactions with the secular meta-narrative structure of contemporary society or issues of education and charitable provision, both develops the space for the answerability identified earlier but also encourages a focus on particular, and contextualised, narratives that focus primarily on specific issues. As has been noted within the more specific circumstance of inter-religious dialogue by Agrawal and Barratt, community level dialogue between situated communities of believers of over practical issues of concern has a far higher chance of successfully producing acceptable outcomes for those communities and, critically, forming ongoing bonds of shared understanding.⁸⁰ By adopting these two factors as part of a commitment to relevance for social engagements, a community level focus on the participants of engagement and a topical focus on the pressing social issues of concerns to participants, seems to provide grounds for a modelling of effective answerability and integrity within the broader social relationship between institutions and traditions. While this level of focus for a practical performance of Christian identity

and community undoubtedly seems useful, it does also raise some concerns over whether this focus might artificially curtail aspects of the relationality that is desired within the broader social context by only allowing for the discussion of, and engagement over, practical aspects of importance.⁸¹ However, this is not the case as the suggestion for a practical and community level focus is to be conceived as preliminary and preparatory ground for the development of further reaching exchange should the creation of integrity within the ongoing instances of interaction occur. This allows for the focus on the practical aspects of shared space within pluralistic societies to form the initial aspects of the inception of relationality between difference, with shared concerns over issues such as religious responses to aspects of secular modernity building from a deeper understanding and shared commitment to the maintenance of the ongoing form of exchange. The connection between broader theological concepts such as ecclesiology or nature of the divine and practical issues of concern to communities, such as how to live within a religiously plural society, is one that has already been explored throughout this volume and in initiating exchange and relationality between differing communities around practical aspects, the necessary trust, answerability, and performance of integrity in narration can be displayed.

In doing this, the form of exchange is built up through the interaction of difference groupings with each other. Integrity is not only built up through actions, but also through the way that those actions are described to others and conceived of by those promulgating them. This includes how the subsequent social power relationships inherent within the narrative structures produced are built, maintained, and worked within.⁸² As Williams writes:

Language about God is kept honest in the degree to which it turns on itself in the name of God, and so surrenders itself to God: it is the way that it becomes possible to see how it is still *God* that is being spoke of, that which makes the human world a moral unity.⁸³

This awareness of the importance of language in our interactions with the other turns us back to the highlighting of the need for an awareness of particularity in our performance of the traditions with which we identify. The rejection entirely of this form of power structuring is not the goal for Williams, rather he provides an insistence that a self-awareness of it is a critical feature of the production of a theological discourse that is aware of its integration with systems of power and suppression. In being aware of the relationship formed between the production of a theological or religious discourse and the production of structural systems of power within and through that discourse, we can begin to avoid the potential for our performance of identity to mask their aims in the services of either temporary advantage or temporal political power.

These four aspects of theological integrity identified by Williams promote and provide practical methodological steps for a furthering of a Trinitarian

disposition within the performance of Christian identity in plurality. Williams's four steps identified here offer concrete practical proposals for the way that this performance can help to bring about the desired social and religious goals of an adoption of a Trinitarian theoretical model of relation and interactions. These steps cover aspects of both physical implementation, seen in the discussion of space and structure in the context of answerability and relevance, as well as demanding the implementation of a dispositional and attitudinal adjustment to the form of Christian performance, seen in the commitments to a greater awareness of the necessarily particular nature of narratives embedded within social structures of power. This commitment to practical and dispositional outcomes reinforces the need for a conception of exchange as most fruitfully occurring over a long period of time, best through a process of mutually living together within a shared society where individual instances, while perhaps focused on specific aspects or emulating specific relations of power, create, through differential repetition, a better reflection of the ongoing form of relation seen in the community of the Trinity.

This form of integrity is, of course, only the first step in the performance of a new form of the Christian tradition that is both relevant to the contemporary Christian experience of plurality and to seeking an ongoing and harmonious engagement with that plurality. Two further aspects, as we have seen, include developing a practice of non-appropriation in our engagements with others and the adoption of a tendency towards non-finality. Each of these aspects describes a way of approaching the incidences of exchange put forward as critical to the performance of the Christian tradition within a plural society that helps the Christian individual or community to better mirror the form of engagement and relationality seen within the working of the Trinity. As we have previously seen in the discussion of the nature of the Trinity, the concept of non-appropriation in engagement is a critical factor in both the balance of the Trinity and the preservation of the form of exchange apparent within it. Williams's original insight into the nature of the doctrine of the Trinity as a source of resistance to finalised narrative production,⁸⁴ and social, economic, and political finality, connects to the appreciation for alternative sites of peace and order within non-Christian social communities evinced by Graham Ward in his consideration of the post-modern, and plural, city.⁸⁵ This allows for the further development of a methodology of practice which focuses on the preservation of the other within society through an adoption of non-appropriation in the necessary relationships. By looking at Graham Ward's open form of ecclesiology and Williams's reading of Panikkar's Christic disposition,⁸⁶ the concept of non-appropriation is founded on the understanding of the place of the Christian narrative as eternally gesturing towards, rather than fully encompassing the totality of, the nature of the divine and the nature of the divine's relationship to our reality. In adopting this attitude towards the completion of the narrative proposed, the narrative and the community formed by it remain open

to the possibility of correction by the Other, without viewing this either as a weakening of the narrative possessed and promulgated, nor as a hostile act on the part of the other. Rather, correction can be seen as an integral part of the internal and external project of deepening our knowledge of, and aspirations to emulate, the divine community – a participatory and mutual refashioning of the ongoing and everyday process of living within a shared society, in shared spaces, and with shared hopes and desire about the future.

In developing this aspect practically, the commitment to non-appropriation explored here offers a way through the difficulty of allowing space for both co-operative and confrontational styles of engagement, while preserving the broader relationality and exchange that is both an inevitable and desired aspect of the plural communities found in contemporary society. Practically, this non-appropriative form of engagement requires a willingness for the instance of engagement to be shaped by the reaction of the other to the promulgation of the Christian narrative, while structurally the continuance of a non-appropriative form of engagement, as D'Costa has noted, requires the acknowledgement of the alternative narrative as it conceives of itself, and not as it is most useful to the narrative of the self. Implementation is therefore a matter of both institutional and individual practice. These work together to arrange the particular instances of dialogue within a broader non-appropriative and non-reductive form of relationship, where the narrative of the other is able to be presented freely and without expectations as to its approach or content or the imposition on its narration of certain structures of power or position.⁸⁷ This contains within it an impetus towards an active engagement with the Other, rather than just an acknowledgement of the existence of the other. In doing so, this reflects the nature of both the Trinitarian community and the form of desire seen within and among it. This is a critical aspect of Ward's methodological approach towards plurality within the post-modern city, and contains within it a strongly positive account of the possibility of ontological peace. This is clearest in his discussion of Barth in *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*⁸⁸ but is also a significant factor in his work within the edited volume *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*⁸⁹ and his *Cities of God*, where Ward's acknowledgement of the complexity and plurality of contemporary social forms allows for the space for the ethical conceptualisation of the duty the Christian community has to its neighbours.

As seen in the previous chapter, the issue of finality or universality poses a tricky area for discussion of narrative and social plurality. The claiming of finality or universality is not uncommon for religious traditions;⁹⁰ however, in attempting to present the particular narration of these traditions by one institution or individual as a universal representation of the tradition as a whole, the possibility for a meaningful exchange is closed down. After all, if one side already owns or represents the totality of meaning, what possible reason could there be for exchange or input from the outside? In response to similar issues regarding the finality of the Christian meta-narrative claim,

Hyman⁹¹ expands on the possibility of fictionality within narratives allowing for a loosening of the necessity of the connection between finality and the meta-narrative structure. It is this understanding of the fictionalisation of narratives that holds the greatest promise for understanding the way in which a self-aware Christian narrative can begin to engage with alternatives in a way that practically mirrors the internal definitional indeterminacy of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Hyman seeks to criticise Milbank, and by extension the Radical Orthodoxy movement, on their reading of the concept of nihilism as in some sense positivist⁹² and in the way in which Milbank seeks to insulate the narrative of Christianity from other narratives, also noted by Hedges, even as he seeks to position and construct those others.⁹³ The concept of a narrative that positions, but is not itself positioned in instances of dialogue, is troublesome,⁹⁴ especially given the sense that this only leads to a non-referential oppositionalism between narratives that closes the possibility of exchange occurring.⁹⁵ This is particularly true of Milbank's conception of the way in which the Christian narrative should engage with alternative religious traditions, as Doak identifies, stating:

In countering modernity's hyper-rational rejection of any religious belief or practice not defensible through reason alone, Milbank (at least on key points) merely reverses modernity's approach, as he criticizes any reason that does not proceed from the premises of the revealed Christian meta-narrative. This either-or approach is also evident in his insistence on an oppositionalism, such that a theological meta-narrative must either "position" or be "positioned by" all other meta-narratives.⁹⁶

This 'positioning without being positioned' is, as should have become clear in the previous chapter, impossible because of the inter-connected nature of our societies. Further to this, it also contradicts the way in which the Trinitarian dimension of the Christian narrative requires relation for participation and preservation of both the Other and its own internal dynamism. There is a paradox here between the need for the Christian narrative to always be pointing towards becoming a meta-narrative in order to fulfil its role of proclaiming the divine universally, and the impossibility of it remaining an untouchable, unaffected, meta-narrative enmeshed within the plurality of real, lived societies. While this pointing towards meta-narrative completion by the Christian narrative is an integral part of its story, the stage at which this is realised, how it is to be realised, and whether its realisation is to be expected prior to the eschaton are all more difficult questions with which theology has attempted to grapple. These difficulties in endorsing a pure drive towards meta-narrative dominance, while rooted in the Trinitarian disposition evidenced earlier, are also apparent in the position and place of Christian communities in the lived world – minority Christian communities in societies that have a majority of another faith or no faith,

cannot necessarily see the resolution of the meta-narrative character of the Christian tradition, but this does not mean that interaction and engagement, the presentation of the holistic Christian vision, can be withdrawn from or postponed.

It is this paradoxical position to which Hyman's proposal for a certain fictionality regarding meta-narratives is most useful in outlining a methodology for a practical approach to religious interaction based on the formation of a narrative about the doctrine of the Trinity. In doing so, Hyman offers an approach which bypasses, and to some extent 'moves through' the difficulties of navigating the interface between the two halves of the dualism through a dispositional approach towards our conceptualisation of the narrative task. We must, in practice, seek to chart a way between this impasse that occupies the current position of the Christian narrative as it is produced within conservative post-modern Christian theology and as it is enacted in instances of inter-religious engagement. Panikkar's allusion to the internal dynamism of the doctrine of the Trinity provides a foundational aspect of this approach; however, Hyman provides the Christian narrative with the ability to go further, applying this dynamism to our own points of narration within the context of practical dialogue. As he writes:

We have seen, however, that although there is a sense in which meta-narratives are unavoidable, there is also simultaneously a sense in which they are impossible; for this ultimate meta-narrative is always also inherently unstable.⁹⁷

In this case, the Christian meta-narrative must be internally dynamic just as it is, like all other meta-narratives, externally unstable within the plural social situation in which we find ourselves. The negotiation of this impasse can only be done through a moving away from a definitive, universal, and final position of the Christian narrative when present in practical instances of dialogue within our pluralistic societies towards an awareness of the internally dynamic nature of the Christian narrative, constantly engaged in a process of interpretation and re-interpretation based on the narration of internal and external variety.

Reminiscent of Panikkar's call for a 'Christic' approach to other religious traditions, this identification of the inherent difficulty in holding together a theological understanding of a universalist account of the Christian tradition with a notion of the particularity of our own narration of it in practice in society, moves the narration of the Christian narrative in practical instances into the realms of a discussion or dialogue rather than a monological narration of static universal applicability. Through a moving beyond a fixed understanding of the character of meta-narratives, we can seek to overcome the difficulties presented by the universalist account of the Christian society given in Milbank's model of the Christian narrative, as well as his appropriative and marginalising methodology of practice, while still

being in tune with the identified necessity of theological integrity and fundamental relation. As Hyman writes:

Thus, the “fictional nihilist” disposition is constituted by a dual movement: by a “commitment to” narratives and a “taking leave” of them.⁹⁸

It is this same moving through that is proposed here, although in a different context, as a foundation for practical engagements in dialogue between the Christian tradition and other religious faiths. A commitment to the Christian narrative in its theological and eschatological finality, but also a movement through the narrative towards a socially realised non-finality and an awareness of the fictionality and instability of all particular narrations of meta-narratives in their encounter with alternative narrative constructions produced in plural societies.

As a step towards implementing this non-finality in instances of dialogue, creative and non-traditional forms of dialogical interaction serve as a useful way of breaking down or de-constructing the power relationships that are apparent in our societies and can come to have an impact on practical instances of dialogue. Given the focus on the interaction of communities in the model of Trinitarian relation proposed here, Illman’s identification of creative approaches to dialogue, such as music, provides a certain resonance.⁹⁹ In Illman’s example, religious interaction takes place through the medium of music, with performers from differing religious traditions sharing creative space with each other in the production of multiple perspectives on a specific historical and social event. In performing in this way, both the production and the finished piece are caught within the broader flow of interactive exchange and relationality within the community of musicians, as well as each of the finished pieces being a complex reflection of both the original traditions and the impact of their interaction with the Other. While the shifting of expected norms in an instance of encounter can pose problems,¹⁰⁰ this unsettling of the expected also allows for differing relationships to form between the participants rather than those that would commonly occur.¹⁰¹ As an example of this form of social interaction that unsettles expectation, Cheetham’s proposals of a non-theological space for inter-religious encounter, seem useful.¹⁰² Practically speaking, unsettling expected norms of dialogical structure might involve the disruption of location or physical layout through the use of round tables rather than square to promote a sense of equality and inclusion,¹⁰³ or the relocation of a dialogical encounter from a workspace or seminar room to the beach, but may also involve the transferral of the dynamic of the dialogue from speech to music, drama, or even dance.¹⁰⁴

As an example, the ‘café-style’ approach seems useful – loosely arranged tables seating a small number of participants with a mix of those who identify with one or the other religious traditions gathered in a non-structured way – but can serve as a template for further experimentation with the

impact of geographic and cultural space on the production of dialogical encounters. Utilising the ability of space to impact the formation of dialogue, for example, the invitation of alternative religious groups into the ritual space of another, as well as provoking discussions on architectural styles and aesthetic appreciation, can be seen as leading towards a multi-layered discussion of the meaning of that space to the believers – its significance, its use, the way in which that use and significance impacts its physical layout, etc.¹⁰⁵ In this way, the dialogue concerning the more theoretical aspects of the inter-relation of the differing religious traditions is related practically to shared aspects of community between the religious traditions, providing a segue between shared practical matters and the conceptual areas of discussion. Setting this conversation outside formally constructed spaces, such as meeting rooms or lecture halls, can also improve the relativisation of the individual narrations present by presenting them in a non-hierarchical fashion.

While these suggestions may seem flippant, it is not the suggestions themselves that are the point. Rather, by engaging in these alternative practices, the fixed and stable notions of social interaction between forms of religious plurality can be de-constructed and opened up to differing forms of engagement. This unsettling of expectations allows for greater transformational learning to occur in the moment of dialogue,¹⁰⁶ as well as the unbalancing of established hierarchies and systems of dominance within groups.¹⁰⁷ This provides resistance within the moment of dialogue to the establishment of fixed norms or patterns, just as the Trinitarian conception of the divine imputes a perichoretic motion onto the divine, resisting the settling of the divine action in the world onto one particular person of the Trinity. In practice, structuring dialogue as a series of differing encounters utilising differing methods of engagement seems to offer the best and most practical option for the working of an alternative Christian narrative form within contemporary society.

This resistance to fixed exchange or relation is only further reinforced by the deeper account of the inter-relation of narratives within plural post-modern societies offered, characterised by individuals belonging to narratives in multiple, complex, and qualified ways. This means that relation cannot be reduced to only an exchange between two partners, but is rather a kaleidoscopic vision of inter-relation and exchange within a constantly changing flux of narrative interaction which presents a better grounding for appraising the practicalities of representation in dialogue in our post-modern plural societies. This approach, in practice and in the adoption of this awareness broadly by Christian participants in our socially plural societies, provides a strong point of resistance to false authoritarian accounts of the Christian narrative, which prioritise social finality or universality for particular accounts of narrative. Instead by bestowing finality onto a higher, un-representable totality of the narrative that, in the Christian case, is only completed with the closing of Creation in the eschaton this problematic area

can be avoided. This further draws forward the distinction of the three-fold form of the Trinity which disrupts reductive accounts of hierarchy and dualism, seeking to move beyond a simple fixed ratio of exchange towards an understanding of plurality that more accurately mirrors our actual experiences of difference.

2.5 The Trinitarian divine

As we have seen at the beginning of this book, the Radical Orthodoxy movement, and the Christian tradition more generally, requires an engagement with, and understanding of, the existence of social plurality in our contemporary societies. This discussion is lacking in the established form of the Radical Orthodoxy narrative, having been largely deployed by Milbank solely as a weapon within his broader and more prominently featured goal of the out-narration of the meta-narrative of modernity. In approaching the matter in this way, Milbank has developed a weakness within his narration of the specific form of the Christian narrative he puts forward, divorcing its actions from its internal commitments to love and harmonic difference, and divorcing the Christian community from the rest of the pluralised society within which it is situated. In order to overcome this weakness, an alternative form of the Radical Orthodoxy narrative has been identified as required, drawing on and foregrounding differing aspects of the broader Christian tradition in order to develop an internally Christian response to plurality that better relates to the actual experience of individuals living within our contemporary societies. As we have seen in this chapter, it is the Trinity, with its inner examples of relationality, difference, and exchange, which offers the foundations for the development of this response.

The doctrine of the Trinity, as we have seen, is an internally Christian form of the perfect community. This community, formed between the three persons of the Godhead, provides a focus point for emulation by the Christian narrative in its practical and theoretical recognisance of difference, whether that difference is internal to the Christian community, or formed by differences between communities within a differentiated society. In the development of the alternative narrative form of Radical Orthodoxy developed here the Trinity functions as a source of inspiration and emulation for Christian thinking about diversity, but also, critically, for the performance and interaction of the Christian mythos itself. In doing so, the parodic representations of the Trinitarian community that have been developed as practical strategies for narration in contemporary society are fundamentally an attempt at learning from the example of the divine and exemplifying it within our own lives. In this way, the doctrine of the Trinity maintains its priority within the cycles of representation and can continue to function as the source of Christian thinking on matters of diversity, plurality, and community while minimising the risks of aspects of criticised Trinitarian practice.

As we have seen in this chapter, the Trinitarian community described in the narrative about it promoted here, consists of a generative flux between relationality and plurality, difference and unity. These aspects, drawn out by the work done by those aligned or associated with Radical Orthodoxy, such as Panikkar or Williams, highlights the Trinity's role as guarding against the set, fixed, or static conception of the Christian narrative that Milbank's engagement with alternative social communities promotes. As we saw in the examination of Milbank's practice, his focus on the need for a powerful form of narrative in order to effectively grapple with the meta-narrative of secular modernity has led to a reduction of the inner diversity and difference embodied by the Christian story. This functions not only in the communal or physical aspects of Christian doctrinal diversity, but also in the reduction or occlusion of aspects of the Christian tradition which rely on a fluid dynamic between related characteristics. These foci, such as the dialectic between the notion of the universal and the particular expressed in theological speculation on the Incarnation or the connection between the divine and created order found in the doctrines and descriptions of the task of Creation, provide ground for an argument that the Trinitarian divine expresses a constant process of development that is creative and generative in its nature.

This creative and propagative form of the divine community mirrors the kind of resourceful and generative interaction argued for between the Christian and non-Christian communities that are embedded within our pluralised societies. In adopting this position for the doctrine of the Trinity within the performance of the Christian story by the Christian community, the performance then takes on specific characteristics that attempt to reflect the truth of the Trinity within the acts and engagement of the Christian community. These characteristics, a disclosure of loving, non-appropriative, and non-final narration as an appropriate Christian response to plurality, deliver both practical and theoretical considerations for a renewal of Radical Orthodoxy's central challenge to the meta-narrative of secular modernity. If the critiques of Milbank undertaken earlier are to have any effect then it must be the realisation that the disposition of the Christian community in attempting this out-narration must be one that is firmly expressive of, and performs in every action undertaken, its commitment to maintaining the harmonic peace-in-difference that the meta-narrative of secular modernity has so signally failed to do. Without this, the Christian narrative fails at its foundational claim to represent a different way of understanding our reality, never mind its further claim to be able to construct our reality in a more just, harmonious, and beautiful way.

The doctrine of the Trinity must, therefore, come to be the central and defining characteristic of the Christian community's interaction with instances of plurality and difference within society. It is only in doing so that this engagement can be structured as a coherent reflection of the internal commitments of the Christian story, and as an effective methodology for the equitable and respectful engagement with communities formed by

alternative religious meta-narratives. This is not to suggest that the Trinity can only be read in this manner, though I do believe that it reflects the central characteristics of Trinitarian doctrine clearly, or that the doctrine of the Trinity is somehow a 'quick fix' for the problematic issues regarding Christian practice in the contemporary world as seems to be the tendency of some uses, but rather that the doctrine of the Trinity, and its development by thinkers associated with Radical Orthodoxy, is a corrective to the performance of the Christian narrative undertaken by Milbank, who stands as almost the sole point of engagement with alternative religions or social plurality within the movement. The Trinity offers up a vision of a possible disposition towards the plurality that forms the experience of our communities in society. This disposition is one that offers a new reading of the Christian that in turn reads the nature of social and religious difference in a new way that opens up the scope of possible actions towards engagement needed by a true social reflection of the internal nature of the Christian narrative.

Notes

- 1 Ayres, "Into the Cloud of Witnesses", 3–5.
- 2 Fortman, *The Triune God*, 62–63; Martinich, "Identity and Trinity", 170–171.
- 3 See, for example: Karkkainen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism*.
- 4 See for example: Fegert, "The Insufficiency of S. Mark Heim's More Pluralistic Hypothesis", 497–510.
- 5 D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, 99–172.
- 6 Heim, *The Depth of the Riches*.
- 7 Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*.
- 8 See: Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 8–16.
- 9 Rahner, *The Trinity*, 99–102.
- 10 See, for example: Insole, "Against Radical Orthodoxy".
- 11 Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol.1: The Doctrine of the Word of God Part 1*, 335.
- 12 Ibid., 340.
- 13 Ibid., 347.
- 14 Rahner, *The Trinity*, 99–102; Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 4; Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 203.
- 15 Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 10.
- 16 Ibid., 13.
- 17 O'Collins, *The Tri-personal God*, 177.
- 18 Thatamanil, "God as Ground, Contingency, and Relation", 251.
- 19 Although Radical Orthodoxy in particular, and conservative post-modern Christian theology more generally, does contain within it thinkers from a variety of backgrounds, such as Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and various forms of Protestantism, it is dominated by a broadly Anglo-Catholic outlook stemming from the Church of England which represents most of the critical thinkers in and around the movement, such as John Milbank, Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock, and Rowan Williams.
- 20 D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, 18.
- 21 Ibid., 109–126.
- 22 Hanby, "Desire", 111.
- 23 Ibid., 112.
- 24 Genesis 1:26–27.
- 25 Genesis 9:6.

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- 26 Hanby, "Desire", 111–112.
- 27 Ibid., 113.
- 28 Tonstand, "The Limits of Inclusion", 5–11.
- 29 Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 25.
- 30 See, for example, Fairbairn's contrasting of pre- and post-modern conceptions of the relationship of the individual to Christ: Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 219.
- 31 Hanby, "Desire", 121.
- 32 D'Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, 19.
- 33 Rahner, *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, 135.
- 34 D'Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, 19.
- 35 Ibid., 20.
- 36 Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism", 2.
- 37 Ibid., 3–15.
- 38 Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges".
- 39 Min, "Dialectical Pluralism and the Solidarity of Others", 589.
- 40 Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism", 3.
- 41 Ibid., 4.
- 42 Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges", 92.
- 43 Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism", 10.
- 44 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 76.
- 45 See, for example, Williams's use of 'interactive pluralism' in the context of politics in: Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 35; Chapman, "Rowan Williams's Political Theology", 68.
- 46 Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism", 6.
- 47 Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism", 14.
- 48 Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, 42.
- 49 Panikkar, *Christophany*, 157.
- 50 Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 63–78.
- 51 Ibid., 69.
- 52 Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 249.
- 53 Heim, *The Depth of the Riches*, 77.
- 54 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 87.
- 55 Hanby, "Desire", 109–126.
- 56 Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 274.
- 57 See: Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*; Goulder, *Incarnation and Myth*; Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*.
- 58 Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 181.
- 59 O'Collins, *Salvation for All*, 231.
- 60 Heim, *The Depth of the Riches*, 131.
- 61 D'Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, 18.
- 62 Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 178.
- 63 Race, "Interfaith Dialogue", 160.
- 64 Cheetham, *Ways of Meeting and the Theology of Religions*, 22.
- 65 Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges", 92.
- 66 This movement can be found prominently within the work of Moltmann, Boff, Fiddes, and Wilson-Kastner. See: Adiprasetya, *An Imaginative Glimpse*, 131–132.
- 67 Williams, "Theological Integrity", 140–151.
- 68 Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue", 151.
- 69 Williams, "Theological Integrity", 142.
- 70 As Swidler identifies: Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue", 152.
- 71 Steiner, *Group Processes and Productivity*, 101.
- 72 Williams, "Theological Integrity", 143.
- 73 Hardy, "Textual Reasoning", 271.

- 74 Thereby breaching the first of Swidler's decalogical rules, as well as disturbing notions of integrity between the stated aims of dialogical interaction and the practice of monological narration: Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue", 152; Linell, *Approaching Dialogue*, 1; Rommetveit, "On the Architecture of Inter-subjectivity", 94.
- 75 Hopkins, "Identity, Practice, and Dialogue", 364.
- 76 Ibid., 364.
- 77 Ibid., 366.
- 78 Williams, "Theological Integrity", 150.
- 79 Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative*, 77.
- 80 Agrawal and Barratt, "Does Proximity Matter in Promoting Interfaith Dialogue", 575.
- 81 Ibid., 581.
- 82 Mirroring Williams's point here, Carr sees this analysis as a foundational part of the permanent self-critique necessary for the preservation of integrity in the narration of theology. See: Carr, "Foucault Amongst the Theologians", 31–45.
- 83 Williams, "Theological Integrity", 146.
- 84 Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism", 24.
- 85 Ward, *Cities of God*, 258.
- 86 Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism", 2.
- 87 Hopkins, "Identity, Practice, and Dialogue", 364.
- 88 Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 12–60.
- 89 Ward, "Bodies", 163–181.
- 90 See, for example, Christian exclusivist claims or the notion of pre-existing Islamic identity in Muslim theologies of salvation.
- 91 Hyman, *The Predicament of Post-modern Theology*.
- 92 See both: Hyman, *The Predicament of Post-modern Theology*, 95–96; Hyman, "John Milbank and Nihilism", 430.
- 93 Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 1.
- 94 Ward, *Cities of God*, 258.
- 95 Sargent, "Proceeding Beyond Isolation", 822–823.
- 96 Doak, "The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy", 370.
- 97 Hyman, *The Predicament of Post-modern Theology*, 143.
- 98 Ibid.
- 99 Illman, "Plurality and Peace", 176.
- 100 Ibid., 177.
- 101 Kim, "The Link Between Individual and Organisational Learning", 37.
- 102 Cheetham, "Ways of Meeting and the Theology of Religions", 63–93.
- 103 Prewitt, "Working in the Café", 354.
- 104 Illman, "Plurality and Peace", 177.
- 105 Illman, "Reciprocity and Power in Philosophies of Dialogue", 62.
- 106 Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 196.
- 107 Prewitt, "Working in the Café", 354.

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3 Desire

As we saw in the previous chapter, the doctrine of the Trinity offers a foundation stone for a renewal of Christian thinking about, and practice towards, instances of social and religious plurality. The previous chapter aimed to kick off the re-presentation of an alternative form of the Christian narrative to the one presented by the current Radical Orthodoxy movement which is formed largely by the Milbankian practices of reductive oppositionalism and a Christendom inflected marginalisation of alternative communities. In contrast, the narrative developed about the Trinity, specifically its focus on relationality and difference within the whole, provides for a Christian narrative that is primarily conceived of as a commitment to a non-appropriative, non-final, and non-reductive account of the Christian story. These emphases in the re-telling of the Christian story drive engagement formed by these commitments, expressed in a postponement of theological particularism, an awareness of the diversity within all religious and social communities including the Christian one, and a commitment to the generative flux of social interaction with the Other which produces a deeper and fuller understanding of ourselves. The Trinity is undoubtedly a vital part of any attempt at building a Christian narrative which considers the central place of plurality and difference within our contemporary societies, offering not only a vision of a divine community for emulation by our own, but also a metaphor for the possibility of holding together the difference and plurality we experience within a broader Christian meta-narrative structure.

While fulfilling this function within the re-presentation of a radically orthodox narrative, the doctrine of the Trinity as delineated in the narrative developed also imputes certain commitments onto the practical engagement of the Christian community with communities of other faith traditions within our pluralised society. The Trinity, with its related doctrinal partners of Creation and Incarnation, provides meaning and explanation for the existence, and continued existence, of plurality within our societies. The connection between these doctrinal points and the presence of diversity not only strengthens the explanatory meta-narrative function of the Christian mythos, but also changes the way that the presence of plurality must be conceptualised by the Christian community in its existence and, importantly,

in its inter-relationship with the Christian community. Just as the notion of the Son cannot be divorced from its relationship to the Father, nor the actions of the Holy Spirit seen as separate from the willing of the Son, neither can the Christian community hold itself entirely apart from the society that surrounds it. It is not enough to hold a divorced or separated account of differing communities within society, rather, the composition and self-understanding of the Christian community, must be seen through the prism of its relationship with the non-Christian forms of community found within broader society. In this way, the doctrine of the Trinity explored in the manner of the previous chapter functions on both a theoretical level, as an example of the perfect divine community, and on a performative or practical level, illuminating the correct Christian form of practical inter-relationship between instances of difference.

While the doctrine of the Trinity offers these foundational resources for the promulgation of a form of the Christian narrative, it also showcases the nature of the relationality and exchange embodied in its communal form. This nature, defined by the inter-relationship of the three persons within it, is one that is generative, in effusively overflowing into the ecstasy of creation, loving, as seen by the connection of one person of the Trinity to the other two, and fundamentally in flux, never settled in a fixed or formalised ratio of exchange the betokens a hierarchy of action. The difference expressed between each of the three persons of the Trinity is therefore seen to be overcome not through the process of out-narration, dominance, and exclusion – a process that would dissolve the communal, generative, and perichoretic nature of the Trinitarian divine – but rather one that functions through the *desire* expressed between differences. The difference within the divine provokes a desiring disposition towards the other, a desire that functions, as we have seen, to preserve, uphold, and engage with that difference. The non-appropriative, non-reductive, and non-final position argued for previously relies on an emulation of the form of community displayed in the doctrine of the Trinity, yet it is this internal form of desire that upholds and sustains that communal form.

If, as previously explored, the challenge for the Christian community and the narratives it propagates is the performance of its central ethical commitments in practice, then this aspect of desire between differences must also come to the fore in any attempt at interacting with social difference encountered by the Christian community. This chapter aims to examine, explore, and deepen our consideration of the nature of desire, its occurrence within the Trinitarian divine, and how this stance of desire towards the other can be outwardly and inwardly perfected in the performance of Christian practice. In adopting this Trinitarian stance toward the other, the problematic aspects of Milbank's earlier practice can be overcome, in favour of a new, more coherent narrative that is more relevant to the forms of social plurality that Christian individuals encounter every day. In doing so, the post-modern understanding of the nature of desire is a critical factor, feeding into the

theoretical groundwork of the Radical Orthodoxy movement as a whole. This draws a contrast between contemporary understandings of desire and the understanding of desire given within the Christian tradition, both divine forms of desire and the desire embedded within the human experience. It is this central position for desire, and the corresponding factors its centrality imputes onto the actions of the Christian narrative, that leads to a characterisation of the Trinitarian form of desire as a fundamentally queer form of desire. This is a desire that postpones the destructive resolution to homogeneity involved in out-narration and expresses its desire in an ongoing holding away from culmination, or resolution, of difference. The Trinity expresses this form of desire, queer, generative, and non-final, as the required form of disposition towards the other within a pluralised society.

Of course, desire as a concept holds a central position within our lives. Whether it is in the fulfilment of our bodily needs, our relationships with other individuals, or in our experience and understanding of our relationship with the divine, desire and its fulfilment, its culmination, its postponement, and its intensity, provides the backdrop for much of our ethical and social thinking. It is difficult to imagine a life without desire or one form or another or to visualise quite how societies would work without the constant ebb and flow of desiring and being desired. Desire exposes the rawest and sometimes basest needs of our human selves, satiating our lust or hunger with materiality, as well as those aspects of dedication and devotion seen as the highest markers of ethical conduct and commitment. Our desires naturally have different ends as well as different effects on the individual. These ends include physical objects, whether to gratify some physical need expressed by our bodies or for the excess accumulation of something deemed of value by the individual, other individuals, seen as either objects for sexual or social utilisation or alternative subjects who engage in the mirrored process of desire and being desired, or ideas and hoped-for realities, a longing for things to be different than they are in the political and social sphere. These forms of desire vary, just as the intensity of each may vary at different times in an individual's life and be oriented towards radically different things in different circumstances. Yet, these desires structure and impel our actions across the whole gamut of social interaction we engage in every day. Whether this is considering which type of food we would prefer to eat, how to go about wooing a desired individual, or daydreaming about a world in which everything is a darling shade of pink; desire in some form permeates our entire lives in a way that seems to exceed any other. Humans are driven by desire, humans live through desire, humans even manage to create other humans out of desire. However, critically, desire does not function in isolation. It is not immune from aspects outside its focus, nor is it immune from the actions of the desired. Central to its functioning is a notion of relationship or exchange between the desiring and the desired¹ – one cannot exist without the other and the existence of one necessarily changes the relationship between the subject and the object.² When this exchange occurs

between two individuals, it sees the individual laid bare in a way that not only exposes the vulnerability and weakness of the self, but invites that vulnerability and weakness to be returned by the one that is desired – a sharing in vulnerability that exposes the truths of their inter-relationship.

For these reasons, and far more besides, desire has come to occupy a central position for considerations of the meaning or purpose of our lives and our societies. This is perhaps particularly true for the Christian tradition, as it has sought through the various narratives deployed in its history to explain the origin of our desire, its correct ordering and orientation during our lives, and its ultimate eschatological culmination in the divine.³ Again, and again, throughout Christian history, desire is deployed as a metaphor for various aspects of the Christian story, from the very beginning with the story of Creation,⁴ the dangers of desire in the story of the Fall,⁵ and the overwhelming nature of love seen in the story of redemption.⁶ As we saw in the previous chapter, this perhaps should not be surprising given the central role that desire plays in the internal divine life. If Christian theology is to mirror and explain that divine life, particularly its relevance to our own, then the use of desire as a metaphor about aspects of the Christian tradition beyond the internal life of the Trinity (where it is also, of course, being used as a metaphor, given the ineffability of the true nature of the divine) is a natural extension. The Trinity shows us that desire functions as the bedrock of the divine life, and therefore functions also as a critical aspect of our own.⁷ This disclosure of desire by the divine forms the foundation of the divine nature – ‘God is love’ is the fundamental aspect of the intra-Trinitarian relation, which must therefore be a point of emulation for our own experiences of relationality between difference.

The Trinitarian conception of the divine discloses not only the possibility of a disposition of desire towards difference that holds that difference, without reduction, in a system of relationality and community, but discloses this form of desire towards difference as the divinely ordered state of community. This divine example of desirous community has been a recurring trope within Christian theology and mysticism, being expressed by in a variety and by a variety of people throughout Christian history. Examples abound even from the very beginnings of the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity – by Gregory of Nyssa in his ‘On Virginity’, where he melds his theological understanding of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, deployed against the heresy of Arianism, with an in-depth and difficult account of the correct limits and ordering of desire,⁸ to Augustine of Hippo’s tortured reminiscing over the power and anguish of desire in ‘The Confessions’, which when laid alongside his ‘On The Trinity’ offers a reflection of the contrasting experiences of the divine and the human,⁹ via a whole host of other early Fathers like Origen and Hippolytus of Rome. Beyond this early work on the nature of the Trinity and forms of desire, the tradition has continued to reach for metaphors of love, adoration, and desire when examining the relationship of the created order to the divine and the inter-personal mystery of the divine

itself. This is perhaps most prominent within the mystical tradition, which has classically paid great attention to the overlap between the desire of God for us, our desire for God, and our desire for each other.¹⁰ This can be seen strikingly in the love poetry of the Psalms, for example in Psalm 105 where the nature of desire is for the divine order, in Psalm 63 where the nature of desire for God by the individual is described in the metaphor of physical bodily need, and in a great many others such as Psalms 23, 25, 37, 40, 42, 69, 119, 145, and, of course, the Song of Solomon in its entirety. Perhaps most beautiful is the nature of desire explored in Psalm 42, where the desire for God is mingled with erotic and bodily imagery, overlaid with a deep anguish regarding the difference between the created and the divine, and a longing for the overcoming of the social order. As is written:

As a deer pants for flowing streams,
 so pants my soul for you, O God.
 My soul thirsts for God,
 for the living God.
 When shall I come and appear before God?
 My tears have been my food,
 day and night,
 while they say to me all the day long,
 "Where is your God?"
 These things I remember,
 As I pour out my soul:
 how I used to go to the house of God
 under the protection of the Mighty One
 with shouts of joy and praise
 among the festive throng.¹¹

Indeed, it may be easier to question just how many times desire, either for God or for another, is not mentioned as the focus of the Psalms. This illuminates the two central claims made in this chapter – that desire is foundational to both the divine life and to the divinely orientated life of the individual. As such, understanding the nature of desire, its power, and its place within the promulgation of a Christian narrative becomes a necessary piece of a Christian response to the existence, continuance, and meaning of social plurality. Without an understanding of the way that the community the Christian story aims to emulate functions, how desire drives the exchange and relationality embodied in the tripartite community of the Trinity, then there is no possibility of embedding the nature of that community within our own.

So, how then might we examine anew the place and prominence of desire within the narrative of Christianity put forward by Radical Orthodoxy? As with much of Radical Orthodoxy, the answer lies somewhere between the Church Fathers and continental post-modernism, with each playing a vital

role in the conceptualisation of desire within the Radical Orthodoxy movement. As with the narrative understanding of society explored earlier, our contemporary notions of desire are informed to a large extent by the work of post-modern thinkers on the nature of love, desire, and exchange. From Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze, Baudrillard, and Badiou, Radical Orthodoxy has inherited a deep account of desire from the post-modern milieu. This account of desire has come to have an impact on the way that desire is seen within the broader Christian narrative to be developed. This chapter aims to explore the tension and relation between these two aspects of desire present in the Radical Orthodoxy movement and begins the description of a way of implementing this disposition of desire in our actions towards the plurality present in our societies.

3.1 Notions of desire

Foucault is the most logical place for this examination to begin, due to his focus on the inter-related aspects of power and identity. While this may seem rather far from the discussion of the nature of the Godhead explored in the previous chapter, the post-modern obsession with understanding the power dynamics of our societies and how these dynamics construct our knowledge of, and actions in, society provides an insight into the way in which the example of the divine community explored earlier can be related to contemporary forms of social construction. For Foucault, the exercise of power and resistance to it form the scaffolding of our social construction, having an impact on every level of society, from the actions and choices of individual to broader, long-term, social and political trends – as he writes, power is ‘exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations’.¹² As we saw with the discussion of the nature of narrative, drawn through the work of Lyotard into the Radical Orthodoxy oeuvre, power shapes the way that individuals conceive reality.¹³ Narratives with the most power display meta-narrative characteristics, where they seek to provide an explanation for the totality of reality – whether this is displayed through a secular account of society or through religious stories. Both share an attempt to not only describe our current realities, but also to provide reasons for their current form of visions of an alternative form. Underpinning these explanations are power relationships which govern the aspects of narrative which connects reality into the broader story, as well as governing the extent to which each narrative is to be judged as coherent or effective. As Milbank and others have noted, in the current context the power of definition with regards to coherency, rationality, and validity for public discourse has come to be controlled by the gatekeeping authority and power of the epistemological structure of secular modernity.¹⁴ Foucault’s work focuses not just on this analysis of power dynamics but also the process by which individuals become its subjects, specifically through the social relations brought about by the power imbalances seen in society. This

involves flows of power, changes in power balances, resistance to power, and an understanding of what the exertion of power means for its subject.¹⁵

These strategies of power are particularly clear in the in the context of the state, where the exertion of state power in the circumstances of modernity leads to simultaneous processes of individualisation and totalisation. This can be seen in the contemporary individualisation of politics and identity within western societies with an increasing focus on the importance of the individual over their attachment to broader forms of social organisation such as the family or local community – as Bauman notes ‘to speak of individualization and of modernity is to speak of one and the same social condition’.¹⁶ Simultaneous to this is the attempt by the meta-narrative of modernity to produce a total account of the nature of reality. As we saw earlier, this account does not aim to just describe the nature of reality as it is, but also to force reality to conform to the expectations embedded within the narrative. As we see with the myth of scientific utopianism, the production of the narrative can shape the outcomes of our realities, fixing it within a pre-ordained and totalising system from which, girded by the epistemological frameworks propounded, we are unable to escape. As part of this, Foucault calls on a strategy of resistance, stating:

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this political “double bind”, which is simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures. . . . We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.¹⁷

For Foucault, it is not so much the operation of power that is central. Rather, it is the understanding of its effects and its origins that provides clarity to power’s role within the formation of relation between things – the systems and ratios of exchange which produce the power structures with which we are familiar. These systems, requiring either violence or consent for their operation,¹⁸ circumscribe the range of actions available, governing the possible through the proscription of alternatives or the construction of a social desire towards the action promoted. Of course, Foucault is aware of the universalising tendencies within his own work and allows space for the reflection of the governmentality of the dominant power structure back through the discourses subjugated, echoing a flow of power between them and located the subjugated discourse as a facet of resistance to totalisation.¹⁹

Critically, for our examination of the role of desire within the Trinitarian community is therefore the notion of power. Baudrillard picks up on this in his critique of the Foucauldian account of power as merely re-inscribing an alternate, but still totalising, account of the function and location of power. As he states, ‘Foucault’s discourse is a mirror of the power it describes’.²⁰ We drift here somewhat close to the paradoxical position of the meta-narrative

seen in the work of Hyman,²¹ where the meta-narrative's inherent need for stability and coherence is undermined by its incessant desire for totality. Baudrillard, drawing a connection between the Foucauldian notion of a systematic form of power as desire and the Deleuzian notion of desire as a system of power,²² rather suggests that both these forms must be moved beyond in an attempt at escaping the paradoxical tendencies of systematisation and totalisation.²³ Both desire and power are therefore related to their fundamental roles as part of the system of production identified as at core of our epistemological structures. For Baudrillard, discourses of the kind put forward by Foucault and Deleuze possess an ultimatum of production or the ability to materialise change or actuality through their deployment.²⁴ In contrast to this, Baudrillard sees seduction as counter to the system of production within which both Foucault and Deleuze remain as it relates not to a 'real' exchange, but is rather concerned with symbolic exchange.²⁵

For Baudrillard, our contemporary social structure relies upon the formation of simulacra, those idealised images that do not themselves have any real existence, but are instead created through the kind of social desire explored above.²⁶ These simulacra reflect reality, but do not themselves possess existence. Think of the world of Disneyland which reflects an idealised, child-like version of our own society, or the portrayal of love and family life in the media, which reflects some forms of reality but does not encapsulate the totality of reality. Think of the confusing overlap that characterises war in our contemporary reality, portrayed in computer games with heightened reality, while very real bombs are dropped using the same technology. A simulacra has been created, a shape or idea without reference to reality which lacks a corresponding signified to which it points. Critically, each scenario (Disneyland, Love, War, etc.) has created a thoroughgoing simulacrum of reality – a new form of the real which is shaped and moulded more by our desires and our thoughts than its reference to a physical reality.²⁷ These simulations have come to permeate our contemporary society to such an extent that they now rely upon one another in a self-referential system of connection, where each non-real simulacrum depends for its definition solely upon other simulacrum. Return to love, where the socially recognisable, and ultimately simulated, ideal form is moulded through our experience of imbibing other simulated forms of love in films, TV shows, and popular culture which are themselves founded on the popularised form of love. Our categories, our ideals, our hopes and desires are filtered through their reliance on a system of simulation and simulacra which has become all consuming.

These simulations have even come to permeate the way in which we conceive of society, with definitions and explorations of it relying on those self-same simulacra. As we saw in the earlier discussion of Milbank's understanding of narratives as having no objective reality, merely floating free as persuasive or unpersuasive stories,²⁸ so too do the simulacra of various phenomenon come to float free of the realities they attempt to signify. The

categories of knowledge, society, ethnicity, morality, and religion with which we all interact, and which we all use to interact with others, are therefore based not on the real, but instead on a swirl of immaterial referentials.²⁹ For Baudrillard, power is itself one of those referential simulacra, created and sustained not by its connection to a physical or objective reality, but rather to a web of other socially constructed simulacra.³⁰ Power is itself only the simulated recovery or reclamation of the real – whether it is the exertion of power in the enforcement of legal regulations, moral and ethical standards, or the modification of individual behaviour, power serves merely to create a simulation of a society. There is no real entity which serves to produce power, power exists only as a simulacrum of itself.³¹

As part of this, Baudrillard's conception of the nature of power also speaks of desire as an instrument of that power.³² To desire something is to crave its reality, its realness, its body closeness and yet this realness is impossible given the hyper-reality of our feeling of desire; focused on a simulated reality constructed not by a relation to an objective reality but rather by the ongoing interaction of simulacra with simulacra. Our desire is a quest for the real, the real that we see merely as an extension of our real selves, so close but ultimately ungraspable. It is this longing and desire for the real, yet its impossibility of ever being grasped, which continually entices us into believing in the real at all. Just think, as Baudrillard and innumerable commentators since, would have us do, of the visual and experiential perfection of the Big Mac which entices us with its perfection and immediacy every time we see it.³³ We know that every Big Mac we have ever had has signally fallen short of the perfection promised, and yet, we still desire the possibility, the reality, of the image. We are stuck in a cycle of desire and production which dangles the lure of the real just out of our reach. We will never have a perfect Big Mac, like the one we see in adverts and our dreams, because the perfect, real, Big Mac does not exist anywhere else.³⁴ Hence the mind-boggling irony of the jingle 'I'm loving it' – you aren't loving it, because you aren't getting it, and you never will. The whole system is built on you thinking you will get it, being disappointed when you get a sub-standard facsimile but somehow continuing to be convinced that the thing you love is out there. This is what allows power to shape and mould our reality, our longing for meaning and reality forces us to create accounts of simulation and simulacra which fake reality, a dizzying hyper-reality where nothing refers to anything but itself.

Only through the process of seduction can this hyper-reality be exposed.³⁵ For Baudrillard, the force relationship found in both Foucauldian power structures and Deleuzian accounts of desire can only be disrupted and undercut by the seduction of that power – enveloping its entirety within a manoeuvre of infinite reversibility. Instead of undermining or attempting to replace a ratio of social relation or social construction, seduction is instead the playing with and ultimately the negation of the seriousness with which the free-floating signs we use to build our frameworks are taken. Seduction plays with signs, challenges our sign making and connection,

and exposes the irony within our placement of value on signs.³⁶ Baudrillard presents seduction as reversing the connections between power, desire, and production – exposing the false nature of the production engaged in and the artifice of our systems of production. Baudrillard therefore sees our society as caught in a system of hyper-reality which is concerned mostly with the maintenance of its fake relationship to reality, where the signs we know and work with maintain their claim to represent things as they really are. As we saw in Lyotard, this connection-making between the real and the signifier supports the coherence and viability of the narratives enmeshed within our societies, which use and create signs in order to promote the coherence of their visions of society.³⁷ This is not only in the descriptive mode of social narratives, attempting to give meaning to and explain how things ‘really’ are in our world, but also for the historical mode of narratives, whether dealing in the historiographical revision of the past in order to explain the present or presenting a vision of the future which explains the current social direction. As Baudrillard notes however, these visions of the past, present, and the future do not share any true connection to the nature of reality. As Milbank has noted, the narratives exist only by, and for, themselves, floating free in a ceaseless cycle of narration with, and against, only other narratives. The important question however, is how these post-modern conceptions of power, desire, and seduction relate to the previously discussed characteristics of the Trinitarian divine. How do these descriptions of the nature of our society reflect, or need to change in order to reflect, the divine unity and community of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? How are power, desire, and seduction linked to the characteristics of Trinitarian life identified in the narrative promoted as including non-appropriation, non-reduction, and a kenotic opening up to the vulnerability of the self? This interaction of post-modern thought with Christian thought is not a new area, having attracted significant work including much of the initial development of Radical Orthodoxy itself. Yet, the Trinitarian facet bears greater scrutiny given its centrality to the project of an alternative radically orthodox narrative being developed here.

The non-appropriative nature of the Trinitarian exchange, stemming from its permanent sharing in community with the other, results in a system in which the other is not reduced through being the focus of the desire of the self. Indeed, the desire expressed within the Trinitarian one is a non-possessive desire, a desire which inverts the assumed flows of power and production systems of non-Trinitarian systems in favour of a continuous flow of desire and being desired between difference.³⁸ The Trinitarian nature of Christian theology as generative and open to exchange between difference provides a further way in which desire can be reconfigured, not as lust for the fulfilment of its own needs, but instead as a call to community and co-operation.³⁹ The holding together of diversity within unity seen in the perichoresis of the Trinity⁴⁰ provides for an internally dynamic desire for the Other that does not seek to incorporate or reduce. Indeed, it is the very

otherness of the Other that drives and returns the desire to the self.⁴¹ The analogical relation to be seen within and between the members of the divine life – the lover, the beloved, and the love itself⁴² – provides relationality to the function of desire in that the desire relies upon the Other in a way in which the nihilist desire and power flows of the post-modern thought of Foucault and Deleuze do not. As Ward notes:

Christian desire is always excessive, generous beyond what is asked. It is a desire not to consume the other, but to let the other be in the perfection they are called to grow into. It is a desire ultimately founded upon God as triune and, as triune, a community of love fore-given and given lavishly.⁴³

This desire stems from understanding the Trinity as the source of an authentically Christian relation to other communities and traditions, relying on mirroring the relations seen in the Trinity, in the relations between the Christian narrative, as represented by the community of the Church, and the wider community formed of multiple individuals and institutional/corporate organisations.⁴⁴ In doing so, the other has space in which to fully narrate as itself, without pressure or pre-judgement from either the Christian narrative or the contemporary meta-narrative of secular modernity. The drive to ‘let the other be in the perfection they are called to grow into’ therefore involves the provision of space for exchange, answerability, and the growth of a deeper understanding of the internal ideals and vision of the other, beyond a transitory point of agreement in reaction to outside pressure. This is not an imposition of the unreachable other onto the passivity of the self, nor the encroachment of the system of the self onto the formless and distant other. This is a living in relation, that inescapable and eternal tidal flow that we can deny, but never escape. It is an opening up to this flow that is called for here, a recognition of its reality, a welcoming of its engagement, and the exposure of the self to the vulnerability required for a full-hearted relation.

Critically, this Trinitarian approach seeks to avoid the simultaneous processes of individualisation and totalisation identified by Foucault as central to the exercise of power between difference,⁴⁵ while also undercutting the necessary responses of violence and consent that allow their operation. The process of individualisation, driven by the need to reduce the possible foci of resistance to the totalisation of power, heightens the feeling of difference between individuals, not only by promoting the positives aspects of their character and experience in comparison to those of others, but also by highlighting the negatives projected onto the other. This process of individualisation can be seen in the increasingly technological nature of our modern systems of communication and community, but also in the themes and motifs driven in the contemporary media landscape of distrust, terror, and societal breakdown. The Trinitarian community is a contrast to this build-up of individual identity, an alternative sign of the form that

inter-relationships can take on, that reverses and undercuts the current presentation of the Other. In doing so, the alternative form is presented within the system of sign and symbols that makes up our social reality, offering not a mirroring of contemporary norms, for example the process of totalisation and homogenisation, but rather a reversal of the dichotomies presented as the only possible options. As part of this, the Trinitarian example offers a critical counterpoint to the ongoing processes of totalisation seen within our late modern societies. While the process of individualisation seems focused on the development of an increasingly differentiated account of individual identity,⁴⁶ that is, an individualised notion of individuality, the process of totalisation is the process which appears to be functioning most powerfully at a social level.⁴⁷

The process of totalisation, identified by Foucault as the second half of the political double-bind in which contemporary societies find themselves,⁴⁸ can be seen functioning on a number of levels within the contemporary social and political sphere. While the process of contemporary individualisation seems to be largely focused on changing the epistemological and ontological self-understanding of the individual, the process of totalisation appears far more often in the context of state exercises of power and the invisible social and political ordering of our systems. This state exercise of power towards totalisation tends to manifest itself in how the state aims to engage with and mould the diverse individuals within society into an easily graspable and conformable whole.⁴⁹ While this is perhaps most obvious in the context of contemporary security and counter-terrorism proposals, with their heavy reliance on technological and surveillance techniques which de-humanise and de-privatise the lives of all individuals within society, it is also a feature of contemporary media and social narratives surrounding issues connected to social plurality. Whether this is seen with regards to immigration to western countries from other areas of the globe and the stoked backlash to its perceived effects, or in the polarisation of the political sphere with a renewal of populist partisanship, the circumstances are connected by a process of division between difference for the outcome of a smaller, but more homogenous, socially constructed polis.⁵⁰ This polis, defined by the socially constructed norms of behaviour and identity, rejects that outside itself in favour of the totalisation and homogenisation of the interior identity. The Trinity shows this promise of internal homogeneity leading to security to be false, casting instead the exchange between difference as the critical aspect leading to peace in society, rather than the subversion of difference through violence to the individual.⁵¹ The vulnerability expressed in the dependence of one aspect of the community of the divine does not just ape the flows of power and desire expressed in the processes of individualisation and totalisation seen in contemporary society, it does not aim to simply replace these constructs with another of similar form, it rather undercuts the assumed danger and projected violence of the other entirely.

The nature of the Trinitarian community as non-appropriative, non-reductive, and kenotic in nature delineates alternative forms of desire, exchange, and love that are possible options for a reconfiguring of the current context. While the nature of desire expressed within contemporary political and social theory is largely bound to themes of control, acquisition, and domination – desire is the experience of a lack of something that is necessary for the fulfilment of the individual's wants or needs. This conception of desire foregrounds acquisition as the primary focus of desire, the ability to exert control over the object of desire and to bring it into the sphere of influence of the individual.⁵² In doing so, the exercise of desire in our post-modern world is generally a destructive process, whereby the totality of the object desired is reduced through its manipulation and control by the desiring subject. The validity of the object, in and of itself, is reduced through its utilisation within the subject's scheme of desire, its bringing into the orbit of the subject reshapes the object's system of symbolic meaning into a definition defined by the subject. We see this occurrence not only in the promotion of the use value of physical or material desires, but also in the sphere of inter-personal desire. Possession, control, and dominance therefore provide the darker undercurrent to current formations of desire. In contrast, the Trinitarian example fleshed out in the previous chapter and seen in this chapter is configured as a generative form of exchange, where the function of desire is not the control of the other, but rather the effusive and overflowing opening to the other that allows for an unburdened and unbound exchange between them.

In this way, the use of the doctrine of the Trinity as a resource for a theologically sound reaction to forms of social plurality in our contemporary societies alludes to the possibility of a way out of the self-reinforcing systems of power and desire within which we live. As the work of Baudrillard and Lyotard shows when taken together, it is not enough to merely attempt the proposal of an alternative form of the same system, a peripheral tweaking of rough edges, or awkward politico-philosophical conjunctions to avoid the sub-optimal outcome of our current world. Rather, the task must be one that proposes a radical re-ordering of our current concepts, particularly in this case, the central concept of desire. As Milbank is right to have pointed out, it is impossible for an alternative Christian narrative to effectively challenge the dominant form of secular modernity as it is currently manifest, due to the hegemonic status it occupies in nearly every facet of our lives.⁵³ The response to this, as we have seen in Milbank's use of Lyotard, is in the deployment of an alternative meta-narrative structure which contains within it the alternative forms of epistemological, ontological, and sociological opinion necessary for an out-narration of currently paradigmatic structures. The doctrine of the Trinity, as we saw in the previous chapter, provides this alternative ordering of reality through its representation of forms of desire, exchange, and love that reverse the normative accounts held

within our contemporary society. Yet, most importantly, what is the nature of the Trinitarian form of desire, and, what aspects of that nature work to reverse our contemporary conceptualisation of desire?

If the doctrine of the Trinity is to be taken seriously, as has been consistently suggested through the prior part of this volume, then the form of desire described within it and in its external relations with the world, must also be taken as a serious suggestion for the correct Christian ordering of our desires and our societies. The Trinity as an example is a strong position from which the consideration of Christian practice can begin, not only in the context of religious and social plurality as examined earlier, but also in how that plurality can be envisioned within the broader social system which governs our inter-personal and inter-communal relationships. Given the role of the Trinitarian example in providing the ground on which plurality can be re-envisioned, its performance of desire is equally important in the development of an appropriate response for the Christian tradition to the presence of plurality within our society. It is not enough to have a conception of what plurality is or how it came about, without also having a conception of the appropriate response to the presence of plurality in our societies. The Trinity is an example, through its description of a perfectly divine community of desire and exchange, of the way in which the Christian community, in its interactions with the myriad forms of plurality existent in contemporary societies, can mirror the fullness and richness of the divine community.

This example can be strengthened using the resources made apparent in the previous description of the Trinitarian community – that the desire within the community of the Trinity is a desire for the otherness of the Other, that this desire desires the continued existence of the other, and that the desire between the three persons of the divine mirrors internally the external flows of desire between God and ourselves and between ourselves and God. As we saw in the discussion of Hyman's concept of non-finality in the context of narrative and its application to the interaction of the doctrine of the Trinity, the broader Christian tradition and the formation of specific narrative proposals regarding a renewed radically orthodox form, there is a connection between the nature of the Trinity and the nature of the Christian understanding of the Christian story.⁵⁴ This connection is apparent not only in the nature of the Trinitarian community but also in the formation of the desire between its members. As Williams and Panikkar have noted, it is the non-final characteristic of the Trinitarian community that provides space for the continued re-interpretation and re-narration of the Christian tradition in differing circumstances, with concomitant effects on the stability of any Christian institution, community, or social construction that aims for totalisation. This undercuts not only the Foucauldian analysis of contemporary power structures, which depend on the process of individualisation and totalisation, but also the requirement of the reduction and absorption of the Other into the subject for the culmination of desire.

This postponement of the need for the consumption and absorption of the Other for the culmination of desire within the Trinity also relates to the issues of ecclesiology identified in the previous chapter. The nature of desire exhibited by the Christian community and the narrative it attempts to expound fundamentally relates to the nature of the Christian community itself. If desire in the Christian community is to emulate the form found in the Trinity, because of rejection of the marginalisation, oppositionalism, and violence identified as present in the Milbankian conception of ecclesiology, then the nature of the ecclesiological understanding of the community must also change from the Milbankian form. As we saw in Doak's critique of Milbank, his approach is largely based on a 'remnant Christendom' model which depends for its functioning on the availability of Christian social familiarity in society, the incorporation of aspects of a fallen secular society into the fixed narrative order of the Milbankian approach, and its gradual redemption from the nihilistic violence of the secular modern.⁵⁵ In contrast, and more in line with ongoing discussion of the Trinitarian example of community, Graham Ward's model of political ecclesiology, is termed a form of 'critical engagement' by Doak.⁵⁶ While it stems from his understanding of the City, is also applicable to the emulation and performance of desire by Christian communities in the situation of plural and multi-faith societies. Ward's argument for a theological response to the post-modern city that is both critical of its excesses but also positive in its interaction and vision for the city, is crucial for a more open form of inter-religious community and a more open methodology of practice for the performance of a Trinitarian form of desire. As Ward argues:

We cannot solve the complexity of the relation before the real questions have emerged. And the real questions only emerge in the practices of our everyday living alongside each other.⁵⁷

Ward's understanding of the post-modern city as an overlapping mosaic of differing narrative groupings all in continuous relation to one another pluralises and continues the de-centring of the understanding of the Christian narrative as static and universally similar,⁵⁸ as can be seen in the earlier discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity,⁵⁹ allowing for a more confident and reactive approach to instances of plurality and engagement by the Christian narrative. In drawing upon the Trinitarian nature, the existence of alternative narrative communities within society is not necessarily a problem to be narrated away,⁶⁰ but is instead a challenge to engage and respond to the questions raised by the Other, displaying the answerability engendered by the placing into vulnerability of the Christian narrative.⁶¹

The practical character of this proposal also engenders a certain understanding of the way in which desire relates to the interaction between the desiring one and the desired. The flow of impact and exchange desired

between Christians and non-Christians in a plural society, ultimately impacts on both. As Ward writes:

given the levels of interdependence, and inter-relationship; given also the practices of our daily living (even if only reactively) – Christians living out their faith (as anyone else living out their implicit or explicit beliefs) will contribute to the social energies and symbolic fields outside the specificities of their ecclesial institutions,⁶²

leading to a situation where the narrative proposed by Christianity is not confined only to those already within its meta-narrative matrix, rejecting the oppositionalism embodied in the Milbankian approach, but is instead a reflection of the ongoing desire not only for presence of the Other in the community, but also for the continuation of the gift of the Others otherness.

As we have noted previously with Panikkar,⁶³ the plurality of the internal dynamics of the Trinity work against the ‘tyranny of a master-story or meta-narrative’⁶⁴ by constantly providing questioning and queering influences on any fixed notion of the Christian story. The inter-related and de-centralised nature of the contemporary social forms, along with the move from shared societal ideals towards individualised desire, gives greater space for individual socialisation within multiple narrative and proto-meta-narrative groupings. This moves beyond the pseudo-binary between secular liberal modernity and its antecedent, the Christian narrative, seen in Milbank, and allows the model to side-step the reduction of exchange between opposing narratives. In breaking free from the oppositional position promoted by Milbank in his mode of practice of inter-religious dialogue and in his theoretical explanation of the ecclesiology needed by the Christian community in contemporary society, an explicitly Trinitarian practice opens the door to a form of desire between mutually engaged religious narratives and communities, while also allowing for greater internal and external variety in the self-conception of the of the relationship between the broader religious stories and their particular narrative forms. The Trinitarian example holds within it a non-appropriative form of desire. This desire seeks to open up vulnerably towards the Other, an opening up that engenders answerability to the Other, and the formation of relations of exchange between them not based on the processes of individualisation or totalisation. Ward holds that the theological narrative seeking to represent the Trinitarian nature of the divine:

necessarily must be a discourse always having to re-examine itself afresh, question its own rhetoric, allow its own blindness to be exposed. It is in this way that the Christian ontology that informs this project is hermeneutical and offers itself always for other and for further interpretations. It is in this way that Christian theological discourse is not seeking to colonise the other, but engage it on the basis of a tradition which is open to its future transformation.⁶⁵

This is related to the earlier identification of theological integrity and the understanding of the Trinity as deeply unsettling to fixed notions of the Christian narrative. This proposal is extended into the field of social and cultural relations, highlighting the way in which a sustaining of this unfixed position allows for a better representation of the Trinitarian ethic within practical relations in plural societies. In terms of practical implementation, Ward represents both a physical proposal, in that an awareness of the liquidity of identity and narration in post-modernity promotes the inclusion in instances of dialogue of a broad spectrum of opinion for the various traditions,⁶⁶ as well as an attitudinal proposal, through the relativisation of the particular representation given of the wider narrative in any particular instance of dialogue by its historicity, its cultural, racial, or gendered position, demanding a hesitancy over creating or enforcing claims to authoritative finality or universal application.

Having established the importance and ever presence of desire and the characteristics of the inter-relation of the aspects of the Trinitarian community, what, then, is the nature of Trinitarian desire? Desire in the Trinity is a very queer thing – it challenges our conception of what desire and love must mean; it is postponed for the sake of validity of the other, it is a performance of constant reaching out which, while never culminated, represents the completion of the necessary form of desire for the preservation of community.

3.2 Queer desire and the trinity

Understanding the nature of desire within the Trinity as a queer form of desire opens up scope for the renewal of the place of desire as the cornerstone of the Christian performance of community. This community, extending beyond the borders of those attached to and inhabiting the Christian tradition and its plurality of related narratives, embodies the alternative possibility to our current social arrangement. Our contemporary society is largely formed by the meta-narrative grip of the secular modern with its simultaneous processes of atomising individualisation and homogenising totalisation operating at different levels of social construction, which carries with it a vision of desire as an omnipresent expression of reductive appropriation and conquest. This vision of desire is a construct of the meta-narrative that functions to support the social structure underpinning our current communities and to provide impetus to the meta-narrative's attempt to successfully function as one – providing a coherent explanation for the nature of the entirety of reality. In doing so, the nature of desire is a critical aspect not only of the Christian story, representing the internal dynamics of the divine as community, but also of the underpinning nature of our contemporary society. Critically, these are differing forms of desire. One, as we have seen in the discussion of the nature of the Trinitarian divine, is embodied in the shared selfhood of the three persons of the Trinity and the relationship expressed between them, a relationship that effusively overflows

with desire not only for the Other but also for the continued existence of the Other as distinct from the self, a postponement of the culmination of desire for the sake of the other. The other is a form of transactional exchange, where the benefit of one is the reduction of the other, where desire, in a false mockery of the love that engenders it, is best expressed through metaphors of domination, conquest, and the appropriation of the other. As we saw in the contrast drawn by Milbank between the foundation of the Christian meta-narrative form and that of secular modernity, the internal aspects of a meta-narrative formation have an impact on the way that it internally conceives of difference and in the performance of its narration towards aspects or communities that remain outside it.⁶⁷ It is for this reason that the implementation of a Trinitarianly focused narrative of the Christian tradition that takes seriously its attempt to emulate the form of desire seen among the divine community is a fundamentally queer approach to our contemporary norms of desire.

Queer, stemming from a reversal of the derogatory use of the term and arising out of the desire for liberation by individuals of non-normative sexualities,⁶⁸ is framed as a challenge to the constructed norms of social behaviour, not just sexual behaviour, that form the implicit and often explicit boundaries of acceptability and legality within our societies.⁶⁹ It does this not only by presenting the possibility of the alternative to the norm, the mere existence of the non-normative undercutting the totalising validity of the construction of that norm, but also by highlighting the created and constructed nature of our contemporary norms, undercutting their claims to universal social, historical, or biological validity. In doing so, queer functions on two levels – the first, as a particular challenge to currently normative accounts of sexuality and gender which promote heteronormativity and homogeneity in sexual expression, and the second as a theoretical stance or position which seeks to challenge all forms of social and cultural norms through a queering of their representation as necessary or inevitable. Queer is therefore both a practice and a position, with one naturally leading to the other as the performance of the particular leads to a differing enactment of the generalised norm. In identifying the nature of desire within the Trinity as a queer form of desire, both of these aspects become a critical part of understanding the way in which this form of desire can have an impact on the Christian narrative propounded and on the everyday practices of the Christian community within a pluralised society.

The Trinitarian form of community explored in the previous chapter, and the form of desire engendered between the members of that community explored in this chapter, together make up not only an internally Christian approach to matters of social and religious plurality, but also provide the building blocks for a renewal of Christian practice in pluralised societies. The desire seen between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and between the divine and the created order challenges our established social norms of desire through its characteristics of non-appropriation, non-reduction, and

non-finality, but also serves as a queering challenge to paradigms of narration and out-narration, meta-narrative finality, social and religious identity, and the nature of community between difference. In doing so, the Trinity functions queerly and as a queering influence by being a non-normative account of the way that society could be structured, undercutting the inevitability and seeming necessity of both Milbankian Radical Orthodoxy and nihilistic secular modernism. In the context of Milbankianism, the example of the Trinity disrupts the necessity for homogeneity within the Christian community seen in Milbank's ecclesiological proposals while also undercutting the extent to which Milbank's division between the Christian community and the secular world can be convincingly upheld. In a similar fashion, the example of the Trinity queers assumptions that undergird the meta-narrative dominance of the secular modern – by presenting a flux between the self and the other that refuses reduction to either,⁷⁰ it disrupts the functioning of the social processes of individualisation and totalisation identified by Foucault as integral to the continued maintenance of power,⁷¹ while also challenging contemporary notions of desire as related to materiality, possession, and exclusivity through the performative example of co-existing difference, similarity, and communal harmony.⁷² Beyond this, the example of peace between difference seen in the inter-relationship of the persons of the divine undermines the approaches of both attempts at producing a meta-narrative account of reality. It does so by removing the need, within the development and practice of communal living, for the reduction of difference through violence, which as we have seen in the discussion of contemporary society and in the discussion of aspects of Milbank's work, remains a central issue for both approaches.⁷³

This is not to say that the queer approach to conceptualising the nature of the Trinity does not have connections to the way that the broader Radical Orthodoxy movement has envisioned the performance of the Christian tradition within our contemporary societies. Indeed, the approach of Radical Orthodoxy as a whole and the approach of Queer theory or theology are themselves somewhat similar, although they differ about the scepticism displayed about the possibility of a fixed or meta-narrative structure in society ever being either stable or appropriate. Beyond this, both approaches share similar conceptions of the narrative nature of society, drawing on the uncovering of the constructed nature of social norms and practices seen in the work of post-modern thinkers in order to de-construct the nature of our contemporary societies as neither fixed nor inevitable in nature.⁷⁴ While queer approaches celebrate this de-legitimisation of specific social norms along with Radical Orthodoxy, for example around queer sexualities or gender performances for queer theorists or around the suitability of religious narratives in a public sphere for the broader Radical Orthodoxy movement, the two projects differ around the approach taken to the general imposition of norms. What I mean by this is that while Radical Orthodoxy does look to the narrative nature of social construction as a way of delegitimising

specific social norms imposed by the meta-narrative of secular modernity which either engender violence onto religious conceptualisations of reality, refuse the validity of religious opinions in the political or policy sphere, or which promote the individualisation of faith into a purely private matter, the project aims to do so in order to allow the envelopment of that social space within a different set of meta-narrative norms. The difference is therefore where these norms are to come from, the Christian tradition, and how they are to be deployed, through the performance of a Christian identity that aims to convince through its better representation of peace than that of secular modernity. In contrast, the queer project, while rejecting specific norms such as aspects of heteronormativity or transphobia, also showcases a suspicion towards the possibility of any meta-narrative construct being able to do justice to minority positions or adequately represent the totality of human diversity.⁷⁵ In adopting this position, the queer project takes the suspicion of the grand narratives evidenced by Lyotard as a symptom and cause of post-modernity to its logical conclusion⁷⁶ – a suspicion of all narratives as constructs which aim to dominate, subjugate, and construct social relations in such a way that power is upheld by those currently in power and denied to those who are not.⁷⁷ The cross over between these two aspects of the queer project, the specific targeting of social norms relating to the minority experience of sexually non-normative individuals and the general suspicion towards narrative structures which attempt to explain or codify reality, drive a constant process. This process, a process of queering, rejects the possibility of a structured meta-narrative which adequately respects the diversity and plurality of individual experiences of reality in favour of a kaleidoscopic vision of exchange, narration, and, some would charge, relativism.

There is therefore obviously a connection between the theoretical basis of Queer theory and the Radical Orthodoxy project, even if they arrive at this similar situation from differing contexts and even if they aim to resolve this similar situation in different ways. Both projects draw on the work of the post-modern thinkers examined earlier (Lyotard, Foucault, Gadamer, Lacan, etc., etc.) in order to develop the conceptualisation of our current social order within which their projects arise. Specifically, both projects share an understanding of our contemporary reality as formed by the interaction of narrative forms, differing descriptive stories about the nature of reality and the nature of our social relations which provide structure, order, and meaning to them. This narrative conceptualisation of society functions for both projects not only as a descriptive model, describing the current flows and structures of power within our societies and their inter-relationships, but also as a strategic model for their attempts at changing various aspects of our current situation. Given the malleability of social norms and values proposed in the narrative conception of social order, the way to go about changing aspects of society which are disfavoured by the projects, whether secular dominance or sexual heteronormativity, is much clearer than in a

concomitant situation where the narrative conception of society is not found to be convincing. Within the narrative model, the way of creating change within society becomes unmoored from the material aspects of power, objective reality, or physical ability and is instead based on the narration, through performance, of a story that aims to be both coherent and convincing in its explanation of reality.⁷⁸ This hurdle is somewhat lower than that required by non-narrative conceptions of social change, although it still places a burden of coherence and validity on the narrative to be formed.

Beyond this narrative conception of social ordering, the projects of queer theory and Radical Orthodoxy share other areas of similarity. This connection is perhaps most clearly seen in the person of Gerard Loughlin. His work is central not only to the Radical Orthodoxy project, being a contributor to the *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* volume,⁷⁹ but also to the developing overlap between aspects of Queer theology, the application of the insights of queer theory to aspects of the Christian tradition, and the Radical Orthodoxy project.⁸⁰ As Loughlin has pointed out, this convergence should not be seen as merely coincidental given the long history of queer thinking about gender and sexuality within the Christian story – from the idolisation of a chaste love to the carnal, embodied, flesh of Christ. This has been fleshed out in his early work in *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology*⁸¹ which draws on the narrative power of theology, arguing for a revitalization of the storytelling aspect of theological endeavour and offering an account of the Christian life as a fundamentally social practice. This was extended in Loughlin's *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology*,⁸² which rethinks more established forms of Christian thinking about the body and desire through the medium of film. As we have seen, this Christian form of desire queers the forms of desire developed within the secular modern framework of late modernity, rejecting critical aspects of its performance and structuring, and presenting a radically alternate form.

In doing so, the queer project incorporates aspects of resistance to normativity which mirror across to the goal of the narration of the Christian narrative within the Radical Orthodoxy movement. This resistance is apparent within the concept of queer through the rejection of the validity of social norms,⁸³ uncovered as purely illusory constructs of power rather than objective realities, and the deployment of disruptive performances by individuals and groups to further highlight the created, and false, nature of social sex and gender norms.⁸⁴ This can be seen in the importance of visibility for aspects of queer activism – Queer Nation's 'We're here, we're queer, get used to us!' – and the centrality of aspects of performance for undermining established gender roles. This genderfucking plays with notions of conformity and homogeneity to seduce the established flows of power and privilege which hang on the structured, and socially defined, gender roles.⁸⁵ By choosing to perform our gender or sexuality in one way or the other, not only are we made aware of the possibility of choice versus the inevitability

of socially assigned role, but we also begin to break down for everyone, not only ourselves, the social patterns which teach us those assigned roles with their attached expectations, requirements, and systems of enforcement. This multi-layered understanding of the way in which our actions are formed by, play a part in forming, and can be used as resistance against, socially constructed norms is a critical aspect of both Radical Orthodoxy, particularly in differing accounts of ecclesiology offered by both Milbank and Ward, and of Queer theory, which promotes both individual and community visibility as an antidote to normative erasure of difference.

Within this overlap between the two projects, there is significant scope for the delivery of a new methodology of attaining the kind of goals desired by the broader Radical Orthodoxy movement. While there are significant problematic areas of the Milbankian approach, including a tendency towards oppositionalism between difference and a reduction of diversity both internally to the traditions or communities under examination and externally in the process of the re-Christianization of the social order, the infusion of the Radical Orthodoxy project with an awareness of the strategies, conceptualisations, and understanding of queer theory offers up greater potential space for the modelling of a form of narration that more adequately mirrors the internal commitments of the Christian narrative. In doing this, the form of the narration offered throughout this book changes from one that seeks to replace the meta-narrative and norm-enforcing structure of secular modernity with another based on a specific and particular understanding of the Christian narrative promoted by Milbank, to one which questions the ability of that specific form of the Christian narrative, or even any settled form of the narrative, to adequately represent, include, or harmonise the social differences to be found within and without the tradition. This is not to say that the desire to replace the meta-narrative structure of modernity is to be lost, nor that all can be reduced to a relativistic milieu awash with ethically indistinguishable stories, but rather that the way in which the replacement of the meta-narrative of secular modernity is to be gone about, the nature of the Christian narrative which attempts this, and the teleological goal of that narrative must all be questioned in the light of both the Trinitarian character of Christian narrative as discussed earlier, and the queer nature of the Trinitarian form of desire identified here.

So, the central question becomes, what are the characteristic features of an understanding of the Trinitarian form of desire as queer? There are a variety of features, which should hopefully have become somewhat clear throughout our exploration of the nature of the Trinity, which suggest a connection between the nature of the Trinity, the nature of the desire present within and between its constituent members, and the queering of contemporary forms of desire as expressed within the structures of capitalist late modernity. I wish to look at four particular features, examining how each of these aspects builds the case not only for a queering of the Trinity itself, but also of the way in which the Christian community, and the narrative

which binds it together, might queerly express that form of desire in their actions within our pluralised societies. These four aspects include the notion of postponement in Trinitarian desire, the performative stance expressed in that desire, an experiential sharing in desire found between and among the three persons, and a rejection of finality or stillness in desire. Each of these aspects contains within it an aspect of the nature of the Trinity which reflects within itself not only an aspect of the divine for emulation on the part of the Christian individual or community, but also an alternative way of structuring our conceptualisation of desire to that found in our current societies. In this way, by looking at the queer form of desire within the Trinity, we can come to develop alternative queer forms of engaging with and desiring the others to be found in our societies. This is a form of performative desire, a performance that shows its inner commitments through the actions taken towards the Other, that creates a narrative within society through showing the difference in action, rather than just a description of an ideal state that attempts to convince. It is not enough to tell people of the beauty of the Christian story, rather one must show the beauty of the Christian story every day, in every way, and with everyone.

The first characteristic quality of the Trinitarian form of desire that I wish to examine in this section is the nature of desire expressed within the Trinity as postponed. By this I mean that the desire within the Trinity is held within a constant state of postponement, a holding off from culmination, that represents a significant aspect of the Trinity's continuing ability to display the flow seen between its various persons. This perichoretic pause is an eternally postponed resolution of desire. As we can see in the nature of the Trinity, the three persons are involved in a continuous dance of exchange and inter-relationship formed by their desire for each of the others, which in the words of Loughlin represents an excessive, generous, and effusive performance of community.⁸⁶ This dance of the three persons of the Trinity is a performance of desire, yet its performance of desire is a queer one in that it disrupts and undercuts our expectations of the form that desire both should, and could, take within our interactions with others. In doing so, it offers a new possibility for parodic cycles of performance by the Christian individual and Christian community which come to better represent the Christian story. As each person of the Trinity is engaged in a process of desiring and being desired, this process is an ongoing one, which requires the continued existence of each individual person in order to sustain the availability of the flow between them. In doing so, the nature of desire expressed is different to the acquisitive and ultimately reductive form of desire explored above as a characteristic quality of desire within late modernity. As we saw in the examination of post-modern thought on the narrative nature of society and the critical function that desire plays in our contemporary social ordering, the desire that is apparent within our contemporary societies is structured by the nihilistic violence of the meta-narrative of the secular modern and largely relies on an acquisitive understanding of desire.⁸⁷ This can be seen

not only in the materialistic form of capitalist desire, which prioritises the acquisition and accumulation of physical goods or monetary wealth for the individual through its removal from another, but also in the destructive nature of the narrative form that our current society takes, where the meta-narrative desire of modernity, with its full bevy of supporting and buttressing sub-narratives, relies on the destruction and out-narration of any alternatives for the preservation of its coherency in providing a total explanation of our reality and for its ability to remain convincing in the face of those points of difficulty brought about by the eruption of the Other into our consciousness.⁸⁸

So, the desire expressed in the Trinity, because it relies on a constant flow and exchange between difference, requires, in some way, the preservation of that difference for the continued functioning of the performance of desire. If the community of the Trinity were to adopt the model of desire seen in our contemporary societies, the desire of the Father for the Son would an acquisitive desire that aimed not only to bring the Son into the sphere of the Father's desiring, but also to grasp and hold that Son as the object of desire in a fixed form of relation whereby the independence and particularity of the Son would be reduced, the relationship between the Father and Son would be set, and ultimately the Son would cease to be a viable counterpoint to the Father at all, devolving instead into a controlled, structured, and, ultimately, submissively incorporated reflection of only the Father's desire. Instead, we have structure of desire within the Trinity which rejects the expected culmination of desire, the acquisition and control of the other, in favour of a postponement of the resolution of desire – because without this postponement, the continuation of the possibility of mutual desire would be impossible. This is a foregrounding of the essential nature of the Holy Spirit within the perichoretic flow of the Trinity, a continuation of process over the end result, and a focus on the continuation of love over its resolution. The queer nature of the Trinity is a desire that is focused on the preservation of the Other over the satisfaction of the Self, it is generous in allowing for the self-expression of the object of desire to overcome the want of the self, it is effusive in prioritising the ceaseless flow of desire over the finalisation of relationship, and most importantly it challenges descriptively and practically our vision of the potential forms of individual and social desire. As Ward notes, the Trinitarian desire is a 'desire not to consume the other, but to let the other be in the perfection they are called to grow into'.⁸⁹

The critical aspect of this queer nature of the Trinitarian form of desire is that it brings to the fore a new way of visualising the sought-after harmony-in-difference that was so mangled in the Milbankian approach to matters of dialogue and ecclesiology. As we saw earlier, while Milbank attempts to cast his version of the Christian narrative as showcasing harmony-in-difference, in contrast to the nihilistic violence of the secular modern, his theoretical approach and practical methodology become problematic when seen in the contexts of internal variation within the Christian community,⁹⁰

inter-religious dialogue with members of alternative meta-narrative constructions,⁹¹ and in the ecclesiological proposals put forward by Milbank.⁹² In the form sketched out here, the queering of desire by the Trinity rejects the kind of teleological culmination seen in Milbank's ecclesiology in favour of a postponement of resolution; much as the desire expressed between the members of the Trinity rejects a full incorporation of the other into the self. Instead, the resolution of the desire felt by one member is held off by the need to preserve the desiring ability of the other. In emulating this, we are called to allow the other to desire us, and to keep on desiring us, as the other itself and not merely as a form to be incorporated into our own acquisitive form. This vision of harmony-in-difference is a more convincing account of the way in which our emulation of the Trinity can come to form a better performance of the Christian story within the type of pluralised, diverse, societies within which we live. Milbank's call for meta-narrative finality, and the ecclesiological and sociological positions this entails, forces a drift from the commitment to the representation of peace among difference. This is the same drift seen in the attempt by the meta-narrative of modernity to adequately control and encapsulate our reality within a fixed meta-narrative structure. The postponement of desire is therefore a critical step in the avoidance of the violence inherent in both secular modernity and the Milbankian form of Radical Orthodoxy. The critical aspect of desire, in this queer form, is not the resolution of the tension expressed between the desirer and the desired, its crescendo, or its climax, rather the critical aspect of desire is in its continuous, effusive, and generous performance of love for the otherness of the other.

It is this nature of desire as performance which forms the second characteristic of Trinitarian desire that I wish to identify as queer. In looking at the Trinity as a dance between partners where each is simultaneously desiring of and being desired by the others, what we have is a perichoresis of desire.⁹³ This movement between the partners continues without resolution, because as we have seen the resolution of desire would require a reduction of the independent validity of the desired person which goes against the continued desire for the otherness of the other. In laying out this vision of the Trinity, where love for the other leads to a postponement of the desire of the self, desire becomes a continuously performed act. This aspect of performance is a critical part of queer dynamics of social change.⁹⁴ While Milbank and his postmodern sources of inspiration regarding the narrative nature of society have largely been happy to call for out-narration and develop alternative forms of narratively formed social ordering, there has been little attention paid directly to the ways in which this out narration might occur. This is particularly true of Milbank who, as we have seen, relies on a Platonic notion of the attractiveness of truth in order to buttress his claim that those exposed to the 'correct' form of Christian narrative will ultimately uncover its truth through the beauty displayed in its conception of a society where harmony is found between difference.⁹⁵ However, as should also have

become clear, not only is the conception of a peaceful society offered by Milbank problematic, but also his strategy for engendering its creation poses particular issues when aligned with the characteristic qualities to which his project aspires.

It is into this framework that the notion of a queer performance of desire speaks. While the quality of the desire expressed between and among the persons of the Trinity has been seen to be queer due its postponed and deferred nature, when compared to contemporary notions of desire and the form of harmony mooted by Milbank, there is also a matter of the ongoing performance of desire. That is, the way that the desire is shown or acted out in the ongoing dance of the divine. This performance is the performance of a disposition of desire. Performance is a critical aspect of the movement from a conceptual and theoretical notion of a desiring community to the embodiment of such a thing. While queer theory has generally used performance as a way of challenge the normativities within our society, whether of gender in Butler's seminal account of 'genderfucking'⁹⁶ or in specific contexts like the reclamation of muscular masculinity by gay male leather communities,⁹⁷ performance is a critical aspect of the way that queer envisions the process of social change. In this context, as throughout this volume, the performance of the desiring Trinity offers an example for the performance of our own forms of desire and concomitant forms of community. The Trinitarian example offered through its continued performance of postponed desire is one in which the needs of the other for continued existence outweigh the desire of the self to acquire or incorporate the other into a finalised account of relation and where the continued ability to perform desire between a community outweighs the need for a resolution. This leads to a dispositional performative form of desire, where desire is expressed not in finality, but rather as a 'stance' which is taken towards the other.

What is meant by a disposition is worth clarifying here. While usually, when we talk of adopting certain ethical commitments and how they might impact our behaviour, we think in discrete packages of actions, consequences, and further actions. The queer example of the Trinity offers up a holistic vision of how these separate instances can be integrated within a broad ongoing commitment to a change in our relationship with the other. As we have seen in the conceptualisation of the nature of desire in the Trinity, the important aspect is not the culmination of a process, but the attitude adopted in the performance of that process. How we desire and the disposition we adopt that prioritises the ongoing process of desire are both more important than the teleological resolution of that desire. So, the postponed form of desire uncovered between the members of the Trinitarian community is an ongoing performance of desire, rather than a discrete action of desiring. It is a stance, or a disposition, that comes to undergird the totality of the self's actions towards the other. This disposition is one of desiring rather than desire, a continuous ongoing and effusive gesture of desire

towards the other that does not come to a close but is rather eternally held open for the sake of its own continuation.

This holding open towards the other as an ethical disposition to be adopted relates to a variety of practical and theoretical proposals for an embodying of the Trinitarian form of desire. Perhaps most usefully, it draws on previously established accounts of desire within the Christian tradition which draw on queer understandings of the body.⁹⁸ Most prominently, particularly among those thinkers aligned with the Radical Orthodoxy movement, would be the work on the nature of desire, love, and the place of the body by Rowan Williams. Williams explores this notion of an open disposition towards the other within the context of evaluating the critical aspects for the validation of forms of relationship within a Christian framework.⁹⁹ In doing so, he identifies vulnerability, an opening up of the self to the other without a guarantee of reciprocation or return,¹⁰⁰ as a critical lesson learnt through our involvement in desiring relationships, with asymmetry in power being its opposite aspect.¹⁰¹ While he applies this insight into an argument for the validity of same-sex relationships, given that they are able to display this characteristic to the same degree as heterosexual ones, its vision of vulnerability through desire is an enlightening one. As we have seen in describing the desire of the Trinity as dispositional in nature – continued, open, effusive – the disposition to be developed in emulating the Trinity is one of vulnerable opening up towards the other. This queers our understanding of desire further from the postponed desire seen above to one that also incorporates the stance adopted within that postponement – while resolution might be postponed, that does not mean that the eternal flux of relation found in between the members of the desiring community is stilled, nor does it rely on a passive view of the self, open to the reception of the divine, and male, other.¹⁰² It complicates the gendered reading of relation by focusing on the active willing of relation on the part of the Christian community, the mutable flux of gift between the self and the other.

So in looking at the way that the conceptualisation of Trinitarian desire can be fleshed out, we see that this form of desire incorporates a queer postponement of resolution and a queer performance of desire which prioritises aspects of vulnerability to the other. The persons of the Trinity are in an eternal flux of exchange, formed by the performance of desire from one person to another. This performance of desire is ongoing and eternal and is formed by the reaching out into vulnerability by the desiring party, a form of non-appropriative and non-reductive form of desire which allows for the continuation of desire and for the continuation of the existence of difference within the desiring community.

While stressing this aspect of continued difference within the anticipated form of community and social relationship proposed from this reading of the Trinity, it is important to also pay attention to the way in which the Trinity, while composed of three persons, is also an indissoluble divine unity.

I wish to make the claim that it is desire, being a shared characteristic of the whole divine community that provides this form of unity within the model sketched out here. This is particularly to be seen in the way in which each of the forms of plurality and difference theorised within the divine community is incorporated by the unifying flow of desire and being desire between them. Each of the persons of the Trinity exists within a simultaneous state of both desiring the others, expressing vulnerability and a postponed form of desire towards difference, and of being desired by the others, having that vulnerability and postponement projected back through the performance of the others in relation with it.¹⁰³ In doing so, the performance of the self is reflected by the performance of the other. The practise of desiring and being desired binds together the plural nature of the divine community envisioned within a shared experience, highlighting the way in which the unity of the divine community can co-exist within and through the plurality expressed. Without plurality in some form, the practice of unity is not only impossible but also obsolete; without the other, the function of desire is unnecessary; without a return, our love must go astray.

The queer form of love outlined therefore does not reject the importance of unity within the divine in its focus on aspects of plurality and difference. Rather the plurality identified as a critical part of the divine life contributes to the formation of a communal unity, which is based on a shared experience of desire rather than the culmination of desire through the reduction of the other. Critically, not only does this conceptualisation offer up unity as an ongoing process of exchange and relation, refiguring contemporary notions of unity as homogeneity, but it also integrates the Christian performance of desire within the pluralised societies experienced today. This relationship between unity and diversity is, as we have seen in earlier discussions of both the Incarnation and Creation, a key feature of the claim of the Christian story to paradoxically represent both within its narrative structure. Just as the Incarnation plays with notions of universality and particularity, and just as Creation plays with notions of unity and plurality, so the notion of desire within the Trinity plays with our expectations of both desire and community.

This is the last aspect of the Trinitarian form of desire I wish to examine in this section – the ability to the Trinity to play with established notions of desire, community, and the divine in order to disrupt our expectations and queer our current formations. While the previous three aspects, postponement, performance, and shared experience, each draw on aspects of the Trinitarian example, it is the role that this example as a whole plays that I wish to swiftly examine here. In showcasing the possibility of a different form of desire, one that has postponed its resolution for the sake of the other, performs its desire as a disposition of vulnerability towards the other, and one that binds together difference not through similarity but rather through experience, the Trinity begins the deconstruction of the currently normative and socially dominant forms of community and desire. There is

within this understanding of the Trinity as expressing a continuous process or exchange, rather than a fixed form of relation, hesitancy towards forms of finality, a hesitancy that can be clearly seen in the work of Williams and Panikkar on the nature of action in the light of the Trinity.¹⁰⁴ Critically within this queering of the notion of desire by the Trinity, is a supplementary queering of our understanding of the nature of the tradition which has formed around this picture of the divine, and, in turn, the community that upholds that tradition. As we saw in the examination of Milbank's forms of community and ecclesiology, contemporary notions of tradition and community largely revolve around notions of fixed homogeneity¹⁰⁵ – that the community all shares some essential characteristic relating to a fixed and static understanding of the tradition which unites them. This can be clearly seen in the way in which a single form of the Christian narrative proposed by Milbank is promoted not only as the solution to Christian attempts at the out-narration of secularity/modernity, but also as the only valid form of the Christian tradition itself.

We see this in Milbank's dismissal of diversity both outside religious traditions, but also in his lack of attention to diversity within religious traditions, both Christian and non-Christian. In contrast the queer form of desire incorporates within itself not only the presence of diversity, the difference apparent between the desired and the desiring persons, but also, through its dispositions of postponement and vulnerability, the continued existence of this difference. Critically this existence and continued existence of difference are not external to the community, as in, say, a withdrawal of the Christian community from engagement with broader society as a whole, but rather the difference exists within, and because of, the continued community proposed. While Milbank claims that his narrative form of the Christian tradition represents a vision of harmony between differences, its Christendom inspired vision of a process of political and social re-Christianisation offers little hope of plurality continuing to exist peaceably in any real form within the bounds of the newly proposed meta-narrative structure. As has been suggested throughout, it is this monopolistic and homogenous vision of finality that represents a critical stumbling block for the internal coherence of the Milbankian project – undermining his central claim of the Christian narrative more adequately describing a vision of harmonious difference than secular modernity.¹⁰⁶

These queer aspects of Trinitarian desire are not to be seen as the totality of the Trinitarian form, nor are they to be taken as prescriptive models of a set framework. Rather, as I imagine will be obvious by now, they are merely aspects of the Trinity which, when used as the foundations of a form of Christian narration, offer a correction to the tendencies seen within the Milbankian approach. As part of this, they are important not only as theoretical descriptors of a different form of possible desire, but also as the inspiration for practical emulation by the Christian community. In both forms, these characteristics work to queer and destabilise finalising accounts of

both community and narrative, with the Trinity vouching for an ongoing, relational, and plural form of both.

3.3 Queer practice and the trinity

The queer understanding of the nature of desire developed above offers scope for a renewal of desirous practice in the Christian performance of community. As we saw, this aspect of performance is critical – the judgement of the Christian narrative as offering a consistent and coherent account of the possibility and shape of harmony in difference is only convincing if displayed, both theoretically and practically, in the Christian community's performance of harmony in a plural society. For this reason, the implementation of the form of desire developed here is a critical aspect of the performance of the Christian story by the Christian community. In undertaking this performance, the Christian community can strengthen or weaken the coherence of the narrative proposed – actions in line with the expressed ideals function to strengthen the coherence and viability of the narrative, while actions which seem to contradict the expressed ideals of the narrative weaken it. This is the critical mismatch seen in the body of Radical Orthodoxy's response to religious plurality, a mismatch between the end ideal of harmonic peace and the tactical methods of out-narration and reduction seen in practice.¹⁰⁷

Given that this is the case, and that the aim of any narration of the Christian tradition is to display the peace, grace, and example of the divine, we must look to develop new forms of performance which display the queer form of desire seen within the Trinitarian community. In looking for practical performances of desire which bear a similarity to the divine form, it is perhaps no surprise that the queer communities within our contemporary societies have offered some of the best places to start. This can be clearly seen not only in the non-heteronormative forms of desire developed within queer sexual communities, but also among other marginalised groups of ethnic or religious identity which have developed alternative constructions of community to the dominant social order.¹⁰⁸ In doing so, they offer to the Christian community resources for a renewal of desire outside its current confines, and a renewal of the place of desire as central to the performance of Christian identity on an individual level, and the Christian story on a communal level. The beginnings of this looking around for practical examples of alternative modes of desire, love, and community can be seen prominently in the convergence between aspects of queer theology and Radical Orthodoxy. This convergence is seen in both critiques levelled at its broader world view, such as those seen in chapters provided by Isherwood, Newell, and Daggers in the critical volume *The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy* which explicitly connects Radical Orthodoxy and the insights of Queer Theology,¹⁰⁹ and also importantly in the work done by figures within the movement. These figures, most prominently Ward, Williams, and

Loughlin, engage with or are at least are aware of the similarities between queer theology and aspects of the Radical Orthodoxy project and the possibility present in their mutual conjunction. Think of Ward's concern with aspects of community and ecclesiology and his engagement with critical theory,¹¹⁰ Williams's theological understanding of desire, relationality, and the formation of appropriate responses to pluralities of opinion within the Church,¹¹¹ and Loughlin's much more explicit concern with both narrative and queer aspects of the Radical Orthodoxy project.¹¹² All three figures listed here, who have also been raised previously in this volume, are somewhat removed for various reasons from the 'mainstream' form of Milbankian Radical Orthodoxy engaged with critically so far. For Ward, there is a distance in his self-identification as a member of the Radical Orthodoxy project, for Williams this distance comes about through his inspiration of Radical Orthodoxy and engagement with it through the years but a lack of explicit personal identification and an understated but consistent criticism of some of its key figures, while for Loughlin, although involved in the early stages of Radical Orthodoxy, has always had a distinct approach to matters of sexuality and gender.

In this chapter, we have looked at a number of ways in which the Trinitarian form of community, seen in the previous chapter as the key characteristic of the divine nature, is fundamentally shaped by its performance of a queer form of desire. This form of desire, as we have seen, relates to the ongoing example of the Trinity in expressing desire without the reductive, appropriative, and violent tendencies of the desire seen in both Milbankian Radical Orthodoxy and the meta-narrative structure of secular modernity. In doing so, the Trinity offers not just a theoretical example of an alternative form of Christian desire and community, but also an example for practical aspects of living within the plural societies of the contemporary world. However, given the strength of contemporary norms of reductive and appropriative conduct in the context of desire and identity, it is perhaps unsurprising that when looking for examples of desirous practice in our world, it is those communities marginalised by their sexuality, race, or religion which offer the most significant teaching examples. In looking at the practice of desire, how the Christian community might come to display and perform the internal form of desire seen in the Trinity in its everyday interactions with others in society, individual and community level practices are both critical aspects. As we have seen in the theoretical practice of the Trinity as a community of desire, the form of desire practiced must be characterised by a disposition towards vulnerability, answerability in the form of an openness to diversity and change within the self in reaction to the response of the other, and a focus on the continuing process of desire rather than its culmination in the reduction of the other to the self. These three critical aspects delineate the appropriate practical response by the Christian community in engaging with social and religious plurality in a manner that adequately reflects the harmony-in-difference theoretically held to be the

central point of difference between the Christian tradition and others, such as secular modernity, and also the critical attractive characteristic of that tradition. So, the question becomes how might we in practice display desire formed by vulnerability, answerability, and non-finality? In answering this question, there must, obviously, be room for inspiration rather than wholesale adoption, and room for the exploration of alternative forms within the practice of Christian identity and community.

By looking at the new forms of relationship and community seen in LGBT+ communities, an area which has seen much attention from queer theorists and queer theologians for obvious reasons,¹¹³ it is not suggested that we can draw direct comparisons between the form of the Trinity and the form of queer sexual relationships – rather, the characteristics present or desired within queer relationships point the way toward a renewal or reconfiguration of contemporary Christian practice towards diversity. When it comes to matters of non-reduction and non-appropriation in exchange, examples such as the sexual and gender balance within homosexual relationships cast light on the way in which relation can be built within a system of similarity and difference that does not necessarily rely on a socially constructed power imbalance. While this feature of homosexuality, the disruption of socially ordered power structures relating to the subjugation of women and the privileging of men, has formed the root cause of much of its stigmatisation,¹¹⁴ we can see that both its existence and the awareness of its existence by those individuals involved leads to a discursive and performative seduction of our contemporary norms. To take this aspect further, in being aware of the power imbalances promoted by our contemporary social ordering within heterosexual relationships, it is possible to foreground this playing with established norms of power and relation in order to satirise and deconstruct aspects of it. This can be seen in the playing with power roles within sexual-preference and sexual-performance minorities, such as the hypermasculinisation of aspects of gay culture which subvert normative heterosexual orderings of masculinity,¹¹⁵ the inverse process of masculinisation and presentation seen in ‘butch’ lesbian communities which disrupt notions of femininity and social acceptability,¹¹⁶ or the deliberate embrace of sexual power play within sexual performance minorities, such as those involved in bondage, dominance/submission, or sadomasochism.¹¹⁷ Each of these forms of relation, in disrupting the dominant norm, offer up alternative understandings and performances of relation. While each may not individually offer up a reflection of the Christian divine, each highlights the way in which the performance of an alternative form deconstructs, disrupts, and ultimately seduces our adherence to the socially dominant norm. It is an opening of the imagination to difference that arises from the awareness of the power flows embedded within our contemporary norms of relation.

If we are to take this aspect seriously, then we must consider how the performance of each of these aspects – non-reduction, non-appropriation, and non-finality – might be performed effectively in the encounter with

individuals or communities within our societies which differ. Implementation is a matter of both institutional and individual attitude, as well as a structuring of the instances of engagement to encourage and reflect upon the non-appropriative and participatory requirements evidenced here. Promoting and utilising a non-appropriative method of relation within the context of an instance of interaction with the other furthers and strengthens the earlier practical proposals and endorses the creation and sustaining of integrity in the narration of the Christian narrative by the Christian community. This involves enabling the other to present its own narration in the context of the issue under discussion freely and without expectation as to its approach or content, or the imposition on its narration of certain structures of power or position.¹¹⁸ As McConnell, echoing some aspects of D'Costa's gesture towards Trinitarian practice, notes:

One of the most significant aspects of my own understanding came through reflection on the ninth commandment; *neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbour* (Deuteronomy 11:20, NRSV). Previously, it was not uncommon for me to engage in interfaith dialogue with pre-existing notions of what my dialogue partner believed. These pre-existing ideas were largely based on information from biased sources that had unspoken polemical aims of refuting the religious claims of the other religion.¹¹⁹

This particular instance of dialogue has been shaped by the continuing process of learning more about the Other. By allowing the Other to narrate free of expectation, McConnell notes that his engagement in dialogue changed from the monological presentation of his views into a dialogical exchange between himself and, critically, someone who was like him. As he writes:

As I began to encounter actual persons who were part of these other religions, I came to realize that, as adherents, their faith was as meaningful and internally coherent to them as evangelical Christianity is to me.¹²⁰

This account highlights the necessity of practical and long-term engagement with those from other communities in order for the respect necessary for a non-appropriative model of practice to emerge. In recognising the Other as fundamentally similar to ourselves, social and ethical obligations toward them become clearer,¹²¹ and the possibility for the formation of equitable and sustainable exchange increases. As Gross notes, the action of engagement is not solely a rational acknowledgement of the place of the Other, but is also an emotional and empathetic engagement that strives towards the recognition of the place of the Other as offering a legitimately different perspective on the world,¹²² requiring an emotional investment by the participants in the vulnerability of the Other.

It is this movement from the acknowledgement of the existence of the Other to an active engagement that is a key characteristic of Ward's methodology for living within the post-modern city. In contrast to other Radical Orthodoxy figures, Ward is significantly more positive about the possibility of ontological peace being found to some degree within the broadly secular meta-narrative structure of our societies. This becomes most clear in his discussion of Barth in *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*¹²³ but is also a significant factor in his work within the edited volume *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*¹²⁴ and his *Cities of God*.¹²⁵ Ward's broader acknowledgement of the complexity of our plural post-modern societies and his exploration of what this complexity and plurality means ethically for the Christian community ties together the practical proposals offered in this chapter as a more general attitudinal disposition toward a living together with the Other with the importance of an interaction with the existence of plurality for the coherence of the Radical Orthodoxy project as a whole.

Beyond this practical strategy of increased engagement is a resistance to forms of finality which limit or fix narrative forms of broad traditions. This is true whether internal to the Christian narrative itself, the issue seen as problematic in Milbank's understanding of the 'true' form of the Christian narrative, or in dealings with other alternative forms of narrative, identity, or community had by the Christian community. The form of Trinitarian desire requires a commitment to the flourishing of both internal and external difference, and the non-reduction of difference present within the object of desire. As part of this, allowing the full diversity of the other to exist in relation is a critical aspect of the postponed nature of the Trinitarian form of desire to be performed – allowing the other to be, and continue to be, free of an externally imposed reduction to either oppositionalism or a unidimensional reality. Practically, this resistance functions internally to the model of engagement as a continuous methodological check on the dominance of a particular narrative over others. This questioning function stalls any 'settling' of the meta-narrative conception of reality into a monolithic, and reductive, account of the present plurality. This queering function within the methodology of practice proposed, driven by the dynamic nature of the intra-Trinitarian relation, functions not only on a practical level, but also at the level of meta-discourse.¹²⁶ This level, where meta-narratives as narrative wholes compete in a ceaseless cycle of narrative dominance and struggle, drives the lower-level interactions in a similar fashion, pushing each instance of dialogue to represent the wider meta-narrative struggle to dominate and control the narration of social reality in a way that synchronises with the meta-narrative's conception of how that social reality should or must be. Hyman's paradoxical proposal of both the necessity and impossibility of any narrative truly fulfilling the meta-narrative function in a stable way¹²⁷ aligns well with the previously discussed impulses towards a state of non-appropriative participation and postponed narrative finality, while also

raising the possibility of a methodological instability to be embraced and sustained in social practice. This instability does not only apply to the believer who is firmly situated within one meta-narrative construction of society, but is also better able to deal with relations of individuals to meta-narratives that are more marginal or liminal in character, or to those that identify wholly or partially as belonging to more than one narrative community simultaneously. This facet of double,¹²⁸ dual,¹²⁹ or multiple¹³⁰ religious belonging has become an increasingly prominent aspect of contemporary religious identity and is one that traditional models of religious identity and belonging have struggled to grasp effectively.¹³¹ This fluidity of identity produces a resistance to homogenised norms, either within a singular religious tradition or in the interaction of religious traditions with each other, as well as producing space for the deepening of enculturated norms of religious identity.¹³²

It is this resistance to rigidity that the proposed model of desirous practice must emphasise. As examined earlier, there is definitional flux within the account of desire, ranging from institutional relations between corporate bodies of believers seeking to represent a religious tradition to the intimate negotiation of place and position between individuals that continuously occurs in our everyday lives. Given this, any attempt to wholly systematise this flow of negotiation between the two (or more) partners into a static account of their 'relation' seems fundamentally flawed, through its reduction of the multiplicity of differing granular accounts of that relation and also its attempt to fix the meaning of the relation at a static level of exchange. The practice of desire, therefore, requires a self-awareness of the particularity of the instance of engagement, and the fleetingness of the propriety of any relation or exchange of meaning involved as representing only a small, hesitant, and contingent point on a rapidly changing scheme of relation between broader narratives. In practical terms, this reinforces a turn to social and community issues as the foundation for the display of Christian desire, while also extending the formation of particular instances of desirous practice as forming one point in the larger story of relation between difference. Given this, the performance of non-finality is perhaps just as important as the cognizance of its necessity. By relativising the statements made in the instances of interaction and contextualising them as to the particular and necessarily limited situation of the participants (along with the historical and cultural backgrounds of the instance, and the imperfect understanding by the participants of their own traditions, etc.) then the instance of engagement and interaction is placed in a hesitant and non-finalised relation to the wider narrative milieu within which it takes place. This sets the scene for the practice of Trinitarian desire to proceed in a way that is aware of its own particularity. Expressing this particularity also plays a role in the recognizance of the power relationships between the participants as representatives of their traditions, between the participants and the marginalised or dominant part of their traditions, and between the broader traditions represented.

3.4 Performing desire

The Trinitarian desire explored here discloses a queer form of desire as a critical aspect of Christian practice regarding difference, plurality, and diversity in our contemporary society. As part of this, the form of this desire seen between the members of the Trinitarian community is reflected in the practice of the Christian community, particularly through the engendering of characteristic forms of desire as non-reductive of the identity and validity of the other, non-appropriative of the other's position or place, and non-final in its attitude towards the story that the other wishes to tell in its relationship with the Christian self. Indeed, it is these aspects of desire which form the point of Trinitarian emulation, providing the Christian community and Christian individual with guidance on how to perform the divine form of desire and love they are called to display. The Trinity, and its form of desire, therefore functions in a threefold manner in this exploration of the appropriate Christian response to plurality – first, as a model of the form of community and relation that mirrors the central claim of the Christian narrative to hold difference in harmony; second, by showcasing the correct conceptualisation of, and actions towards, difference for the maintenance of peace through harmony; and third, by correcting through performance the problematic areas explored within the Milbankian approach to matters of social construction, ecclesiology, and identity.

The central claim made here is that the narrative developed about the Trinitarian form of desire better models the form of desire that is integral not only to the divine community but also to the coherent and consistent external display of the internal commitments expressed by the Christian narrative. When the Christian narrative claims to represent the 'true' meta-narrative proposal which will sustain harmony amongst difference, peace among plurality, and the integrity of the differences held in relation, the convincing nature of this claim can only be shown to others, and assessed by them, through the practical actions of those enmeshed within the Christian narrative itself. As we have seen, the Milbankian approach towards engagement with the other, based on a tactical out-narration of difference and a constructed oppositionalism, poses issues in its theoretical commitment to harmony amid peace, and its practical engagement in violence towards the self-definition and self-conception of the other. In doing so, not only is the inner commitment shown to not be taken seriously, undermining the strength of the identification of the Christian narrative with peace, but also the attractiveness of the truth of the narration in the Platonic sense is reduced.

Beyond this performative and emulatory function, the Trinitarian form of desire is seen to be critical for helping the re-conceptualisation and re-development of appropriate Christian responses to plurality in society. The development of this response, made necessary by the importance of social and religious plurality to contemporary experiences of community

and by the paucity of developed responses within the Radical Orthodoxy movement, draws on the example of the Trinity to foreground desire as the appropriate disposition towards the other. As part of this, we have seen that a disposition of opening up vulnerably to the narration, experience, and difference of the other is the appropriate response to its existence. By conceiving of difference in a different way, as part of the created order spilling from the divine Trinitarian order, the threat of difference and the need for its complete obliteration by the promulgation of a fixed meta-narrative structure of the Christian story is obviated. Difference, in the form of social or religious plurality, becomes an opportunity to engage in the relation which is the foundation for the display of characteristics held to be central to the Christian community. Rather than a fixed or static Christian meta-narrative engaged in an eternal, and ultimately impossible, quest to out-narrate every other possible form of reality, the Trinitarian form of desire engages in a process of de-construction, queering, and seduction of our established norms of social construction.

This queering of things is therefore fundamentally about how power is expressed through desire, whether in the Foucauldian analysis of a constructed relation of imbalance, or the Baudrillardian system of simulacra and an ever-retreating gratification of desire. In living our lives as desiring individuals, whether in simple direct fashions such as our desire for home and sustenance, or in more complicated and meaningful ways, such as our desire for meaning within the barren field of our existence or for someone to share our hopes, dreams, and fears with, we engage in the cycle of desire as a continual process. The Trinity shows us a new form of desire, which as we have seen, disrupts our established conception of the process by which desire occurs, by which it is performed, and how it is to be satisfied. While Baudrillard may teach us that in our current capitalist system the Big Mac is an ever retreating fantasy, a lure to encourage our participation in imbalanced power relations which privilege everybody but ourselves, the Trinity shows us that the postponement of the culmination of desire is not necessarily a bad thing, but can be expressed as a desire for the continued presence of the other as other. This is not to directly draw an analogy between the Trinitarian form of the divine and our economic system, but rather has the aim of opening our eyes to the form of desire within the Trinity not as an unobtainable and wholly non-referential dogmatic position of form, but rather as the point of the Christian life, the goal towards which our lives point, and, critically, the foundation of our actions in this world.

By treating the Trinity and its form of desire seriously within our understanding of the Christian life, not only does the example of the Trinity hold together the critical internal commitment of harmony among difference with Christian practice better through the display of non-violence, non-reduction, and non-finality, but the performance of that story holds a greater sway within the performative milieu of contemporary post-modern society. The claim to meta-narrative truth has been disrupted and the claim

of objective reality beyond the confines of the narrative has been shown to be unconvincing. All that is left is narrative, and with it, performance. While the project of Radical Orthodoxy has developed a Christian narrative in response to the changing demands of the meta-narrative dominance of secular modernity, a theoretical explanation of how things could be different and an intellectual challenge to the foundations of secular thought which underpin it, it has failed to express this narrative in practical terms as a performance of the Christian story in the lives of Christian individuals. In doing so, the lived experiences of the community have slipped from a position of priority, taking second place to a tactical, and ultimately violent, strategy of reduction and out-narration. The Trinitarian form of desire offers a practical point of emulation for the Christian community, a new way of doing as well as a new way of thinking. Even if the emulation of the nature of the divine in our own, fallen, society is an impossible task, this does not absolve us of the duty of attempting to pursue it as a quest. Better to seek beauty than to resign ourselves to the contradictory violence of Milbankian orthodoxy or the barren nihilism of the secular modern.

Notes

- 1 Henriksen, "Desire", 9.
- 2 Williams, *Lost Icons*, 151–152.
- 3 Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 90–92.
- 4 Loughlin, *Alien Sex*, XVII; Hayes, *Gift of Being*, 65; Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*.
- 5 Easily seen in the work of Augustine, but also see: Shults, "De-Oedipalizing Theology", 81–83.
- 6 Ward, *Cities of God*, 187.
- 7 This is most famously explicated by Rahner but has become a recurring feature of both Trinitarian theology and ecclesiological commentary. See: Rahner, *The Trinity*, 22; LaCugna, "Reconceiving the Trinity as the Mystery of Salvation", 1–23; Greshake, "Trinity as 'Communio'", 331–345; Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 308–339; Jensen, *God, Desire, and a Theology of Human Sexuality*, 119–138.
- 8 Hart, "Reconciliation of Body and Soul", 450–478.
- 9 See for example: Jensen, *God, Desire, and a Theology of Human Sexuality*, 63–65.
- 10 McGinn, "The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism", 157–158; Egan, *Christian Mysticism*, 4; Loughlin, "The End of Sex", 18–19.
- 11 Psalm 42: 1–5, New International Version.
- 12 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 94.
- 13 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 60–62.
- 14 Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 101–144.
- 15 Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment*, 202; Pylypa, "Power and Bodily Practice", 21.
- 16 See: Bauman, *The Individualized Society*, 144–145; Beck, *Individualization*, VII; Atkinson, "Not All That Was Solid Has Melted into Air (or Liquid)", 3–8; Atkinson, "Beck, Individualization, and the Death of Class", 352–354.
- 17 Foucault, "The Subject and Power", 785.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 786–789.

- 19 This is a critique of Baudrillard's – that Foucault's hint toward allowing the recirculation of power dynamics through subjugated forms of knowledge only allows so far for an escape from the logic of the subjugator. See: *Ibid.*, 786 and 789.
- 20 Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, 10.
- 21 Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology*, 143.
- 22 Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, 36.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 26 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1–3.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 28 Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 279.
- 29 Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, 45.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 53–54.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Wynward, "The Bunless Burger", 170–173.
- 34 The same is true of other obviously hyperreal constructs like Disneyland: Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 10; Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 24.
- 35 Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, 53–54.
- 36 See: Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 98–126; Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, 48; Avanesian, *Irony and the Logic of Modernity*, 107.
- 37 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 40.
- 38 This reading of the Trinity is common within Trinitarian theology. For an example, see Williams's discussion of the nature of the Trinity in Balthasar: Williams, "Balthasar and Difference", 85.
- 39 See, for example: Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 165–195.
- 40 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 84.
- 41 Loughlin, "Erotics", 144.
- 42 Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 8.10.14.
- 43 Ward, *Cities of God*, 77.
- 44 Kim, "Christian Education in a Trinitarian Perspective", 132–154.
- 45 Foucault, "The Subject and Power", 785.
- 46 Deacon, "An Analytics of Power Relations", 115–117.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 117.
- 48 Foucault, "The Subject and Power", 785.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 790.
- 50 See: Fukuyama, "Identity, Immigration, and Liberal Democracy", 5–20; Fligstein et al., "European Integration, Nationalism, and European Identity", 106–122.
- 51 Kucer, *Truth and Politics*, 133; Bourne, *Seek the Peace of the City*, 147.
- 52 Stemming from Hobbes, but widely discussed since: Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter Six; Herbert, "Thomas Hobbes' Dialectic of Desire", 154; Coltheart, "Desire, Consent and Liberal Theory", 113–114.
- 53 Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 1.
- 54 Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology*, 83–85.
- 55 Doak, "The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy", 371.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 386–391.
- 57 Ward, *Cities of God*, 258.
- 58 Doak, "The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy", 390.
- 59 Kim, "Multicultural Religious Education in a Trinitarian Perspective", 256.
- 60 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 87.
- 61 This is a difference I would highlight between the approaches made by Ward on one hand and Milbank on the other. While both gesture towards a position of questionability in Christian belief, with Ward stating his openness to

- mutual exploration in living together in difference which may move toward the conversion of all participants to something new, Milbank remains in practice focused on the goal of out-narration as has been seen in the earlier chapters. See, Hoffmeyer for a fuller explication of this difference: Hoffmeyer, "Charitable Interpretation", 10–12.
- 62 Ward, *Cities of God*, 236.
 - 63 Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, 42.
 - 64 Loughlin, "Christianity at the End of the Story or the Return of the Meta-Narrative", 365.
 - 65 Ward, *Cities of God*, 74.
 - 66 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 25.
 - 67 This dynamic is thoroughly documented, but in this context, Kinnvall's treatment of political identity seems most apposite: Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism", 741–767.
 - 68 Jagoose, *Queer Theory*, 1–6.
 - 69 *Ibid.*, 75–77.
 - 70 See, for example: D'Costa, "Queer Trinity", 269–280.
 - 71 See, for example, Williams' account of Trinitarian resistance to power: Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism", 10.
 - 72 See, for example, Cunningham's exploration of Trinitarian community: Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 165–195.
 - 73 See Milbank's own critiques of the role violence plays in the performance of secular modernity and the critiques of Milbank by Cochrane, Murphy and Lash on this same issue: Cochrane, "At the same time blessed and lame"; Murphy, "Power, Politics, and Difference"; Lash, "Not Exactly Politics or Power".
 - 74 See, for example, the oeuvre of Althaus-Reid which focuses on disrupting aspects of normativity in contemporary society: Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 44–45; Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 112–124.
 - 75 Ryle, *Questioning Gender*, 84–91.
 - 76 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, XXIV.
 - 77 Jagoose, *Queer Theory*, 1–6.
 - 78 Kraus, "The Narrative Negotiation of Identity and Belonging", 107.
 - 79 Loughlin provides the previously referenced "Erotics: God's Sex" to the volume, yet the meaning and import of this piece is somewhat re-worked in the introduction to the volume: Loughlin, "Erotics", 143–162.
 - 80 This is particularly true of his edited work, *Queer Theology*: Loughlin, *Queer Theology*.
 - 81 Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*.
 - 82 Loughlin, *Alien Sex*.
 - 83 Kirsch, *Queer Theory and Social Change*, 18–19.
 - 84 See, for example: Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 175–193; Butler, "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions", 416–422; Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination", 371–387.
 - 85 Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
 - 86 Loughlin, "Erotics", 145.
 - 87 Coltheart, "Desire, Consent and Liberal Theory", 113–114.
 - 88 Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 170–175.
 - 89 Ward, *Cities of God*, 77.
 - 90 Hedges, "Radical Orthodoxy and the Closed Western Theological Mind", 125.
 - 91 Sargent, "Proceeding Beyond Isolation", 829.
 - 92 Doak, "The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy", 373.
 - 93 See Ward's defence of kenotic, perichoretic, participatory relationships as the ground of theological reflection: Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 80–85.
 - 94 Butler, "Critically Queer", 17–24; Martin, "Sexualities Without Genders and Other Queer Utopias", 110.

- 95 Milbank et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 10.
- 96 Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
- 97 MCoun, Levitt and Manley, "Layers of Leather", 93–123.
- 98 Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 15–32.
- 99 See, for example: Williams, "The Body's Grace".
- 100 Ibid.
- 101 Ibid.
- 102 This feminist critique of the 'motion' of the divine is widespread, but has perhaps most recently and cogently been put as part of Tonstad's critique of Queer Trinitarian theologies: Tonstad, *God and Difference*.
- 103 Koopman, "Vulnerable Church in a Vulnerable World", 241–244.
- 104 Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism", 2; Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges", 89–116.
- 105 In Milbank's case, this can be seen in his general inattention to variety within the Christian tradition and how this internal variety makes the narration of the tradition in his way problematic.
- 106 This is a long-running critique that connects to a variety of contexts within his work and the work of others within the Milbankian tendency in Radical Orthodoxy. See, for example, Armour's critique of Pickstock, Hyman's of Milbank's rhetorical approach, and Doak's critique of Milbank's ecclesiological practice: Armour, "Beyond Belief", 224; Hyman, "Review of 'Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology'", 426; Doak, "The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy", 375.
- 107 Sargent "Proceeding Beyond Isolation", 829.
- 108 Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology*, 11–14.
- 109 Isherwood, "Impoverished Desire", 1–12; Newell, "Communities of Faith, Desire, and Resistance", 178–195; Daggers, "Girls and Boys Come out to Play", 97–118.
- 110 Ward, *Cities of God*; Ward, *Christ and Culture*; Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*.
- 111 Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism".
- 112 Loughlin, *Queer Theology*.
- 113 Halberstam is perhaps best known for this cultural/sub-cultural approach: Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*; Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*.
- 114 See, for example: Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 5–10.
- 115 Hennen, *Faeries, Bears, and Leathermen*, 134–136.
- 116 Levitt and Hiestand, "Gender Within Lesbian Sexuality", 49–51.
- 117 Isherwood, "Queering Christ", 249–261; Carette, "Intense Exchange", 11–30.
- 118 Hopkins, "Identity, Practice, and Dialogue", 364.
- 119 McConnell, "Educating Seminarians for Conducted Civility in a Multi-faith World", 331.
- 120 Ibid.
- 121 Agrawal and Barratt, "Does Proximity Matter in Promoting Interfaith Dialogue", 582.
- 122 Gross, "Religious Diversity", 365.
- 123 Ward, "Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice", 12–60.
- 124 Ward, "Bodies: The Displaced Body of Christ", 163–181.
- 125 Ward, *Cities of God*.
- 126 Hyman, *The Predicament of Post-modern Theology*, 143.
- 127 Ibid., 143.
- 128 Cornille, "Double Religious Belonging", 44–46.
- 129 Tan, "Dual Belonging", 29–31.
- 130 Roberts, "Religious Belonging and the Multiple", 57.
- 131 Ibid.
- 132 Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, 9.

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4 Beauty

The previous chapter left us at a crossroads, understanding the need for a performative and narrative understanding of the Christian story in the everyday lives of Christian believers, but struggling to enunciate or develop how this performance could be shaped. In responding to aspects of plurality, it has become clear that not only has the Milbankian form of the Radical Orthodoxy movement failed in its attempt to adequately model its own internal commitments, but that beyond this, there has been a lack of attention paid to the everyday performance of the Christian story. In focusing on this aspect of performance, the Trinitarian form of the divine offers a central and convincing account of a form of community which holds together difference within harmony, performing for us a continually effusive and generative form of relation. This form of relation, as we have seen, has a number of particular characteristics, including non-finality, non-reduction, and non-appropriation in exchange, all of which describe a form of relation in which difference exists and, critically, continues to exist even through the performance of desire. There is no culmination of the Trinitarian desire, there is no acquisition or exertion of control, there is no reduction of the other by its entry into the cycle of desire. Rather, the other maintains its selfhood within the flow of relation between the desiring and desired precisely because of the postponed nature of the desire displayed.

This form of desire queers aspects of the Christian narrative, recasting established tropes of Christian narrative forms in the light of a radical vision of a desiring community, as well as working to queer contemporary non-Christian forms of desire, whether those are formed by social aspects of heteronormativity, capitalist rationality, or nihilist secular modernity. In doing so, the practical performance of the Trinitarian form of desire mirrors the theoretical description of the inter-relation of the Trinitarian persons, in that it must come to display the key characteristics identified as critical to the queering example of the Trinity. In this chapter, I wish to focus on one specific aspect of the Trinitarian form of desire, examining the ongoing and eternal nature of the performance of desire within the Trinity, in order to develop the practical understanding of what this would mean for Christian individuals and communities enmeshed within the plural nature of our

contemporary societies. As we have seen, the performance of this form of desire is a process which has no end – it is an open ended and never complete performance where the Christian individual and community emulates the Trinitarian nature of the divine through attempting to open outwards, vulnerably, towards the other. It is a quest in which the Christian individual or community attempts, in every interaction with the other, in every moment of their lives, to display the internal beauty of the Christian story, including its description of a community in which difference is in harmony. It is therefore a quest in which the Christian attempts to live and perform the beauty of the divine in this world.

It is this vision which drives the purpose of this chapter – the vision of a performance of the beauty of the divine in the everyday interaction of the Christian narrative with our social reality. By developing a more beautiful account of reality from within the Christian narrative, not only can the form of narration tied to Milbankianism identified earlier be narrated against, but so too can the beauty of the divine community be more consistently and coherently displayed by the Christian community. In doing so, the ability of the Christian story to harmonically contain within it difference is shown to be possible through the actions of those representing the narrative, and the development of the social ordering desired is progressed. Beauty is the continuing goal of the performance of Christian identity within the narratively ordered social structure within which we live. While the perfection of the form of society seen within the community of the Trinity is the goal of the performance of the Christian narrative, much as the form of desire was shown to be postponed in the face of culmination through reduction, so too the performance of the divine beauty is a goal which is always receding from us. In chasing it we improve the correlation between our performance and the performance of the divine, but actually reaching that goal is an impossible challenge for us, situated within the fallen reality of creation. The attempt at beauty is a continuous, ongoing, and never-ending quest for perfection, but this perfection, as we have seen in the discussion of desire, is not a static state, but rather the perfection of an ongoing performance.

The narrative of the Trinity developed is a non-final, non-reductive, and non-appropriative process of desiring, rather than a fixed position or ratio of desire. In describing the internal life of the divine in this way, the Christian community, the Christian story to which it holds, and the narrative it attempts to promulgate in interactions with the other, is obligated to mirror to the greatest possible extent this description. As God behaves lovingly, effusively generous, and with unending grace, so too must the Christian community and the Christian individual. And yet, this commitment to display the beauty of the divine must be interrogated. Specifically, what is the concept of beauty within the Christian tradition and how might this conceptualisation fit in with the previously explored conception of desire, how the continuous nature of the form of desire and relation expressed within the Trinitarian form of desire impacts on the conceptualisation of the

teleological goal of beauty, and the implications for Christian practice that this quest for the realisation of divine beauty incurs. Each of these aspects furthers the goal of fleshing out not only how the Christian story can conceive of the meaning of our reality, our societies, and our individual lives, but also how the Christian story can tell anew the ethical and moral imperatives that govern our everyday interactions with the other.

4.1 Conceptions of beauty

The connection between the form of desire within the divine and its outward representation as beauty, both within the Christian story and within the actions of the Christian community, is, much like Milbank's connection between the narration of the Christian narrative and its attractiveness to those outsides it confines.¹ While the purpose here is not to delve deeply into the connection developed between truth and beauty, it bears some exploration as a preliminary excursion to a broader consideration of the nature of beauty within the Christian story and within alternative conceptualisations of the inter-relationship of beauty, desire, and the divine.

For Milbank and others, the attraction of the Christian story is contained within its display of our reality, that the story given within the Christian tradition is the best form for explaining this reality, and, therefore, when compared to the violent narratives of secular modernity or other religious traditions, the truth will naturally come to be more attractive once properly explained to the rational mind.² This makes the narration of the Christian narrative critical in order to deliver the truth of its internal story to society, but also makes the complete out-narration of alternative meta-narrative constructions of reality an inevitability.³ The truth is naturally a display of beauty, and is, in turn, attractive and the object of desire of human reason through its more coherent conceptualisation of reality, it's more coherent understanding of the nature of society, and it's more convincing account of the meaning and importance of individual lives within it. Without this convincing nature, the meta-narrative attempt by whichever form of Christian narrative is spun from the broader Christian tradition ultimately lacks coherence and persuasive power, failing to account for the plurality and diversity of experience within our social construction. This leads, as we saw in the previous discussion of the difficulties of the secular modern meta-narrative, to a crumbling of the perceived inevitability of the structure narrated by the meta-narrative and a decline in the persuasive power of the narrative itself.

Beauty, and its theoretical and practical display, is therefore a critical aspect of the persuasive and narrative power of the Christian story within our contemporary society. As we have seen, the beauty of the divine stems from its ability to display a form of community which preserves the existence and involvement of difference within a harmony formed through a desiring interchange between those differences. Beauty is the display of

the simplicity of harmony without a reduction of the complex underlying inter-relationship which makes that harmony between differences possible – without difference there can be no harmony, only monotony, and harmony is beautiful because of its simplistic, but not reductive, representation of that difference.⁴ Critically, beauty is therefore a way of expressing the plurality, diversity, and complexity of the divine example in a simple fashion which through its aesthetic quality is both attractive and coherently expresses the Christian story.

This form of beauty represents a long and interconnected thread of scriptural description, which ties together the form of divine beauty, human attractiveness, and gospel accounts of the social beauty of the Kingdom of God. In doing so, beauty becomes a regular trope within the description offered in the scripture of the divine life and, critically, of the shape our own lives can take through their connection to the divine. As we have previously seen, this connection between the life of the divine and our own lives is carried throughout the Christian story from the beginning of Creation, the radical meeting point of the Incarnation, to the eschatological close of the created order. Each of these aspects of divine-profane connection helps us to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of beauty within the Christian mythos and how this beauty can be better displayed in the actions of the Christian community. Throughout the scriptural sources, beauty recurs in a number of ways, particularly in the context of the Old Testament, with beauty playing a significant role in a number of stories, and in the context of the book of Revelations, with its focus on the eschatological resolution of the created order.

Within the Old Testament, beauty largely appears in three different, but inter-connected ways – beauty in creation, human attractiveness, and representations of the glory of God as beauty. There is an appreciation for beauty throughout the stories of the Old Testament, however this appreciation for beauty is largely framed as an appreciation for the beauty of positive outcomes from things like creation and an appreciation for the ongoing wonder of creation.⁵ This appreciation is therefore not an appreciation of beauty purely for the aesthetic quality it is imbued with, but rather an appreciation for the positive outcomes created by things. It is the provision of good to the world which makes something beautiful, not an intrinsic quality. This can be seen most clearly in the recurring connections seen in the Psalms (8, 19, 29, and 104, for example) between the beauty of natural creation and the good that this created order forms. For example, this connection is particularly clear in the structure and content of Psalm 104, which, while describing the entirety of the process of Creation focuses explicitly on the way in which the created order, in causing social good to arise, offers an example of the divine beauty. As can be seen in verses 10–18, it is the outcome of the created order that forms its beauty:

He sends the springs into the valleys;
They flow among the hills.

They give drink to every beast of the field;
 The wild donkeys quench their thirst.
 By them the birds of the heavens have their home;
 They sing among the branches.
 He waters the hills from His upper chambers;
 The earth is satisfied with the fruit of Your works.
 He causes the grass to grow for the cattle,
 And vegetation for the service of man,
 That he may bring forth food from the earth,
 And wine that makes glad the heart of man,
 Oil to make his face shine,
 And bread which strengthens man's heart.
 The trees of the Lord are full of sap,
 The cedars of Lebanon which He planted,
 Where the birds make their nests;
 The stork has her home in the fir trees.
 The high hills are for the wild goats;
 The cliffs are a refuge for the rock badgers.⁶

In contrast to the thought of many of the pagan societies surrounding the Hebrew community, the state of nature was not seen as something difficult or evil that required a fight against, but rather as a source of beauty through its provision of material and social goods to the Hebrew community.⁷ This reflects the imbuing of Creation by the divine will, in its ordering and in its continued existence, and the interconnection of the divine performance of continued interaction with Creation and the lives of individuals within it.

Beyond this focus on the natural order, through its provision by the grace of God of positive outcomes and resources for the social community, there is also an explicit focus on the nature of human attractiveness and beauty within the historical accounts of the Old Testament. Although throughout the preceding chapters we have addressed questions of relation, desire, and beauty, we have done so largely from a theoretical and theological perspective. However, critically, these notions also contain within them connections to the primal and carnal forms of sex, lust, and infatuation. Within the Old Testament, human beauty was seen to be largely a good thing, with many of the figures appearing within the historical narratives being described as exhibiting beautiful features. These include both male and female figures, with Sarah, Rebekah, and Esther being prominent females described as beautiful within the narratives, and David, Daniel, and Joseph being showcased as examples of beautiful males.⁸ Yet this form of physical attractiveness is usually presented as a secondary characteristic of the figure in question, almost as an outcome of their actions rather than an inherent quality. This can be most easily seen in the harking back to Old Testament verses such as Proverbs 31, in the New Testament addresses of 1 Peter 3 and 1 Timothy 2, which portray piety as a critical underpinning for the outward display of beauty. This connection between the internal dynamic and the outward

characteristic is, as we have seen, a recurring feature of the notion of natural beauty in the scriptural resources, but also a critical factor in the display of a Trinitarian form of desire within the social and cultural performance of desire. Beyond this, the human form and human action, doctrinally imbued with the notion of the *Imago Dei*, represent outwardly the internal image of the divine through their actions.

The third area in which the recurrence of beauty is notable within the Old Testament is in the descriptions offered of the divine itself. While the previous two areas relate to aspects of the created order, the natural world made beautiful through its provision to humanity and the created humanity reflecting outwardly the divinely ordered internal image, this third area is the direct description of the presence and action of the divine as beautiful. The Old Testament, particularly the Pentateuch and the Psalms, contains within it an explicit theology of beauty that connects the beauty of the divine with its internal, and eternal, creative gesture.⁹ This harks back not only to the ongoing nature of Creation, the maintenance of existence and created order being mandated by the divine at every moment, but also the reflection made on the connection between the beautiful internal form of desire displayed within the Trinity and its outward performance by the Christian community. This divine creativity is seen as beautiful because of the way in which that creativity has led to the provision and goodness of the world. This connects the nature of the beauty of the divine with the described beauty of the natural world.¹⁰ Beyond this, the divine beauty is, as can be seen in Psalm 90 and in Isaiah, related to the ongoing process and promise of redemption from suffering – an improvement of current circumstances through the continued involvement of the divine in the created order. This is clear in the promises offered in Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion –
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,

a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendour.¹¹

Beyond this, we also have a connection between the beauty of the divine and its presence within and among the community. As we saw, the community expressed within the divine is mirrored in the community, and the relations that form it, here within our existence, and, as such, the mirroring of the resultant beauty is also a significant part.

Within the Old Testament, each of these areas is connected by a strand which focuses on beauty not as an inherent quality or a purely physical matter of aesthetics but rather something that arises out of the correct ordering of the underlying relationships that underpin the Christian story.¹² This can be seen in all three areas considered: natural beauty arising from its ordering towards sustaining the relationships which undergird Creation, whether between the divine and humanity, humanity and the living world, or the myriad of complex relationships which sustain our ecology;¹³ human beauty arising from the correct ordering of human behaviour towards piety and reverence for the divine, this ordering having been implanted by the *imago Dei* and displayed by great religious figures of the Christian story;¹⁴ and the beauty of the divine arising from the divine's creative nature, the effusive, generative, and beautiful performance of desire between difference from which our created order has arisen.¹⁵ These aspects form an understanding of beauty as related to the process of living well in community, of undertaking relationality with an other in such a way that that relationality reflects the relationality of the divine, and as a continuous process of attempting perfection. It is the attempt to desire as God does that leads to the outward manifestation of the divine beauty within the created order.

This notion is expanded from its occurrence in the Old Testament, focused largely on the beginning of things, to the presence of the beauty of the divine in the gospels of the New Testament and in the book of Revelations. There are two aspects I wish to pick up on regarding the place of beauty. The first is the Pauline understanding of beauty as an intrinsically attractive part of the display of the Christian story through the actions of the Christian community. This a recurring theme in his calls for the early Christian communities to live well, but is particularly clear in both Titus 2, where the exhortation to correct behaviour internal to the Christian community and in its relations with external communities is seen to lead to the development of an external beauty and therefore external attractiveness of the Christian belief,¹⁶ and in Romans 10, where beauty is to be found in the sharing of the good news of the Christian story and its appropriate contextualisation within the broader work of the Christian community as a whole.¹⁷ Each of these aspects reinforces the notion of beauty as an outcome of the correct internal individual, social, or narrative ordering, rather than a fixed or static characteristic quality. In addition to these occurrences within the Pauline literature, is the refiguring of beauty as connected to the power and splendour

of God within the eschatological drama relayed in the book of Revelations. While Revelations seeks to avoid overtly anthropomorphic representations of the divine, God's splendour and glory are often described in ways which connect to the conception of beauty, for example in Revelations 4:3 or in Revelations 21:2, where the oncoming Holy City is described as a beautiful bride.¹⁸ Beauty in this context, as before, is not a simply a form of attractiveness but arises from the performance of God's will and the correct ordering of things in the eschatological process. Beauty is to be found in God's glory because of its presence and because of its representation of God's power to initiate, sustain, and redeem Creation.

In this way, the various forms of beauty described in this section begin to hang together. Beauty is the exhibition of complexity within a harmonious whole, a bringing together of difference within relationality, and the display of the internal nature of the divine in our external actions towards the others. Beauty is the eternal attempt to better perfect this last aspect, the display of the divine nature in our own actions as an ongoing performance of the Christian identity. As we saw in the discussion of the nature of Trinitarian desire, there is a concern exhibited for the preservation of complexity and plurality within the broader communal unity of the Trinity, without a need for a finalising reduction to the same. This Christian understanding of beauty is therefore multi-layered, with connections to both correctly ordered forms and to the continuous process of emulating the beautiful conduct of the divine in the profane world within which we live.

Beyond this largely scriptural description of the nature of beauty in the Christian tradition, beauty is also a feature of some aspects of the Radical Orthodoxy movement having been addressed by both Milbank and Ward in their Rockwell Lectures and by David Bentley Hart, an American Orthodox thinker whose radically conservative social positions and interaction with aspects of post-modern philosophy from a conservative Christian position make him closely aligned with both the substance of the Milbankian form of Radical Orthodoxy and the epistemological practice of out-narration. Milbank and Ward both directly address the location of the concept of beauty within their development of the Christian tradition in their Rockwell Lectures, presented along with chapter by Edith Wyschogrod, in *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty*. While both present theological reflections on beauty in this work, it is Milbank's reflection on the connection between the experience of beauty and the soul that connects most closely with the project developed.

Milbank defines beauty as the inescapable wonder engendered by the experience of a formed reality that escapes analysis and transcends the ability to exhaustively be described in a way that might supplant the need for the aesthetic experience. Beyond this, beauty also functions as a form of continuous imagining for Milbank. As he writes:

To experience the beautiful is not only to be satisfied, but also to be frustrated satisfyingly; a desire to see more of what arrives (nonetheless

with the same specificity that renders this “more” problematical) is always involved. Therefore, the beautiful resides not only in the truth of the object but also in its goodness that is a kind of destiny of the object for the subject.¹⁹

This conception of the nature of beauty incorporates aspects of non-finality in the experience of the aesthetic value of the thing found to be beautiful and, more importantly, a location of this experience of beauty within a broader, ongoing, social ordering of beauty. It this aspect of beauty, the transcendent quality that moves the beautiful beyond the merely aesthetic, that sets the form of beauty explored in Milbank’s form of the Christian narrative apart from the current forms of beauty found within the epistemological construction of modernity. As Milbank goes on to argue:

Modern beauty after Kant is therefore a “raped” beauty. She appears only in that scene where she is violently surrounded and delineated, and desire for her arises not from her instigation, consent, and production, but is wrenched from her as an entire appropriation of all her form to the (dis)interest of our feeling.²⁰

This reading of the modern form of beauty connects with Milbank’s earlier opposition to the social construction of the meta-narrative of secular modernity, but also critically with the previously explored form of modern desire seen as a problematic counter to the expressed relationality embedded within the Christian narrative offered.

It is relationality that forms the focus of Milbank’s piece, focused on the way that the relationality and problematic understanding of the nature of reciprocity between the divine and the human relates to Milbank’s commitment to the soul over the form of the modern subject. In doing so, Milbank explicitly connects the relationality contained within the Trinitarian form of the divine to the notion of beauty developed earlier and connects this with his broader work on the nature of the gift – one-way in the postmodern reading,²¹ but marked by a transcendent reciprocity within the Christian conception of the divine-human relation. Milbank writes:

But if beauty concerns a mediation between the invisible and the visible, then it involves *reciprocity*. The invisible “gives” the visible (since it is in itself hypervisible), but the visible “returns” to the invisible (since it neither negates invisibility, nor in any sense adds to its sum).²²

Beauty in this sense is the continuous relation of the visible and the experienced to something that exists beyond the limits of visibility and experience, mirroring the relation seen within the Christian tradition between the divine and human, which despite the gulf of difference between the transcendence of God and humanity, allows for the return from ourselves of the

gift of the divine in a form that parodies but does not complete the divine's gift to us. As Milbank states:

So in returning, we are always again given, in our distinguished degree of participation.²³

Milbank goes further, drawing on the Trinitarian nature of the divine in his account of this relationality, highlighting the connected nature of the triune divine and the development of ever increasing forms of reciprocity.

This Trinitarian vision is a critical aspect of Milbank's broader delineation of the importance of the soul within traditional accounts of beauty, but in this context, and in the light of Tonstad's critiques of the lack of attention to pneumatology in contemporary Trinitarian theology, Milbank's vision of the way that the Trinity opens up the theological project beyond just theological speculation. We can see this when Milbank writes:

Through the Spirit, the transformation of the human essence is made available to us; through the Spirit, we also, as merely human hypostases, are enabled to "personify" the return to the Trinity, within the community of really related persons that is the Church.²⁴

Milbank here connects, much like has been done earlier, the form of the divine Trinity to the performance of Christian identity within our social realities. While limiting this insight to the context of the Church, which for Milbank remains enmeshed in processes of opposition and authority regarding its location within our contemporary society, Milbank's thought contains the possibility for a call to a better performative emulation of beauty through a commitment to the integral flow of gift, relationality, and reciprocity.

Milbank's notion of beauty is therefore a complex one that perhaps requires further exploration in the context of his wider work. While it connects with various aspects of his work, beauty remains an ongoing, but doomed, attempt at the perfection, in humanity's actions, of the attempts return of the divine gift. Beauty is the constant ghostly echo of the divine, the shimmering suggestion of something beyond or above our current reality, that calls our theological and social longing towards it. In doing so, for Milbank, it stands in opposition to the de-transcendentalising tendencies of secular modernity, which resists the form of reciprocity necessary for the ongoing flux and negotiation of meaning produces in the mediating position of the beautiful between the visible and the invisible, the real and the beyond real, the divine and the human. This beauty, and its place within our experience of reality relates for Milbank to the ongoing and Trinitarian involvement of the divine in our realities. Beauty is the mirror of the relation of reciprocity explored by Milbank between the human and the divine through the Incarnation. In divinising our humanity through the gift of the

Son, the gift and relation between the human and the divine can be returned in a way that, like the flex of beauty, not as addition to the invisible but as another reflection and performance of the infinite. Beauty calls us toward relationality and reciprocity in our engagements with the other, whether that relationality is to be modelled within our social realities with others in our community, or through the constant reminder of that beyond ourselves in the divine.

4.2 Khaled Abou El Fadl and the methodology of beauty

The critical aspects of the scriptural accounts of beauty and Milbank's use of the concept in his own work offered above point in one direction – that beauty is not a fixed or static position, an achieved point of unchanging perfection, or something possessed inherently by the aesthetically pleasing. Things can be aesthetically pleasing, but not beautiful, in, for example, the aesthetically pleasing individual who acts badly in society, and, in reverse, things can be beautiful even if not aesthetically pleasing, for example, the beauty of the ongoing ecology of the marshlands of our world stems not from aesthetics but rather from their balanced complex harmony of interaction. In adopting this model of beauty into the Trinitarian model developed before, we see a commitment developed regarding our own interactions with others in society. This commitment is not to a notion of beauty which requires the decisive and final out-narration of non-Christian narratives by a fixed account of a perfect Christian narrative and society, but rather a commitment to a process of beautification. This process, on both a personal and a community level, is about perfecting the mirroring of the example of relation, community, and interaction given by the divine in our ongoing relationships, communities, and interactions with the other within our pluralised societies. In doing so, we commit ourselves to an ongoing process of social and personal beautification – that is the commitment to courses of action which positively impact our lives, the lives of others, and the whole ordering of our societies towards the form of community displayed in the divine. This form of community is, as we have seen, one that is able to hold harmony between difference through its postponed, non-reductive, and non-appropriative nature of desire.

This conception of beauty as the end goal of an ongoing process of beautification is not one that is confined to the Christian story. Indeed, it has strong roots in other religious traditions, particularly within the Islamic tradition where the notion of beautification crops up within historical mystical practices as well as in the contemporary practice and reflection on matters of the *Shari'ah*. While this volume is focused on the place of desire and beauty within the Christian tradition, and the effects that this must come to have on the actions of the Christian community and individual, if the form of relation proposed is to have any form of hold then it must come to be practiced in our current reflection. As part of this, and as we have seen in

the discussion of the nature of narrative in society, it is impossible to isolate one particular narrative form from the other surrounding narratives which produce not only the social construction within which the Christian narrative finds itself, but also the ongoing historical, sociological, and theological framework within which its reception will be grounded. As part of this, in fleshing out the notion of beautification we must come to embrace the possibility offered by a non-appropriative interaction and interchange between religious traditions on matters of shared concern and shared reflection. While, as we saw with Sargent's critique of the Milbankian form of interaction, it is tempting to believe in the isolation of a narrative form from its surroundings, this ultimately leads not only to a defective conceptualisation of the body of the narrative proposed, due to the reductive understanding of its limits, but also to a descent towards an oppositionalism between the narrative conceived as immune from interaction. While this may be done in the name of meta-narrative efficiency and stability, a static narrative with clear boundaries and an identity defined in opposition to others is a much easier short-term sell for the purposes of aggressive out-narration, ultimately, as we have seen in the discussion of the way in which narratives function within contemporary society, this picture of isolated narratives is both false and reductive.

The discussion of beauty and desire above reiterates that the process of emulating the form of community seen within the divine requires interaction with the other within our society, whether this other takes the form of a religious other, in this case the historical, social, and theological traditions encompassed within the concept of Islam, or the forms of differing social and cultural experiences, which often arise and function within the lives of individual's differently precisely because of their positioning and structuring by a different meta-narrative construction of reality. By examining the place that the notion of beauty has taken within the broader Islamic tradition, not only is this form of relationality explored in practice, but the broader narrative of a new form of social and community orientated Christian practice can be brought to better reflect the theoretical commitments expressed within the Trinity. The conception of beauty as represented in the divine, as being the ever hoped for, but never fully achieved goal, of our daily emulation of the divine example, bears a similarity to aspects of the use and deployment of beauty within the Islamic tradition, and in the various narrative forms that this tradition has taken in both historical and contemporary circumstances. As part of this, exploring how this notion of beauty might deepen and strengthen our understanding of how the process of beautification might be performed in society is a critical part of ensuring that the process of beautification is not a reductive one that seeks to out-narrate, but rather a narration of mutual flourishing within, and through, our social, cultural, and religious differences.

Within the Islamic tradition, spanning a vast swathe of religious, cultural, and social difference, the notion of beauty has been a recurring trope in

discussions regarding the nature of the divine and, critically, the appropriate course of action of the individual and the community. While, as we saw in the previous discussion of the place of beauty within the Christian scriptural sources, beauty as a concept takes a number of different forms depending on the context and circumstances within which it is employed, there are underlying motifs which influence the broadly Islamic understanding of beauty. I wish to focus on three particular, but connected, aspects which provide depth to the Christian conceptualisation of beauty as intimately connected to the performance of a Trinitarian form of desire: the first, the recurring connection between the name of the divine as *al-Musawwir*, the fashioner or creator of beauty, and the Creator of order;²⁵ secondly, the ongoing focus within Islamic ethical thinking between the theoretical commitments of the Islamic faith and their social performance, the transition from the inner belief of the individual, *iman*, to the outward performance of that belief in social actions, *ihsan*, and the perfection of this connection as a *muhsin*, that is 'one who does what is beautiful';²⁶ and, thirdly, the use of the notion of beauty as part of the ethical determination made in contemporary thinking on the Islamic legal system, the *Shari'ah*.²⁷ Each of these three areas forms a critical part of the broader paradigm surrounding the use of beauty within the Islamic tradition and offers a point of connection between the concept of Trinitarian desire and beauty developed earlier. In examining these occurrences not only can a deeper understanding of the nature of divine beauty be built up, but so can, through interaction and relation with the religious other, the social practices which form the foundation of the social realisation of beauty within pluralised societies.

I wish to focus this discussion particularly on the work of a contemporary legal scholar, Khaled Abou El Fadl. Born in Kuwait in 1963, Khaled Abou El Fadl is a contemporary scholar of Islamic and Western legal traditions, currently working at UCLA in the USA.²⁸ Although representing, by virtue of his classical training in Islamic law, his positioning as a member of a diaspora Muslim community in the West, and his focus on involvement in the public and popular sphere, a critical engagement by a Muslim scholar with contemporary issues such as social and religious plurality, identity and community formation, and religiously and ethically appropriate social action, Khaled Abou El Fadl remains a relatively understudied figure. Unlike many contemporary thinkers on the interaction of Islam with western forms of modernity, Abou El Fadl is situated within the western Islamic community, identifies himself as being a 'western Muslim', and targets much of his work towards communities in a similar situation to himself, while also being rooted within the classical tradition of the *Shari'ah* due to his training in the Middle East. This creates a particular 'authenticity' for the work of Khaled Abou El Fadl, especially when compared to other similar figures working within the same field. This is not to suggest that others do not produce valid accounts of the interaction of Islam with secular modernity, but that similar figures such as Wael Hallaq, Sherman Jackson, and Tariq Ramadan,

while also offering proposals fail to incorporate into their works the unique aspects of Abou El Fadl's faith, popular focus, and classical training.²⁹ It is for this reason, and the centrality of the concept of beauty to his entire project, that Abou El Fadl is the most appropriate thinker for the necessarily brief interaction proposed here.

The notion of beauty in the project of Abou El Fadl is a recurring theme, not only through historical reference with acknowledgement of its roots within the mystical Sufi streams of religious thinking and reference to a multitude of historical legal scholars who draw on this underlying motif, but also as a point of reference for the consideration of contemporary social and religious questions. Beauty is not an appreciation for the aesthetic perfection of logical clarity in argument, the satisfaction at the completion of a task, or a static position. Rather, for Abou El Fadl, the Islamic notion of beauty is best encapsulated within the quest for beautification in this world, the process of making and becoming beautiful.³⁰ I wish to consider the roots of this concept within the work of Abou El Fadl, before moving on to an examination of the way that this concept functions within the methodology seen in Abou El Fadl's own work. In doing so, the connections and possible points of contact between the Christian and Islamic traditions, stemming from both historical antecedents and contemporary work on religious reactions to modernity, become not only theoretically clearer, but also provide the ground on which the social display and performance of the process of beautification can occur within social and religious plurality.

Perhaps the clearest place to begin in considering the concept of beauty within the work of Abou El Fadl is by identifying where the need for this concept arises within his broader methodological project. Much as the notion of beauty arises within the Christian narrative worked towards earlier rises out of a certain conception of desire and relationality built on the traditional and scriptural sources of the doctrine of the Trinity, so too does the concept of beauty play an integral role in the goal of Abou El Fadl's project. While Abou El Fadl's work spans a variety of genres, from reflective auto-biographical work to short critical academic pieces, each piece, whether addressing issues of identity, gender, or social practice, contains within it a goal of re-assessing and renewing the legal and social traditions of Islamic culture. This process is undertaken within the 'western Muslim' context identified above, dealing with ongoing issues and concerns raised by the interaction of Islamic religious belief and identity with the forms of politics, social construction, and relation seen within Western modernity. It is this context to which the work of Abou El Fadl speaks, highlighting the role of the classical tradition of Islam in both understanding the current issues facing Muslim communities, but also deconstructing contemporary forms of thinking on the *Shari'ah* which distort fundamental aspects of its cultural, religious, and legal heritage, whether liberal or conservative in character.

Throughout Abou El Fadl's project there is a focus on the retrieval of the existing classical tradition for its use within contemporary circumstances.

While damaged by the onslaught of modernity, it is Abou El Fadl's opinion that the classical tradition allows for a counterweight to what he describes as the twin ailments of contemporary thinking on the nature of Islam's interaction with western modernity.³¹ These twin ailments are that on the one hand, a conservative authoritarianism that restricts the range of viable identities through the privileging of particular interpretations of the law,³² and, on the other, a liberal form of relativism that jettisons much of the substantive body of the traditions and the law in the hope of reforming its social outcomes.³³ By framing the current form of reactions within the Muslim intellectual sphere in this manner, Abou El Fadl creates space for both de-constructive and constructive strategies within his project, which can be clearly seen in the way in which his published work has become part of a broader project. This project aims to re-present the classical Islamic legal tradition and social practices as better suited to the actual realisation of Islamic liberation than either of the two options currently found within modernity, liberal relativism or conservative authoritarianism through a development of the established Islamic legal methodology.³⁴ In making this attempt, Abou El Fadl's methodology becomes a vitally important part of his project, as his performance within his work is connected to the ongoing narration of an argument for a reformation of contemporary social and legal practices.

The difficulties of this position are perhaps most clearly displayed in his delicate balancing act between the two extremes he identifies. While having critical differences with both liberal relativistic forms of reform and forms of conservative authoritarianism, the current narrative power and prominence of Wahhabi and Salafi forms of authoritarian conservatism has meant that his focus has largely been on the undercutting of their social and political power.³⁵ This necessary focus is clear when his published work is examined, with the engagement and narration against forms of conservative authoritarianism forming the bulk of *Speaking in God's Name*,³⁶ *The Great Theft*,³⁷ and *The Search For Beauty in Islam*³⁸ but is perhaps most clearly to be seen in the rather short, but trenchantly argued, *And God Knows the Soldiers*.³⁹ However, this methodology apparent within his works applies to his engagement with both forms of current approach he identifies as problematic. I wish to examine this methodology, in the light of the preceding work on Christian notions of beauty, as without doing so the place of beauty within Abou El Fadl's project would be unmoored from its strategic and tactical deployment within his work. *And God Knows the Soldiers* is the clearest and simplest place to begin this uncovering of Abou El Fadl's attempts to utilise the re-presentation of the classical legal tradition as a way of re-discovering issues of plurality, religious ethical actions, and identity within contemporary societies.

Within '*And God Knows the Soldiers*', Abou El Fadl analyses and de-constructs the nature of conservative authoritarianism through the prism of a particular fatwā. In choosing to focus his work on a specific instance of

the creeping authoritarianism that concerns him, in this case a fatwā issued by a group called the ‘Society for the Adherence to the Sunnah’ in response to an issue raised by the refusal of a Muslim American basketball player to stand for the American national anthem,⁴⁰ Abou El Fadl is able to highlight the assumptions and processes which underpin the broader social narration of conservative authoritarianism. This is clear when Abou El Fadl explains his choice of topic, stating that this particular fatwā, ‘illustrates the tension between the authoritative and the authoritarian’, the ‘process by which the authoritative is used to produce the authoritarian’, and because ‘in style and method it is fairly representative of the endemic quality of contemporary Muslim discourses’.⁴¹ Critically, the target of narration here is not the content of the fatwā, but rather the process by which this fatwā has come about – the broader processes of power, desire, and identity which allow the functioning of contemporary forms of social conservatism and authoritarianism to present themselves as legitimate representation of the ‘mainstream’ Islamic tradition.

In attempting this form of narration, Abou El Fadl develops a three-stage process of de-legitimation, re-presentation, and ethical determination which drives the wider functioning of his project. The first step, de-legitimation, is an attempt at identifying and highlighting those areas of the authoritarian discourse which either over-step the established boundaries of the classical legal tradition or which expose contradictions within the discourse presented. Khaled Abou El Fadl then uses these to show the illegitimate connection that is drawn between the authoritarian discourse and the social and religious authority of the tradition. The second step, re-presentation, builds on this by presenting a contextualised version of the plurality present within the long historical and social history of the *Shari’ah*, using the plurality of the tradition to undercut the reductionism present within both conservative authoritarian approaches and liberal relativistic ones. In showing and presenting the variety and diversity of social and religious forms present within the broader tradition the claim of any single one to adequately represent the entirety of the *Shari’ah* is undercut, reducing the consistency and coherency of the claim. This is where the third step, the focus for our discussion around beauty, comes into importance. This third step is one of determination among the plurality presented that utilises the cultural and theological marker of beauty as a determinative model of judgement – measuring each position and outcome against the over-arching conceptualisation of beauty in order to determine the course which most closely matches the progress of the beautification of society. Abou El Fadl’s methodology is therefore two-fold, in that the process of the methodology is both a call back to an internally Islamic plurality of tradition and a challenge to the presentation of solitary Islamic authority as residing with contemporary authoritarian formulations (Abou El Fadl 2014). By engaging in a process of de-legitimation of the specific narration of the Society for the Adherence to the Sunnah (SAS) on the topic matter of

the Abdul Rauf affair, Abou El Fadl's process also works toward a deconstruction of their assumed position as the legitimate representation and proponent of the authority of the broader *Shari'ah*, a deconstruction of their presentation of 'Islamicity' as solely belonging to their specific narration. In having the methodological and procedural flaws in their presentation highlighted from within the authority structure which they aim to utilise, the authoritarian claim that 'the *Shari'ah* says X and only X' can begin to be undercut, weakened, and ultimately out-narrated to the extent that the authoritarian discourse is no longer able to maintain its level of structural control of the forms of Muslim relationality, community, and identity seen in contemporary societies. Critically, this de-constructive process occurs not from outside the system presented as providing the legitimate authority of the conservative authoritarian discourse, but rather from within that self-same legitimating system. This separates Abou El Fadl's critique from the more usual secular or liberal criticisms of conservative approaches to the *Shari'ah*, while also allowing for an internal challenge to the authoritarian nature of many conservative discourses, while not disallowing the presence of all conservative discourses at all. This action works to dissolve the SAS's, and more general forms of conservative authoritarianism's, ability to legitimately claim an ability to interpret and present the *Shari'ah* any better than those alternative narratives they seek to occlude and undercuts its ability to exert control over the social and religious actions of individuals enmeshed within the religious tradition of Islam.

Having engaged in this process of de-legitimation, or perhaps more accurately, a process of contextualisation for the specific forms of the Islamic narrative offered by the authoritarian discourses deliberately without context, Abou El Fadl goes on to offer a re-presentation of the plurality present within the classical tradition on the matter at hand. In doing so, his project moves from one of critique and deconstruction to a constructive model that focuses on the development of an alternative position. Abou El Fadl attempts in presenting a plurality of legal opinion to represent better the cultural and social plurality of the Islamic historical tradition. This is in contrast to the terms of presentation offered by the SAS, which focus solely on the singular account of authority delivered, a unitary account of the single valid opinion seen to be correct within the *Shari'ah*.⁴² While the SAS attempts to reduce the meaning of the various *hadith* quoted in their proposal, Abou El Fadl's approach problematises this action by disrupting the convincing possibility of there being only a singular reading of a text as complicated as the historical and social tradition of the *Shari'ah*.⁴³ However, this disruption of the homogeneity proposed by the methodology of the SAS is not a purely negative form of deconstruction on the part of Abou El Fadl, but rather allows space for the constructive delivery of plurality into the sphere of social and ethical deliberation. This plurality, drawn from the classical tradition and mindful of the variety present within past and present approaches to the *Shari'ah*, is not an attempt at the relativisation of ethical

action within Islam in the broad sense, which can be seen in some liberal approaches which dismiss the value of the corpus of the law,⁴⁴ but rather a targeted and specific de-construction of the connection between the proposal of a single opinion and its social and religious presentation as the sole valid opinion able to represent the totality of the *Shari'ah*.

It is at this point that the methodology proposed by Abou El Fadl integrates a conceptualisation of beauty. This is done to allow the mediation between the plurality presented in the second methodological step to proceed with clear, coherent, and religiously grounded framework. While all discursive positions, by their nature, choose which aspects to foreground, it is a critical marker of the attempt to close plurality that can be found in the occlusion of this aspect of the delivery of a narrative. Abou El Fadl's approach, foregrounding this aspect of choice and making clear his reasoning for it, stands in contrast to the way in which authoritarian proposals often seek to deliver their discourses as representing not only the correct interpretation of, say, the *Shari'ah*, but also as the uninterrupted and unchanged transmission of the singular tradition.⁴⁵ In doing so, the actions and choices of the authoritarian discourse are hidden, with the authority of the established tradition purportedly represented being used to cloak the authoritarianism of the discourse. In contrast to this, Abou El Fadl seeks to utilise the concept of beauty as his marker for discerning the relevance of particular juristic formulations presented as part of the tradition's plurality to specific practical occasions raised by his situation within the Muslim community.

It is therefore part of the constructive proposal of Abou El Fadl to utilise the concept of beauty as part of this ethical determination between and among plurality. Beauty allows for the discerning of the relevance of particular juristic formulations to specific circumstances in a way that exposes and explains the process of ethical discernment between competing options, rather than subverting and attempting to hide the reality of that process of choice. In engaging in this manner, Abou El Fadl's use of beauty opens up flexibility in the law regarding the context of specific contexts and particular situations while being open about the nature of this flexibility. Beauty is there not the appreciation for logical clarity or fixed relation sometimes seen as the mark of coherence, but is rather a deliberate methodological and process orientated step towards the social mirroring of the divine form of beauty.⁴⁶ This divine form of beauty within the Islamic tradition stems from the description of the nature of the divine contained within the religious tradition and developed through the historical, theological, and social deployment of the concept in a variety of forms. Two of these forms are a critical part of Abou El Fadl's use of the concept, the connection of beauty to the social performance of actions of beautification in everyday life, and the divine example stemming from an ongoing mystical quest for communion.

The process of beautification within Abou El Fadl's project is therefore based on the social performance of the law, its application to particular

circumstances through a specific methodology, with the determination of the correct ethical conduct being made with the use of the concept of beauty as its guiding goal. This is similar to the form of social and ethical action taken as part of the journey of individual Muslim believers toward a social performance of their faith and draws on the foundational account of the aims of the *Shari'ah*, the *muqasid*. In the same manner as the performance of beautiful practices, *ihsan*, based on the scriptural example of the Prophet and the beautiful society of the *al-salaf al-salih*, the first three generations following the Prophet, leads to the outward beautification of the individual as a *muhsin*, so too in Abou El Fadl's model does the ongoing practice of choosing the outcome of the law in particular circumstance which best aligns with the commitment to beauty within the *Shari'ah* work towards a beautification of the whole of society.⁴⁷ This is a continuous process of self-reflection, improvement, and effort which results not in the attainment of a permanent state of beauty – rather the beautification of the individual, and of society more generally, occurs only through the continued nature of the ongoing effort to better reflect in everyday social circumstances the goals of the *Shari'ah* as a whole – a beauteous and divinely ordered society. In this way, Abou El Fadl's project, through the use of the marker of beauty functions differently to the more commonly found forms of *muqasid* reformism.⁴⁸ While the *muqasid* approach utilises the broad goals of the *Shari'ah* in order to promote social outcomes, it does so without serious reference to the way that these goals have previously been approached within the classical tradition and without examining the internal methodology by which those goals can be brought about. Abou El Fadl's approach utilises the existing tradition in presenting the plurality present within it and deepens this connection by relying on the established religious and theological concept of divine beauty in order to justify his choices of action.⁴⁹

For Abou El Fadl, the form of beauty that allows for this ethical determination is an ongoing quest for the beautification of the individual and of society. This continuous aspect of beauty has strong roots within the Islamic tradition particularly in relation to the mystical practices of Sufi forms of Islam and the foundational characteristics attributed to the divine. These characteristics are apparent in one of the names of the divine, *Al-Musawwir*, the Shaper of Beauty mentioned in the Qur'an (59:24), and which has gone on to have conceptual power within both the legal tradition and the Sufi streams of thinking.⁵⁰ This name of the divine, one among many ascribed to the divine in the Islamic tradition, provides the tradition with conceptual space for understanding the nature and acts of the divine, specifically in this case relating to the divine action of creation. Stemming from the Arabic linguistic roots of *sood*, *waw*, and *raa*, the term *Al-Musawwir* relates to three critical aspects of the general translation of the Shaper of Beauty or the Shaper of Forms. The first is the notion of making something incline, lean, or bend towards something, a gentle but firm correction to a deviance, or the bringing together of similarity. Secondly, the term has an undercurrent

of forming, fashioning, imagining, or sculpting, the formation of a shape out of the unshaped mass or the development of order within disorder. Thirdly, we have the notion of inclination or desire towards something, the natural tendency towards something that results from the indwelling form of the thing.⁵¹ Each of these forms of the divine name deepen the understanding of the divine's connection to the conceptualisation of beauty, and, in turn, deepen our understanding of the way that beauty, both divine and social, is apparent within the Islamic tradition. Beyond this, the description of the divine as the Shaper of Forms or Shaper of Beauty distinguishes firmly between the nature of the divine as Creator and the created order formed according to the Creator's will, with the continued unfolding of the created order being according to the inclination of the divine will, and the desire of the created order to continue towards the perfection of the divine order. As 59:24 states, the created order is a continuous exaltation of the divine will and creation's eternal longing for the divine.

The importance of this rootedness of the concept of beauty within the Islamic tradition is that it allows for the deployment of beauty within Abou El Fadl's wider project to occur from within the historical and cultural background of the religious tradition. It connects his project with the ultimate goal of the *Shari'ah*, the beautification and divine ordering of society, while also functioning as a broader, overarching, and ongoing teleological goal for the performance of the law. This connection between the theological concept of the divine form of beauty and the social performance of actions which lead to the beautification of society is no surprise within the work of Abou El Fadl as it connects to underlying inspiration in his work from both the Sufi and legal traditions.⁵² Abou El Fadl's characterisation of the role that beauty must play in the determination and application of the law further relates to the classical division of religious practice into three aspects – *al-islam*, *al-iman*, and *al-ihsan*. These three stages explicate the process by which the individual believer comes to perform their belief in the narrative form of the religious tradition through the internalisation of the ethical precepts contained within the narrative and then their outward performance. The first step, *al-islam*, is the voluntary submission of oneself to the divine and the outward performance of the practices essential to Muslim identity, the *arkan al-islam*, the five pillars of Islam. This is followed by the second stage, *iman*, the belief that underlies and motivates practice, including the *arkan al-iman*, the six articles of faith required. The third stage, *ihsan*, perfects and develops this underlying belief into the highest form of worship, the perfection of one's inner faith through the perfection of all outward acts of living. This *ihsan* is a continuous showing of the beauty of the divinely ordered life through the ongoing performance of community and relationality in the believer's words and actions.⁵³

It is this conception of beauty as having both a continuous aspect to it and arising from the outward reflection of inner commitments to aspects of religious ethics that drives Abou El Fadl's continued engagement with and

use of the concept. This is particularly true in his understanding of the purpose of the law, in his case the beautification of society through the natural tending towards the emulation of the characteristics of the divine. When the law fails to mirror, in its processes and judgements, the internal and eternal beauty of the divine, then it is failing in its purpose of causing individuals and communities to engage in that mirroring too.⁵⁴ As Shah-Kazemi notes:

[Abou] El-Fadl shows that the real beauty of this apparently arid dimension of the Islamic tradition arises out of the effort of the jurist to transcribe in legal terms his inner ethical sensibility – his “aesthetic” appreciation of the good, which is inherently beautiful, and not merely the moral sense of right, based on what is lawful.⁵⁵

It is therefore in the search for the outcome that best reflects the process of social and individual beautification from within the plurality available within the tradition that connects Abou El Fadl’s practice of the classic methodology of the law to his broader social project of re-presenting and renewing the law. In addition, this retrieves the role of the jurist in determining the most appropriate course available within the plurality of the law that accords with the *muqasid*, whether the protection of life, dignity, or religion, as part of his own inner search for the beautiful dimension of Islam, a connection that has seemingly become lost in contemporary formulations of the practice of the law, its relation to society, and its impact on the individual.

The description of the legal quest for beauty, both on an individual level for the jurist and on a social or community level in the integration and performance of the law within society, bears hallmarks of the classical *Sufi* tradition, which contains within it multiple examples of a quest toward the beauty of the divine, the omnipresence of this divine beauty within Creation and within the ongoing actions of the divine, and an intense, personal, and deeply experiential feeling of the love of God delivered in a variety of ways.⁵⁶ There is a connection that can be seen between Abou El Fadl’s legal work towards social beautification and his own inner, experiential, work toward self-beautification, which is perhaps most clearly apparent within his work ‘*The Search For Beauty in Islam: A Conference of the Books*’, which mirrors in its structure and content the mutuality evinced between the social and personal aspects of the quest for beauty.⁵⁷ By showing the process by which he responds to problematic issues raised in the course of his performance of the law, Abou El Fadl evidences the way in which his commitment to the beautification of society is related to his performance of everyday actions and decisions. This is a personal struggle towards beauty, reflecting a great number of classical *Sufi* mystics,⁵⁸ and seeking to attain the perfect mirroring of the internal and external aspects of Islamic belief in one’s everyday life. While this aspect is deeply rooted within both Abou El Fadl’s practice, being seen in his conference of books as a personal and experiential quest and within ‘*And God Knows the Soldiers*’ as a drier form

of legal methodology, this connection between public and private performances of belief is a critical aspect of Abou El Fadl's ongoing relation with the *Sufi* stream of thinking within the broader classical Islamic tradition.⁵⁹

This is perhaps most clearly to be seen in the overlap that becomes apparent when a question of the law is explicitly framed by Abou El Fadl as a choice between the beautiful and the non-beautiful.⁶⁰ In doing so, and making the interpretative pause and judgement at that point explicit, Abou El Fadl reflects on the nature of the interpretation he is engaging in and presents his decision as having a certain form of hesitancy that arises from its applicability beyond the specific circumstances within which it is offer. This framing relativises the judgement made to within the particular contextual circumstances of the decision, allowing for a continued flexibility within the application of the law to better strive toward the perfection and beautification of society. Beyond this specific circumstance where hesitancy comes to the fore in Abou El Fadl's methodology, the *Sufi* tradition contains within it a broader and richer account of the nature, and necessity, of hesitancy. While the *Sufi* tradition is generally accepted as being the part of the Islamic tradition most concerned with matters of spirituality and mysticism, this does not mean that matters of knowledge and reasoning have not been integral, rather the tradition is most concerned with a mystical quest for religious knowledge beyond the rational.⁶¹ As part of this concern, Sufism has developed a complex understanding of the relationship between reason, revelation, and experience that includes a particular emphasis on the path by which knowledge can be found. Within this, and in connection to the mystical inclinations of the tradition, a traditional mistrust or hesitancy over the claiming of certainty has arisen, in favour of a view of human life and the acquisition of knowledge as involving a quest toward the certainty that is ultimately only to be found in the Divine. This certainty, while ultimately out of our reach is, like beauty, a point of emulation and progress of both the individual and the community as increasing our knowledge and understanding of the divine increases our ability to adequately reflect the internal beauty of the divine within our social actions.

As part of this utilisation and influence of *Sufi* thinking on Abou El Fadl's work is a connection to the concept of the divine permeation of every action of the believer's life through the transcendent unity of being, or *Wahdat al-Wujud*. The concept of *Wahdat al-Wujud* is a vitally important part Sufi tradition – while other thinkers, such as Ibn Sab'in (1217–1269), dealt with this concept before him and in slightly different ways, it is Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240) who is most commonly associated with *Wahdat al-Wujud*. He asserted that the doctrine of *tawhid*, or the unity of the divine, does not relate solely to God, but that reality is also one – with each thing being reflections of this unitary reality.⁶² The influence of this conception is clear in Abou El Fadl's work in his references to Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, an epic Sufi poem dealing with this concept, in the title of his book, the *Conference of the Books* and in the ongoing concern he

displays for the development of a unifying connection between individual performance, social practices, and methodological determination.⁶³ The conception of the divine as infusing all the created order with meaning and importance, including the actions of the individual, is a recurring resonance within the work of Abou El Fadl, especially apparent in his constant self-reflexive thinking about the beautification of society and the way this can be brought about through his own actions and choices.⁶⁴ This relates to the tradition where humanity can never definitively bridge the gap between divine certainty and human uncertainty, only able to travel, aware of its own fallibility, towards an ever-receding but always present possibility.⁶⁵

This use of beauty, and Abou El Fadl's broader engagement, has however come under criticism for the way in which it seems to rely solely on the broader commitment to social beauty, however defined, over the aspects of the Islamic legal tradition. This critique tends to arise from one of two factors, though occasionally both can be found. These are either a misreading of Abou El Fadl's more recent, more polemical, and more popular work as representing his entire oeuvre, where his engagement with aspects of the contemporary implementation of the *Shari'ah* is taken to represent his entire methodology, ignoring his previous work such as *Speaking in God's Name* and *And God Knows the Soldiers*, or an engagement with the political and social vision of his project over the technicalities of the methodology employed. This second criticism is the stronger, relying consistently either on a generally critical approach to the *madhhab* formation of *fiqh*, whereby the following of a legal school is viewed as either unnecessary or morally harmful within generally neo-conservative approaches to the Islamic faith, or on the specificities of where Abou El Fadl applies the process of ethical reflection engendered by the centrality of beauty within his methodological schema.

What we therefore see arising from the work and practice of Abou El Fadl is a two-fold mode of practice which combines a stress on the impossibility of achieving certainty with an understanding that striving to arrive as close to it as possible is a necessity. These conceptions of being, love, and knowledge are a recurring factor in the work of Abou El Fadl and, as we have seen, drive his ongoing engagement with law. This is not just a dry theoretical attempt for Abou El Fadl – it is the anguish of ethical choice played out on a social, individual, and methodological scale. Beauty for Abou El Fadl is as certainty and love of the divine are for the *Sufi* mystics, a point to dedicate one's life to questing towards. As we saw in the conception of beauty offered in the Christian scripture, the process of the beautification of society through the law is not a goal that can ever be finished, rather it is the all-consuming attempt to better mirror the love of the divine in our own lives. This approach transcends the individual religious traditions and represents a broader goal of shared relationality in that it allows for the performance of religious identity to be seen as an ongoing exploration of meaning, rather than the delivery of a fixed or static form of narration. In doing so, it points

the way towards a practice of beautification that incorporates both individual and social action within the pluralistic societies which form our contemporary milieu. It is this practice to which we must now turn, examining how these commitments to an ongoing quest towards beautification of the kind examined in both the Christian and Islamic traditions can be grounded in our everyday actions.

While this focus on aspects of practical methodology is a necessary correction to their lack within the Milbankian approach to matters of social and religious plurality, future ongoing engagements cannot ignore the interconnection of practice back to their ethico-theological basis. The actions of the individual within a specific instance of engagement take place within a broader theological framework that connects the specific to the universal. The Trinitarian aspect of the Christian story reinforces that, with a deep connection being built up between the relationality of the self with others and the relationality of the divine to the created order. This theological explanation of the presence of and need for continued engagement with difference provides further grounding to the practical methodologies developed and is, to some extent, an under developed aspect of Abou El Fadl's wider project. While Abou El Fadl's use of the concept of beauty as a determinative factor in his relating of the law to specific circumstances is a useful one for preserving aspects of plurality and non-finality in narration, its deployment within his work is supported by a particular interpretation of its place within the theological background of the Islamic tradition. Its use is contextualised both within the traditional legal and mystical aspects of the Islamic tradition, as we have seen earlier, but also within the particular circumstance of Abou El Fadl's social position and his inclination for aspects of social reform. This can be seen not only in his choices regarding narration – his focus on tackling conservative authoritarianism more prominently than liberal relativism,⁶⁶ his focus on aspects of gender and social authoritarianism within Muslim communities,⁶⁷ his focus on the relationship formed between Muslim minority communities and majority non-Muslim societies rather than religious minorities within Muslim majority societies,⁶⁸ but also in the issues around which he chooses to invoke his relation to beauty, where he sees the difference between current and beautiful practice as most divergent.

Within this, Abou El Fadl's project lacks a deep account of the theological context of his appeal to the concept of beauty that must be further fleshed out in practice. While his use of beauty is clearly delineated within the specific contexts he addresses, a broader implementation of that process of ethical reflection and determination remains elusive. Abou El Fadl's actions remain responsive to the issues that impact his particular circumstances and remain within the response of the law to these circumstances. While this is a critical feature of his project, it fails to connect effectively to the broader goals of his project, with a lack of articulation between the specific instances of his narration and the broader change that the performance of his project within the community seeks to change. This is particularly clear in his work

that critiques aspects of the secular state within which the Muslim community finds itself as a minority.⁶⁹ While he is able to focus on the issues apparent in the contemporary situation of the Muslim community in the West, this requires a stronger and clearer connection to a constructive social vision to adequately reflect the universal nature of the religious story. In addition to this, by situating the legal and social practice developed in his work within the broader theological account of the religious tradition that would provide Abou El Fadl's project not only with greater scope within the tradition, but also the ability to effectively present a constructive social order beyond the particular Muslim minority situation.

Abou El Fadl's more recent work, particularly his *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age*,⁷⁰ has begun to move in this direction with an increased focus on the constructive possibility of the relationship excavated between the divine and the created order within the specific context of the relationship between the individual and the law. This can be seen in the attention paid to aspects of the identity formation, particularly the connection between the internalisation of the broader relational paradigm between Islam and the West into the specific identities of individuals within the Muslim community, and those who occupy liminal or marginal identities within it.⁷¹ This notion of identity empowers Abou El Fadl's work beyond the specific and towards a reconfiguration of the nature of Islamic identity, both individual and corporate, within the Western secular meta-narrative social form.⁷² His interaction and narration against forms of reactionary authoritarianism is therefore not only part of his broader critique of the secular rationalist meta-narrative of modernity, the progenitor of the reactionary sub-narrative,⁷³ but also a broader critique of the way that this sub-narrative impacts on the formation of Muslim identity within the eyes of the West, and, critically, within the eyes of the Muslim community itself. It is for this reason that his targeting of the notion of 'Islamicity' is so critical to his wider project. Abou El Fadl's challenge moves beyond the legal and juristic methodologies seen in the performance of his project and into a broader project of resistance to the reduction of modernity – a reduction of the Islamic tradition into liberal relativism or conservative authoritarianism, a reduction of the identities of individuals Muslims solely to pastiches of terror, submission, and marginalisation, and a reduction of the myriad complex forms of multiple and multi-layered identities formed in the interstitial space between the corporate identities people choose or are given and their own individual performances.

4.3 Practical aspects of beautification

Throughout the latter part of this volume, it has become clear that while having a theoretical understanding of the nature and meaning of plurality is an essential criterion for a useful engagement between a religious tradition and society, it is not enough to solely engage in theoretical speculation about

the value and importance of the others within our communities without performing these internal commitments through our external actions. As we have seen in the discussion of desire previously, and of beauty in this chapter, the internal and external aspects of the performance of religious identity are intimately connected both in the living out of the religious faith by the individual and in the interaction of that faith with others. Without an adequate reflection of the internal commitments expressed in the practical external actions of those claiming to possess them, the claim that those internal commitments are important to the individual or to the religious tradition with which they identify is decidedly weakened. We cannot maintain that we believe something if our actions fail to show the meaning and importance of those beliefs. This was the critical flaw in the execution of the Milbankian approach to the narration of the Christian narrative. Its actions – aggressive out narration, reduction of the pluralities within both the Christian tradition and other traditions it engaged with, and the establishment of oppositionalism as the mode of conceptualising inter-religious relation – failed to adequately represent those ethical commitments it claimed were at the core of its project – harmonic peace between difference, the preservation of peace in social theorising and social practice, and the reflection of the example of the divine within the created order.

In order to avoid this disconnect between the theoretical and the practical in our performance of the Christian narrative in our lives, it is important to engage in a similar process to the one delivered by Abou El Fadl in his methodological deliberations. As we saw in the section above, he engages with the process of ethical determination in an open and deliberate manner, which allows for a reflexive process to emerge between his specific work engaging with problematic issues arising from the performance of Islamic belief within contemporary, particularly western, societies and the broader ethical goal of the beautification of individual and social action. In doing so, not only does his work drive towards a better reflection of the divine order on an individual level, but this likeness is delivered through an active process of discernment on the part of the individual which incorporates a reflection on the connection between internal beliefs and external practices. As we have seen in both the Christian tradition and in its use in the Islamic tradition, the concept of beauty provides a solid foundation for the incorporation of this aspect of ethical deliberation in the actions of individuals and communities. By reflecting on beauty as the end goal of an ongoing quest of inner and outer beautification each tradition has found a way of pushing the process of ethical determination beyond a rote repetition of the same in the face of its inability to function effectively as a meta-narrative and has instead turned to an ongoing process of shared discovery with the other as a better reflection of the nature of the divine and the nature of the divinely ordered society.

As we saw in the examination of the use of beauty within the Christian tradition, it is this commitment to the reflection of the divine order and

the way that this order is required to be performed as part of an ongoing display of internal commitments that represents beauty as a category within our reality. This is a performative and divinely orientated beauty that exceeds the purely aesthetic form through an ongoing dedication to the form of reflection brought about by its presence. Milbank's development of the notion of beauty extends this with beauty functioning within our experiential reality as a point of reflection and point of excess, where the form of a thing exceeds its purely physical and visible reality, heralding the invisible through this excess. Both Khaled Abou El Fadl and Milbank share aspects of their approaches to beauty, though obviously from within differing circumstances, and with differing goals in mind. While Abou El Fadl pays a great deal of attention to the practical import of his use of the concept of beauty within the Islamic tradition, with a focus on what the notion of beauty means for our actions in our societies, Milbank's exploration of the concept of beauty within his development of Radical Orthodoxy is driven by a largely theological and theoretical concern for its importance to his boarder argument about human-divine reciprocity and his even broader argument about the nature of the divine.⁷⁴

Both uses of beauty examined earlier share similar constructions of beauty as a fundamentally ongoing process. Things do not have beauty intrinsically, but rather the beauty of the thing is formed by its ongoing relation to other things, whether this takes the form of social beauty, as in the correct social ordering of society producing beauty or the good provided to humanity through the bounty of nature being a measure of the beauty of Creation, or in the form of a things relation to something beyond itself, the reflection of the transcendent divine within the material reality of our lives. Beauty is formed through relation for both Abou El Fadl and Milbank, where it is the ongoing process of reflection brought about by the experience of beauty that orientates us towards the divine and beyond our necessarily limited natures. This connects the critiques of modernity also apparent in the work of both thinkers, with each taking aim at the processes of de-transcendentalisation unleashed by the meta-narrative formation of secular modernity. In embracing this secularisation of our experience of our reality, expressed by Milbank in the violent ontologies of modernity and for Abou El Fadl in the rise of authoritarian literalism in the Islamic community, both Milbank and Abou El Fadl argue that we have lost not only our rich notions of beauty, but also the ability for the presence of that beauty to point us toward the emulation of the ongoing reciprocity and relationality it represents.

This shared reflection on beauty as a continuous process of beautification, a vital connection between theoretical commitments and practical actions, binds together a number of the aspects of the conceptualisation of plurality previously considered. These include the Trinitarian and relational aspects of the divine, with the ongoing working of the divine within the created order and the example of the relationality within the divine offering resources for an emulation by the Christian communities; the centrality of

non-appropriative and queer forms of desire in preserving this relationality within complex, multi-faceted, and plural communities where an individual's relation to a tradition or narrative may take multiple forms; the preservation of peace in and through difference, with difference providing the means by which peace might more effectively be sustained than a reduction to homogeneity through violence; and the importance of dialogue and ongoing engagement between religious and social difference in order to more closely emulate the divine peace between difference in our own societies. Each of these aspects imputes a certain form of action on to the process of beautification.

This connection over the notion and use of beauty within the work of both Milbank and Abou El Fadl is therefore driven by a shared concern over effect that the narrative of modernity has had on our ability to relate our specific acts with a broader, over-arching, ethical scheme. In drawing on beauty, both thinkers piece together not only a layering our contemporary reality with the divine beyond, but also a necessary social performance and commitment to the development of this notion of beauty. This notion, while present in the work of Milbank to a much lesser degree than can be found in Abou El Fadl, points to the shared utilisation of beauty as a way of engaging in a reflective process regarding the performance of the narrative each thinker puts forward, making the way that the narrative engages with and reflects beauty itself a critical factor in the attractive nature of it. For both Abou El Fadl and Milbank, beauty is a critical underpinning not only of the theoretical modelling of their narrative proposals, but also of the performative attractiveness of those narrative. Beauty for both is therefore an ongoing process of being reminded of the divine in our experienced realities and the grounding for an attempt at modelling the reciprocity and relationality embedded within that beauty.

4.4 Beyond Milbankianism

While both Milbank and Abou El Fadl are working within differing religious traditions, their projects share a number of similarities in the nature and context of their approaches, and in the balancing act performed by both between the pre- and post- modern aspects of their intellectual heritage. The focus on hesitancy and the postponement of certainty within the methodological project of Abou El Fadl, stemming from humility in the face of the diversity of human experience and in relation to the nature of the divine, differs fundamentally from the conceptual approach taken by the Milbankian strand of Radical Orthodoxy, which relies, even if only temporarily, on the possession of certainty for the form of Christian narrative put forward and the violent imposition of the meta-narrative structure of that narrative onto the plurality of the imagined future society.⁷⁵ Fundamentally, there is a difference between the singular conception of the Christian narrative within Milbank's work, with the one true or correct form of the

narrative which must be narrated and will ultimately come to subsume and correct all others being possessed by the form of the Christian tradition to which Milbank subscribes, mediated and interpreted through Milbank himself, and the deliberate awareness and methodological preservation of the plurality present within the Islamic tradition as represented by Abou El Fadl, in both a contextually and historically aware fashion. It is Milbank's goal of full out-narration, the performance of the meta-narrative social role solely by the Christian narrative with its twin temptations of reduction and universalisation, that ultimately leaves little room for the forms of hesitancy and postponement that we have seen are not only conceptually critical in the emulation of the Trinitarian example of community and exchange, but also an important aspect of the practical methodological implementation of religious narratives within social communities of believers. Both of these aspects, if integrated and performed appropriately, offer a deepening of the dialogical example of the Trinity within the performance of Christian identity through a better mirroring of the characteristics of peace between difference, relationality, and community. While the Milbankian approach attempts to mirror these aspects within our contemporary plural societies, the conception of relation as being predicated solely on a form of 'mutual suspicion' results in a form of Christian practice which fails to adequately reflect both the internal commitments of the tradition and the reality of the nature of difference within society, which cannot be conceptualised solely as a temporary aberration awaiting resolution through the meta-narrative positioning of the Milbankian narrative.

By employing analogous methodological processes as those seen to be fundamental to Abou El Fadl's approach to similar issues within the Islamic tradition, the Christian narrative produced by the Christian community, envisioned as Trinitarian in character, plural in teleological vision, and internally varied in content, can begin to speak clearly not only to others within a plural society, but also to the internal lives of individual believers who constantly interact with forms of social and religious plurality. In doing so, the conceptual commitments to the Trinitarian nature of the divine and the nature of the desiring community expressed within that divine, can be grounded within a disposition towards hesitancy, non-finality, and a framework of practice which preserves non-appropriative ongoing exchange and the full diversity of the Christian and non-Christian tradition. In doing so, the meta-narrative nature of the Christian narrative, its applicability to everything everywhere, is held apart from the social dominance of a meta-narrative within a plural society with its concomitant factors of reduction, violence, and marginalisation. In this way, the story of Christianity is still able to claim its universal applicability, while, in the performance of its postponed form of desire, allowing for and encouraging the continued existence of social plurality.⁷⁶ It is Abou El Fadl's use of beauty, and his understanding of the need for a conception of beauty that is a constantly changing and improving form of beautification, that provides his project with the

ability to display change within its narration, to preserve the presence of plurality within the tradition with which he is working, and avoid the reduction of the diversity of the narrative inherent in the decontextualisation and authoritarian usage of singular interpretations of the historical and cultural diversity of a religious tradition.

While it is true that Milbank is aware of and to some extent comfortable with the idea of plurality within the Christian tradition, as can be seen in his use of the post-modern conceptualisation of a narrative framework,⁷⁷ this does not seem to extend into the vision of social and political ecclesiology developed in *Theology and Social Theory*⁷⁸ and more fully in his more recent works *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People*⁷⁹ and *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future*.⁸⁰ While this initial openness to plurality and change within the critical aspects of the Christian tradition has led to some criticism of Milbank from conservative quarters,⁸¹ the failure to effectively carry this insight through to the implementation of his project provokes further critique of the kind delivered here. In contrast, Abou El Fadl lays stress on the plurality within the tradition when practicing aspects of the law, especially when developing the reasoning for his choices in choosing between the highlighted plurality. In this way, the internal praxiological aspects of the tradition of the law are brought into engagement with Abou El Fadl's own social desires, and the specific, in the form of particular *hadīth*, is related to the general, in the form of the goals of the *Shari'ah*, effectively and with minimal reduction.

However, in delivering this flexibility depending on context and substance of the particular instance of engagement, Abou El Fadl resolves the reduction to the same seen within the Milbankian vision of social implementation.⁸² Abou El Fadl mirrors the concept of a constantly changing dynamic of both the religious tradition itself, but also of the tradition's form of interaction with the reality of our contemporary social world. This relates not only to the form of dynamism seen within Loughlin's description of the role of desire within the Trinity,⁸³ but also to the form of engagement specified within Ward's ecclesiological proposals.⁸⁴ It is Milbank's monological tendency⁸⁵ that sees his conception of the Christian meta-narrative as an open-whole of harmonious difference become problematic, due to the contrasting demands of difference within the harmony proposed⁸⁶ and the subduction of that difference within a monological social meta-narrative form. Abou El Fadl's approach to mediating between this dichotomy of difference offers the best practice for a renewal of Radical Orthodoxy's ability to speak effectively within a plural situation.

This concern for issues of authority within the narration of traditions in a plural society extends into the consideration of the practice of narration. In attempting to allow for, and preserve, the authenticity of the representation of the tradition within instances of engagement, the methodology proposed throughout this work aims to bridge the necessity of shared space between

difference in an instance of engagement and the fully embodied representation of that difference through an awareness and inclusion of plurality within it. Abou El Fadl's practice is again useful here, with his positioning as an embedded scholar of the law within a religious community resulting in a practice focused and orientated theoretical framework that reflects the historical practice of the Islamic legal tradition more closely.⁸⁷ These practical issues connect the needs of the community, living in religiously and socially plural societies, with the specificities of engagement between difference that preserves that multi-layered and complex form of identity. It is through the aspect of non-finality highlighted above that this can be balanced, with a focus on the needs of the lived community resulting in a preservation of the space for the other to present itself and its self-understanding effectively. Milbank's reliance on a vision of social interaction formed by 'mutual suspicion' results in a tactical desire for a strong form of rhetorical narration for the Christian tradition, with the tactically useful characteristics of homogeneity, clarity, and fixed content becoming more important than the particularities, pluralities, and shades of difference that reflect the reality of the lived Christian tradition. While Milbank seeks to either obliterate or out-narrate this messy nature of reality, we have seen within Abou El Fadl's practice a way of managing the plurality apparent within the diversity of the tradition and, importantly, an openness to a discussion about how this plurality is interpreted, contextualised, and worked through in relation with the broader social and historical tradition of the religious faith.

It is this awareness and constant respect for the ongoing reality of the nature of interaction between differences in plural societies that drives the commitment to non-finality in the proposed form of the Christian narrative and in the commitment to a practice of non-finality in particular instances of exchange between the Christian narrative and others within society. This non-finality, as we have seen, relies on the postponement and not the dissolution of the acknowledgement of one particular tradition as containing and circumscribing truth, with social aspects relevant to embodied narrative communities taking priority within the theological project, because of the difficulty in the resolution of the meta-narrative paradox identified by Hyman – both necessary and impossible.⁸⁸ This moves the push toward non-finality beyond the dispositional aspects highlighted earlier, and strengthens the commitment to the forms of practical proposals outlined, especially the contextualisation of specificity within the broad and continually unfolding story formed between the differences in our societies. This aspiration for the practice of religious identity and narrative production in a plural society is perhaps best encapsulated in Abou El Fadl's attachment to the phrase 'And God Knows Best' when concluding his deliberations on practical matters of the law.⁸⁹ In relativising his particular statements within the certainty and universality offered by the divine, the line is clearly drawn between the particularity and contextual nature of the specific and the universality which belongs only to the divine. This is a practice of hesitancy such as that implied

by the constantly changing social dynamic of the Trinity and its relation, in Williams's eyes, to aspects of the Christian historical tradition while also being a performance of the negation of authority on the part of the scholar, in that it reflexively orientates the specific performance of the tradition by the scholar to the ultimate authority from which the law derives.

Beyond this, the methodology of non-finality has broader social implications for the relationship between differences within society. While Abou El Fadl's work is largely focused on interactions internal to the religious tradition within which he identifies, it offers up a process by which the internal and external plurality of society can be preserved while moving towards shared social ideals. In using beauty as an outside marker by which his particular instances of practice can be judged, Abou El Fadl incorporates a relationality aspect into the ongoing performance of his project – he is enmeshed within a constant flow of relationality, within and outside his religious tradition, between practicality and idealism, between the general and the specific, between the now and the future. In bringing this methodology into conversation with the similar moves identified within the Radical Orthodoxy movement, this particularity is naturally amplified. Yet it is this very dynamic which works to preserve the dynamism of the proposed interaction, a shared and situated conversation about specific concerns within the shared social context of plurality that works towards the emulation of the divine beauty within the created nature of difference and the created order of society.⁹⁰ In this, the instance of practice developed in the previous chapter can function as both an example of practice, and as the route towards a new mode of practice, developed through the exchange and relationality built up between differing religious traditions.

These reflections on the nature of the projects in conversation over the issues of practical social methodologies and the process of beautification within our contemporary forms of plural society are naturally cursory and only skim the surface of the deep reflection on these matters contained within both religious traditions. They serve a useful purpose however, in deepening the understanding of the nature of engagement given by the alternative form of the Radical Orthodoxy project proposed that better takes into account, and accounts for, the presence, continued existence, and necessity of engagement with, social and religious plurality. The process of exchange is a critical feature of this alternative proposal, mirroring in the ongoing flux of interaction between plurality the depth of the lessons to be learnt from the other. It is only by husbanding this relationality that the inter-connected nature of our plural social lives can be matched by our understanding of difference. This is a commitment to living together, both conceptually and socially, and an embrace of the power of shared community. This chapter has aimed to provide a process for the filling in of the lack identified within the broader project of Radical Orthodoxy and the Milbankian approach in particular around the issue of social and religious plurality and a lack of practicality in contemporary Trinitarian approaches to difference. The resources identified

here, both within the Christian tradition and stemming from work in the Islamic tradition by Khaled Abou El Fadl offer a way of putting the theoretical account of the Christian story into practice in a way in which the performance of Christian identity leads to an ongoing performance of the nature of the divine community.

This way is formed from inspiration given by the example of the Trinity regarding relation and community and the methodology of practice seen in the work of Abou El Fadl. Practically, these sources offer strategies for helping the performance of the Christian story more effectively mirror its internal commitments through the development of a greater theoretical and practical connection between the performance of our narrative and the integrity with which it is narrated. Beyond this commitment to the display of integrity in narration, both dispositionally and practically, we have seen a need for a lengthening of the dialogical instances beyond discrete discussions and into an awareness of the ongoing nature of relationality and exchange between difference in society. This helps to connect the narrative presented and the actions performed, showing how the narrative informs the choices made by individuals or communities when faced with the engagement of the other, free from out-narration, appropriation, or false representation, into the instance of exchange. In doing so, the Christian narrative is itself freed to be able to express its internal diversity and plurality, free to confound expectations in its generosity and openness, and free to perform its identity in the spirit of vulnerability towards the other that is essential for exchange. This vulnerability imputes an openness to change in actions based on the responses of the other to the narration of the Christian story, and this changing aspect of social performance makes necessary the postponement of the identification of the universally final aspect of the Christian story with the particular social imposition of a singular form of the Christian narrative. This opens up the tradition as a whole to the rejection of static and authoritarian readings and allows for the inner life of the Trinity to be effectively modelled by the ongoing process of living together – open to a shared, participatory, vision of multiple, over-lapping, narrative communities living within the communal space of a plural society, engaged in a kenotic donation and loving embrace of vulnerability. While this practical Trinitarianism and commitment to beautification offer a fuller and deeper account of a truly Christian practice, it is only able to be sustained while the ‘living out’ process of negotiation and exchange that make up our shared lives continues. Without the continuous push toward exchange with the other and without the continuous reflection to a broader goal of social beautification, it is too easy for the excesses of power, authority, and finality to re-assert themselves negatively into our interactions with the other.

Only through ongoing practical steps can this reversion be avoided, with a commitment to applied aspects of the display of the internal Christian commitments. By structuring specific instances of dialogue in order to promote answerability, by allowing for an equal participation of the other

within those instances of dialogue, and by promoting the awareness of the plurality existent within the Christian tradition and other traditions this practical display can emerge. This is not enough by itself and requires a serious dispositional commitment on the part of the Christian individual and the Christian community. In addition, the internalisation of attitudes towards the other becomes the critical factor in sustaining the impulses and commitments outlined here – dispositions towards the promotion of integrity in our personal and corporate actions towards the other, the adoption of social non-finality in the performance of the Christian narrative which resolves, to a certain degree, the issues of marginalisation and exclusion seen within Milbank's ecclesiological vision, and a disposition towards hesitancy and humility regarding certainty over the applicability, correctness, and legitimacy of our narrative constructions. Only in this way, by questing for the beautification of our societies with and through our neighbours, can the beauty of the divine come to be reflected in our own actions and in the actions of our community.

Notes

- 1 See, for example: Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 8.
- 2 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 331.
- 3 There is a strange inevitability to Milbank's vision of the future and the gradual subsuming of alternative religious traditions and individuals within the Christian framework as the beauty of the narrative is revealed to them and/or their living under the violence of the secular modern becomes intolerable. This is perhaps most clearly seen in Doak's assessment of Milbank's ecclesiological vision alongside those of Ward, Cavanaugh, and Bell. See: Doak, "The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy", 390ft78.
- 4 Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 17–20.
- 5 Spitaler, "Beauty and the Bible", 101–114.
- 6 Psalm 104:10–18.
- 7 Doughty, "Environmental Theology", 234–248; Hiers, "Ecology, Biblical Theology, and Methodology", 43–60; Pollard, "The Israelites and Their Environment", 125–133.
- 8 MacWilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty and the Hebrew Bible", 265–287; Genesis 12:11; Genesis 24:16; 1 Samuel 16:12; Daniel 1:15.
- 9 Loader, "What Do the Heavens Declare?", 160–163.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Isaiah 61:1–3.
- 12 Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 9–12.
- 13 Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 111–129.
- 14 Dyrness, "The Imago Dei and Christian Aesthetics", 161–172.
- 15 Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, VIII.
- 16 Titus 2:10.
- 17 Romans 10:14–15.
- 18 Revelations 4:3; Revelations 21:2.
- 19 Milbank, "Beauty and the Soul", 1–2.
- 20 Ibid., 6.
- 21 Ibid., 7 ft. 9.
- 22 Ibid., 6.
- 23 Ibid., 7.
- 24 Ibid., 8.

- 25 'He is Allah, the Creator, the Shaper out of naught, the Fashioner. His are the most beautiful names. All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifieth Him, and He is the Mighty, the Wise' – Qur'an, 59:24.
- 26 Ayoub, *Islam*, 68.
- 27 See, for example, the use of beauty in the work of Khaled Abou El Fadl: Slater, "Khaled Abou El Fadl's Methodology of Reform", 306–308.
- 28 All biographical information comes from Khaled Abou El Fadl's biography at the *Scholar of the House* website: www.scholarofthehouse.org/biofkhabelfa.html
- 29 Wael Hallaq as a non-Muslim, Sherman Jackson due to his academic focus, and Tariq Ramadan due to his lack of legal training.
- 30 Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam*, XIX.
- 31 See his early critique of both approaches in the context of the Abdul Rauf affair: Abou El Fadl, *And God Knows the Soldiers*, 19–20.
- 32 Ibid., 20.
- 33 Abou El Fadl, "The Culture of Ugliness in Modern Islam and Reengaging Morality", 33, 62; Jensen, "Confronting Misconceptions and Acknowledging Imperfections", 83.
- 34 The exact methodology of the application of Islamic Law is a contested field, however a generalised outline is as follows: while the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* provide Islamic law with a variety of resources for ethical and moral thinking, the process through which these resources are formed into prescriptions and guidelines for living a moral life within changing forms of society is a key part of the Law itself. While a great number of issues can be easily solved by direct reference to the *Qur'an*, more complicated matters necessitate engaging in a methodological process of examination and interpretation of that foundational source: first, of the *Qur'an*, for directly relevant pronouncements in circumstances that match those of the context under discussion; second, of the *Sunnah* for examples of the Prophet engaging in or explaining a particular course of action as laudatory in circumstances that are directly similar to the context under discussion; third, of the established opinion of the *'ulamā* or clerical class in matters of *fiqh* or jurisprudence, known as *ijmā'* or consensus, which has addressed a directly comparable instance of difficulty and which commands the support of a significant proportion of learned scholars of the law; fourth, by engaging in the process of *qiyās*, or analogical reasoning of various kinds between the circumstances under consideration and the various circumstances addressed by the previous sources of the Law. This process, although highly simplified here, forms the basis for the methodology of Islamic law, providing those engaged in the process of divining the law from the original sources with a clear structure to the promulgation of *fatwā*, or non-binding legal opinions, for particular cases. If greater detail is required, please refer to: Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law*, 123–149.
- 35 See, for example, the focus on disrupting the socio-narrative power of conservative authoritarianism in: Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft*; Abou El Fadl, *And God Knows the Soldiers*; Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*; Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*.
- 36 Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*.
- 37 Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft*.
- 38 Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam*.
- 39 Abou El Fadl, *And God Knows the Soldiers*.
- 40 The Abdul Rauf affair of 2013 was caused by the refusal of an NBA player, Abdul Rauf, to stand for the American national anthem citing his Islamic faith. This action resulted in a one-match ban, being followed by a compromise whereby Abdul Rauf would be able to stand and pray during the anthem. Further events, including the pranking of his local mosque by two radio DJ's, made the atmosphere in Denver uncomfortable and led to him leaving the team, before leaving

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the USA after three more seasons of basketball. Now returned to the USA, he has faded into relative obscurity. For more information see these two retrospectives: Sanchez, "The Conversion of Chris Jackson"; Maisonet, "Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf: Here, Gone, and Quickly Forgotten".

41 Abou El Fadl, *And God Knows the Soldiers*, 44.

42 Ibid., 63.

43 Ibid., 90.

44 See, for example, Abu Zayd's moves in this direction: Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 93–101.

45 Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*, 44–45.

46 Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam*, XIX.

47 'There shall be no sin (imputed) unto those who believe and do good works for what they may have eaten (in the past). So be mindful of your duty (to Allah), and believe, and do good works; and again: be mindful of your duty, and believe; and once again: be mindful of your duty, and do right. Allah loveth the good' – Qur'an 5:93.

48 See, for example: Auda, *Maqasid Al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law; Ramadan, Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*.

49 Beauty as a concept is developed throughout Abou El Fadl's oeuvre; however, it is most clearly delineated as a methodological step and broader vision in: Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam*, 70–72, 81–86, 176–185, 348.

50 Van Bruinessen and Howell, *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam*, 157.

51 Abdulraheem, "Al-Musawwir".

52 Abou El Fadl, "Qur'anic Ethics and Islamic Law", 7–28.

53 Ayoub, *Islam*, 68.

54 Abou El Fadl, *The Search For Beauty in Islam*, 162.

55 Shah-Kazemi, "Conference of the Books: The Search for Beauty in Islam", 220–221.

56 Fatemi and Fatemi, *Love, Beauty and Harmony in Sufism*, 47–59; Kamali, "The Indicators of Wasatiyyah or Moderation in Islam", 264–266.

57 See the structure and content of the semi-autobiographical work: Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam*.

58 Perhaps still most clearly delineated by: Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 23–186.

59 Abou El Fadl, *The Search For Beauty in Islam*, 162; Eman, "On the Way to Beauty".

60 Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam*, 121.

61 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 3–4.

62 The concept of *Wahdat al-Wujud* is a vitally important part of the broader Sufi tradition. While other thinkers, such as Ibn Sab'in (1217–1269), dealt with this concept before him and in slightly different ways, it is Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240) who is most commonly associated with *Wahdat al-Wujud*.

63 Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*, 87–97.

64 Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam*, 345–347.

65 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 130.

66 Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft*, 26–44; Abou El Fadl, *And God Knows the Soldiers*, 44.

67 Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*, 209–263.

68 Abou El Fadl, "The Place of Tolerance in Islam", 3–26.

69 Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam*, 234.

70 Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*, 318–359.

71 Ibid., 3–18.

72 Ibid., 91–112.

73 Ibid., 203–270.

- 74 This is, of course, a vital aspect of Milbank's critique of modernity as a form of Christian heresy related to nominalism and Duns Scotus and a therefore a critical part of the Radical Orthodoxy project.
- 75 Sargent, "Proceeding Beyond Isolation", 823.
- 76 Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges", 89–116.
- 77 Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism", 232.
- 78 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*.
- 79 Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*.
- 80 Milbank, *The Politics of Virtue*.
- 81 Reno, "The Radical Orthodoxy Project", 40.
- 82 Doak, "The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy", 370.
- 83 Loughlin, "Erotics", 144.
- 84 Ward, *Cities of God*, 258.
- 85 Hedges, "Radical Orthodoxy and the Closed Western Theological Mind", 125.
- 86 Doak, "The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy", 370.
- 87 For expansion and clarification on the historical practice of *fiqh* and *fatwā* as a part of the community performance of the law, see: Hallaq, "From Fatwas to Furu", 29, 44; Hossain, "The Story of Fatwa", 237, 238.
- 88 Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges", 89–92.
- 89 Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam*, XX, 109, 115, 122, 144, 326.
- 90 Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 395.

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5 Conclusion

Our contemporary societies cannot escape the fact of plurality. Nor can they escape how difference has an ongoing impact on every instance of social interaction between individuals or between communities. With the pluralisation of our society has come the pluralisation of our societies and of ourselves. No longer is our society able to be contained within a real or imagined homogeneity formed by a shared religious faith, a shared understanding of the imposed social class structure, or a shared racial or ethnic background. Instead, our societies have come to encompass a dazzling and befuddling array of difference that literally defies description in its complexity. While matters of religious difference are relatively easy to measure and track when considered at a base level of identification and practice, our tools for understanding the nature of this difference begin to struggle when the full gamut of plurality is appreciated at the level of religious identification. How we conceive of our individual, group, and social relation to religious faiths differs according to a kaleidoscope of other identity characteristics such as our gender, our ethnicity, or socio-economic class, or our personal historical relationship with that faith. From this, not only do we have plurality expressed on a social level between religions, with established faiths competing within themselves, with differing faiths, and with a whole panoply of new or renewed forms of religious faith that have made themselves at home in the contemporary milieu, but society also has to grapple with the relationship of the individual, and communities, and indeed society as a whole to this pluralised existence of difference. We visualise, conceptualise, and perform our own religious identities in a variety of different ways and in doing so, interact with and cause change to occur within the same processes engaged in by others. The actuality of difference, expressed in a plurality of choices, opens up further space for the realisation of the potential for, and possibility of, difference.

It is no longer enough to solely examine these differences in discrete packages, measuring piece by piece the rise or decline in each of the established religious traditions in our communities like stock market tickers. The presence of this level of difference and the level of complexity contained within it requires a deeper awareness of the way that this difference shapes our

societies around it and how we shape and mould this difference within the epistemological categories of relation that we create. Our societies contend with this layering of difference, working with and through its various strata and controlling and exerting power over it through the narrative created about its existence. Difference, and the pluralities engendered by it, exist because of the conceptualisation of those differences within a broader, overarching, account of the meaning that this difference holds – our concepts of difference with regard to class relate to the meaning that socio-economic plurality has been given through the ongoing social interactions of individuals and communities within society and the ongoing story told by society as a whole about this. This is a factor, as we have seen earlier, in every interaction an individual undergoes within society. Every interaction with friends, family, community, or state is resolved through the matrix of our social narrative regarding the meaning of these differences. This framework of meaning creates narrative connection between discrete incidences of contact, providing the linkage between the meeting had between neighbours that occurred this morning with the one that occurred yesterday morning and overlaying the specifics of that exchange with a strata of further layers of difference between them, relating their interaction within a broader narrative about differing social, religious, and cultural characteristics. The characteristic quality of plurality in our contemporary societies is therefore a critical aspect of any attempt at forming a coherent account of the meaning of society as a whole and an individual's place within it. However, it is also a point of difficulty for the meta-narrative formations which either do govern our contemporary societies or hope to, as the presence of plurality in individual characteristics and identities disrupts neat or simple explanations for the nature of our realities. Simplicity, whether it is on the social and political level or at the level of individual identities, is no longer enough to encapsulate our personalised experiences of reality or the varieties of identity characteristics we form around those experiences. We are no longer comfortable sacrificing the particularity of our experience for the sake of a group identity that fails to adequately represent us.

It is this significance of plurality within contemporary western societies and the ongoing and continual experience of this plurality by individuals encompassed within our societies that Radical Orthodoxy has failed to adequately respond to. While attempting the out-narration of the various aspects of ontological and epistemological violence upheld by the current meta-narrative dominance of the secular modern, the broad Radical Orthodoxy project undoubtedly has coherent and consistent value as an attempt at exploring the possibility for a theological response to the secular nature of contemporary society. However, it fails to adequately form an adequate response to the reality of plurality within our social experiences. This is, as we have seen, a particular characteristic of the Milbankian approach to issues of religious plurality, which, while being one of the few areas where religious plurality is directly addressed within the broader Radical

Orthodoxy project, engages with incidences of religious plurality in a way that works to repeat the same characteristic problems highlighted in the consideration given to the violence of the secular modern in Radical Orthodoxy. Radical Orthodoxy repeats the same mistake in a process of oppositionalism between the proposed meta-narrative of the Christian tradition and the narratives built up around alternative religious traditions, which acts, through the tactical and strategic requirements of the proposed meta-narrative character of the Christian narrative, in a reductive manner, both within the Christian tradition itself and towards the plurality present within the alternative traditions. This fails to reflect in practice the form of the Christian tradition presented within the Radical Orthodoxy narrative.

This disconnect between the importance of plurality for the experience of societies by individuals who inhabit them and the narrative of the Christian tradition arranged and promoted by the Milbankian approach within Radical Orthodoxy opens up a number of the difficulties that have come to prominence in critiques of the broader Radical Orthodoxy project. In attempting to provide an alternative Christian meta-narrative structure to that given to society by the currently dominant meta-narrative of secular modernity, Radical Orthodoxy has engaged in a process of narrative performance. Yet, as should have become increasingly clear throughout the preceding chapters, this performative aspect of the desire for narration within contemporary society has been neglected in favour of the pursuit of theoretical relation and ratio between increasingly fixed and oppositional accounts of the Christian tradition on one hand and the various other potential meta-narratives, whether religious or not, that are to be out-narrated. This has damaged not only the viability of the proposed form of narrative about the Christian tradition given by Radical Orthodoxy in general, and by John Milbank in particular, but also the inter-social relationality necessary for a coherent association between the narrative proposed and the experiences of those individuals and communities enmeshed within society. It is this relationality that is a critical outcome of the awareness of the presence of plurality within our societies – the extent to which all of our actions interact with, are produced by, and produce themselves, narratives about the ongoing meaning of our realities in conjunction with the ongoing, continual, and varied performance of others. This means that while Radical Orthodoxy engages with secular modernity, it fails to adequately engage with or articulate a response to people's experience of contemporary reality. Stuck in an imaginary and ultimately parochial world of narration, the form of narration proposed by the Milbankian approach offers only a tangential relation to the experience of modernity by individuals and communities enmeshed within its cycle.

The narrative offered attempts to address both the reality of plurality within contemporary society from within the Christian tradition and to address the distinct lack of an adequate response to this reality from within the broader Radical Orthodoxy project. This is a lack both in quantity,

with Radical Orthodoxy's approach to alternative religious traditions being largely confined to Milbank's early sketches of the possibility of dialogue beyond the pluralist paradigm and his more recent political engagement in aspects of narration against Islam, and in quality, with a lack of detail and awareness that this requires. Developed here is an attempt at one possible alternative narrative form of the Christian tradition and of the Radical Orthodoxy project that showcases the possibility for a fuller and more coherent account of the nature of our plural reality, the nature and meaning of our interactions with others, and the possibility for a more harmonious form of Christian social imagining.

The proposal takes the form of a narrative about the Christian tradition, that is a story with all its flexibility and choice regarding context, plot points, and narrative presentation, that draws on the previously produced narrative of Radical Orthodoxy and broader, particular, points of doctrine and example within the traditions and individual's experiences of that tradition. It is a narrative, not an attempt at producing a fixed, true, or objective description of what the real actually 'is', but rather a story that attempts to explain and rationalise the experience of reality that we all have in our everyday lives. It works within the narrative framework of our social construction explained and examined earlier, understanding the rules and structure of our society as being formed by the exchange amid and between positions of power between difference within our communities, and proposes a narrative alternative to those already apparent within the conflict between Milbankianism and the meta-narrative of the secular modern. As we have seen, the current situation only allows for the promotion of narrative forms as agents of social change, with the lack of a fixed or objective reality meaning that the narrative back and forth is an inescapable aspect of the creation of change within the lives of individuals, communities, or societies as a whole. In doing so, the narrative offered over the preceding chapters attempts to tell a different about social difference from within the Christian tradition than that offered by John Milbank, and in doing so, to change the landscape of possibility within the Christian tradition within that context. The narrative attempts, through producing a story regarding differing ways of conceiving of social and religious difference seen within the broader tradition, whether in a scriptural or doctrinal form, to disrupt the narration of the Milbankian form of Radical Orthodoxy and to open up further space within Radical Orthodoxy for an awareness of, and appreciation for, both internal and external plurality. As we saw in Abou El Fadl's deconstruction of the nature of religious authoritarianism within the methodology of Islamic law,¹ it is this connection between the dominance of one narrative form of a tradition and the performative power of its maintenance of epistemological hegemony that results in the closing down of space for alternatives, plurality within the traditions itself, and a reduction to oppositionalism with regards to the other. This is the result seen in the performance of the Milbankian form of Radical Orthodoxy. The proposal therefore must

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take its place as one narrative among many about the possibility within the Christian tradition for differing forms of social imagining, self-aware of its own constructed and contingent nature, open about the choices made regarding presentation and prioritisation, and cognisant of its limitations and its contextual location within the interaction and conceptualisation of social and religious difference.

The narrative chooses certain aspects of the tradition in order to form the prominent aspects of its narration, choosing to foreground the Christian experience of, and reaction to, the existence and omni-presence of plurality within our societies as a critical part of ongoing living within diverse and plural communities. Within the construction of the narrative undertaken so far, these prominent characteristics should have become clear, with the narrative having a clear connection to established parts of the broader Christian tradition. This is a critical preliminary point – the narrative proposed is not one that establishes itself from outside the Christian tradition and aims to set itself up in opposition to the explicitly Christian narrative offered by John Milbank. Rather, it is an alternative form of the same narrative production that the narrative used by John Milbank is, the utilisation of, and reference to, aspects of the historical and cultural tradition of the Christian community in order to construct an explanatory meta-narrative structure for the experience of contemporary society. The narrative proposed centres its narration around the specifically Christian doctrinal attachment to the Trinitarian form of the divine, which forms the central point of inspiration for the form and content of the narrative produced. In doing so, the specifically Christian character of the narration is placed firmly at the forefront of the narrative attempt, and through practice, this Christian character can be displayed in contextual and particular situations. While the Trinitarian aspect of contemporary theology has come under criticism, particularly its service as a placeholder for whatever the theologian may wish to find and argue for within the tradition,² the narrative proposed throughout this volume aims to perform both the priority of the reality and divine nature of the Trinity within any parodic representations and performances within our communities and the priority of the internal form of the Trinitarian community over its theoretical or narrative connection to aspects of our own experience.³ This avoids the reading from contemporary forms of community and society back onto the nature of the divine, and it avoids the somewhat easy charge of only representing an aspect of the Trinitarian form.⁴ The narrative nature of the proposal encapsulated here is self-aware of the process of choosing between aspects of the broad Christian tradition, and makes these choices within a framework delivered by the tradition itself. It is not a case of searching for somewhere to hang an otherwise secular proposal for liberal tolerance or everyone to get along; rather, it is an exploration of the meaning and possibility of a central part of the Christian narrative within a specific context.

The meaning and possibility presented has taken a variety of forms in the exploration undergone in the preceding chapters, but recurring motifs

should have become apparent between the discrete foci offered. These include a deep commitment to the relational nature of the divine Trinity which, through possessing and modelling plurality in a way that preserves the viability and existence of difference, offers up a model for the relationality experience within our own existence. This not a read of our existence as being a direct reflection of the nature of the divine, the distance between our created nature and the divine nature forestalling any quick connection between the two, but rather a point of practical and socially emulative possibility. Just as our commanded modelling of the love of the divine involves the inspiration and aspiration of social action proceeding from it, so too does the form of relationality and community seen within the Trinity offer up emulative possibility. In doing so, the characteristics of this form of community are those that can be seen to be able to be emulated within the contemporary social sphere – characteristics of non-appropriation, non-reduction of the other and of the differentiated community, a queer, postponed form of desire that disrupts our contemporary notions of love, and a non-final exploration of the connection between the nature of divine and social beauty. This requires for its continuance an ongoing system of relationality and growth between the self and the other, between the community and those outside it, and between our world and the divine.

In tandem, there are critical limitations on the bounds of the narrative proposed. The narrative proposed embraces fictionality and non-finality towards the possibility of meta-narratives, and is not proposing to displace the currently dominant forms of narrative through the oppositional meta-narrative tussle seen in Milbank's vision of out-narration. Milbank's vision relies on an understanding of community and narrative form that, through highlighting the extent of difference both current and historical between meta-narrative forms, fails to take into account the inter-connected and relational aspects of our lived reality.⁵ Meta-narratives as stable and fixed accounts of the totality of reality are, as both Hyman and Loughlin have noted,⁶ an impossibility in the range of their content and in their successful fulfilment of the meta-narrative function. The narrative form proposed here rejects this form and delivers a postponed realisation of social and community homogeneity which connects to the ongoing work of performance within the reality of our contemporary social situations. It is a narrative that attempts to explain the way that things are and the way that things could be, but is not a (proto-) meta-narrative that attempts to provide a fixed or static account of an imagined future social ordering or to legitimate itself with a construction of objective reality beyond the aesthetic example of the relationality of the Trinitarian divine.

This lack of fixity is a critical part of the proposed narrative form's ability to narrate within the current social situation in a way that avoids the reductive and appropriative qualities of the meta-narrative form. The narrative does not propose a clear or structured account of the shape that the narration of the narrative inevitably leads towards. Instead, the narrative

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attempts to point towards a methodology of practice and performance within the current structuring of society that leads towards the ongoing and never fully resolved mirroring of the divine beauty within our own lives.⁷ As noted above, this is not to be seen as an attempt at a fixed description of the way that the Trinitarian divine is, but rather, a description of the way in which our actions can be inspired by the doctrinally held example of the actions of the divine. While this use of the Trinity is one that focuses on matters of emulation and inspiration, there is a connection developed within the narrative between the form of the Trinity and the obligation of the Christian community to act in a manner which reflects this form. This is a reading from a point of doctrine, the holding that God is three consubstantial persons that, while distinct, share the same nature and reciprocally contain each other within an ongoing perichoretic flow of exchange, to a responsibility for the upholding of the pattern of behaviour theologically apparent within the Trinity in our actions within the created order. While this connection can undoubtedly be challenged, the emulation of the divine order within the created order is an established facet of Christian belief and Christian practice. This can perhaps most prominently be seen in John 13 where the mirroring of the divine love performed towards the created order in Christ is situated as an obligation to the Christian community in their performance within the created order. As John 13:34–35 states:

A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so also you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.

It is within this context that the drive toward an emulation of the form of community seen in the Trinity arises – a desire to perform, however badly our fallen nature will allow us to, the form of love given to us by the divine. This obligation to display the form of love and community held to be a central facet of the Christian conceptualisation of the divine naturally extends from the individual, to the Christian community, to all those enmeshed within our shared societies. As we have seen, the division of the Christian tradition or the Christian community from the variety and plurality of the wider world, whether in the production of historical, cultural, or political narratives, is ultimately a process of reduction; of the everyday lived experiences of the individual, who lives among and often embodies in their own identity aspects of difference and diversity; of the broader tradition that is supposed to be being represented by reducing the marker of that tradition's identity solely into a negative and oppositional sign of the Christian tradition itself; the notion of a specifically and wholly Christian community or narrative, whether actualised within contemporary society as sometimes seems to be imagined in Milbank's proposals or in the form of a historical or geographical golden age which stands in as a sign of both distant perfection and present imperfection. This, as we have seen, is a problematic

proposition to sustain given the evidence of contemporary and historical forms of plurality and diversity present within and without the boundaries of any imagined and constructed 'tradition'.⁸ While this tradition can be constructed, not only does it do violence to the scope of the established historical and theological diversity of the tradition and the variety expressed within the relations of individuals to that tradition, but it reduces the performance of Christian identity to a monotonic repetition of sameness.

The narrative is engaged in a process of fictionalising the meta-narratives and proto-meta-narratives that occupy our current society, undercutting and highlighting their inability to adequately perform the meta-narrative role of providing a totalising account of meaning, while attempting to move beyond the essential quality of the meta-narrative. This is an engagement in narration by the proposed narrative form of the Christian tradition and an attempt at the out-narration of aspects of practice engendered by alternative forms of the Christian tradition put forward within the Radical Orthodoxy movement in general and within the work of John Milbank in particular. The narrative proposed here aims to narrate an alternatively focused form of the Radical Orthodoxy project, drawing on resources both within its bounds and without, that focuses on aspects of the tradition, both the Christian tradition and the 'tradition' of Radical Orthodoxy, in order to bring about a better practical alignment of internal commitments and external performances. This involves the persuasion and out-narration of damaging forms of internal construction, such as the Milbankian tendency towards reductive oppositionalism in encounters with difference, and the concomitant narration of an alternative form of the Radical Orthodoxy 'tradition' that is at odds with the presentation and performance of the Milbankian form. The proposed narration attempts to queer the identity of Radical Orthodoxy by disrupting the hegemonic position of the Milbankian approach to matters of difference through the reclamation of alternative voices, such as Ward, Williams, and Loughlin, and the re-imagining of the normative form of the movement within its relationality with our wider societies. In doing so, the internal dynamics of the proposed narrative's place within the Radical Orthodoxy movement mirror the attempted narration of the narrative outside the movement, whereby meta-narrative attempts are destabilised in favour of an ongoing quest towards the resolution of outward performance and inward ethical commitment.

This external movement of the narrative, what change it attempts to produce and what social construction it aims for, is an area in which the interaction of the narration of the narrative and its commitments in the context of narration is complex. In attempting to narrate a call toward the Christic action of Panikkar and the emulation and performance of a shared social form of divine beauty, the narrative seeks to avoid the lapse in the static and fixed meta-narrative formation exposed as problematic within the Christian tradition and within Milbank's practice. While this draws on the Trinity, especially its relationship to matters of difference, plurality, community, and

exchange, while also looking practically at the way in which plurality is preserved in practice within the Islamic tradition, in doing so the narrative is attempting to remain internally plural and open to change while also seeking to disrupt the singular and fixed meta-narrative accounts of society that we appear to be stuck with. This is a process of queering our desire for a fixed form of social construction, a settled and all-encompassing meta-narrative formation, in favour of a mirroring of the form of desire seen as integral to the perichoresis of the Trinity – non-reductive,⁹ non-final,¹⁰ and constantly open to the correcting flux of relation with the other.¹¹ In doing so, the need for the meta-narrative structure of society to possess the strategic and tactical strength of a fixed and settled form of narration, with all the concomitant symptoms seen in the Milbankian and secular modern attempts, is reduced in favour of the form of relationality modelled by the divine community. In this, the harmony expressed between differences is maintained without the need for a resolution to homogeneity seen within the current meta-narrative formation. First, through a commitment to desire of the other, a contrast to oppositionalism,¹² second to a commitment to the plurality of the possible expressions of the divine, through the Christian tradition through the narrative form proposed,¹³ and third a commitment to the moving through of the Christian desire for the Christianisation of society by the postponement of the imposition of a Christian meta-narrative structure for society in the future hope of the resolution of created difference within the eschatological drama of the Christian story.¹⁴

The narrative proposed within this volume is therefore engaged in an attempt at bringing the reality of the plurality experienced by us all within the context of the Christian tradition through a narrative reworking of the theological response of Radical Orthodoxy to that plurality. In doing so, it argues for certain changes within the presentation of the Christian tradition, its conceptualisation by members and non-members, and a change in the performance of Christian identity within society. In delivering a renewed theological approach to matters of plurality and difference within our societies, not only is the hope to renew the Radical Orthodoxy movement from the hindrance of its lack of connection to the reality of social and religious plurality, but also to drive forward the mirroring of Christian ethical commitments in the external interactions with others that form the bulk of Christian performance. The proposed narrative does this in a number of ways, including by adopting aspects of non-appropriative and non-reductive practice in instances of engagement with the other and by reconceptualising the place and significance of difference within our social reality. This point towards a future in which the methodology of practice undertaken by the Christian community is explored, but in which the concrete realisation of any concomitant form of Christian social construction is left deliberately open to the creative generative flux engendered between the Christian community and the expressions of difference within society. This moves the narrative developed here from a reactive and deconstructive proposal, reacting to the lack of address towards social and religious

plurality in the Radical Orthodoxy movement and the lack of an effective pattern of the modelling of its supposed ethical commitments in its practice of narration and deconstructing issues of Christian meta-narrative necessity and normative conceptualisations of Radical Orthodoxy, towards the constructive possibility of a renewed form of practice.

This renewed form of practice takes the form of a commitment to matters of social and religious plurality, Trinitarian emulation, and the performance of queer desire toward the other. In doing so, it opens up the Christian narrative to the possibility and reality of plurality within our societies, delivering an account of the Christian narrative that seeks to explain and construct the presence of difference within our reality not as a problem requiring out-narration, but rather as an integral part of both our experience of society and of the Christian story itself. In doing so, the proposed narrative moves beyond the oppositionalism expressed in the Milbankian form of Radical Orthodoxy, towards a dispositional attitude towards the other that is characterised by an opening up in to vulnerability. This vulnerability is developed not as a passive waiting for penetration by the mysterious and totally unreachable other, but is rather an active invitation to relationality between the Christian community and other similar communities that share social space. It is a reaching out, an invitation issued, a showcasing of the desire for connection and meaning and exchange with something different that drives the great emotions of the human heart. In doing so, the narrative attempts to change the disposition of the narrative of Radical Orthodoxy from one of confrontation and suspicion to one that inculcates a new form of practice towards the other that, through its performative display of critical ethical commitments seen as central to Christian identity, serve to change and improve the social conceptualisation not only of the Christian community and faith generally, but also the broader social dynamic of the whole of society.

Beyond this movement developed toward the existence of plurality is a simultaneous adjustment of the place of plurality within the social, ecclesiological, and eschatological vision of the Radical Orthodoxy movement. The narrative proposed offers a new delineation of the meaning and purpose of difference as it is conceptualised by the Milbankian form. In doing so, difference, that omnipresent feature of our social milieu that permeates every interaction we have between ourselves and the other, can be represented within Radical Orthodoxy not as something which represents a flaw or defect in the ordering of the created world, something that requires a violent out-narration, but rather as an integral part of the true representation of the Christian story and of the Christian performance of identity in our contemporary world. As we have seen in the consideration of both desire and beauty within this volume, the presence of plurality, that kaleidoscopic shimmer of ever changing shades of different difference, allows for the integration and preservation of a perichoretic flow of exchange within the tradition itself and between the tradition and those aspects of society seen to be outside it. While the Milbankian form seeks to close off the Christian

tradition from its historical and contemporary interchanges with difference, the proposed narrative places the process of negotiation and exploration with the other as a central factor of Christian performance and Christian identity in the contemporary world.

This process of negotiation and exploration must itself be formed in the image of the Trinitarian relationality, forming a part of the practical working out of a commitment to the Christian ethical and theological framework. In doing so, the narrative proposed calls for a reconceptualisation of Christian practice towards the other with a simultaneous reconfiguration of the theoretical importance of the underpinnings of these aspects of Christian performance. It is this which drives the connection between the theoretical commitment to the notion of the Trinity developed in the narrative as a point of emulation and the practical impact on our actions as Christians – a turn to Christian identity and the Christian story as *performance*. There is, as has been demonstrated, an intimate connection in the internal conceptualisation of identity between the theoretical adoption of epistemological or ontological structures associated with Christian identity and in the external performance of the individual who displays and narrates those internal commitments in their external practice. Beyond this however, lies a layering of community and social dynamics which build up strata of repeated and reflected performances, building up structures and systems of relation and expectation that colour the interaction of individual narratives with their own narration, the narration of aspects of identity with others also claiming or maintaining that aspect of identity, and the broader narrative formation of our social, economic, historic, religious, and political structures. Christian identity *is* Christian performance and Christian performance *is* Christian identity. By seeking to change our theological engagement with aspects of experienced difference and plurality, it is not enough to merely envisage a new story about the meaning of difference, we must have centrally located as an aspect of that renewal an understanding of the practices by which that narrative formation can be reinforced, buttressed, and expressed in the continually changing narrative flux of society.

This is a matter of performance – the acting out of an individual's or community's Christian identity through the parodic re-presentation of the Christian story again and again within the panoply of contexts encountered in our social realities. The narrative proposed has addressed this aspect of the need for Christian performative methodology through a re-inscription of the Trinitarian characteristics onto the practical actions of the Christian believer and community – those aspects of the Trinity identified which provide an example for the way in which our relation with difference can be remodelled after the relation to difference of the divine. This includes the identification of the function of desire within the Trinity with a queering of our normative understanding of desire, relying on non-final, non-reductive, and non-appropriative forms of engagement that results in a functioning of desire that preserves the integrity of the Other. By mirroring, through our practical acts, these forms of behaviour, for example by using

de-hierarchical forms of meeting space or by structuring instances of dialogue as a long term patterning of exchange, the form of desire seen within the Trinity can come to represent our own form of social and community desire. The loosening of the need for finality in the Christian narrative proposed resolves the need for a defensive constant narration of place and position that damages not only the representation of the content of the tradition itself, but reduces the full validity and integrity of the alternative narratives engaged with. Beyond this, the narrative proposed here also brings with it a relaxation of the meta-narrative need for social resolution, the mirroring in the construction of society of the internal commitments of the narrative. In doing so, through the loosening of the boundaries of finalisation and identity within the narrative, the need for a social implementation of a fixed and static understanding of the narrative form that society should take can be replaced, slowly, with a commitment to the process by which society can come to better reflect the desires of the communities by which it is made up. This is a commitment to journeying, to questing, to discovering together, rather than an imposition of something already fixed. It is a retreat both from the active imposition of the Christian narrative on the Other and from the passive reception of the untouchable and mysterious Other that violates the self – it is a reaching out with an invitation in, a desire for the deepening and strengthening of a relationality that, despite the attempts of meta-narrative social construction, exists on a fundamental and inescapable level. Echoing Cross, it is an invitation to rethink, not a proposal of the tradition once already rethought, a vision of performance and disposition towards the other that rejects the static and oppositional account of narrative interaction delivered by Milbank.

Yet, this proposal for a shifting pattern of mutual exploration and relationality between the Christian community and others lacks a propelling vision. It lacks, without the supplement of the notion of beauty, a driving goal and aim that provides impetus to the continued performance in society of the internal commitments of the narrative. As we have seen in the use of beauty within the work of both Milbank and Abou El Fadl, beauty represents for them a reaching beyond the confines of our present realities, a haunting of our experience by something beyond and above our perception. It is this intangibility that exceeds our ability to replicate or describe that forms the point of longing for beauty, that drives the constant process of attempt and emulation. Just as the connection between the human and the divine is formed as excess, a superfluity of divine generosity, that allows for reciprocity across the chasm of our difference from the divine, so too does the point of beauty guide us towards an awareness and appreciation of that which constantly exceeds our individual, circumscribed, lives. It reminds us of the grander whole, and beckons us towards the exceeding of our limits of inclusion and identity.

The goal of beauty, explored here in the context of both Christian and Islamic traditions, is not only a goal for the internal mirroring of Christian belief in action, a living out of the promise of the Christian story as a

performance both internal and external to the Christian community, but also for the ongoing process of relationality and living together with difference expressed in the joint exploration of social meaning by the pluralities present in our contemporary societies. The narrative proposed here is an invitation to renew the bonds between Christian belief and Christian practice in a way that better reflects the beauty and harmony found within them. It is an acceptance of the difficult and polydoxic nature of our contemporary reality, formed from innumerable shades of difference, and a realisation of the need for an engagement with this feature of our reality. Beauty, formed through the eternal and ongoing process of beautification, is, for the narrative proposed, a quest towards this kaleidoscopic vision of society, where difference and similarity can exist within the harmony reached for by Radical Orthodoxy. It is a guiding lodestone that offers, through the processes of particularisation, contextualisation, and the reflection of each action against a broader theologically and socially embedded ideal, a vision for the continuance of Christian practice and performance within the glittering diversity of the contemporary world.

The narrative proposed here is one of beauty – that is the social performance by members of the Christian community of a disposition towards the presence of the other that attempts to model the practical characteristics of the form of beauty expressed in the community and relationality of the Trinity. In doing so, our actions as members of the Christian community must come to mirror the form of relationality seen as the divine example. The way that desire is expressed within the Trinity, the way that difference and unity are present in the Trinity, the way that this presence of difference creates a process of exchange, embrace, and generative flux; all are aspects of the inner beautiful promise of the Christian tradition that can, through careful commitment to a change in dispositional attitudes towards the other, result in a truer, less violent, and more beautiful performance of the nature of the Christian tradition within our societies. The vision is for a renewal and reconstruction of contemporary social practice, a re-conceptualisation of the theological response to the presence of plurality in the context of Radical Orthodoxy, and for a future in which the reductive violence seen as endemic within the secular modern meta-narrative is not reflected in a violent and appropriative practice of our Christian narration.

Notes

- 1 Abou El Fadl, *And God Knows the Soldiers*, 83–92; Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*, 87–112; Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*, 141–169.
- 2 See Tonstad's critique of queer Trinitarian theology: Tonstad, "The Limits of Inclusion", 3–5.
- 3 Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 90–107.
- 4 Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 8–16.
- 5 Cross, "Where Angels Fear to Tread", 41; Hedges, "The Rhetoric and Reception of John Milbank's Radical Orthodoxy", 31–36.
- 6 Hyman, *The Predicament of Post-modern Theology*, 143; Loughlin, "Christianity at the End of the Story or the Return of the Meta-Narrative", 365.

- 7 Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges", 89–116.
- 8 Hedges, "Radical Orthodoxy and the Closed Western Theological Mind", 125.
- 9 D'Costa et al., *Only One Way*, 213.
- 10 Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism", 10.
- 11 Ward, *Cities of God*, 258.
- 12 Sargent, "Proceeding Beyond Isolation", 822.
- 13 Hedges, "Radical Orthodoxy and the Closed Western Theological Mind", 125.
- 14 Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges", 115–116.

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