

interpreting the postmodern

RESPONSES TO "RADICAL ORTHODOXY"

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a literary account written after the model of the killing of an English bishop in other times, contexts, and circumstances. How he can do this is difficult to say except in relation to radical orthodoxy's claims of universalization. Moreover, he thinks that Becket was the only priest in history killed celebrating worship.

Unfortunately there have been many humble priests without glory or rich cathedrals who have been murdered in the slums while saying mass. Long goes as far as to mention the "defenders of capitalism" as the killers of Romero, who were "protect[ing] their people from their own archbishop."²⁴ The struggle and commitment of an archbishop for his people, a commitment that led him to his early death, is an issue treated almost with mockery. Long quotes Jon Sobrino (whom the paramilitaries intended to kill along with the other Jesuits), who saw in Romero's death the presence of the crucified God among the crucified people of El Salvador. To this Long simply retorts that the economic principle of "scarcity, substitution and marginal utility" are the true foundations of economy and not the death of Romero.²⁵ And he continues by saying that as liberation theologians do not understand mathematics they therefore use martyrdom to justify their economic theology. How does one who witnessed the effect of the death of Romero throughout the continent reply to such ignorance and lack of sensitivity?

All in all, radical orthodoxy lacks respect for the martyrs and the marginalized of yesterday and today. This was something that liberation theology knew very well: not to make easy theology with issues pertaining to the life and death of millions of Christians. The martyrdom of Latin Americans is the historical product of more than five hundred years of alliances between church and power. But "the church" is made of people with names and faces, and alliances of power and privilege too. European theologians have a long history of responsibility in the power games that demand the dehumanization of people disguised as a desire to put dogmatics and of course "God" first. In all this, the Other has become a depoliticized, metaphysical Other. So, "the next theology is not for people." But for whom do we think we do theology? For God?

Those of us who believe in the presence of God in history and specifically in the events of liberation also believe that history usually judges theologies. The overspiritualizing of people's suffering and depoliticizing of people's contexts of suffering produce theologies of indifference. Radical orthodoxy is not one of them though. Radical orthodoxy has taken a clear option for a discourse of privilege and class. But exteriority is not something they should look for only in Latin America. Britain also has its Ayacucho. The council states of Britain, the situation of its ethnic minorities, and the reality of unemployment and degradation among its homeless would be enough plateaus to start a theology of passion and compassion aimed at transforming their lives, rather than a theology intent on producing medieval discourses.

But God Godself came in Jesus to Ayacucho, and God has not yet departed from there. The plateaus of destitution in theology are not simply optional, nor are they given up to secular gods. Christianity is a religion built around a destitute God who came for destitute people. This is why I should like to send radical orthodoxy to Ayacucho.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., 92.

8. Radical Transcendence?

Divine and Human Otherness in Radical Orthodoxy and Liberation Theology

—Mayra Rivera Rivera

For decades, "divine transcendence" has acquired a reputation for promoting social indifference. Its common associations with otherworldliness, immateriality, impassivity, and separation have lead most progressive theologians either to avoid the notion almost altogether or to use it as a pejorative shorthand for a long list of attributes that reinforce the disparagement of nonhuman nature, women, and subaltern groups.¹ Yet radical orthodoxy claims precisely the opposite: that transcendence grounds a Christian ethics adequate to support progressive political projects.² However, radical orthodoxy also distances itself from other socially concerned theologies on this issue. Indeed, John Milbank has explicitly accused liberation (and feminist) theologians of compromising divine transcendence, if not of simply avowing a fake one. Transcendence has nonetheless played a crucial role in liberation theologies and is arguably inextricable from other central liberationist themes, such as the reign of God. How then might we interpret radical orthodoxy's challenges to liberation theologies' notion of transcendence?

I am interested in this debate because I too have been drawn to the notion of divine transcendence; as a theological idiom alluding to God's otherness, transcendence suggests itself as a unique theological site for pondering questions of otherness. Yet, like feminist theologians, I am also mindful of how transcendence has worked to legitimize androcentric and hierarchical mindsets by establishing a metaphysical dualism where transcendence/immateriality/progress/independence/Man/God are set over against immanence/materiality/stagnation/dependence/Woman/Nature.³ Might it be possible to rediscover the idea of transcendence, of God's irreducible otherness, without reinscribing the cosmological dualisms that it commonly evokes?

In this essay, I want to explore the possibility of such theological rearticulation by examining the proposals of the radical orthodoxy theologians John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, which will eventually lead us to its specific challenges to liberation

1. I am grateful to Angel Méndez for his insightful and challenging comments to this essay.

2. Kathryn Tanner has consistently made this claim as well, without identifying herself either with radical orthodoxy or liberation theologies. Cf. Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

3. Cf. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 269.

theology as lacking an acceptable concept of transcendence. My reading of radical orthodoxy will pay special attention to the metaphysical structure implicit in these depictions of transcendence—that is, to the image of God, the created world, and of human beings that they espouse. Having discussed the meaning and metaphysical basis of Milbank's transcendence I will proceed to assess his contentions against liberation theology.⁴ I will then consider the proposals and critiques of the liberation theologians Ignacio Ellacuría and Marcella Althaus-Reid, among others, with an aim of uncovering not only the subtle ways in which liberation theology may in fact collude with a dualistic construction of transcendence, but most importantly, the not yet fully realized promise within liberation theology of a concept of *transcendence-in* creation and history.

Transcendence in Radical Orthodoxy

The idea of divine transcendence is inextricable from radical orthodoxy's definition of its own theological identity, indeed, of the very "truth" of theology itself. In the introduction to *Radical Orthodoxy*, the editors state: "[Radical orthodoxy] does not, like liberal theology, transcendentalist theology and even certain styles of neo-orthodoxy, seek in the face of [the nihilistic drift of postmodernism] to shore up [modern] universal accounts of *immanent human value* (humanism) nor defenses of supposedly objective reason." It also differs from those theologies that "indulge . . . in the pretence of a baptism of nihilism in the name of misconstrued 'negative theology'"—radical orthodoxy's typical characterization of postmodern theology. Instead, they argue that radical orthodoxy seeks to respond to "the secular demise of truth" by seeking "to reconfigure theological truth." The latter may seem surprisingly "close to nihilism" because "it, also, refuses a reduction of the indeterminate." Yet that theological truth differs from nihilism in "its proposal of the rational possibility, and the faithfully perceived actuality, of an indeterminacy that is not impersonal chaos but *infinite interpersonal harmonious order* in which time participates."⁵

The *radical* of radical orthodoxy means: (1) "return[ing] to patristic and medieval roots," (2) deploying the recovered vision of patristic and medieval sources for a critique of modern society, (3) rethinking tradition, and (4) espousing that "only *transcendence*, which suspends [embodied life, self-expression, sexuality, aesthetic experience, human political community] in the sense of interrupting them, 'suspends' them also in the other sense of upholding their relative worth *over-against the void*."⁶ This is a basic pattern in radical orthodoxy's transcendence/human structure, the intricacies of which we will analyze in the following sections. This *over-against* is determinant as much for radical orthodoxy as a theological enterprise as for the model of transcendence that radical orthodoxy (re)formulates. Right from this moment of self-definition, radical orthodoxy sets itself off against liberal theology,

4. Unfortunately, Milbank does not offer the textual basis for most of his contentions, frequently not even referring to any particular theologian or text, and thus he precludes the reader from engaging him at specific points. Furthermore, for many of his points he refers to Karl Rahner, or to "Rahner and his followers," arguing that it is from him that liberation theology gets its problematic version of integralism.

5. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 2, emphasis mine.

6. *Ibid.*, 3, emphasis mine.

modernity, humanism, and secularism. It is a movement sustained and mirrored by a divine transcendence set off against *the void*. Between these two poles—divine transcendence and the void—dangles human value.

The Problem of the Demise of Transcendence

Radical orthodoxy understands itself as a response to the concrete realities of the contemporary ("postmodern") world. Its defense of transcendence is aimed at rescuing theology from the grasp of *secular* modernity while rejecting postmodern options. More specifically, radical orthodoxy is posed as providing an alternative for *immanentist* modernity and its postmodern exacerbation, which, those theologians argue, leads only to nihilism. These characterizations of the contemporary world are inscribed in a fall narrative—a fall from a past society structured on the basis of an external transcendent realm (the legacy of Western Platonic philosophy). The fall is claimed to occur in two clearly defined historical steps: modernity and postmodernity.⁷ In premodernity, it is argued, "everything had its appointed and relative value in relation to a *distant, transcendent source*."⁸ The premodern teleology and hierarchy were lost in modernity, when "the world was . . . accorded full reality, meaning and value in itself," resulting in the emergence of a "spatial plane of immanence" where "fixed natures, especially human natures" were distributed and ranked across a "fixed spatial grid."⁹ The ordering of the world no longer referred to anything outside; this gave way to the birth of humanism and secularism, which Milbank associates, as we will see through this discussion, with "immanence." The transcendence that modernity lost is thus imagined as an external source of value associated with vertical dimensionality itself: *highness*. A loss of height, it is assumed, is a loss of transcendence. Yet modernity is still not the lowest level of the fall, as Milbank describes it. In modernity, "Height was lost, but there was still *depth*," he claims.¹⁰

To depict modern social ordering as heightless is a simplification that risks occluding important aspects of a cultural imaginary (and its hierarchies) that still informs our thought. As postcolonial thinkers have shown, what Milbank describes as a "fixed spatial grid," which entailed the ordering of human beings in discrete races distributed geographically, was never devoid of a vertical dimension. The categorization of human beings was simultaneously hierarchical and temporal—each geographical area/race imagined as a different stage in evolution. North was high and contemporary; South was low and primitive.¹¹ Indeed, the North/ South division looms large in the mental

7. One would need to analyze the consequences of this historical depiction, not only for its reliance on a logic of fall—the inverted mirror of the myth of progress—but for the failure to problematize a basic assumption of the myth of progress: the primacy of the West as the gauge of world history.

8. John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, Radical Orthodoxy (ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward; London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 194, emphasis mine.

9. *Ibid.*, emphasis mine. Milbank is referring to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of the "plane of immanence": an "unlimited One-All" that gathers all philosophical concepts. They contrast the philosophers' plane of immanence with the religious "transcendent order imposed from the outside by a great despot or by one god higher than the others" (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, European Perspectives [ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman; trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell; New York: Columbia University, 1994], 43).

10. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 194, emphasis mine.

11. See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

cartographies of postmodern subjects, immersed as we are in the force fields of a globalized capitalist economy where that division coincides with the division of labor.

The fall from modernity to postmodernity—implicitly a step toward total immanence—is a further loss of spatial dimensions. In postmodernity, Milbank argues, “shifting surface flux” replaces any fixed grid, and even “depth is lost as ‘immanence’ comes to be conceived in terms of time, not space.”¹² Time erases space. This demise of transcendence thus gives way to the “dissolution of limits,” Milbank’s main contention against postmodern culture (194). For all its talk of difference, “In the postmodern times, there is no longer any easy distinction to be made between nature and culture, private interior and public exterior, hierarchical summit and material depth; nor between idea and thing, message and means, production and exchange, product and delivery, the State and the market, humans and animals, image and reality—nor beginning, middle and end” (187). As a consequence, Milbank protests, humans no longer perceive their development as limited by nature nor moving toward a teleological goal. The distinction between men and women is blurred, and thus heterosexual-ity is being replaced by relation of multiples in a matrix of homosexual sameness (207). Human intervention with nature—an invasion of nature by culture—has produced undesirable effects, from AIDS to global warming. Home has been invaded by public media, while the public spheres have become meaningless. The obliteration of political boundaries has supported the economic devastation of globalization. The cultural presupposition that underlies all these blurrings of boundaries, Milbank argues, is *immanence*.

Participation: Between Creation and the God Beyond

This account of the problem of contemporary culture as a fall from a past, when social structures referred to external and hierarchical transcendence, governs Milbank’s proposed solution. To overcome the modern (heightless) spatially fixed categorizations or the postmodern (depthless) dissolution of limits, radical orthodoxy seeks to reassert stability of essences, and thus of boundaries necessary for real differences to exist, by turning to premodern thought. Milbank provocatively calls for a *reappropriation* of “our Western legacy” expressed in “the creeds of transcendence in Judaism, Christianity and Islam” (175, emphasis mine).

We have already seen that in Milbank’s depiction of premodernity, transcendence was a source—distant and high—in reference to which “everything had its appointed and relative value” (194, emphasis mine). Transcendence is a universal, “not as something clearly grasped, spatially fixed and operable, but rather something eternally present yet not fully accessible”—always being given and deferred (174). How then does Milbank describe the process through which this source becomes inscribed as stable human essences? How does its *height* “suspend” embodied life, self-expression, sexuality, aesthetic experience, human political community?

Milbank’s system is based on the interplay between an eternal and universal divine reality and the (human) dynamisms described through the platonic notion of *participation*. Participation establishes the relation and balance between stability and change,

12. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 194 (consecutive references to this work are cited parenthetically in the text). Similarly, Pickstock mourns Western thought’s departure from its ancient Athens roots, which has lead to a new version of immanentism, “immanentist modernity,” with similar social consequences.

eternity and transience, old and new meanings, particularity and universality (171). Flux and permanence sustain each other. Thus Milbank’s analysis poses two opposing poles, the relation between which constitutes the fabric of created existence. The relation between these poles is imagined, however, not as mutual intertwining of two distinct realities, one human, the other divine; for the divine is not only spatially distant and high, but it is also eminently “real.” In the midst of the continuous change of our existence, “Only if reality itself is regarded as ‘given’ from some beyond does it become possible to trust” the seamless continuity between the old and the new (171, emphasis mine). What is *reality itself*? What is *not* reality itself? What can be said of that which can only receive *reality* from beyond? Is it something, or nothing? Is it the void?

And what about the *beyond* from which reality is given? Where or what is it? Is it an otherworldly realm of unchanging immateriality—more Platonic than biblical—the assumptions of which feminist theologies have challenged for decades? Not necessarily so, I believe—but I do so against Milbank’s own contentions. Milbank’s allusions to a beyond that is nonetheless a “pre-condition of justice,” an elsewhere that invades our passing reality, evokes crucial liberationist moves (177, emphasis mine). Images of an elsewhere that irrupts in our daily life—of something beyond our selves, whose coming we experience as the irruption of the alien, the Other—have helped liberation thinkers reclaim and reformulate transcendence as an ethical opening of the self to the other. Welcoming that which comes from *elsewhere*, from *beyond* the self, is indeed a precondition of justice, liberation theologians would say.¹³ However, as we will see, Milbank wards off such liberation (as well as Levinasian) moves. Milbank’s notion of transcendence as always in a dynamic relation to participation—as a “horizon of unknown variation”—evokes a sense of openness that represents a promising move against the absolutization of an existing (or previously existing) state of affairs.¹⁴ But Milbank also insists on locating this beyond *outside* of the world. He describes it as “other-worldly” (177).

Transcendence for Milbank means not just divine excess: the source of novelty, meaning, and unity of the created world. It also evokes discontinuity: the spatial separation and independence of that which resides beyond all “ontological heights” (211). In its relation to the transcendent God, the world’s future, he argues, does not arrive through time (history) only, as this would imply the possibility of an organic development toward it. “It arises also from another space, or from a space forever constituted by externalities . . .” (180). It is God’s absolute independence that *guarantees* “that the future contingency is super-added to the present, and not emergent from it by mere instrumental causality—whose absolute sway would demand that everything was given from the very first instance of time” (180). Keeping open the possibility of the coming of an unpredictable future is crucial for any discourse attempting to avoid foreclosing the coming of the Other. However, Milbank presents us here with two and

13. The Latin American liberation philosopher Enrique Dussel has consistently developed Levinas’s model of transcendence encounters in the face of the other to propose a model of transcendence that supports an ethics of liberation. For an early exposition of his project see Enrique Dussel and Daniel E. Guilloit, *Liberación Latinoamericana y Emmanuel Levinas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Bonum, 1975). See also Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), for a discussion that queers the liberation discussions on otherness.

14. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 171, emphasis mine.

only two alternatives: either the future emerges from "mere" causality, totally given from the beginning, or it comes from an *absolute exteriority*. He chooses the latter.

What does this contraposition of mere causality to absolute exteriority tell us about Milbank's notion of cosmological participation in the divine? A cosmos minus the externally constituted future would be *mere causality*—driven by whatever was *given from the very first instance of time*. Tellingly, his example of this type of causality is "a flower issuing forth from a shoot."¹⁵ Are we to suppose then that this flowering takes place independently from participation in the divine? Or instead, if he is assuming that the blooming flower *does* participate in the divine, is he implying that such participation is not enough, that it must be supplemented? That something else must be *externally super-added* to, is lacking in, a cosmos participating in the divine? Something that must be unilaterally given from above?

Milbank argues that transcendence establishes the continuity between the old and the new. He also claims that transcendence guarantees (from the *outside*) the outcome: "we can, one day, be liberated" (211). But how would external intervention maintain the continuity between the new and the old? How can one then prevent the externality of this transcendence from overwhelming or rendering ultimately inconsequential the creatures' movement toward an ever deferred encounter with God and thus with their nature and essence? We are not told.

Let us try to resist the pull of that external space of ontological elevation and defer the talk of guaranteed futures to consider the complex space-time of a cosmos and the *indeterminacy* of its *infinite interpersonal* relations—the realm where social justice must be pursued. We are told that here in the cosmos access to the divine is "mediated throughout by an elusive participation." This vision of distributed rather than centralized power, which characterized Christian and Jewish descriptions of God until the end of the Middle Ages, represented a "revolt against *either* particularism *or* the cult of universalizable power" of its time (175). Through the concept of participation, Christians and Jews imagined a God who, being always beyond their grasp, was "only available as diversely mediated by local pathways" (174, emphasis mine). Through participation, humans relate to God, who is always beyond and always multiply, if elusively, present. "A recognition of transcendence," however, "requires not just the legitimizing . . . of infinitely many regional perspectives," each of them, "particular and ineffable," and thus, I presume, *uniquely* participating in the divine. It also requires an attempt at characterization, Milbank asserts.

How, then, does one judge between competing universals? Admitting the difficulty of this issue, Milbank proposes the following image: "A recognition of transcendence requires not just the legitimizing . . . of infinitely many regional perspectives, but also the constantly renewed attempt to characterize the one human 'region' in the cosmos, and to *erect*, as it were, the *universal totem*" (174). This totem is "tangible, and yet non-fetishistic," Milbank clarifies. That is, it is the product of the collective agreement, rather than the individual.¹⁶ And yet, why is such a phallic image offered precisely at this point, where the discussion moves to the question of universals? Feminist theorists have shown the mutual implication between phallic images and Western culture's privilege

15. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 180.

16. I am grateful to Trish Sheffield for bringing Durkheim's distinction to my attention.

of sameness over difference, sight over sensation, man over woman.¹⁷ Will Milbank's universal quietly drift toward a system based on masculine-defined parameters where woman is reduced to the one who lacks? We will return to this question in our discussion of the gender structure that Milbank explicitly delineates.

Milbank continues: "Catherine Pickstock . . . has provided us with an exemplary account of how one '*universal totem*' . . . supremely operates in a fashion that is at once entirely tangible, and yet non-fetishistic and non-socially divisive"—"namely, the Catholic eucharist."¹⁸ In Pickstock's rendering, the rite enacts the ceaseless reconstitution of a community "entirely from without," not mediated by human hierarchy. This kind of "collective and supra-rational devotion" is for Milbank a "pre-condition for collective solidarity and just redistribution," for which he argues (176f.). That is, this eucharistic totem is the kind of relation to transcendence that he would *erect*. Let us then turn to Pickstock's description of the eucharistic rite.

God in Language

In Pickstock's analysis, the relation between the linguistic sign and the referent in liturgy mirrors the relation between humans and the "transcendent" God. The worshippers, like the signs, stand in relation to something that transcends them. The Roman eucharistic rite, she proposes, enacts this asymmetrical relation between the worshippers and the "transcendent" God. Like Milbank, Pickstock associates transcendence with spatial distance and height; "the altar of God is an infinitely receding place, always *vertically beyond*."¹⁹ However, her account of the rite gives special attention to the temporal element implicit in the notion of transcendence—that is, transcendence refers not only to those characteristics of God that place "him" at a distance, but also to the constant deferral of fulfillment. The I-Thou relationship established through the use of apostrophic language—the words addressed to an absent God as if God were present—is not completed "with the first utterance of an invocation, since the divine 'Thou' is not an object which our voice can stop at or appropriate. Rather, our utterance must give rise to further speaking" (197). Liturgical language must thus be ceaselessly repeated, striving for that which will always exceed it. The continuous repetitions and recombinations in the liturgy perform the deferral of the completion of liturgy until the eschatological time. Although Pickstock's emphasis here falls not on an insurmountable difference between God and the finite, but on the inexhaustibility of the divine, her interpretation of transcendence is intrinsically linked to the spatial distance. The "apophatic reserve" of language "betokens our constitutive, positive, and analogical distance from God" (173).

The incessant movements toward an ever receding transcendence are complemented by what can be described as movements in the opposite direction: from the referent toward the sign, from God to creature. Through what she calls "ontology of the gift," Pickstock claims to offer a model for the *reciprocal* exchange between God and

17. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 74.

18. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 176, emphasis mine.

19. Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, in *Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (ed. Gareth Jones and Lewis Ayres; Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 183, emphasis mine. Consecutive references to this work are cited parenthetically in the text.

creature, in contraposition to the unilateral flow that characterizes postmodern thinkers' depictions of "the gift." The possibility of the encounter between the transcendent God and the community is founded on a strong, even *essential*, link between the sign and the referent, exemplified in her descriptions of liturgical language and the Eucharist's bread and wine. The names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit "are really one name," she asserts (182). "This name is . . . not a static name affixed outside being, but is an *essential name commensurate with the existential space of the Trinitarian journey*" (182, emphasis mine). Similarly, the "Amen" pronounced in the liturgy "is the *language in common between God and worshipper*, for it is at once the incarnational bodying forth of God and the true human response to God" (182). Pickstock argues that, by invoking the transcendent, apostrophic language establishes a "supreme dialogic relationship" between the celebrant and God, one that "shatters the protocols of all other relationships by taking place between the visible and invisible, the present and the absent" (197). Indeed she proposes an interpretation of the sign where they may be seen as "*leaping over the stage of indication or reference*" (262, emphasis mine). Given that languages are systems of relation between signs, this leap requires the liberation of the signs, as it were, so that their "character as *bounded things* become dislodged" (259, emphasis mine). Language is thus claimed not only to be more than it seems but also to exceed the limits of human relations and communication. While Pickstock's allusions to constant deferral, incompleteness, and apophatic reserve emphasize the beyondness of a transcendent God, her descriptions of liturgical language move in the opposite direction by claiming instead the power of liturgical language to overcome its own limits.

In Pickstock's account of the encounter between God and creature, God's transcendence is desired, encountered, felt, enjoyed. In this reciprocal exchange, the simple chronology of call and response, gift and reception is destabilized. "The utterance of the apostrophe is, *by definition*, contemporaneous with God's entry, not simply as a subsequent response, but as that which enables the worshipper to call out in the first place" (194, emphasis mine). Participation appears as an endless and unrestrained flow where "it is impossible to desire God empty, without that desire provoking and constituting its own *consummation*" (194, emphasis mine). That desire is never empty, never simply lack, but evidence of having had received, is perhaps an ancient insight, but one worth repeating to unsettle modern common sense.²⁰ But is *consummation* not the end of desire, grasping and thus completing the move toward the Other?

"At the same time," however, Pickstock asserts that the relationship established through the apostrophic utterance "reveals the *merely* (or empirically) '*present*' to be that which, without this relation with the apparent 'absent,' constitutes the *ultimate absence*."²¹ Surprisingly, creatures begin to lose "presence"—or their "solidity," as Milbank would say²²—in comparison with the "transcendent subjectivity" of the God in which they are nonetheless "grounded," which makes them "more."²³ This relegation of humans to mere empirical presence might be hinted at in Milbank's references to

20. See Irigaray's discussion of this argument in Diotima's speech as recounted in Plato's *Symposium* (Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993]).

21. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 197, emphasis mine.

22. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 210.

23. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 198. This might be a by-product of the Nicene definitions: "The father begets the Son out of his own essence, but makes the world out of nothing," in Virginia Burrus's succinct articulation. The world and its creatures fall on the side of (almost) nothing (Virginia Burrus, "The Sex

the reality itself as given from beyond, and in the statement that "only *transcendence*" "suspends" life "in the other sense of upholding their relative worth *over-against the void*," cited above.²⁴ Having examined the essential status that Pickstock grants to some signs only makes this assertion more startling.

Placing the constitutive source of subjectivity away from the self unto an *other*, radical orthodoxy refuses the idea of the priority and autonomy of the ego, which was central to modern constructions of subjectivity. However, this *other* at times seems to mirror the very model of modern subjectivity that arguably needs to be challenged. The transcendent other is described not only as eminent but also as absolutely autonomous. While compellingly warding off attempts to construe truth as an object to be apprehended and mastered, Pickstock's model still relies on a logic of mastery—in the opposite direction: from the divine other to the human subject. "Liturgical truth," she argues, is "a *prior seizure* of the subject by an overwhelming subjectivity."²⁵ To call out to God is to have already been, not merely called or touched, but *seized*.²⁶ I am encouraged by Pickstock's appeals to a reciprocal relation between the creator and creatures and by her questioning of the distinction between call and response. But can there be an authentic response when one is *seized* by an overwhelming subjectivity? Can a "reciprocal exchange which shatters all ordinary positions of agency and reception" take place in the context of a seizure, in the absence of real agency at both sides of the encounter?²⁷ In contrast with Pickstock's own promising proposals for a *reciprocal* relation, this portrayal of the encounter with God's overwhelming subjectivity hovers between two poles, as it were. On the one hand, the allusions to consummation, seizure, and commensurability evoke images of fusion, which is not reciprocity. On the other hand, we are offered a picture of humans as *mere presences* striving toward the "ultimate and elusive boundary . . . which surrounds *emptiness*."²⁸ This is a humanity that (being almost nothing?) strives for that union that will suffuse humanity with meaning and value. Neither one of these moments seems to keep the crucial balance between respecting the noninterchangeability of the subjects and the genuine but different contributions of each one.

In this model, we find a collection of selves (merely presences) turned toward the overwhelming subjectivity of a God that gives them whatever reality they have—from without. This relation reconstitutes the community "entirely from without," without the mediation of human hierarchy. Apart from the difficulties and dangers entailed in any claims to dislodge any human activity from its entanglement in its context, this scene of the human/divine encounter as a model for the constitution of a collectivity seems to occlude an essential element: other human beings.²⁹ Do human relations not

Life of God: Divine Begetting and Creativity in Ancient Christian Texts," paper presented at The Language of Body and Bodily Processes: Sensual and/or Metaphorical?, Oslo, Norway, 2004).

24. Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 3, emphasis mine.

25. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 198, emphasis mine.

26. On the important distinction between grasp and touch, see Karmen MacKendrick, *Word Made Skin: Figuring Language at the Surface of Flesh* (New York: Fordham, 2004).

27. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 176.

28. *Ibid.*, 198, emphasis mine.

29. Pickstock comments that "however much a particular finite relationship might seem to have the quality of destiny, it ultimately remains fortuitous and is at most transitory, since one I-Thou relationship can be followed by a second and a third, and in each case, the new 'Thou' will be endowed with a new and different name" (*ibid.*, 197).

mediate the constitution of a collectivity? Do the selves in this scene ever look at or talk to each other? Do they give or receive from each other anything worthy of consideration for the constitution of the collectivity?

God's Transcendence and Human Otherness

Pickstock's account of the Eucharist evokes the image of a priestly God dispensing the elements to a congregation with no sense of each other. How then can it become a model for the universal that Milbank envisions as the "pre-condition of collective solidarity and just redistribution"?³⁰ What are the implications of this rite, which Milbank likens to a universal totem, for interhuman relations? What kind of collectivities does Milbank imagine it would foster?

In the Eucharist, Milbank observes, "symbolic power is not, primarily, mediated by a human hierarchy: on the contrary, it is in the first place mediated by the general ingestion of these symbols through time" (177). In Pickstock's view, the apophatic reserve of language, itself a sign of God's distance, leads to a constant deferral of the completion of liturgy. Thus, the "ruling principle" that this reading of liturgy evokes "is a deferral to a plenitudinous unknown Good which is always still awaited," Milbank explains; "liturgical rule is able to await on further capacities of the self as yet undisclosed or ungranted" (179). From this Milbank derives a principle for sociopolitical analysis: "Rule itself is (at least in principle) understood as the possibility of a self-critique through attention to what lies *beyond the self* (individual or collective)" and the "avoidance of absolutization of the self making this critique" (179). Observe that transcendence is here used to denote a *deferral of fulfillment*, the reality of something always beyond the self that prevents it from closing around itself. This openness to what lies *beyond* is sustained by what Milbank suggestively calls a "culturally imbued sense of transcendence" (180). Are other human beings about to appear on this scene? Although Milbank is quick to add the spatial otherworldly dimension of this *beyond*, in his chapter on culture he continues to develop the notion of transcendence as *deferral*. The deferral of God's presence implies a deferral of the fulfillment of human being's identity, which, as we saw, comes from God.

Thus Milbank proposes a reinterpretation of identity and difference, not as something given, a "natural law," but as something disclosed through time by repetition. It is in relation to this interpretation of the dynamics of identity formation that Milbank introduces the concept of "affinity." Affinity, as Milbank defines it, is "the arriving gift of something that we must partially discover in patient quest, active shaping and faithful pursuing" (204). The prime example of identity formed by *affinity* is Jesus. In agreement with Origen, Milbank explains that "Jesus was God because his affinity with God was so extreme as to constitute identity . . . not of substantial nature, but of character . . ." (203).³¹ This bond of affinity—a "non-theorizable and almost ineffable

30. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 176f. Tellingly, Milbank's example of a collectivity constituted from without, as part of the body of Christ, is the "European collectivity" (ibid.).

31. Origen describes the incarnation as follows: "[The Son] granted invisibly to all rational creatures . . . a participation in himself . . . each obtained a degree of participation proportionate to the loving affection with which he had clung to him. . . [one soul] clinging to God from the beginning . . . in a union inseparable and indissoluble . . . was made with him in a pre-eminent degree one spirit. . . This soul, then, acting as a medium between God and the flesh . . . there is born . . . the God-man, the medium being that existence to whose nature it was not contrary to assume a body" (*On First Principles* 2.6.3).

identity"³²—is not exclusive to the God-Jesus relation. Jesus' community with his disciples is also established on the basis of affinity through their own repetition with difference of Jesus' character. And so also with subsequent Christian communities. Repetition continues—always with difference.

Milbank thus calls for a reinterpretation of identity, and thus of human nature and essence, not as givens but as "what may eventually be disclosed . . . with and through time" (201). In contrast to the modern notions of fixed and categorizable identities, Milbank proposes to think of identities as becoming. However, this openness toward transformation, expressed by the concept of affinity, is limited by his assertion of teleological ends. The two poles of this definition of identity mirror the two poles we have identified in Milbank's descriptions of transcendence: one emphasizes the inexhaustibility of the divine, while the other highlights its distance, autonomy, and power.

The tension between the two poles of identity becomes most visible in his treatment of gender difference. An idea of gender identity as disclosed through time rather than already given seems congruent with feminists' statements, from Simone de Beauvoir to Judith Butler, to the effect that "one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman . . . *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming."³³ But Milbank is not assenting to such "gender trouble." The becoming of identity is for him not open-ended, but guided toward a set teleological end. We may thus gain "true knowledge" about bodies only "when we share something of God's insight into how he wished them to be."³⁴ One can only hope not to be excluded from that "we"!

While Milbank begins by describing *affinity* as a "non-theorizable and almost ineffable identity," never fully present, he surprisingly proceeds to equate it to ontology (203). "Affinity or ontological kinship . . ." he says in passing, and moves on to describe sexual difference as "ontologically more *resistant* than people would suppose" (206, emphasis mine).³⁵ When the *ontological* nature of sexual difference is rejected, as was the case of Aristotle's philosophy, femininity is deemed a mere deficiency. Milbank's feminine-affirming gesture is nonetheless not followed by a welcome to the unpredictable challenges of women's views—that is, by openness to the other beyond masculinist discourse. Instead he attempts to categorize his sexual others. Despite disclaimers and even an encouraging nod to Luce Irigaray, the results are hardly *radical*: "men are more nomadic, direct, *abstractive* and forceful, women are more settled, subtle, particular and beautiful" (207). This restatement of "inherited generalizations" cannot but give a patronizing tone to the following: "both sexes are innovative, legislative, commanding and conservative *within* these different modes" (207, emphasis mine). Asserting the "equality of difference" supposedly implied in the gender depictions he has just offered, Milbank explains: "Without the feminine settled, male *abstraction* is not an abstraction but only another . . . settled view" (207). Indeed. But does this argument not pertain to the protection of a male ideal through the projection of its opposite onto woman? It is a male ideal imposed on women by men.³⁶ This

32. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 203.

33. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 43.

34. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 210, emphasis mine.

35. Milbank claims that while race is a cultural construction, gender is not.

36. Luce Irigaray, "Each Transcendent to the Other," in *To Be Two*, trans. Monique M. Rhodes and Marco E. Cocito-Monoc (New York: Routledge, 2001).

mechanism has been deployed repeatedly to protect not only gender hierarchies but also racial and ethnic ones. To inscribe them in a narrative of divinely given identities occludes their historicity and, more dangerously, masks human hierarchies as divine telos. Rather than affirming a culturally imbued sense of transcendence, is this not a transcendentalizing of select cultural values?

Tellingly, we find the abstractive/settled dichotomy replayed in the very characterization of Christian identity. This time it is "Jewish specificity" that occupies the space of the settled to which "Christian abstraction is necessarily betrothed."³⁷ In another (related) statement of "inherited generalizations," Milbank characterizes Christianity as "the religion of the obliteration of boundaries," (196) and Judaism as "perhaps the very opposite" (197). Predictably, Christianity's *Other*, Judaism, occupies the space of the feminine, an association hardly upset by describing their relation as a betrothal—after all, for Milbank marriage is strictly heterosexual.

Milbank's invocation of Irigaray's thought in this discussion may at first glance seem appropriate. Irigaray, like Milbank, observes that our "masculine culture generally ignored the objectivity which exists in the pre-given: the body, bodies, the cosmic universe."³⁸ (The "culture" she refers to is a masculinist culture rather than postmodern culture.³⁹) Irigaray further argues that ignoring the objectivity of the body has led to the loss of the transcendent potentials of the encounters across sexual difference. I would welcome a theological encounter between Irigaray's attention to transcendence as emerging across difference and Milbank's affinity as an ineffable bond between creatures as well as between creatures and God. But this betrothal seems, at this point, improbable. Whereas Milbank asserts the need to affirm a "supra-human power beyond" in order to provide society with a principle by which "it might be *measured* and *limited* . . ." ⁴⁰ Irigaray, in contrast, sees the construction of a God as a transcendental subjectivity, not as a correction but as a symptom of the erasure of the objectivity of bodies, or, to use Pickstock's language, of their depiction as mere presences. The need to pose a supranatural limit to our subjectivity derives from the "erasure of the other as other," as a contiguous transcendent other always beyond the self.⁴¹

If male and Christian abstractions depend on a settled woman and Judaism, respectively, Milbank's depiction of transcendence seems to depend on a settled Other: *immanence*.⁴² And vice versa. But the distance between the two poles of the transcendence/immanence dyad tends to infinity. Although the contraposition of transcendence to immanence is almost common sense in theology, it is important to notice its distinctive overtones for Milbank and Pickstock. Whereas many contemporary theologians attempt to hold together the "immanent" as much as the "transcendent" as aspects of God, evoking images of God's presence both *inside* and *outside* of creation, in radical orthodoxy writings we have considered, "immanent," "immanentist," or even "immanence" are frequently used to evoke the *rejection* or *absence* of God—that which denies

37. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 207.

38. Irigaray, "Each Transcendent to the Other," 90.

39. Irigaray also observes the anxiety that the givenness of the body and nature provokes in a capitalist society. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 99.

40. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 5.

41. Irigaray, "Each Transcendent to the Other," 92.

42. Here I am referring to Milbank's sense of the term immanent, which I do not share.

the beyond. In general, one finds them associated with the terms secular, modern, *nihil*.⁴³ Indeed, Milbank is willing to attribute to "secular immanence" the horrors that contemporary criticism has credited to "totalitarianism."⁴⁴ "Secular immanence," Milbank writes, is "totalizing and terroristic because it acknowledges no supra-human power beyond itself by which it might be *measured* and *limited* . . ." (5).⁴⁵ This identification of immanence with godless totality is also apparent in Pickstock's *After Writing*. Platonic myths of transcendence, she argues, represent a radical challenge to "the immanentist city," "the beginnings of a technocratic, manipulative, dogmatically rationalist, anti-corporeal and homogenizing society undergirded by *secularity* and *pure immanence*."⁴⁶

This setting off of a "purely immanent" realm is most evident in Milbank's engagement with other theologies. Milbank identifies two versions of "postmodern modes of religiosity." First, he identifies "new age religions," characterized by their assertion of "the sanctity of an empty mystical self able to transcend, identify with, and promote or else refuse the totality of process in the name of a truer 'life' which is invisible."⁴⁷ More relevant for my discussion is the second group, which he describes as the addition of a "Spinozistic twist" to "postmodern Marxist atheism," of which Deleuze, Negri, and Hart are given as examples. These he criticizes for seeing "*the plane of immanence* . . . as the sphere of active, productive forces, which manifest themselves in human terms as love and desire. . . ." ⁴⁸ If posing a sphere of forces that manifest in human love, where "once oppression is surpassed, liberated nature-going-beyond-nature fully appears," is problematic for Milbank, it is because he assumes, or *implicitly* accepts, the assumption that such a plane of immanence is devoid of God (195).

Transcendence in Liberation Theology

The Debate with Radical Orthodoxy

A structurally similar critique is raised against Latin American liberation theology. In his essay "Founding the Supernatural: Political and Liberation Theology in the Context of Modern Catholic Thought," Milbank contends that liberation theology replaces transcendence with social processes.⁴⁹ He claims that the root of the problem is that liberation theology has "embraced" the "*immanent* principles of secularization and politics," as evidenced in its use of Marxism.⁵⁰ As a result of the alleged adoption

43. For example, "immanentist modernity," "spatialization [of modernity] constitutes a bizarre kind of immanentist ritual," and "the nihilism of immanent presence" (Pickstock, *After Writing*, 239, 198).

44. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 5.

45. For him, however, the term "secular immanence" might be tautology, as his definition of both "secular" and immanence emphasize their lack of reference to transcendence. Right after defining secular as, among other things, lacking reference to transcendence, he asserts that postmodernity is "not more open to religion than modernity," but indeed "more emphatically immanentist" (Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 195).

46. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 48, emphasis mine.

47. Levinas would not equate visibility with graspability.

48. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 195.

49. John Milbank, "Founding the Supernatural: Political and Liberation Theology in the Context of Modern Catholic Thought," in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (ed. John Milbank; Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993),

50. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), 243, emphasis mine.

of immanent principles, liberation theology has posited an autonomous "profane sphere," which it has assumed can be understood outside of theology while, at the same time, claiming this space to be the site of God's grace. Milbank challenges the use of the social sciences to question theology; it is theology that should govern any description of and program for the transformation of society. Therefore, he asserts that liberation theology, guided as it has been by the social sciences, has mistaken "immanence" for transcendence. Liberation theology's praxis is, in his opinion, nothing but "political practice" "outside Christian tradition."⁵¹ In the end, Milbank argues, "the social process is identified as the site of transcendence" (not a "culturally imbued sense of transcendence"?). Furthermore, "although the process is a purely human one, and although there are no human needs which cannot be immanently met, liberation can still be identified by theology as the anonymous site of all divine action."⁵² A purely human process opposed to divine action? But who is assuming a *plane of pure immanence* here? Certainly not liberation theologians.

As a consequence, Milbank continues, liberation theology's concept of salvation has to do with an "empty, formless epistemological *transcendence*" while the social realm is "thought to possess its own *immanent* ethical principles."⁵³ Instead, Milbank argues, theology should be founded in its Christian "ethical distinctiveness."⁵⁴ A non-immanent Christianity? Indeed, the question of whether a particular theological assertion is conducive to social justice is somehow the wrong question for him in the context of this argument—for his starting point is the affirmation of the theological as the legitimate basis for judging the social.

Liberation theologies may be reluctant to subsume all ethics under the Christian understanding of the Christ event.⁵⁵ This circumspection, however, does not spring from an assumption of the autonomy of social ethics from the divine, as Milbank supposes. Instead, there is in liberation theologies a desire, indeed a commitment, to uphold all spheres of society—Christian or not—as potential sites of divine action. This is based, as we shall see, on a strong liberationist affirmation of all existence as *existence in God*. There is no region of "pure immanence," if that means the possibility of existing outside the divine. No purely human, if that means devoid of participation in the divine: "The very being of the human is constitutively a being in God."⁵⁶ As Michael Lee explains, for Latin American liberation theologian Ignacio Ellacuría, "Christian praxis, as the historicization of faith . . . which might employ social sciences

51. Ibid., 209, emphasis mine.

52. Ibid., 229. It is not clear whether the characterization of liberation as "purely human" or of the needs as "immanently met" are presented as Milbank's opinion or as his representation of liberation theology's stance. If the latter is assumed, one would have to contend that neither "purely human" (as opposed to divine) nor immanent (as opposed to transcendent) fit easily with the *historical* transcendence proposed by Ellacuría, Sobrino, or Dussel, for instance.

53. Ibid., 233, emphasis mine.

54. Ibid., 230. This ethical distinctiveness, however, is, he argues, "Platonic-Christian," as ethics begins with Plato and, in the end, all ethics is in some sense traceable to Judaism or Christianity (ibid.).

55. Milbank challenges liberation theology on a number of fronts, which, although not reducible to the question of divine transcendence, do seem to converge in a concern about its perceived failure to assert a theological foundation comprehensive enough to subordinate the social sciences.

56. Michael E. Lee, "Liberation Theology's Transcendent Moment: The Work of Xavier Zubiri and Ignacio Ellacuría as Noncontrastive Discourse," *Journal of Religion* 83, no. 2 (2003): 230.

in analysis of intramundane reality, still perceives reality's deeper theological dimension, [its] rootedness in God."⁵⁷

Paradoxically, Milbank's own contentions depend on an implicit—albeit explicitly denied—division between the profane and the sacred; that is, on the possibility of asserting the existence of "purely human" processes (devoid of transcendence), where human needs are met *immanently*. This is perhaps another side effect of the tendency to reduce humans to mere presences (almost nothing) over which future potentialities are externally super-added.⁵⁸ Is there still room for any significant (bodily) notion of participation where human needs are reduced to immanence—in Milbank's sense of the term? Conversely, Milbank seems also to assume the possibility of extracting the theological from all conscious or unconscious, past or present, sociopolitical assumptions and interests, in order to obtain Christian principles as the pure foundation for practices that would otherwise be purely human—*immanent*. This tendency to selectively "locate" certain things on either side of an assumed immanent/transcendent line runs through Pickstock's and Milbank's works. We have seen, for instance, Pickstock's treatment of some liturgical language as essential and "commensurate with the existential space" of the Trinity, of some signs becoming dislodged of their "character as bounded things." The risk of the latter is to inadvertently cross the line between protecting God from appropriation and claiming a transcendent authority for one's own discourse.

The risk of appropriating divine transcendence to assert one's authority has been the main concern of liberation theologians, as Althaus-Reid summarizes: "Religion as the representation of an absolute essence is a Hegelian idea which has been disputed by the liberationist Marxist approach, through an understanding that the absolute essence is nothing more than a political ideology *homologizing itself with a God-like discourse* of sacred authority."⁵⁹ The challenge of the endowment of religious thought with divine authority is accompanied by a challenge of any notion of revelation that assumes it has *leaped over* the realm of human historical knowledge. Revelation, Althaus-Reid adds, "is not considered anymore as the almost mediumistic art of pulling down a Platonic idea of an abstract absolute idea of God." Instead, revelation is *enmeshed in* not only human language, but also in all aspects of human bodiliness. "In any case, revelation reveals (unveils, undresses) God in our historical circumstances, and assumes a materialist twist in our understanding."⁶⁰ "That is the point of doing theology from people's experiences, *and*"—adding her own zesty challenge to established liberation theology—"from their sexual stories, because they reveal the *falsity of the border limits* between the material and divine dimensions of our lives."⁶¹ Rather than assuming it has leaped over boundaries, this theology questions them.

Thus, not only does liberation theology affirm the rootedness of all created reality in God (and thus would refuse to characterize humans as *merely* immanent), it also asserts the finitude of our own experiences of the divine. Like Milbank, liberation

57. Ibid., 241.

58. Milbank criticizes humanism because it "denies the inherent nothingness of things" (*Being Reconciled*, 179).

59. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 148.

60. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 148.

61. Ibid, emphasis mine.

theology attends both to the "infinitely many regional perspectives" and to the "constantly renewed attempts to characterize the one human 'region' in the cosmos." However, this would not lead liberation theologians to retrieve medieval Western universals, which after all supported the expulsion of the Moors, witch hunts, and other atrocities. Their view, indeed their experience, of history reveals complexities that challenge Milbank's appraisal of "universal values." Having been for centuries the receptors of externally imposed Western universals, having seen their own human value and needs subordinated to its principles, Latin Americans are keenly aware of the dangers involved in raising one set of values as predefined "universals."

Transcendence in History: Liberationist Voices

In his article "The Historicity of Christian Salvation," Ignacio Ellacuría explores the biblical basis and the theological importance of a liberationist interpretation of transcendence in history. Transcendence, he argues, "calls attention to a contextual structural difference without implying a duality;" it "enables us to speak of an intrinsic unity without implying a strict identity."⁶² If for radical orthodoxy liturgical language (in its broadest sense) becomes a site of contact between a transcendent God and humanity, for liberation theology the point of connection is *history*. History is the "place of transcendence," where both God and human beings intervene.⁶³ Indeed, the unity of divine and human history "affirms the dual unity of God in humanity and humanity in God."⁶⁴ Ellacuría attributes to "pernicious philosophical influences" the fact that transcendence has been identified with *separateness*, which in turn leads to the assumption that "historical transcendence is separate from history."⁶⁵ In contrast, he argues that it is possible "to see transcendence as something that transcends in and not as something that transcends *away* from; as something that physically impels to more, but not by taking out of; as something that *pushes* forward, but at the same time *retains*."⁶⁶

Ellacuría's incarnate notion of transcendence is coherent with his theological anthropology.⁶⁷ While radical orthodoxy's descriptions of creatures emphasize that their value derives from their dependence on their transcendent source, Ellacuría insists upon a certain innate worth, even divinity, in their finitude.⁶⁸ Rather than placing the value of human life outside of it, in something to which one may or may not relate or respond, Ellacuría places the value of human life *in* human life. Ellacuría asserts that God's creation is the "grafting *ad extra* of Trinitarian life itself," and thus "each thing, within its own limits, is a limited way of being God. This limited way is precisely the *nature* of each thing."⁶⁹ It is not "simply that God is in all things, as

62. Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Historicity of Christian Salvation," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 254.

63. *Ibid.*, 259.

64. *Ibid.*, 264.

65. *Ibid.*, 254.

66. *Ibid.*, 254, emphasis mine.

67. For a detailed analysis of the relation between Ellacuría and Zubiri, focusing on its impact on Ellacuría's notion of transcendence, see Lee, "Liberation Theology's Transcendent Moment."

68. This assumption of the intrinsic value of creation is shared by process theologies.

69. Ellacuría, "The Historicity of Christian Salvation," 276, emphasis mine.

essence, presence, and potential," but that the Trinitarian life is "*intrinsic* to all things."⁷⁰ Thus, the human being is a "relative absolute," but one whose essence is also to lie open to the experience of the Trinitarian life—always dynamically open to God's "more."⁷¹ This opening to God's "more" not only prevents each human person from closing around him- or herself, from absolutizing her or his own particularity, but also calls that person to turn toward creation and toward the human other. *Transcendence* in leads humans toward, not away from, creation.

This relation to transcendence requires a constant renewal of the received experience of God, a reception of "more than the God of the fathers" and the "historical repetition of what the scripture expresses as *theopraxy*."⁷² Luis Segundo explains that the emphasis of revelation shall not be on the limited acquisition of knowledge about God but on the reception of a "difference that makes a difference."⁷³ Divine-human communication succeeds only inasmuch as the recipient succeeds in "transforming it into a humanizing difference within history."⁷⁴ According to Ellacuría, the historical repetition of theopraxy brings about a future that "invalidates negativity and recovers old experience in a new way."⁷⁵ The continuity between the old and the new is thus maintained through repetition with difference, through transformative practice, rather than through access to an external unchanging source. In history, "God and humanity collaborate," so that the future depends, although in a different way, on God's faithfulness and human response.⁷⁶ As discussed above, radical orthodoxy attributes similar functions to liturgical language. There are, however, significant differences. For instance, Ellacuría does not contrast transcendence with *immanence*. In fact, the term immanence does not play a significant role in Ellacuría's argument. The absence of this transcendence/immanence opposition results in an account of the Christ event quite different from that offered by radical orthodoxy theologians. For radical orthodoxy theologians "God's incarnational appearance is . . . a *condescension* to the conditions of finite, created perceivers,"⁷⁷ a downward movement from the heights of transcendence to the lowliness of creation. In contrast, Ellacuría interprets Jesus not as an instance of God's condescension toward *immanence*, but rather as "the supreme form of historical transcendence"—*transcendence-in*.⁷⁸ The theological potential of this notion of

70. *Ibid.*, 277, emphasis mine.

71. *Ibid.* When the dynamic openness is limited there is a negation of Trinitarian life, there is sin.

72. *Ibid.*, 259, 63, emphasis mine.

73. Juan Luis Segundo, "Revelation, Faith, Signs of the Times," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino; New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 330.

74. *Ibid.*, 332.

75. Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Historicity of Christian Salvation," 259.

76. *Ibid.*

77. James K. A. Smith, "Speech and Theology," in *Radical Orthodoxy* (ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward; London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 126, emphasis mine. Marking his disagreement with Milbank's and Pickstock's readings of Plato, though not with their proposals, Smith argues that this condescension is not an *extension*, but an *inversion* of Platonic participation, as it implies not the finite participation in the infinite, but the infinite's participation in the finite.

78. Ellacuría, "The Historicity of Christian Salvation," 266. Ellacuría clarifies, however, that this does not imply the "subjection of profane history to the specificity of Christ as head of the church, and therefore to the church as continuation of the work of Christ," but to the "historical-cosmic Christ" (273).

transcendence-in—of a transcendence in creation and history, something that physically impels to more, but at the same time retains—is yet to be fully realized.

Despite the emphasis on the intrahistorical character of transcendence, Ellacuría's transcendence retains its independence from the created realm—a common feature of many (by no means all) Latin American liberation theologies. “In history,” Ellacuría explains, “transcendence must be seen more in the relationship between necessity and freedom than between absence and presence. God is transcendent, among other reasons, not by being absent, but by being freely present. . . .”⁷⁹ In its freedom, transcendence retains its capacity to “break in the process,” to cross a boundary, so that “something *more than history* becomes present in history.”⁸⁰ Transcendence thus assures the possibility of unconditioned novelty. The depiction of a *transcendence-in* as that which retains as it impels forward—an image of development that evokes the cyclical rhythms of nature—is thus here overshadowed by the (more phallic) imagery of something “breaking in” from the “outside,” in the present or at the end of history. These reassertions tend to reinscribe the idea of an external deity that liberation theologians have sought to challenge.

The idea of God who intervenes from outside the world becomes particularly problematic when theologians implicitly claim to have access, through God, to a criteria of judgment external to the realm of created existence—one of the most common traps into which theologies of transcendence have fallen. Feminist liberation theologians have been mindful of this risk and have tried to keep theology aware of its own limits. Arguing from within the force field of Latin American liberation movements, these feminist theologians do not follow Milbank's call to “replace theology mediated by social science” with “theology as ‘metanarrative realism,’”⁸¹ but quite to the contrary argue that liberation theology's questioning of the metanarratives—secular and Christian—has not gone far enough. These intimate *others* of liberation theology have urged liberation theologians to a “permanent exercise of serious doubting,”⁸² or, as Milbank would say, of constant self-critique and avoidance of absolutization of the self (or one's theology, I add). This requires letting go of any illusions of *leaping over* contextual mediation. “Theological discourse about God gives God a historical substance, an image, and a role. But who are the people who give God a role?” asks Ivone Gebara—thus turning the critical gaze to the theologians themselves.⁸³

“The point is,” explains Althaus-Reid, “that Liberation Theology is not a self-contained entity or peculiar category of analysis related to God and a particular theological subject as the poor.”⁸⁴ Even when liberation theology proclaimed to ground its experience of God in the encounter with the human other, it retained its claim (perhaps unavoidably, though not necessarily innocently) to discern which aspects of the other reflected God's image and God's calling. Althaus-Reid specifically observes that, in its relation both to secular and theological discourses, liberation theology has had

79. *Ibid.*, 255.

80. *Ibid.*, 258, emphasis mine.

81. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 251.

82. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 5.

83. Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 35.

84. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 22.

problems accepting that “the simplistic confrontation between oppressive and liberative aspects of our lives” is “a farce.” “In the end,” she explains, “Liberation Theology and structures of oppression both share a common epistemological field.”⁸⁵ And so does radical orthodoxy.

Final Thoughts

I agree with Milbank that transcendence offers unique resources to avoid the absolutization of the subjects or systems and promote ethical relations between human beings. To unleash the potential of the notion of divine transcendence for social justice requires, as he insists as well, unrelenting openness to self-critique and avoidance of self-absolutization. This, as Milbank argues, requires “attention to what lies *beyond* the self (individual or collective). . . .”⁸⁶ But why, then, should one place this *beyond* also *outside*?

Milbank argues that “if the immanent world is all there is, then it tends to reduce to our abstract grasp of it” (209). I share this concern. However, I believe that the theological promise of transcendence lies not in proposing a reality other than the world, but rather in its potential to help us overcome the habit of reducing the “immanent” to the graspable, or more precisely to reduce the created to the *purely immanent*. This is the strategy pursued by the liberation and feminist theologians I have engaged herein; its full implications for theological anthropology are yet to be developed. It does not necessarily mean, as Milbank suggests, a reduction of God “to a shadowy hypostasized Other lurking just behind the human other”—a coded rejection of Levinas's ethics, I suppose (154). To affirm *transcendence-in* is to proclaim the rootedness of all of creation in God and thus the participation of all creatures in God's transcendence—a creation inherently related to God, not externally linked to God.

This theological model of divine transcendence in creation and history calls us to seek divine transcendence within the *folds* of a divinely created reality, where things are indeed “more than they appear” (Pickstock) and always exceed our most radical expectations. This entails a reinterpretation of the created others and of our relations to them where others are not mere presences. Instead it would recognize the irreducibility of other human beings to any system as “ineffable likenesses of God” (203)—as nonidentical repetitions of our relations to the intimate but ineffable God. This “culturally imbued sense of transcendence” would not think of human needs as only “immanent needs” subordinated to some other (higher?) need. Instead, the processes by which human needs are met—people are fed, sheltered, and loved, and societies become mediators of such nurturing processes—are manifestations of transcendence, which is always already taking place in creation.

To affirm *transcendence-in* is to accept that one cannot leap outside one's self. To pretend to dislodge oneself from finitude to find a higher authority from which to speak is the first step toward denying the transcendence of God and of the other. This risk haunts discourses of transcendence. When liberation theology claims to be able to discern the irruption of a transhistorical transcendent hand in particular historical

85. *Ibid.*, 149.

86. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 179.

moments, or when radical orthodoxy claims to find a *commensurate* language with God, they are at risk of claiming to transcend the limits of creaturehood, of "homologizing themselves with a God-like discourse." These theologies might be better protected from these risks by integrating more consistently their own recognitions of the irreducibility of God to human systems, of the *agony of apostrophic striving*, of the "failure to mean that haunts all theological claims,"⁸⁷ of the *always beyond* of the reign of God—that is, divine transcendence.

PART III



theology, economics, and politics

87. Kathryn Tanner, "Creation as a Mixed Metaphor" (paper presented at the Drew Transdisciplinary Theology Colloquium, Madison, N.J., 2001), 2.