Reply to Milbank

Alain de Benoist

In his "Liberality versus Liberalism," John Milbank certainly begins with good intentions, but the article is open to ambiguous understandings.[1] Personally I have no difficulties agreeing with parts of his criticism. Like Milbank, I believe that since the collapse of "really existing socialism," which the soviet systems claimed to represent, "liberalism" is without a doubt the contemporary "bearer of modernity" and "progress." In addition, globalization is primarily a "liberal" phenomenon: the transformation of the planet into an immense single market. Milbank is equally correct when he evokes the "vicious global spiral" that tends to transform today's liberal democracies into societies of surveillance à la Big Brother. He writes that "liberal democracy can itself devolve into a mode of tyranny," and he shows that liberal democracies manipulate sentiments of anxiety and fear in order to "justify the suspending of democratic decision-making and civil liberties. . . . It is liberalism itself that tends to cancel those values of liberality . . . that it has *taken over*, but which, as a matter of historical record, it did not invent." I finally also agree with Milbank, when he writes, like Jean Baudrillard, "Liberal democracy is then doomed to specularity: the represented themselves only represent to themselves the spectacle of representation."

Yet this invocation of "liberalism" nonetheless leaves a certain discomfort. First of all, of course, there is the classic misunderstanding of the term across the Atlantic. In the United States, the word "liberalism" belongs above all to the left of the political spectrum, while on the European continent it belongs to the right. In one case, liberalism is the

1. Alain de Benoist's reply was translated from the French by Russell Berman.

opposite of conservatism, while in the other it could in fact be confused with it. For most Europeans, the most typical "liberal" politicians of the second half of the twentieth century are Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. In Europe, liberalism is defined above all by individualism, belief in free exchange and the omnipotence of the market, and the critique of the large state. It is crucial to remember this difference, which often prevents Europeans and Americans from understanding each other.

Yet one must ask to which "liberalism" Milbank refers when he declares that "the central premises of liberalism . . . are based in Manichean fashion upon the ontological primacy of evil and violence." This assertion is somewhat surprising for those who believe that liberalism, as an heir to the Enlightenment, is based, on the contrary, on an optimistic vision of man, who is naturally good and who, even before his entrance into society, is entitled to "rights" that are inherent in his "nature."

But this is not the important point. It is rather in the alternative that Milbank suggests opposing "liberalism." His legitimate reaction against neo-liberal materialism leads him in effect to affirm not only the primacy of certain moral values but also the idea, much more questionable, that politics must be inspired or guided by religion. Describing his own project, he writes: "This approach must include at its center an openness to religion and to the question of whether a just politics must refer beyond itself to transcendent norms." He specifies that by "religion" he means "a Catholic Christian approach to the social sphere." From such a perspective, faith (or "Catholic social thought") could or should serve as a foundation for politics, even if this implies reaching a new form of theocracy. ("Christ is now King upon the earth.")

A series of judgments regarding democracy follow which can only stupefy a political theorist or a historian of ideas. Thus, one learns, successively, that "the only justification for democracy is theological" ("The truth lies with the people somewhat in the way that truth lies in the Church for St. Paul"), that "when there is no public recognition of the primacy of absolute good as grounded in something super-human, democracy becomes impossible," but also that "in the United States part of the problem is that there is a yearning for the madness of pure democracy," and that "pure democracy tends to deny the sanctity of life, the importance of the child." What connection can such claims have with democracy, which has never been anything but the regime that locates the legitimacy of politics in the sovereign power of the people?

Other equally surprising claims are just very difficult to comprehend. When Milbank speaks of "an ontological participation of the temporal in eternal peace and in the hope for a final eschatological disclosure of this peace here on earth," when he writes that for Catholics "every economy is part of the economy of salvation and every process of production and exchange prepares the elements of the cosmic eucharist," when he assures us that "there are no more strangers . . . because we are sons, daughters, and brothers in Adam, and now in the new Adam who is Christ," what does he want to say exactly? And what should we think of his nearly surrealistic appeal for the creation of a "cooperative banking perhaps supervised by Church, Islamic, and Jewish bodies"? These are gratuitous assertions with a mystical resonance but with no connection to the world of concrete politics—and they bear witness to an interpretation of faith so personal that it is not even clear if theologians could support it.

Milbank evidently confuses metaphysics and ontology. He believes that truth is not truth unless it is "transcendent." He holds onto the truth as the intellect's correspondence with the thing, in the manner of the Scholastics, not however as *alethia*, as it was understood by the Greeks. This is quite clear when he writes that "Christianity renders all objects sacred," and that the Christ "provides the *idiom* for rendering all sacred"—statements in clear contradiction with each other. Milbank does not grasp the difference between "holy" and "sacred," and he does not realize that if everything can become sacred, then nothing is sacred any longer, for the sacred only exists in contrast with the profane.

Far from having made "all objects sacred," Christianity, in the wake of the Bible, has emptied the world of every sacred dimension. The biblical and Christian idea of a divine transcendence manifested in the creative act of God, the very idea of God the Creator, disenchants the whole world, and the world remains only an object created by the voluntary will of the Lord. From such a perspective, the world is only a "sign" of a presence, the "other," the sign of another world or a hidden world (Nietzsche). It can no longer be intrinsically the site of the sacred. It becomes a simple object appropriated by human reason, in conformance with the injunction of Genesis, which enjoins man to rule the earth. What the ancients called the "soul of the world" suddenly disappears. In this way the slow process of "disenchantment" of the world begins, as described by Weber.

The opposition between the "holy" and the "sacred" was among others developed by Emmanuel Levinas, who expressed a veritable repulsion of the sacred: "I have always asked myself if holiness can sojourn in a world which is not desacralized." Holiness in fact requires a labor of deconstruction, of dedivination and desacralization of the world. In antiquity, the sacred was the other to the profane. However, with the advent of Christianity, God becomes the fully Other. Christian faith desacralizes the world by thinking God as the fully Other to all things.

In order to characterize the political regime of his preference, Milbank speaks of a "mixed government grounded in eternal law." If I understand correctly, he sees such a government in a "monarchic anarchy" (inspired by Tolkien!), with a monarchic or aristocratic element at the top, socialism at the basis, and the whole construction crowned by a religious element (a "theological social carapace"). But to what in the Catholic tradition would such a "mixed government" conform? Historically, the Catholic Church has rather legitimated the pyramid model of absolute monarchy. Moreover, many authors have established a parallelism or a structural convergence between monotheism and centralized power: a single god, a single monarch, both omnipotent and absolute. Classical monarchy itself was modeled on papal power, which in turn derived from the model of unlimited divine power. In the course of history, it has rather been Protestantism that has turned out to be compatible with the democratic spirit. As far as the "polytheism of values" goes, it is certainly more open to a pluralistic society than a monotheism, which essentially reduces everything to sameness.

Let us note Milbank's extravagant assertion that the "equality of women . . . stems from St. Paul." Has Milbank really read the first Epistle to the Corinthians: "The wife doesn't have authority over her own body, but the husband" (1 Cor. 7:4); "The head of the woman is the man" (1 Cor. 11:3); "For neither was man created for the woman, but woman for the man" (1 Cor. 11:10–11)? Or the Epistle to the Ephesians: "For the husband is the head of the wife, and Christ also is the head of the assembly" (Eph. 5:23). And in the First Epistle to Timothy: "Let the woman learn in silence in all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (1 Tim. 2:11–12).

To say that "In speaking of *ecclesia*, St. Paul proposes a new sort of *polis*" is equally untenable. From its origins, Christianity defines itself, especially through the valorization of inner life, in clear distinction to the

institution of the *polis* as a site of experience embedded in the harmonious continuity with the hierarchical structure of the cosmos. As Louis Dumont has shown so well, the Christian of the first centuries was an individual-outside-of-the-world to the extent that he stood as an individual in a personal relationship to God. The infinite value of the individual implies a devaluation, or at least a relativization, of the human world and its social institutions, even if they are seen as emanating from God.

Milbank reduces Christianity to morality, which is certainly plausible, but he also identifies morality with religion, which is not. Essentially defined by ritual practices and the necessity of sacrifice, the religions of antiquity have no moral dimension. This does not imply that ancients did not know morality, but that it derived for them from wisdom, the ideal of the excellence of the self and self-mastery, not however from religion. Reflection on good and bad stands at the heart of Greek philosophy, but not however in Greek religion. The distinction between good and bad, whatever definition one gives it, was seen as an existential given in the human presence in the world. Milbank's proposed equivalency between *lex*, *nomos* and *torah* is in this regard misleading. The *torah* is a collection of moral laws, while the *lex* and the *nomos* are not at all. (The opposition between *nomos* and *torah* has been explored by the legal theorist Michel Villey.)

In addition, Milbank confuses private morality and public morality. Private morality is not adapted to politics, since there are no politics confined to a single individual. A society is not merely an addition of individuals, and the exigencies of public life are of a different nature than those of private life. Nor is the difference between public and private synonymous with the distinction between collective and individual (the family is a collective reality that belongs to the private sphere, and all the social relations are not public). The difference between individual and collective is quantitative, while the difference between public and private is qualitative. The public defines above all an impersonal, institutional relationship. Carl Schmitt has clearly demonstrated the difference between the private enemy (*inimicus*) and public enemy *(hostis).* They do not differ from each other in degree but in nature. This difference between public and private is totally absent from Milbank's text.

In a more general sense, politics should not be seen as dependant on morality, since it constitutes an autonomous dimension of human existence.

The *political* distinctions of just and unjust, or appropriate and inappropriate, have nothing at all to do with the moral distinction between good and evil. This certainly does not mean that politics is fully alien to morality, but rather that it has its own morality, which overlaps with the service for the common good.

The common good is not what is common to all the aspirations of the individual citizens. It is not the sum of the particular goods of individuals but rather the good of the community, which they constitute together, a community which itself should not be confused with the republic or with the state. (Tocqueville spoke of the "good of the country.") Nor is it reducible to utility or the general interest. Finally, it is not a divisible good but a good the sharing of which is itself common. External public security is one of the aspects of the common good. It presumes the distinction between friend and enemy. Other aspects are domestic peace, which is both the community of life and friendship in the Aristotelian sense of the term, as well as collective prosperity, always distinct from the well-being of the individual. Service to the common good is itself a political goal, but not a moral goal. In politics, moral appreciation relates to the choice of means and the manner of putting them to work. But there are no means proper to morality, and this is why morality, as Julien Freund underscored, is different from all other activities, including politics. Morality is a finality without real means. It is concerned with the manner in which all actions are accomplished, whatever they may be. If power persecutes or tyrannizes its citizens, it betrays its own political role. The "morality" of a political action depends solely on its appropriateness to natural political ends, especially the service to the common good.

Milbank underlines the importance of the notion of subsidiarity (which is not only one of the aspects of the social teaching of the Church but also one of the bases of federalist thought), and he correctly asserts that we should "subordinate contract to gift." I am in agreement. Milbank is right to appeal to the logic of the gift, in opposition to the "tyranny of an unrestricted capitalist market," and to take a position in defense of a society in which "we favor local production of locally suitable things linked to local skills." ("We should import and export only what we must or what truly can only come from elsewhere.") Like Milbank, I believe that a rehabilitation of the notions of gift and sharing can help recreate a social bond that modernity has systematically weakened, if not eradicated, making all human relations more vulnerable.

Yet it would be important to understand the logic of the gift, the analysis of which surely points more directly to Marcel Mauss than to the "Holy Spirit." Thus here Milbank clearly confuses notions as different as gift and charity. "What must challenge liberalism is a truer 'liberality' in the literal sense of a creed of generosity." Here one encounters again the confusion between public morality and private morality. Confusing as well sacrifice and "exchange," or even more so love as *eros* and love as *agape*, Milbank does not see that charity, which transforms *eros* into *agape* (this is the very theme of the first encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*), implies a triple desacralization of knowledge, power, and law. Charity mobilizes the generosity of the individual, but it cannot be transformed into a political or social institution. As far as faith goes, which is not so much a gift as a grace (implying a welcoming predisposition), it requires cultural and socio-historical mediations. One is struck in Milbank by this sort of angelism or irenism, evidenced by his method of assimilating gift to charity and of turning charity into a scheme of generalized exchange.

By writing that we need a "new conception of the economy as an exchange of gifts, in the sense of both talents and valued objects that blend material benefit with sacramental significance," without however broaching the question of value, Milbank appears to want to apply the regime of gift to the axiomatics of exchange, even though the very characteristic of the logic of the gift precludes its being linked to the epistemological register of the economy. The logic of the gift (and of the counter-gift) implies that it operates in total indifference with regard to the law of supply and demand. Neither side regards the gift as a gain. This is the point at which its logic differs totally from market exchange.

In contrast to what Milbank appears to believe, the gift possesses a clearly agonistic dimension. Far from being comparable to charity, it can turn out in fact to be polemogenic. Charity consists in giving something; the gift consists in giving oneself through what one gives (it is a matter of ceding part of oneself in order to be tied to the other). In charity, the sole constraining obligation is to give; in the gift, there is the obligation to receive and to return the gesture. This is why Mauss says that the gift is free and gratuitous, and "at the same time constrained and interested." Hence what Georg Simmel calls the "unsolvable responsibility": "The gift is not at all simply the effect of one upon the other, but rather what

one expects from a sociological function: it is the reciprocal effect." The logic of the gift is a "total social fact."

Milbank speaks of "Biblical political thought." This oxymoron suggests that he misunderstands what politics involve. Politics surely do not concern a "paracosmic reality," nor a "newly realized cosmic body of Christ, ruled by the new order of love." But these expressions are revealing. They lead back to the old dream of a politics without force and constraint, even though both are preconditions of justice. They attest to an angelism with its aspirations for a society without conflict, based on a bloodless vision of human nature.

Carl Schmitt was not the only one to have recognized that the political is also linked to a dimension of antagonism and hostility resulting from the mere fact of human diversity, and that politics aims to organize human coexistence "in conditions which are always conflictual because they are traversed by the political," as Chantal Mouffe has put it. Politics does not consist of denying or of hoping to attain the extinction of the antagonistic or polemogenic dimension of social-historical existence, but rather in trying to domesticate it, or perhaps in letting it play out in agonistic forms that respect pluralism and diversity. Chantal Mouffe writes correctly on this point: "The crucial question of political democracy is not how to arrive at a consensus without exclusion . . . but to succeed in establishing the discrimination between us and them in a manner which is compatible with pluralism." *Polemos* is inseparable from *polis*. Politics tries to enable contradictory aspirations to coexist, and to guarantee order in the midst of the conflicts "born of the diversity and divergence of opinions and interests" (Julien Freund). The dream of a perpetual peace can only open onto the reality of perpetual war. A society without an enemy, trying to establish a reign of perpetual peace through law and morality, would be a society composed solely of judges and the guilty.

Milbank's text is in many ways admirable, and it raises significant questions. But the author's line of argument exposes the intellectualism that gives birth to the illusion of being able to surmount—thanks to morality—the deficiencies and limits of human nature, through reference to an ideal perfection imagined to be possible. It is however in fact totally utopian to wait for a solution to contemporary political and social problems through a reemergence of a philosophical culture "built around a wisdom tradition that re-awakens the old Western fusion of Biblical with Neoplatonic tradition." (How, moreover, can one envisage such a

perspective in a lay and "disenchanted" society, in which even the believers—or what is left of them—have ceased believing in a society based on faith?). Milbank seems to be proposing a naïve return to certain socialists of the nineteenth century, such as Pierre Leroux—or even to the Anabaptists! Instead of the gospels and the epistles of Saint Paul, one ought to read instead: Georges Sorel, William Morris, George Orwell, Christopher Lasch, Chantal Mouffe, or Serge Latouche.