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## ONWARD, RIDICULOUS DEBATERS

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### ABSTRACT

This article responds to Adam Kotsko's counter-positioning of Thomist-Milbankian hierarchy on the one hand and Deleuzian-Surinian univocity on the other as competing visions for an ontologically grounded universal socialism. Pointing to Milbank's declaration that it would be "ridiculous" to debate Christianity's universality, Rubenstein raises suspicion about the ethical and political value of universality as such. Ultimately, she points to Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of "sharing" as a means of relating existents that neither reconsolidates a static hierarchy nor abolishes transcendence. Rather, sharing "shares beings out," clearing a space for genuine debate among those who are *essentially* different.

**Keywords:** hierarchy, Jean-Luc Nancy, John Milbank, sharing, universalism.

I am grateful for Adam Kotsko's critical mapping of *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*,<sup>1</sup> and for his gentle tug back to the fray that still manages to elude most theological reflection: the concrete needs of the poor and oppressed, the excluded and ridiculed. I am also indebted to the work my radically orthodox, and radically heterodox, friends and colleagues have done in this volume to reconsider Marxist ontology—to articulate being itself as *shared*. To speak within Kotsko's provisional schema, I remain compelled both by John Milbank's suspicion of the univocal and by Kenneth Surin's suspicion of Christian hierarchy and universalism. This is the reason I have found Jean-Luc Nancy's work so helpful; it is the

1. Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek, eds, *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 257. All in-text citations are from this volume.

most thoroughgoing articulation I have found of a genuine transcendence of univocity that, at the same time, undermines any static ontological order or claim to comprehensiveness. Moreover, with Kotsko and perhaps *contra* Surin, I am inclined to think it possible to hear such unsettling as a response to the call of the gospel.

As Kotsko suggested, I am troubled by the stark either/or this conversation tends to maintain between hierarchy on the one hand and univocity on the other. For Milbank, analogy holds beings in horizontal relation within a vertical ontological order, which alone provides the condition for peaceful—or as Surin puts it, pacified—existence. As an alternative, Surin offers a politics of the multitude, which admits of no hierarchies at all, and acts according to a strategic, collective “autopoiesis” (257). I do worry that such an immanentist collapse, rather than opening onto exteriority, might reinscribe the logic of the autonomous, self-fashioning self at the communal level. That having been said, if the only other option is “the great chain of being,” I could perhaps be persuaded to try out collective autopoiesis for a while. This is not because I reject vertical difference or hierarchy as such; to the contrary, it is clear that beings are profoundly different from one another and from their gods. My discomfort lies with the assumption that we know exhaustively what all these differences are and where they lie. As political theologians (especially those that go unrepresented in *Theology and the Political*) have taught us for decades, the traditional enshrining of a particular kind of dominology between God and “man”—however purportedly benevolent—has rigidified and even deified the privilege of man over woman, light over dark, soul over body, reason over passion, and humanity over everything else. Surely we need not rehearse here the manifold demonstrations of these binaries’ metaphoric sustenance of the Christian colonial project, the West African slave trade, the genocidal “civilization” of the Native Americans, or the ongoing racism and sexism both sustaining and destroying mainline Christianities. So I confess: I do not *know* whether there is a great chain of being or not. But I do know what happens when Christians act like there is.

Seen in this light, any insistence upon the inherent peaceability of Christianity rather resembles Samuel Johnson’s estimation of second marriages: “the triumph of hope over experience.” And while I share radical orthodoxy’s impossible hope for the peace that passes all understanding, it seems anti-historical at best and violent at worst to claim that the way toward it is to make the whole world Christian. Milbank’s conviction that only Christianity can ground socialist practice is supported most recently by Alain Badiou’s and Slavoj Žižek’s “new favoring of Christianity [as] an integral part of their desire to reassert human universality” (400). But in the spirit of Kotsko’s critique, I wonder what is new about “this

new concern for the universal” (394) or, for that matter, about its being wedded to the Christian narrative. Christian universalizing may be a strange phenomenon among contemporary continental thinkers, but it seems little more than a return to Hegel—and specifically to the cultural imperialism that renders more or less useless vast swathes of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. This aside, however, can Hegelian ontology really be said to provide the departure we seek from Marxist ontology, when the latter is merely the former upside-down? To be sure, Milbank ventures beyond the atheist-Hegelians Badiou and Žižek by appealing to “the radical content of orthodox Catholic Christianity” (404), but I would argue that his analysis remains lodged in the Hegelian by virtue of its assumption that the idea of universality *amounts* to universality: “Christianity is universal because it invented the logic of universality” (401).

This proclamation seems at first gloss to run dangerously close to that old adage that “the Bible is true because the Bible says it’s true.” Like Hegel’s, however, Milbank’s logic is more complicated than this: the uniqueness of Christian universality arises from the radical particularity of the Christ-event—the absolute interrelation of the specific and the general, the temporal and the eternal, the human and the divine in “the universal man Christ” (401). But is this *coincidentia oppositorum* really unique to Christianity? Why not appeal to the identity of atman and Brahman, or emptiness and form, to ground universality (if universality is, in fact, a virtue)? It is hard to tell why these would or would not suffice, because this argument does not fully engage the non-Christian traditions it proclaims to have surpassed. “Materialism and Transcendence” does mention “Hinduism’s” failure to attain universality because of each caste’s “specific hierarchical position” (401), but considering the patristic and scholastic inscription of ontological hierarchy, it grows harder to see what is truly unique about Christianity—apart, perhaps, from the missionary imperative that has effected Christian universality by imposing it. One might therefore question not only Badiou’s, Žižek’s, and Milbank’s equation of universality and Christianity, but also the ethics of “universality” itself.

To be clear: it is the historical self-assertion of Christian universalism—not some philosophical commitment to “flux” or “nihilism” or “relativism”—that motivates my concern here. With Surin, I cannot see how peace can be called peace if it first requires the submission of the whole cosmos to a hierarchy that one portion of the human community claims to be universal. Again, I cannot say there is no such thing as a universal truth, but the consequences of claiming to have one (whether it be Christ, progress, democracy, theocracy, capitalism, or even socialism) seem disastrous. Furthermore, it seems to me that such static world orders and inviolable human truths are unquestionably the target of the synoptic

gospels. There may be hierarchy in the kingdom, but it's a hierarchy on its head; there certainly is a "way," but it's not ours. Viewed from this angle, there is an auto-deconstructive principle to the New Testament: whatever we privilege, God will cast down; whatever we neglect, God will raise up; whatever we worship, it's not (quite) God. It is in this spirit that Pseudo-Dionysius, who invented the word "hierarchy," claims it is more proper to call God a worm than it is to call God "good." For as high as the good is on the great chain of being, it *still* falls short of God—not perhaps ontologically (but who knows?)—but rather epistemologically. The problem with calling God "good" is that we think we know what we mean. At least when we call God a worm, we know we don't know what on earth we're saying, and in this sense, it is a better and higher name for God. So Dionysian hierarchy mediates its own inversion and subversion by means of a progressive un- or not-knowing, which I would like to commend as a way to shift the tenor of the "debate" at hand.

As Kotsko points out toward the end of his reflection, this element of *agnosia* is most markedly absent from ontologies that claim to know there is a hierarchy, and what it looks like, and who is on top. Milbank claims to ground his own certainty about this matter in the decisiveness of the Badiouian event which, as distinct from Derrida's futural messianic, is decisively past, which is to say eternally present. But, I would submit, the event with which Christianity keeps trying to come to terms still has not arrived—not really—insofar as the Christ-event persistently defies the full comprehension that attends arrival and presence. Milbank knows that "one is speaking of an unimaginable, logically impossible (for formal logic) middle" (417), and yet he simultaneously insists that this impossibility be universally affirmed. Perhaps my unregenerate Kierkegaardianism is beginning to show here, but it seems to me these two convictions (the impossibility and universality of Christianity) are actually unmediable. The paradoxical Christian event cannot be universally embraced because, to put it bluntly, it makes no sense. Yet Milbank maintains the opposite, saying, "It makes no sense to *refuse* this event, at least as a horizon of possibility. Debate and dialogue at this point would be ridiculous, short of the emergence of some more universal horizon" (403; emphasis added). And here, it seems, is the central problem: if Christianity is the universal and the universal is Christianity, then contesting the identity of Christianity and universality, or *the value of the universal as such*, is "ridiculous" from the start. This means, as both Kotsko and Surin have noted, that the "debate" is closed down ahead of time, and peace is only promised on the condition that we all agree.

Universal accord is the condition for Milbank's Christian socialist praxis because of its commitment to an ethic of distribution, of sharing.

As Milbank explains it, people are to be loved by virtue of the image of God they all share, so that “what is valued here is not the ineffably and inexpressibly different, but rather what is universally acclaimable and shareable, albeit precisely because it is unique and particular” (399). So sharing draws together and differentiates simultaneously. If we are to avoid monadic reinscription at this point, we will have to go on to say that this sharing operates not only between particularities but also within them. Or as Nancy would put it, sharing “shares beings out,” making us not-quite-graspable to one another *or to ourselves*. Might such inter- and intrapersonal transcendence engender the kind of humble *agnosia* that refuses the certainties of orthodoxy *and* its antagonist “isms”? Might the sharing-out of sharing sustain a willingness to be surprised and actually changed by an event we can’t quite grasp? For this seems to me the condition of a genuine debate: a commitment to communicating precisely in that space Milbank tags as “ridiculous”: without a pre-established consensus; among those who are *essentially* different, and thereby intertwined with us, making “us” nothing apart from this conversation, this contamination, this ridiculous witness itself.

**Mary-Jane Rubenstein** is Assistant Professor of Religion at Wesleyan University, where she teaches philosophy of religion and modern Christian thought. She has published articles and chapters on Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Derrida, negative theology, and the crisis over sexuality in the Anglican Communion. Her book, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe*, will be published by Columbia University Press in March 2009.