God’s grace in post-Christendom societies:
Edward Schillebeeckx’s Christology
for an unapologetic public theology

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FOREWORD

This project began in 2013 when my doctoral supervisors, Prof. Stephan van Erp and Prof. Christoph Hübenthal, advertised two positions working on doctoral projects on the subject of Edward Schillebeeckx and public theology at Radboud University Nijmegen. I am very grateful that they, together with the selection committee, not only trusted me to do the work, but also allowed me to choose my own research angle on the topic. From the very moment I commenced work, in October 2013, I could always rely on their insights, critique and incessant encouragement, an invaluable support without which I could not imagine having written this dissertation. I would also like to thank my Master’s supervisor, Dr. Marcus Pound, for having encouraged me to apply to work at this doctoral project.

Prior to settling in Nijmegen in 2013, I was prepared to spend the next three and a half years in the city in which Edward Schillebeeckx had lived over half of his life. I had the pleasure of encountering many people whose paths had crossed with that of Schillebeeckx; to this end, I was privileged enough to get glimpses into the life of the person whose work I was beginning to study. Little did I know then, that this dissertation’s journey would lead me onto further, unknown places. From January 2015 onwards, when Prof. Stephan van Erp moved to Belgium in order to become a professor of fundamental theology at KU Leuven, I started visiting Leuven on a monthly basis. This led not only to my being accepted as candidate for a double doctorate, from RU Nijmegen and KU Leuven, but also to the provisioning of a six-month stay in Leuven, from January to July 2016. Prior to that, I had just finished enjoying a four-month research period from August to December 2015 at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. This was a great opportunity afforded by Prof. Mary Catherine Hilkert whom I would like to thank for the dedicated effort she put into inviting and accommodating me there, but most of all for the time and care she took to supervise my work during my stay at Notre Dame. I benefitted greatly, not only from her unparalleled knowledge of Edward Schillebeeckx’s theology, but also from the encouraging interest she took in my work. Special thanks also go to Prof. John Betz who arranged for me to present my work to graduate students of the faculty and whose availability to discuss critically the theology of Radical Orthodoxy contributed positively to the present shape that this dissertation has taken.

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INTRODUCTION

Research Question

Faith-based contributions to political discussions have become an issue of contention in many Western societies in recent decades. On the surface, the debates seem to happen between convinced secularists who oppose any of these contributions and members of diverse faith traditions who refuse to separate their political views from the tradition in which they were raised. In this dissertation, I enter these discussions by concentrating not on faith-based contributions to secular politics in general, but on Christian theological contributions to political discussions in post-Christendom societies in particular; I presuppose that these general debates in contemporary Europe are related to the pronounced dissolution of the strong links between church and state which occurred in previous eras. From my particular perspective, I reflect upon the theological significance of the secularist opposition to faith-based contributions to public political debates; this is a reflection which I have found missing in a broad swath of public theological literature. More precisely, I follow Edward Schillebeekx in asking the question of whether those secularists could demonstrate, in their very opposition to theologically motivated political engagement, that they, themselves, follow God in a direction which Christianity has erroneously foreclosed during its imperialist Christendom past. In short, my question is: Can Christian theologians understand it as a grace that some of their contemporaries oppose any faith-based involvement in political discussions? Thus, my research question is part of the more overarching concern about the political role played by Christian theology in post-Christendom societies, and I follow the public theological intuition that Christian theologians should now pursue a different political trajectory than those associated with Christendom imperialism. Choosing to address the question from a Christian theological perspective, my hypothesis is that if the opposition to any theologically informed political engagement is received as a mediation of God’s grace, Christian theologians will learn to appreciate something about the reality of redemption, which they would otherwise take for granted. In this way, I contest the predominantly apologetic approach, which is characteristic of the most prominent answers proffered to the question of theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies. These apologetic approaches systematically deflect attention away from this secularist opposition’s theological significance.

Approach

Acknowledging the legitimacy, and even advisability, of also approaching the question concerning the political role of Christian theology in post-Christendom societies from the perspectives of other faith traditions, including secularism, I have chosen to approach the question from a distinctively Christian theological perspective for the following reasons: Most fundamentally, I presuppose that there is not one unanimous answer to the question of the role

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1 In this dissertation, I will not analyse any specific proponent of such an opposition, as my concern is with the theological reception of any opposition to theologically motivated political involvement in general. As it will become clear in chapter 5, however, further projects would have to include the examination of what specific grace is believed to be mediated by specific opponents to theologically motivated engagement in political discussions.

2 By apologetics I mean, in this context, a defence of the Christian faith in the face of those who oppose it.
played by Christian theology in post-Christendom societies, but that each answer depends significantly upon the particular traditional background of the one who answers. On this basis, I want my answer to contribute to the Christian tradition; here I understand ‘Christian tradition’ in the broad sense of coming into ‘dialogue with other Christian theologians and in consideration of what they have said before’. Finally, I want people from other faith traditions, as well as secularists, to understand some of the theological reasons proffered in a Christian answer to the question concerning theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies.

More precisely, and having decided to answer the question from a Christian theological perspective, I have chosen to opt for a systematic theological approach. In systematically assessing the insights and shortcomings of some of the most prominent answers to the research question that currently exist, my particular focus will be on how theological understandings of nature and grace, as well as Christology, correspond to the answers theologians provide to the question concerning theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies. With this focus on nature and grace in mind, I join existing debates concerning the political importance of these particular doctrines, and add a focus on Christology as a corrective to one-sided understandings of nature and grace in the existing literature. Debates about nature and grace are connected to my hypothesis concerning apologetic approaches’ disadvantages, inasmuch as Christian theologians who approach my research question apologetically usually bypass any consideration of the ways in which God’s grace could be mediated by the secularist opposition to theologically informed political engagement. By contrast, I contend that a more Christocentric understanding of grace would demand a more sincere theological reflection about the theological significance of this secularist opposition to theologically informed contributions to post-Christendom politics.

Whereas the rejection of apologetics has traditionally been associated with post-liberal Protestant theologies, I question the apologetic approach from a Catholic perspective. Post-liberals would reject apologetics, because they deny the translatability of the Christian faith into publicly accessible terms. From my more Catholic perspective, by contrast, I will question the legitimacy of defending the Christian faith in the context of contemporary post-Christendom. Both positions are related to theological understandings of nature and grace. Post-liberals tend to identify revelation, and consequently the Christian faith which depends on revelation, with grace, and assume that everything non-Christian lies beyond the realm of revelation, thereby constituting a purely natural, un-graced realm. My own perspective assumes that grace abounds both within and beyond the Christian tradition, which is why non-Christian insights and arguments can also possess a revelatory value. On this basis, I will claim that the revelatory value, and thus the theological significance, of the strong opposition to theologically informed contributions to political debates in post-Christendom societies should influence a theological answer to the question of theology’s political role in those same societies.

Structure

The first chapter serves to briefly present the alleged dichotomy of the most prominent responses to my research question provided by public theology, on the one hand, and Radical Orthodoxy on the other. Beginning by introducing contemporary public theology as the emerging theological sub-discipline, which raises my research question concerning theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies, my particular emphasis lies in public theology’s contextuality. The specific post-Christendom context is connected to a new political situation, in which it is no longer unanimously accepted that Christianity should determine the social
order, and to a new cultural situation of pluralism, inasmuch as post-Christendom societies are no longer marked by a monolithic Christian culture. Those who oppose any theologically informed involvement in public politics pose a particular challenge for theology in this context. Public theology’s response to this challenge is determined by its apologetic defence of Christian theological contributions to political debates. I introduce the two most prominent apologetic justifications that recur in public theological literature, dividing them into a secular one, characterised by its reference to the common good, and a theological one, characterised by its reference to Christianity’s universality. Moreover, I present a third justification that concerns the establishment of public theology as a new theological sub-discipline in this unique post-Christendom context. This justification concentrates on the context’s characterisation as a pluralist culture, unapologetically stressing that theology has now been presented with the opportunity to discern the theological significance of non-Christian contributions to political discussions. These three justifications of the importance of public theological research, taken together, will guide the structure of my first two chapters. In Chapter 1, I begin to distance myself from the public theological apologetic approach to the question concerning theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies; this is performed by way of indicating how both apologetic justifications of theology’s political relevance lead public theologians to re-ascribe a central political role to Christian theology, even in a post-Christendom context. In the final part of chapter 1, I briefly introduce Radical Orthodoxy, as a theological movement from which public theologians have distanced themselves, due to its allegedly different response to all three of the aforementioned justifications concerning public theology’s relevance. With regard to the first, public theologians criticise Radical Orthodoxy thinkers for being counter-cultural in their refusal to defend Christianity apologetically in secular terms. Concerning the second, public theologians seek to distance themselves from Radical Orthodoxy’s apparently imperialist construal of Christian universality and concomitant upholding of a remnant of Christendom. Regarding the theological significance of non-Christian contributions to politics in a pluralist culture, public theologians criticise Radical Orthodoxy for operating with an erroneous understanding of grace, one which predefines non-Christian positions as entirely un-graced and which allows Radical Orthodox authors to present Christianity triumphantly as solely graced with the position of being able to solve all political problems.

Chapter 2 serves to explain Radical Orthodoxy as alternative to public theology. Overall, I argue that both public theology and Radical Orthodoxy share a fundamentally apologetic approach to the research question, despite the different answer that each provides to the question concerning theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies. My argument proceeds by way of explaining Radical Orthodox theologians John Milbank’s and Graham Ward’s respective stances concerning all three aforementioned justifications of public theological research. Highlighting the differences between Milbank’s and Ward’s positions throughout, I show that Radical Orthodoxy is not principally counter-cultural regarding secular justifications of theology’s political relevance, but the movement raises certain concerns about secularist cultures in particular, which they accuse of perpetuating the very brand of Christendom imperialism that public theology seeks to thwart. Milbank then apologetically defends a Christian social order as a better alternative, while Ward apologetically defends Christian theology as perfecting the postmodern aspirations to overcome this secularist imperialism. Regarding public theology’s reference to Christianity’s universality as the second justification of theology’s political relevance, I explain how Milbank’s and Ward’s respective understandings of universality, in terms of the world’s participation in God, promise to be more dynamic than a secularist understanding of universality, and as such to be better able to accommodate a pluralist culture than secularism is. I then discuss the extent to which the ascription of a central political role to Christian theology in post-Christendom societies might be objectionable from a Christian theological
perspective. This concern will guide the remainder of the dissertation from the point at which I turn to Radical Orthodoxy’s understanding of the theological significance of non-Christian contributions to political discussions in post-Christendom societies. Examining Milbank’s and Ward’s respective understandings of grace, I argue that both Milbank and Ward present Christian theology’s relation to non-Christian positions as acting as direct imitation of Christ’s relation to creation, criticising that this proposal exhibits an insufficient acknowledgment of sin’s effect on their own theological vision of a better social order. This is why I then move into investigating responses proferred to the question of theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies that have been more unapologetically guided by Christology; specifically, those marked by a more emphatic stress on Christ’s uniqueness.

In Chapter 3, I introduce John Howard Yoder’s and Kathryn Tanner’s respective Christologies in relation to the research question asked. In both cases, I show how their conceptualisations of Christ’s Incarnation, Cross and Resurrection and the church’s role in the completion of Christ’s redemptive work are all related to their own assessments of apologetics, as well as to the political role they ascribe to Christian theology in post-Christendom societies. In a second part, I explain how their respective understandings of grace correspond to their evaluation of non-Christian political positions’ theological significance. Yoder will be presented as a particular representative of post-liberal theologies, who principally rejects both apologetics and any remnant of Christendom for the sake of Christianity’s integrity. I distance myself from this principled rejection, inasmuch as I criticise Yoder for parallelling Radical Orthodoxy in conflating Christ and Yoder’s own theological vision of how the world’s redemption might be completed. Kathryn Tanner is then introduced as deflecting attention away from Christian theology, concentrating more on the redemption uniquely won by Christ, a redemption upon which Christian theology as well as any non-Christian position rely equally. This leads her to reject the necessity for theology to adopt a central political role in post-Christendom societies, in favour of confessing theology’s own entanglement in sin. However, Tanner’s understanding of grace predisposes her to discard from the outset the possibility that the very opposition to theologically informed contributions to public politics might be theologically significant. I part ways with Tanner at the point at which she offers theological solutions to contemporary political problems in order to convince opponents that Christian theology can contribute positively to political debates in post-Christendom societies, because I want to consider the theological significance of the opposition to any such contribution more sincerely.

Having consistently criticised the failure, of all of those theologians introduced, to consider the theological significance of the secularist opposition to theologically informed contributions to political discussions in post-Christendom societies, I then turn in Chapter 4 to Edward Schillebeeckx whose theology is marked by a remarkably non-defensive reception of atheist thought, despite atheism’s open rejection of Christianity in Schillebeeckx’s own context. While I began Chapters 1 and 2 with public theology’s and Radical Orthodoxy’s apologetic defences of Christian theology’s political relevance in a post-Christendom context, then going on to explain how this is related to their respective understandings of grace, Chapter 4 begins with an explanation of Schillebeeckx’s unapologetic approach to those he may have considered to be theology’s opponents. I argue, in the remainder of Chapter 4, that Schillebeeckx’s optimistic reception of atheism corresponds to a Christology that is better able to distinguish between Christ’s uniqueness and the sinful shortcomings of Christian theology than those of public theology, Radical Orthodoxy or post-liberal theologies. As a consequence, Schillebeeckx’s understanding of redemption differs considerably from all of the others introduced throughout this dissertation. While the others associate the Christian faith in redemption with theology’s ability to solve political problems, Schillebeeckx is more pessimistic regarding theology’s ability to solve problems and is more optimistic concerning
the reality of redemption in which the whole world always already participates nonetheless; this reflects a pessimism concerning humankind’s liability to sin and an optimism regarding God’s forgiveness. Consequently, theology’s most specific political task is to discern the way in which this forgiveness is mediated in the contemporary context, despite both Christianity’s and atheism’s shortcomings.

In Chapter 5, I assess the contemporary relevance of Schillebeeckx’s Christology to answering the question of theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies by way of tracing the way in which he continuously modified his own theology in accordance to what he understood to be contemporary mediations of God’s forgiveness. I argue that his approach, given that it is characterised by a merciful critique of non-Christian positions, focusing primarily on what Christian theology can learn and only secondarily on what must be refused, needs to be retrieved for contemporary public theological discussions. Finally, I return to public theology’s emphasis on the contexts of post-Christendom and pluralism by way of retrieving the way in which Schillebeeckx reshaped his theology through attending to the theological significance of these contexts, and conclude by applying Schillebeeckx’s hermeneutics of mercy to contemporary political questions.
CHAPTER 1
PUBLIC THEOLOGY:
APologetic defences of theology’s political relevance in post-christendom societies

In this chapter, I critically introduce public theology as an emerging sub-discipline of Christian theology. First, I examine how public theologians define their own area of research, thereafter contextualising public theology in the second part. Thirdly, I analyse how public theologians apologetically defend the relevance of their own research. These self-justifying arguments will be divided into two apologetic and one unapologetic justification. An investigation into the latter aims to show that the theological concept of grace is crucial to public theology’s self-stated relevance. However, I will argue that the way in which theological understandings of nature, grace and sin all relate to the public theological question about Christian theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies has not yet been sufficiently explored.

I conclude the chapter with a brief introduction of Radical Orthodoxy as an alternative dominant approach to the question of Christian theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies. As well as presenting public theologians’ main reservations towards Radical Orthodoxy, this last part of Chapter 1 also constitutes the basis for Chapter 2 in which I explain Radical Orthodox theologians John Milbank’s and Graham Ward’s positions in greater detail.

1.1 Definitions of public theology

Discussions about exactly which questions the emerging sub-discipline of public theology seeks to address are still ongoing. In the following two sections I introduce public theology, first by way of providing a definition of its field of enquiry. Thereafter, I give a systematic overview of the accounts of the present context, which has given rise to this relatively new theological sub-discipline. Altogether, I present public theology as comprising a contextual theology, one which specifically addresses problems arising in post-Christendom societies.

Definitions of public theology differ slightly with respect to the degree to which this sub-discipline is regarded as being predominantly a practice or a critically reflective and theoretical undertaking. Moreover, there are also differences regarding who is defined as a public theologian and who is not. Sebastian Kim categorises all Christian engagement with people outside the church on issues of common interest under the term ‘public theology’. In other words, all members of the Christian community, and the people with whom they interact, could be called public theologians. For Ronald Thiemann, public theology is not simply another term for practical Christian engagement in the public sphere, but is rather a theological examination of this engagement. He defines public theology as faith seeking to

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understand the relationship between Christian convictions and the broader cultural context in which Christianity is set, something which is suggestive of a kind of Christian sociology. Elaine Graham also defines public theology as a discipline that reflects on the interaction between Christian faith and the wider public. However, her definition of public theology as ‘the study of public relevance of religious thought and practice, normally within Christian tradition’ reveals a different research focus than Thiemann’s. For her, what Christians think and do is not primarily studied in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of the Christian faith, but instead Christian public engagement is measured against whatever is defined as ‘public relevance’. In other words, Thiemann’s definition suggests that public theology investigates the meaning of Christian political engagement for adherents to the Christian faith, while according to Graham’s definition, public theology examines the meaning of Christian political engagement for a broader public than Christians alone. These definitions remain very broad and somewhat vague. An examination of what is meant by the term ‘public’ will help to clarify the issue.

Others have observed that public theologians may use the term ‘public’ as synonym for ‘universal’ or as a synonym for ‘common’, depending on their national context. The public is understood as a political category, particularly when ‘public’ refers to ‘common’. Public theological research, then, concerns theological contributions to a particular society’s common good. The public often refers to some notion of space in which people meet each other ‘not as family members or intimates, but neither as aliens or utter strangers’. The public, thus, ‘points to a realm of encounter and engagement characterized by a limited degree of plurality’. ‘A limited degree of plurality’ indicates that the public is always distinct from a larger global, as well as from a smaller intimate, community. This political understanding of ‘the public’ is recognisably present in leading British public theologian Sebastian Kim’s thought. He argues that public theology, as a distinct sub-discipline, is rooted in the increasingly acknowledged need for greater interaction between theology and contemporary society, where public issues are concerned. Consequently, ‘public theology is theology engaging with the main bodies in the public sphere and the Church’s attempt to contribute to wider society’. Public theologians in the UK tend to identify the public with the democratic forum in which theologians can voice their opinion as representatives of one societal group amongst many others. As will be clarified in the section below, concerning public

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6 There is no precise, commonly shared definition of the term ‘public’ in the existing public theological discourse. I have only indicated what the term designates in those sources most relevant to this dissertation.
9 Barbieri Jr., “Introduction,” in At the Limits of the Secular, 7.
11 Kim, Theology in the Public Sphere, 230.
theology’s post-Christendom context, this means that ‘the public’ denotes a pluralist political forum, in contrast to the monolithically Christian political forum of previous eras. This raises the question of the legitimacy of Christian theological contributions to political debates, and the shape these contributions take.

A great deal of public theological literature has inherited the understanding of the public in terms of universal accessibility from Jürgen Habermas’ discourse theory.\(^\text{13}\) A publicly accessible argumentation is one which is open to inspection and can be discussed by all.\(^\text{14}\) Others have referred to this aspect by explaining that the notion of the public is associated with visibility and transparency.\(^\text{15}\) This association has two consequences for public theology: On the one hand, Christian theologians are asked to contribute publicly accessible and intelligible insights to public discussions, and on the other hand, more internal Christian theological discussions might also be opened up to public inspection. Placing this aspect of public accessibility at the core of public theology has meant that the sub-discipline has been defined by its proponents as public, primarily because of its method.\(^\text{16}\) The method observes the procedural criteria of dialogue within a pluralistic public sphere.

However, the assumption of public accessibility often presupposes that there exists some neutral, in the sense of not culturally conditioned language, and understanding. The existence of this kind of neutrality has been most forcefully contested by Radical Orthodox authors, who argue that specific cultural influences and biases can never be transcended, as will be explained more explicitly in Chapter 2. A position, such as that of public theology, might tend to reify a society’s common good as a thing in itself that exists independently from different cultural interpretations of the term. Even if some public theologians understand each specific public as being historically contingent, due to its constitution in and through evolving social relations, it is still presupposed that each public involves some ‘common interests’ as well as a shared acknowledgement that some of these are problematic and necessarily debatable.\(^\text{17}\) If, however, the notion of ‘common good’ evokes very different associations by different people within the same public, depending on their socio-cultural background, that there is agreement concerning what counts as problematic and what counts as being politically advantageous project might be far less clear than public theologians presuppose.

In total, proponents of public theology are generally in agreement that the phenomenon to be examined by the discipline is the interrelation between the community of Christian faith and the wider public in which it finds itself. Public theology is defined as both to the nation state. Thus, public theologians seek to converse with ‘citizens on issues wider than religious matters’ (Kim, “Editorial,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 1 (2007):1; Malcolm Brown, Stephen Pattison and Graeme Smith, “The Possibility of Citizen Theology: Public Theology After Christendom and the Enlightenment,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 6 (2012):184). Also, Jeffrey Stout understands the public in close connection to the nation state. His American context, however, is evidenced in his association of the nation state, not so much with a specific geographical territory, but with a group which is constituted whenever any number of people address each other as citizens. This address is allegedly marked by a shared responsibility for the common good (Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 113).

\(^\text{16}\) Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 97.
\(^\text{17}\) Barbieri Jr., “Introduction,” in *At the Limits of the Secular*, 8.
this interrelation itself, understood as an activity and as a theoretical reflection on this interrelation. In many West-European contexts, the overarching aim is to determine how, in a shared political forum, Christian theology and other public agents contribute to the common good. I analyse the context in which public theology is situated in the following section, in order to clarify why this should warrant a new theological sub-discipline, which devotes its full attention to the relation between the church and its surrounding society.

1.2 The context of public theology

The context that gave rise to public theology as an emerging theological sub-discipline is marked by two main characteristics. First, there is the political context of post-Christendom, which means that Christian theologians must reconsider the impact Christian theology can legitimately have upon the social order of a society. While Christian theological considerations might have played a significant political role in days gone by, it has become debatable in a post-Christendom context whether Christian theologians should be allowed any central role in political discussions. This primary post-Christendom context is, then, also why public theologians highlight that they operate within democratic systems. Second, there is the cultural context of pluralism, which is a result of the first. With the dissolution of Christendom, there is no longer one monolithic Christian culture, and Christian theology proceeds in an environment of increasing cultural diversity. In the exposition that follows, I argue that public theologians tend to connect this situation of a pluralist culture to the political challenge of reconsidering the common good which should unify such a society and that, in this way, public theologians re-ascribe to Christian theology a central political role in a post-Christendom context.

a) The end of Christendom: De-centring theology’s political role

The most important characteristic of the contemporary context, in reference to public theology, is the increasing loss of Christianity’s social and political hegemony in Western Europe. This provides for an unprecedented theological context, one which deserves particular attention. Some public theologians have referred to the current situation as the ‘collapse of Christendom’. Christendom refers to the post-Constantinian form of governance where state and church were insolubly interrelated to such an extent that Christianity was identical with the whole of organised society, and thus Christian theology was closely linked to determining the overarching social order. Public theologians seek to respond to a context

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19 I refer to Christendom as a historical era (R.W. Southern, *Western Society and Church in the Middle Ages* (Middlesex: Penguin Books 1970), 16, cit. by Paul G. Doerksen, *Beyond Suspicion: Post-Christendom Protestant Political Theology in John Howard Yoder and Oliver O’Donovan* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 1 n.1). This is distinct from associating Christendom with the church’s Soteriological role (William Cavanaugh, “Church,” in *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2004), 397, cit. by Doerksen, *Beyond Suspicion*, 1 n.1). The
in which Christianity has lost its privileged position. Agreeing that this situation deserves particular theological attention, I contend that public theologians have, thus far, insufficiently overcome the problems of Christendom’s imperialism. The public theological response to this new situation is to accept that political debates are no longer dominated by Christians, but rather shaped by politicians from a plurality of backgrounds. Presupposing that secular liberalism should determine the social order of post-Christendom societies, public theologians immediately move to the practical question concerning how, in a context in which Christian theology has lost its privileged position, Christian theological arguments might be defended apologetically. They argue that this new situation demands that religious arguments must be accessible to the scrutiny of all and are concerned with rendering Christian theological claims publicly assessable. In this pragmatic approach public theologians have tended to re-advocate a privileged political position for Christian theology, as will become apparent in the course of this chapter. My concern is not to question the possibility of this translation, nor do I intend to join public theological discussions concerning what particular form of apologetics should be chosen in the contemporary societal context. Instead, I am concerned with the way in which this apologetic focus, on defending the Christian faith in a secularist context, has tended to deflect theological attention away from the issue at stake; namely, that theology’s political role has become contested.

At this point, it must be mentioned that there is an awareness among contemporary public theologians that present-day theology is faced with particular opposition from the post-Christendom public. Unlike in previous eras, theology’s relevance for the public is no longer presupposed by society. This is why public theology seeks to respond to those contemporaries who think of ‘religion’ as a merely private affair, and to those who vehemently reject any Christian theological contributions to public politics. Concomitant with their apologetic approach, public theologians seek to enable members of post-Christendom societies to trust and respect Christian theological contributions to public life once again. This is perceived, on the one hand, as a practical issue insofar as some of the mistrust against Christianity has arisen due to the churches’ past political failures to meet their own propagated ideals. In this respect the churches have to win the public’s trust back by following their calling more faithfully. On the other hand, public theologians also seek to

interrelation between the two understandings of Christendom will be clarified during the course of this dissertation.


21 Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 69-70; 98.


23 I avoid the term ‘religion’, following William Cavanaugh’s argument that the term ‘religion’ has been constructed in the interest of Western colonialism in order to separate a people’s faith from the political organisation of their societies. This allowed colonial powers to govern, whilst allowing the peoples to practice their ‘religion’ (William T. Cavanaugh, “The Invention of the Religious-Secular Distinction,” in At the Limits of the Secular, 105-128).

respond theoretically to the more fundamental problem that theological arguments are no longer granted an a priori authority.25

The problem with their apologetic response to this opposition or mistrust of theology’s political role becomes apparent in the way in which public theologians present the role of Christian theology in a democratic context. Public theologians evaluate democracy as a favourable form of government, for politics is meant here to arise from the public and common life.26 Public theologians, therefore, want to contribute to this public policy-making. However, this would still involve discussions about the weight given to the Christian theological impact on the way in which a particular democracy is organised. In this regard, it is striking that some public theologians return to a position of advocating a central role for Christian theology in these matters, implicitly remaining within the problems associated with Christendom. Some still advocate a central place for theology in democratic life, associating Christian theology with the responsibility of developing a normative vision for the whole of democracy.27 This is not so much phrased in terms of providing the social order, as it is in terms of providing ethical guidance to the entire society.28 However, the entire argument that Christian ethics could and should be accepted by all relies on the implicit assumption that Christian theology is universal in a way that other traditions are not. And, this is precisely what those who oppose Christendom, as well as any theological involvement in public politics, reject.

Another public theological position wants the Christian churches to be responsible for the facilitation of dialogue needed in order to overcome conflicts in a democratic culture.29 This position promises to enhance democratic life by acting as the mediator for conflicting parties. Public theology’s facilitation of democratic dialogue is furthermore advocated as a remedy to the systemic exclusion of marginalised groups from democratic debates. Following the lead of Latin-American liberation theologies, public theology seeks to empower these marginalised voices.30 This position would still cling to the belief that Christian theology plays a central political role in post-Christendom societies too. A Christian theological understanding of conflicts, appropriate dialogue, compromise, marginalisation and reconciliation would be necessary in order to establish churches as places that facilitate democratic dialogue. In summary, it can be said that both those who want Christian theology to offer the overarching normative vision or ethical guidance for society and those who want public theology to facilitate and enhance democratic dialogue ascribe a more central role, than that of being just one equal contributor to the democratic forum, to Christian theology. The same problem reappears with regard to public theological considerations of the role of Christian theology in a pluralist culture.

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25 Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 211.
b) Pluralism: Christianity amongst a plurality of worldviews

The end of Christendom and the loss of Christianity’s hegemony in Western societies have led to a cultural and religious pluralism in which Christian theology represents the perspective of but one worldview amongst others. Public theology wants to counteract the danger that Christian theologians might interpret this pluralism in Western societies to act as an incentive to define Christianity as just one detached subsystem amongst others. Public theologians strive to uphold the church’s calling to redeem the whole world instead of seeking security within its own confines, even in a pluralist society. Despite this universalist tone, public theologians also want to respect the pluralist context by abstaining from any aspiration to return to a Christian monopoly. Public theologians, then, proceed by way of focusing on problems with contemporary pluralist cultures and by offering Christian theological solutions to these problems.

Two specific problems are connected to the pluralist context that public theology seeks to address. Firstly, public theologians attest a lack of common ground as to what the common good, for which all people should strive, actually is. This is a problem for public theology since representatives of the sub-discipline are convinced that a society is held together by its search for the common good. Secondly, there is the meta-reflection concerning the problem that, although a pluralist society legitimates and celebrates a plurality of worldviews, most faith traditions do not identify themselves as simply one worldview among others. One could say that there is a clash between a secularist outlook, which regards the plurality of worldviews as all formally equal, and the particular faith-based outlooks, which render the public sphere pluralist, even though they might regard themselves as uniquely valid. Many faith traditions claim to describe the whole of reality more truthfully than others.

There are two prominent positions in public theology that respond to this pluralist context. One negates the essential reality of pluralism in Western societies. The plurality of worldviews is interpreted as a surface phenomenon which is, however, still held together by the same cultural foundation. Here, it is argued that theology is able and responsible to excavate this shared moral vision, which might organise the plurality of worldviews within a society. One representative of this is Max Stackhouse’s trust that our present society is still based on the Christian heritage that led to modernity and which simply needs to be recovered from over-zealous secularisation. Moreover, there is a current within public theology that understands the plurality of worldviews to be more fundamentally real. They regard Christianity as one worldview amongst other equally legitimate worldviews, and seek to discern the appropriate place for theology in this mélange.

Also connected to the pluralist context, public theology is a self-consciously international discipline, in which the Western-European and North-American contexts are not meant to be privileged over others. This is manifest in the International Journal of Public

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31 Kim, Theology in the Public Sphere, 7.
32 Kim, Theology in the Public Sphere, ix.
33 Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, xviii.
34 See for example Graham’s critical chapter on evangelical identity politics (Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 140-175).
35 In Chapter 2, I explain that Radical Orthodoxy is concerned with this problem, understanding secularism to be one faith-based worldview amongst others with equally universalising truth claims.
Theology, which has established a theological debate that includes authors from a wide range of nationalities. In the face of the whole world’s increasing economic, infrastructural and political interconnectedness, public theology seeks to establish a theological discourse which reflects upon and harnesses this interconnection. Public theology, thus, strives towards a more inclusive globalisation. Increasing globalisation is believed to intensify the need to define the common good more than at any other previous point in human history. Public theology seeks to contribute to a more inclusive globalisation by connecting different contextual theologies in such a way that they enrich each other. Again, here public theology ascribes a mediating position to itself, seeking to mediate between globalisation optimists and the pessimists who plea for a radical re-regionalisation. Public theology appreciates both an unprecedented interconnectedness amongst all, and a variety of highly divergent regional developments.

In sum, I will continue to refer to public theology as a new theological sub-discipline that establishes itself in response to the end of Christendom. The end of Christendom has challenged theology’s political role, given that some contemporaries firmly oppose any strong Christian theological contribution to public politics. Public theologians respond to this opposition by defending the Christian faith apologetically. Representatives of the field seek to uphold the Christian theological responsibility to reflect on the whole of society’s redemption, which they most often phrase in ethical terms. At the same time, they are wary of re-establishing a Christian social order, since this would amount to the re-establishment of Christendom. I have argued, however, that their apologetic approach tends to lead public theologians to re-advocate a central role for Christian theology in organising the societal whole. Some public theologians, following Max Stackhouse’s lead, advocate Christian values as providing the common ground, even for a pluralist post-Christendom society, while others ascribe a mediating position between conflicting parties to Christian theology, one which again would set the terms for how conflict is successfully mediated.

I will continue, in what follows, to scrutinise public theology’s apologetic approach on the basis of my contention that public theologians have not yet fully overcome the problems associated with Christendom. To this end, I will now turn to the ongoing public theological debates about the political relevance of Christian theology in a post-Christendom context. In what follows, I analyse in greater detail the public theological contention that the political context of post-Christendom confronts Christian theology with the new challenge of defending theology’s public relevance apologetically. The cultural context of pluralism, on the contrary, is being associated with the particular opportunity, and challenge, to reflect upon the theological significance of non-Christian insights and practices. Overall, throughout the course of this dissertation, I will disagree with the former and agree with the latter intuition. More precisely, I will contest the former apologetic approach on the basis of my agreement

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37 Sebastian Kim highlights that most contributions stem from the UK, the USA, Australia and South Africa (Sebastian Kim, “Editorial,” International Journal of Public Theology 8 (2014): 121-122). For a critique of the notion that ‘the public’ in public theological literature often remains a specifically Western concept see Peter Casarella, “Public Reason and Intercultural Dialogue,” in At the Limits of the Secular, 51-84.


39 Kim, Theology in the Public Sphere, 18.

40 Kim, Theology in the Public Sphere, 40.

with the contention that the pluralist context offers the opportunity to discern the theological significance of non-Christian insights.

1.3 Public theology as apologetics

The previous two parts of this chapter have provided a brief description of public theology, by way of examining its self-definitions, and the specific contexts to which public theologians respond. I have particularly highlighted the importance of the post-Christendom context to the emergence of public theology as a sub-discipline, on the one hand, and public theology’s insufficient overcoming of the problems associated with Christendom, on the other. Since this insufficient overcoming has been associated with public theology’s preference for an apologetic approach to any opposition of Christian theological contributions to public politics, I now wish to turn to the more critical investigation of a core concern in public theological literature, namely the ‘relevance’ of public theology. I distinguish three reasons given for the necessity of public theological research: the first, and this is the most contested justification for the relevance of public theology, concerns the argument that Christianity’s distinctiveness in a pluralist public context allows Christian theologians to offer unique contributions to public discussions. Since this justification concerns theological contributions to the common good, as it is defined by the surrounding society, I will call this a secular justification for theology’s public relevance. This justification is met with the criticism that ‘[t]ypically, “public theologies” are self-destructively accommodationist: they let the “larger” secular world’s self-understanding set the terms, and then ask how religious faith contributes to the purposes of public life, so understood’. However, there are also two types of theological justifications of public theology, which each deserve separate attention. First, the task of contributing Christian insights to the wider public is also defended on the grounds that Christian theology is inherently public; it is not solely confined to serve the churches. In other words, theology’s public relevance is defended in association with the universality of the Christian message. I will call this a theological justification for theology’s public relevance due to this assumption of the Christian perspective. A second theological justification for the relevance of public theology concerns the argument that insights from the wider public can enhance the Christian self-understanding. I will call this the theological significance of the public. This is then no longer an apologetic defence of theology’s political relevance, but it is a justification for the necessity of a kind of public theological research, one which concerns Christian theology’s attentiveness to a pluralist post-Christendom context.

Overall, I emphasise, in what follows, the ways in which the first two justifications of theology’s public relevance are associated with apologetics and lend themselves to ascribing a central political role in post-Christendom societies to Christian theology. The third justification of public theological research, which would ascribe the task of interpreting the

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43 The defenders of this justification would claim that it is not necessary to be Christian in order to be convinced by this justification.
46 I would like to thank Christoph Hübenthal for sharing his unpublished paper “Public Theology – A Humble Project Outline” upon which my own systematisation partly depends.
pluralist context from the perspective of Christian theology to the sub-discipline, might allow public theologians not to return to such a remnant of Christendom.

a) The common good: Secular justifications for theology’s public relevance

Many public theologians justify the relevance of their own sub-discipline with reference to the common good; this can take weaker or stronger forms. For Sebastian Kim, theology can contribute alternative, and otherwise unknown, solutions to public problems.47 A contribution to the common good can be made by drawing upon the resources that the Christian tradition provides for this undertaking.48 Theological insights are presented as an enrichment of public life.49 Some public theologians have highlighted that Christianity should not be given any privilege over other worldviews in the search for the common good.50 These are weaker, non-theological reasons for the pursuit of public theology in the sense that they, as mentioned above, presuppose that the public defines the common good, and that theology can contribute to this vision as one of many positions in the public sphere. One problem with this position concerns the very assumption that the public is still striving towards the common good, such as Christian theologians understand it, and this might still be an unjustifiable holdover from Christendom. In other words, the problem with this justification is not only that it runs the risk of accommodating the Christian faith to a secular agenda, but also to impose the Christian perspective onto the public, and not permit the public to develop in genuinely different directions.

The latter risk is evidenced in the writings of those public theologians who see public theology not just as one contributor to a publicly defined common good, but who position Christian theology at a more central place in debates of public concern. They regard the public as in such a dire need of theology that the whole of society would collapse if it did not draw upon theological resources. It is argued that secularism is unable to provide the values necessary to managing a harmoniously shared public life.51 Therefore, contemporary Western societies need religion in order to secure public discourse and to provide the platform on which consensus can be founded. This justification of public theology follows in Jürgen Habermas’ footsteps. Following his defence of secular reason, Habermas came to detect the insufficiency of secular argumentations to the task of establishing a harmonious society, which is why he came to reconsider the public relevance of theological arguments. Habermas now claims that moral and metaphysical ideals are necessary in order to argumentatively

47 Kim, Theology in the Public Sphere, 3.
49 Kim, Theology in the Public Sphere, 8.
51 Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, xvi-xvii.
maintain the dignity of human beings as a universal reference-point. Max Stackhouse, in a similar vein, has argued that public theology has to remind society that truth, beauty, justice and honesty transcend the realm of that which can be materially accounted for. This presents the secular as itself barren of values and consisting of material realities exclusively.

In Chapter 2, I will introduce Radical Orthodoxy as the theological movement that has most recently contested the underlying assumption of this justification. Far from being valueless, and in need of theology in order not to collapse, John Milbank argues that secularism works with a very specific metaphysical vision of material reality and the problem is precisely that secularism denies this vision and pretends to access materiality purely in its immanence, something which Radical Orthodox theologians reject. I will argue throughout the course of this dissertation that both the public theological understanding of secularism as valueless, as well as the Radical Orthodox countering of the specific values and metaphysics of secularism, ascribe a questionably central political role in post-Christendom societies to Christian theology. Both positions point to a problem within secularism (namely its inability to organise a society well, which public theologians associate with secularism’s supposed valuelessness and Radical Orthodox theologians associate with secularism’s supposedly erroneous metaphysics) in order to, then, apologetically present Christian theology as a solution to this problem. This apologetic approach readily becomes circular, inventing a problem associated with secularism, to which Christian theology is then offered as solution. Moreover, this apologetic approach circumvents the task of theologically discerning the theological significance of any vehement secularist opposition to theological contributions to post-Christendom politics, because the focus is one-sidedly on the secularist perspective’s supposed need of theological correction. This conflicts with the public theological self-claimed sensitivity to the theological significance of the public, explained in greater detail below (under c).

b) Universality: Theological justifications for theology’s public relevance

In distinction from those who criticise this first justification for being too accommodationist to Christianity’s surrounding public, I contend that this first justification of public theology’s relevance tends to re-ascribe too central a political role in post-Christendom societies to Christian theology. It is worth attending to the Christian theological justifications of theology’s public relevance. Here, Christianity’s relevance for the wider public is associated with the Christian mission to proclaim the gospel to the whole world in word and deed. This is primarily based on the fact that Christianity has no concept of some secret revelation for a select few, but that it confesses a God who has revealed Godself publicly. Since the God Christians believe in has revealed Godself in the midst of the world, the Christian message should not be passed on as some type of secret wisdom, belonging only to the faith community. Whatever Christians have to say should be as publicly manifest as God’s

52 Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 49-52. Habermas interprets the loss of the Christian vision of the realisation of the Kingdom of God on earth as unifying ideal for Christian societies to be problematic.
own self-revelation. This justification of Christianity’s publicness, then, does not yet cover any questions concerning the degree to which the public is served or the extent to which the public appreciates the Christian proclamation in its midst. A problem with this claim is that it is too vague and is hardly contested by any other Christian theologian. Not many Christian theologians would uphold Christian theology as a form of secret wisdom, but neither would all of them argue for the need of public theology.

In this regard it is important to note that public theologians often associate this publicness of Christianity’s message with the need to translate the Christian faith into the language of the surrounding culture. Elaine Graham even claims that public theology is distinct from both post-liberal theologies and Radical Orthodoxy due to its contrasting answer to ‘the question of the extent to which public theology should “translate” Christian language into speech acceptable and intelligible to a non-Christian audience in order to make any significant impact’. As will become apparent in the course of this dissertation, however, there is no necessary association between theological utterances, which are public in the sense of not being kept secret, and the translatability of Christian theology into a publicly accessible language. The refusal of some Christian theologians to translate the Christian faith is connected to their denial of the existence of some neutral, universally intelligible language. They regard such a neutral language to be a particularly modern conception, which is suspected of concealing its own rootedness in a particular tradition, and of thereby disguisedly perpetuating Christendom’s imperialism. Consequently, other theologians envision different ways of conceptualising Christian universality in order to overcome the problems of Christendom imperialism more successfully. It can be summarised that apologetic justifications of theology’s public relevance have neither managed to overcome the remnant of Christendom, nor have they yet confronted the problems concerning theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies exhaustively.

c) Grace: The theological significance of the public

Apart from these apologetic defences of theology’s political relevance in post-Christendom societies, public theologians also justify the necessity of their newly established sub-discipline with reference to Christian theology’s reliance on insights from the public realm. This justification is primarily associated with the aforementioned context of cultural pluralism, one which accompanies the political context of post-Christendom. In a society that is no longer monolithically Christian, Christian theologians are now presented with the task of discerning the theological significance of non-Christian positions, insights and practices, and are required to modify their own theological politics accordingly. In this regard, public theologians have, thus far, presented the pluralist public either as a corrective to already existing theological insights or as somehow expected to contribute original insights, insights which theology could not otherwise gain on its own. The stance of the public as corrective is implicitly advocated by Stackhouse, according to whom the universality of theological claims is tested and proven by theology’s ability to create greater inclusiveness, greater justice and greater mercy in society at large. The public would then serve as empirical evidence (or

58 Stackhouse, *Globalization and Grace*, 84.
falsification) of the Christian proclamation. The problem with this position is, however, that it simply assumes that the Christian understanding of justice, for instance, is publicly acceptable. Appreciating true plurality might imply that the Christian understanding of justice is much more radically challenged by the way in which other traditions understand the term.\(^{59}\)

Being more than just a corrective, David Tracy, another forefather of public theology, understands the plurality of insights from the public as something integral to the Christian tradition. For Tracy, Christian theologians must not simply repeat the Christian tradition in contemporary culture, but must recreate it in ever new contexts.\(^{60}\) The tradition has to be manifested anew in each historical circumstance. In other words, doing exactly the same thing as what has been done in the past would be a distortion, because the past activity belonged as much to a past context as the present activity has to belong to a present context. Conversation with the environment and a hermeneutics of suspicion which unmasks the distortions of the Christian tradition are inherent components of Christian theology. The public is, thus, a constitutive aspect of the faithful transmission of the Christian tradition within the contemporary context.

While Tracy’s proposal could be termed a philosophical hermeneutical reflection on the transmission of traditions throughout history, Graham puts this argument about the relevance of the public for theology in doctrinal terms. She argues that common grace and natural law theory oblige Christian theologians to discern God’s presence outside of the confines of the churches.\(^{61}\) Apart from common grace, she also refers to ‘the seeds of [...] redemption’ that are scattered throughout the world, in need of further cultivation by Christian theology.\(^{62}\) If the acceptance of God’s offer of grace is central to the Christian life, and the rejection of the self-same offer is regarded as being sinful, then Christian theology must attend to the public in order not to reject the offer of God’s grace prematurely. On the other hand, the public is presented as being in need of Christianity for the fulfilment of its ‘seeds of redemption’. Combined with public theology’s emphasis on dialogue, instead of ‘one-way preaching’, this means that the public is not just a passive field lying in front of theologians to be studied.\(^{63}\) Instead, public theology wants to provide a platform in which the public can actively contribute to theological discussions and receive the theological completion of its contributions.

In the chapters of this dissertation which remain, I shall agree with and further elaborate upon this understanding of the pluralist public as graced and the presentation of Christian theology with the task of discerning ways in which insights from non-Christians might be theologically significant. However, public theologians have not yet considered the question of how far the very opposition to theologically informed contributions to political debates in post-Christendom societies itself might be considered to mediate grace. My concern is related to an insufficient public theological engagement in theological debates about nature, grace, and sin. Throughout the course of this dissertation, I will show that different theological understandings of grace are connected to divergent understandings of the political role ascribed to Christian theology in post-Christendom societies. While public theologians erroneously criticise post-liberal, as well as Radical Orthodox, theologies for

\(^{59}\) In chapter 2, I argue that Radical Orthodoxy is concerned to respect pluralism in this sense, which means that my criticism at this point is indebted to their arguments.


\(^{61}\) Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, xxi-xxii.

\(^{62}\) Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 129-130.

neglecting mediations of grace in the non-Christian public, in order either to withdraw altogether from contributing theologically to political discussions (post-liberals) or re-install Christian theology as providing the best overarching social order for the whole of society (Radical Orthodoxy). I will argue that the problem is more complicated than that. While not many theologians deny that grace is also mediated by non-Christian positions, theology’s role in organising the societal whole is related to the understanding of the relation between graced nature, graced nature’s fulfilment in Christ, as well as to sin, and Christ’s overcoming of sin.64

1.4 Public theology vs. Radical Orthodoxy

In order to pave the way to the subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I will now turn to two theological positions commonly rejected by public theologians and against the background of which they present their own approach as a third alternative. First, there is Radical Orthodoxy, which public theologians reject in relation to the movement’s supposedly inadequate response to both post-Christendom politics and the context of cultural pluralism. Radical Orthodoxy fails not only to appreciate the grace mediated by non-Christian insights but also seeks to uphold a remnant of Christendom.65 In the following section, I will briefly introduce Radical Orthodoxy as a theological movement as well as the main public theological concerns therewith. A more detailed discussion of the degree to which these criticisms are justified, and the way in which Radical Orthodoxy can challenge public theology in turn, will follow in Chapter 2.

However, at this point, it should briefly be mentioned that public theologians also reject a second theological position; namely, post-liberalism. Post-liberal theologies are being rejected, once more, in association with a presumably inadequate response to the political post-Christendom context as well as to the cultural pluralist context. Post-liberals erroneously interpret the context of post-Christendom to be an incentive to no longer reflect theologically on the organisation of the whole of society, and to limit theological reflection instead only to questions concerning the organisation of the church.66 Many public theologians agree with the

64 In this vein, associating the theological significance of the public with a plurality of ‘truth-seeking communities’ also needs further nuancing (Storrar, “2007: A Kairos Moment for Public Theology,” International Journal of Public Theology 1 (2007): 12). From a Christian theological perspective, it must be assessed how far the non-Christian search for truth is being fulfilled in Christ, and/or in Christian theology. The aspect of sin has been highlighted by some public theologians who refer to Christianity’s responsibility of reconciling the world and of bearing witness to God’s mercy (Kim, “Editorial,” International Journal of Public Theology 1 (2007): 3-4). Public theology should raise awareness to those parts of public life which are still in need of redemption. However, instead of showing how the public’s acceptance of grace and its lack of grace are interconnected, public theologians have thus far associated theology’s critique of the public with the prophetic tradition (Kim, Theology in the Public Sphere, 16).


post-liberal idea that churches should be morally outstanding communities, but they contest the stark split between church and public, such as it has been postulated by post-liberals. Public theology holds fast to the idea that Christian theology should still search for solutions to the problems that concern the society as a whole. Moreover, public theologians criticise post-liberals, just as they criticise Radical Orthodoxy, for failing to recognise the grace mediated in non-Christian insights in a pluralist culture. In Chapter 3 of this dissertation, John Howard Yoder and Kathryn Tanner will be presented as two different theologians who are associated with the post-liberal tradition. John Howard Yoder counts as one of contemporary post-liberalism’s forefathers, while Tanner had been trained in this tradition and later distanced herself therefrom. Chapter 3 helps this dissertation’s overall argument, insofar as the remnant of Christendom upheld by both public theology and Radical Orthodoxy will be challenged. In turn, I will show that neither Yoder nor Tanner could be legitimately criticised for any sectarian withdrawal from secular politics. In what follows, I first briefly introduce Radical Orthodoxy for those who might not be familiar with the movement.

a) Radical Orthodoxy as a theological movement

Radical Orthodoxy is a theological movement that was inaugurated with the publication of Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology in 1999, a volume edited by the then Cambridge-based theologians John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward. The movement’s aim has been ‘to contest secular culture’ and to counter ‘the side-lining of theology from academic and public discourse’. In other words, Radical Orthodoxy shares public theology’s opposition to the privatisation of Christianity, which is why the movement has been characterised as essentially a ‘world-oriented’ theology. Radical Orthodoxy aims to disclose the insufficiency of purely immanent accounts of reality, in order to oppose the privatisation of faith traditions. In this sense, their Christian theology is a way of cultural critique in a secularist culture. Part of the Radical Orthodox cultural critique is to contest the idea of there being some ‘neutral reason’ and to uphold, instead, the idea that reason is only truly reasonable within the framework of Christian theology. Radical Orthodoxy contests the secular understanding of immanent reality, as being objectively given, and regards it instead to be a contingent human creation, a view that is in agreement with postmodern philosophers. Truth claims, including Christian ones, are being valued as historically

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71 James K. Smith, Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 68.
73 Shakespeare, Radical Orthodoxy, 7. Their opposition to modern secularism, thus, exhibits Radical Orthodoxy’s leading authors’ familiarity with French post-structuralist thinkers, which is why their
conditioned. At this point, it is important to highlight that Radical Orthodoxy regards the privatisation of religion as being indissolubly interlinked to a purely immanent, secularist worldview, whereas some public theologians evaluate secularism in a less critical manner.

Some praise Radical Orthodoxy for offering helpful resources for imagining an alternative way of being in the world, due to its constructive goals. In sum, Radical Orthodoxy values and retrieves the Christian tradition as a fertile resource for contemporary church and society. The goal is to provide a comprehensive account of every aspect of the world from the Christian perspective. In doctrinal terms, this means that, as a constructive alternative to secularism, Radical Orthodox theologians uphold the idea of the participation of all of reality in God. This idea highlights, on the one hand, that immanent reality is other than God and that immanent reality can only be adequately understood in relation to God on the other. This analogical relation of the world to God is, for Radical Orthodoxy, not merely a static theory, but ‘[i]t is a living way of relating to God, best expressed in Christian life and worship’.

While the term ‘movement’ could be associated with some singular agenda, Radical Orthodoxy is better characterised through its initiative and readiness to examine the realities, which one might always have assumed to be unambiguous or self-evident, from a different perspective. Radical Orthodoxy, thus, denotes a ‘certain spirit of theologically driven cultural engagement’. In conclusion of this very brief introduction of Radical Orthodoxy, it is noteworthy that, over the years, Radical Orthodox authors have become more nuanced and less confrontational with respect to those whose ideas they oppose. Graham Ward has distanced himself from the movement in recent years completely and refers to Milbank’s project as a ‘nostalgic’ retrieval of the ontology prior to Christianity’s supposed loss of orthodoxy in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, it is important, where this dissertation is

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74 Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 21-22. Shakespeare remarks that this aspect is regularly overlooked by Radical Orthodoxy’s critics. One example of such a misunderstanding that Radical Orthodoxy sharply distinguishes between ‘secular rationality and the truth of revelation and everything that flows from it’ is that of Barbieri, “The Post-Secular Problematic,” *At the Limits of the Secular*, 129-161. This is why Barbieri prematurely allocates Radical Orthodoxy, post-liberal theology, and Scriptural Reasoning into the same camp.

75 Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 68.

76 Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 69; 73-74.

77 Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 22.

78 Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 22-23.


80 Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 66.


concerned, that Ward still shares Radical Orthodoxy’s opposition to an exclusivist secularism and purely immanent understandings of reality. The similarities and differences between Milbank’s and Ward’s responses to the question concerning theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies will be elucidated in Chapter 2.

b) Problematic universality: Radical Orthodoxy’s remnant of Christendom

Amongst the many reservations held about Radical Orthodoxy by the theological community, there are two which are especially important in reference to the present discussion about public theology. The first accuses Radical Orthodoxy of a dualistic split between the Christian churches and the extra-ecclesial public, as well as between Christian theology and all non-Christian dialogue partners. Radial Orthodoxy is charged with being too concerned with upholding a distinct Christian identity over and against the non-Christian public. As is obvious from the above introduction, this split manifests itself in Radical Orthodoxy in the re-invention of a Christian ontology as the better alternative to the contemporarily prevalent secularist ones, and not in the sense of any sectarian withdrawal from the world. This is why the second important criticism of Radical Orthodoxy, with regard to public theology, concerns the movement’s supposed advocacy of the re-establishment of an oppressive Christian imperialism. Radical Orthodoxy’s aspiration to retrieve and reconstruct a particularly Christian reading of all of reality is associated with the desire to re-establish a privileged position for Christian theology in political debates. In other words, Radical Orthodoxy is criticised for seeking to restore the political primacy of Christendom. This is connected to Milbank’s advocacy of his Christian ontology as the only true one. These newly launched journal: Graham Ward, “Affect: Towards a Theology of Experience,” Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics Vol. 1 (2012): 55-80. In his most recent work, Ward is more hesitant to reproach Milbank with nostalgia, but still seeks to distance his own theology from any such nostalgia reproaches, and in the same vein also from Milbank’s theological project (Graham Ward, How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 70-74).

87 Shakespeare, Radical Orthodoxy, 150.
89 Kathleen Roberts Skerrett, “Desire and Anathema: Mimetic Rivalry in Defense of Plenitude,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 71 (2003): 800-802. Roberts Skerrett claims that there is an inner contradiction between the postulated content of Milbank’s ontology (peace) and the exclusivist way in which he presents it.
criticisms are sometimes not as much aimed at the content of Milbank’s ontological vision as they are at his exclusivist rhetoric.\(^90\)

Overall, public theologians are sceptical of Radical Orthodoxy’s cultural critique. The Radical Orthodox refusal to accept the prevailing secular ontology has been called counter-cultural.\(^91\) It has been claimed that a particularly Christian interpretation of reality risks losing any foothold in the public realm. ‘Counter-cultural’ here is connected to the public theological self-contextualisation within a democratic public. It is argued that Milbank’s supposed animosity, vis-à-vis atheist secularism, might restrain many Christians from sufficiently engaging in the democracies in which they live.\(^92\) It is argued that Christians could contribute more effectively to public discussions if they accept that, in a de facto pluralist public realm, Christian arguments are best heeded where the theological presuppositions remain implicit.\(^93\) This suggests that, in contrast to the Radical Orthodox understanding of each context as being ambivalently open to a multiplicity of interpretations, public theologians interpret the contemporary pluralist post-Christendom context either as an unavoidable given with which Christian theology must cope or even as a blessing for the Christian theological endeavour. In Chapter 2, I will argue that Milbank presents his Christian ontology precisely as a criticism of secularism’s disguised hegemony, apparent in such a postulation of one self-evident interpretation of pluralism. This then renders the public theological alliances with secularism suspect of perpetuating the problematic aspects of Christendom.

In significant contrast to Milbank’s project, most critics agree that Graham Ward is the Radical Orthodox author who displays the most amicable stance towards the non-Christian public.\(^94\) Ward’s theology has been appreciated for treading ‘on a similar territory to that conventionally occupied by public theology’.\(^95\) He also asks how contemporary culture might be transformed, how public institutions generate truth and meaning and how Christian practices relate to these truths. Ward’s theology is most significantly distinct from that of Milbank with reference to the criticism of Milbank’s assumption that Christian theologians can understand the whole of reality better than others. Ward, to the contrary, stresses the


\(^91\) Graham, \textit{Between a Rock and a Hard Place}, 116-117, Stackhouse, \textit{Globalization and Grace}, 83. This can be connected to the observation that Milbank denies the existence of a neutral common ground between Christianity and the surrounding public, which has been assumed in much of modern apologetics (Hübenthal, “Apologetic Communication,” \textit{International Journal of Public Theology} 10 (2016): 7-8).

\(^92\) Stout, \textit{Democracy and Tradition}, 92-94.


\(^95\) Graham, \textit{Between a Rock and a Hard Place}, 124-125.
limitedness and finiteness of Christian theological insights into reality.\textsuperscript{96} In contrast to Milbank, Ward is praised for respecting the otherness of his dialogue partners by suspending judgment on them.\textsuperscript{97} This more positive understanding of the public might be what allows Ward to reflect on the cultural influences which co-condition any theological thinking much more, an acknowledgment for which Ward has received positive critique.\textsuperscript{98} Ward then argues that theological sensibilities resurface in late-modern culture and that the sacred re-appears within the public.\textsuperscript{99} This aligns Ward more closely to public theological sensibilities than Milbank.\textsuperscript{100}

And yet, Ward has been criticised for still advocating a position of Christian superiority, stopping half-way in his respect for non-Christian dialogue partners. He allegedly does not allow Christian theology to be sufficiently criticised by others.\textsuperscript{101} The problem is that Ward presupposes that only contemporary culture needs to be transformed, not Christian doctrine.\textsuperscript{102} Ward has been criticised for simply presupposing traditional Christian orthodoxy’s authority, despite contemporary cultural currents (such as feminism) that put certain doctrines into question.\textsuperscript{103} Consequently, Ward, like Milbank, has been criticised for his refusal to approach non-Christians in a dialogue that refrains from the use of non-theological vocabulary.

This is linked to Ward’s agreement with Milbank concerning the preferability of a Christian interpretation of reality over a purely immanentist one.\textsuperscript{104} Contrary to some secularist assumptions, Ward seeks to show that the particularity of different faith traditions is not primarily problematic, but constitutes an enrichment of any shared public. On this basis, he embraces the Christian faith tradition wholeheartedly. This is why Elaine Graham’s criticism that Ward’s theology might lack an account of how theology could learn anything from the public, and why Ward regards the particularity of Christianity within the wider public to be unproblematic,\textsuperscript{105} should be reconsidered in my more nuanced examination of Ward’s position in the following chapter.

Having explained how both Milbank’s and Ward’s understandings of the political role of Christian theology in post-Christendom societies has been criticised for still exhibiting certain problems associated with Christendom imperialism, which public theologians strive to

\textsuperscript{96} Grumett, “Radical Orthodoxy,” \textit{The Expository Times} 122(6) (2011): 266.
\textsuperscript{97} Shakespeare, \textit{Radical Orthodoxy}, 142.
\textsuperscript{98} Shakespeare, \textit{Radical Orthodoxy}, 36.
\textsuperscript{99} Graham, \textit{Between a Rock and a Hard Place}, 124.
\textsuperscript{101} Graham, \textit{Between a Rock and a Hard Place}, 108.
\textsuperscript{103} Virginia Burrus, “Radical Orthodoxy and the Heresiological Habit,” in \textit{Interpreting the Postmodern: Responses to “Radical Orthodoxy,”} eds. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marion Gau (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 38, FN 5. For a similar criticism see also Linn Marie Tonstad, \textit{God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude} (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 70 who argues that ‘[t]he story Ward tells is surprisingly familiar’. Tonstad criticises Ward when he maintains ‘a standard theology of marriage’ which he then merely expands to also include same-sex couples.
\textsuperscript{104} Wisse, “Introduction to the Thinking of Graham Ward,” in \textit{Between Philosophy and Theology}, 67-68.
\textsuperscript{105} Graham, \textit{Between a Rock and a Hard Place}, 128.
overcome, I will now turn to criticisms that are related to the cultural context of pluralism and public theology’s focus on the theological significance of non-Christian insights.

c) Ignoring grace: Radical Orthodoxy’s failure to appreciate a pluralist public

Regarding the question of an adequate theological interpretation of non-Christian insights, Milbank’s exclusivist rhetoric has been criticised for breaking with the content of his ontology insofar as he is unable to conceive of how his opponents participate at all in God. In this vein, Milbank has been criticised for prematurely discarding all non-Christian insights as either irrelevant or even outright hostile to Christian theology. Radical Orthodoxy’s opposition to modernity in the wake of the Enlightenment has been particularly criticised for undermining the gains this era has brought to humanity. Doctrinally, public theologians relate this underestimation of the revelatory value of non-Christian insights to an erroneous understanding of the doctrine of common grace. Presumably, the presence of God’s grace within the Christian tradition is overemphasised at the expense of an adequate acknowledgement of non-Christian mediations of God’s grace. Radical Orthodoxy’s rejection of the idea of the public as a neutral realm is associated with the denial of the existence of any shared space in which common grace operates. Non-Christian conversation partners are either construed as being neutrally un-graced or as sinfully rejecting God’s offer of grace. Against this, public theologians hold that the doctrine of common grace implies that Christian theology cannot fully understand the implications of grace if it solely discerns how Christians are moved by grace. It should be acknowledged that grace moves non-Christians in different, but important and supplementary ways.

Ward’s opposition to any presumption of speaking from a God’s-eye perspective suggests that his understanding of grace might be closer to that of Elaine Graham than it is to that of Milbank. Graham also appeals to the doctrine of grace in order to argue that public theology should confidently remain fragmentary and partial in its contemporary proclamations, in the hope that God’s grace will fulfil the work. Nonetheless, Ward postulates Christ as the ordering principle of reality in his criticism of purely immanent ontologies and seeks to account for how all cultural occurrences exist in Christ. This means that all beings must be interpreted in terms of their submission to Christ. This could suggest that Christian theologians possess an overarching vision of reality more akin to Milbank’s

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106 Mathewes, A Theology of Public Life, 125; 127, FN 32.
109 Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 107; 116-117.
110 Shakespeare, Radical Orthodoxy, 176.
111 This is connected to Radical Orthodoxy’s supposed failure to acknowledge that the theological tradition has always appropriated resources from the surrounding culture as providential partners for the construction of Christian doctrine (Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 137).
112 Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 111-112; Stout, Democracy and Tradition, 103.
113 Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 101.
ambitious project than to Graham’s fragmentary public theology. How Ward combines these two, somewhat divergent, strands of thought in his theology will be examined in Chapter 2.

At this point it must be stressed, however, in defence of both Milbank and Ward, that more subtle critics have observed that it does not follow from Radical Orthodoxy’s cultural criticism that Radical Orthodox theologians would think that there is nothing of value in the secular public. This issue will be clarified in the following chapter by way of a more thorough examination of Milbank’s and Ward’s understandings of grace. It will then become apparent that they both understand non-Christian insights to be expressing an aspiration for grace — which is not nothing, but which is already partially good — and Christian theology as the fulfilment of this initial and fragmentary goodness. In other words, when their critics suggest that Radical Orthodox authors should not interpret their opponents as those who reject the True and the Good, but as those who distort it, both Milbank and Ward might very well agree.

Regarding Radical Orthodoxy’s understandings of the doctrine of grace, it also deserves to be mentioned that, in contrast to those who criticise Radical Orthodoxy’s use of theological vocabulary in post-Christendom societies’ public forums, both Milbank and Ward have also been repeatedly criticised for their intensive engagement with postmodern thought. They are said to merely draw on theological resources in the interest of furthering philosophy. It has been claimed that Radical Orthodoxy is more grounded in a post-foundationalist philosophy, which aims at a deconstruction of modernity, than it is grounded in Christian orthodoxy. In this vein, Radical Orthodox theologians have been criticised for not exhibiting the same respect for Christian Scripture and practices that has marked the Christian tradition throughout the centuries. Radical Orthodox authors appear to be speaking from intellectualist vantage points rather than from the perspective of a specific faith tradition, exhibiting no ‘signs of any kind of praxis of faith’ in their works. This close link to postmodernism, however, is why Radical Orthodoxy has also been evaluated more positively, as one amongst many other contemporary ways of criticising secularism. As

117 This can be attributed to the influence of Henri de Lubac’s theology on Radical Orthodoxy.
118 Mathewes, A Theology of Public Life, 125. This criticism is only directed against Milbank, but the logic of the criticism would also apply to Ward’s opposition to secularism.
121 Hemming, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 135.
124 Barbieri, “The Post-Secular Problematic,” At the Limits of the Secular, 142-145.
such, Radical Orthodoxy is regarded as being committed to pluralism in a way ‘that works against the totalizing tendencies of secularism’. In this vein, Radical Orthodoxy is expected to offer a creative alternative vision to all others who strive to overcome the problems associated with secularism. Putting the question that arises from these contrasting evaluations of Radical Orthodoxy’s engagement with postmodernism in theological terms, the question remains about the degree to which postmodern philosophies should be understood as a grace for Christian theology. I will argue, in Chapter 2, that Milbank focuses more on the flaws postmodern philosophies have, and which need to be repaired by Christian theology, while Ward presents postmodern philosophy as expressing an aspiration for grace that needs to be completed by Christian theology.

Conclusion

Thus far, it can be summarised that public theology is concerned with theology’s political contributions to post-Christendom politics, and sees the need for the creation of a new sub-discipline due to the altered context in recent decades. Christianity has lost its unquestioned central place in Western societies, which has given rise to the question concerning the communication between Christians and non-Christians in democracies, where issues concerning everyone are at stake. While I agree that this contemporary context deserves particular theological consideration, public theology’s apologetic approach to the issue raises a number of questions, which have remained unanswered. Based on the public theological literature introduced in this chapter, the main question of this dissertation is then: What should Christian theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies be? Public theologians, thus far, tend to assume the secularist social order as a given, and seek to contribute to it theologically. However, this chapter has shown that in so doing, public theologians re-ascribe a privileged position in the societal whole to Christian theology. My hypothesis is that the question about theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies can be better approached by way of an increased focus on the public theological incentive to discern the ways in which God’s grace is mediated, even in non-Christian positions and insights. In the course of this dissertation, I radicalise this incentive by way of suggesting that also the secularist opposition to Christian theological involvement in public politics should be understood as mediating God’s grace. What this would mean for theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies remains to be examined.

For now, I have begun to introduce Radical Orthodoxy as an alternative contemporary theological approach to public theological questions. This chapter has served to present the main public theological reservations against Radical Orthodoxy very briefly. These criticisms concern Radical Orthodoxy’s supposed aspiration to reinstall Christendom as the best form of government and the concomitant closure towards non-Christian dialogue partners, which has been associated with erroneous understandings of grace. In what follows, I will assess both Milbank’s and Ward’s respective understandings of theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies in more detail. This assessment will include both an examination of the degree to which the public theological reservations against Radical Orthodoxy are justified, and an extrapolation of criticisms that Radical Orthodox theologians could voice towards public theology.

124 Barbieri, “The Post-Secular Problematic,” At the Limits of the Secular, 158.
CHAPTER 2

RADICAL ORTHODOXY:

APOLOGETIC DEFENCES OF A CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ORDER

This dissertation’s question concerns theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies, and I have discussed two public theological reasons for why Christian theology should be involved in the organisation also of post-Christendom societies. In confrontation with those who oppose any faith-based arguments in matters of public policy, these reasons turn into apologetic defences of theology’s political relevance. I have called the first a secular justification inasmuch as public theologians justify theological contributions to public politics by promising to contribute positively to whatever the wider society understands as being the common good. The second justification is theological inasmuch as public theologians here argue that theological claims are politically relevant for the entire society, due to Christian theology’s universality. As well as these two justifications concerning Christian theology’s political relevance for post-Christendom societies, there is also a third justification concerning the endeavour of public theology itself. This justification points in the opposite direction, postulating that theology gains the new task of reflecting on the theological significance of non-Christian contributions to public politics in the pluralist cultures that characterise post-Christendom societies. This third justification had been associated with the doctrine of grace, and I have argued that the discussion could be elucidated with the help of a more nuanced examination of the relation between grace and Christianity, grace and non-Christian positions and the impact of sin upon each.

Moreover, I have briefly presented the ways in which public theologians construe their own sub-discipline in conscious distinction from Radical Orthodoxy. Regarding the first justification of theology’s public relevance in secular terms, public theologians criticise Radical Orthodoxy for being counter-cultural due to the movement’s firm resistance to any accommodation of Christian theology to secular culture. Concerning the second justification in reference to Christian theology’s universality, public theologians criticise Radical Orthodoxy for misrepresenting this universality to the effect that they advocate the re-establishment of Christendom. Regarding the theological significance of non-Christian contributions to public politics in a pluralist culture, public theologians criticise Radical Orthodoxy for erroneously regarding non-Christian positions as entirely un-graced and, consequently, irrelevant for Christian theology.

Overall, public theologians suspect Radical Orthodoxy of presenting Christian theology as being solely responsible for establishing the social order, even in a post-Christendom context. In this chapter, I will analyse the extent to which this suspicion is justified. Particular attention must be paid to the concerns that I have raised in the previous chapter, particularly my suspicion about public theology of being equally liable to re-advocating a central political role for Christian theology in post-Christendom societies.

I proceed by way of presenting Milbank’s and Ward’s positions in relation to all three aforementioned public theological self-justifications. Regarding the secular justification of theology’s public relevance, I will argue that Radical Orthodoxy is not counter-cultural in principle, but that both Milbank and Ward provide considerable reasons why secularism in particular might be viewed with suspicion. Apart from presenting Radical Orthodoxy’s negative criticism of secularism, this first part of Chapter 2 also serves to present Milbank’s and Ward’s respective alternative proposals. In 2.2, I will present both Milbank’s and Ward’s
understandings of Christian theology’s universality, as the second apologetic defence for theology’s political contributions to post-Christendom societies, examining the charge of Radical Orthodoxy’s supposed advocacy of a re-established Christendom in this context. I argue that Milbank’s and Ward’s understandings of theology’s universality, in terms of its participation in God, renders it more dynamic than the public theological understanding of universality. Due to Milbank’s and Ward’s different understandings of God, however, this has different implications for how they each view theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies. Finally (2.3), I turn to the question concerning the theological significance of non-Christian contributions to political discussions in a pluralist context by way of examining Milbank’s and Ward’s respective understandings of grace.

2.1 Apologetics beyond commonality: Contesting secular justifications of theology

In the previous chapter, I have explained that public theologians justify the relevance of their discipline partly by way of arguing that Christian theology can contribute to the common good, as it has been defined by the surrounding society. Charles Mathewes’ criticism that this position risks accommodating Christian theology to the mainstream culture has already been briefly mentioned in this context. In what follows, I explain that Radical Orthodoxy does not reject the accommodation of Christian theology to the surrounding culture generally, but that Radical Orthodox authors are wary of very specific threats from a secularist culture, most significantly its disguised perpetuation of Christendom imperialism. Pretending to be neutral, in the sense of not being culturally conditioned, secularism now inhabits the central role of organising the entire society, a role which Christian theology had previously played. Part of the Radical Orthodox project is, thus, to contest secularism’s pretended neutrality. Both in the case of Milbank and in that of Ward, I begin with an explanation of what they oppose and then introduce what they positively offer as their alternatives. In section e), I speculate how the rejection of secularism, as determining the social order for post-Christendom societies, challenges the public theological apologetic answer to the question concerning Christian theology’s political role in those societies. The political implications of Milbank’s and Ward’s positions will be further developed in 2.2 and 2.3.

a) Milbank’s contestation of secularism: No neutral social order

The purpose of this section is to elucidate the fact that Milbank does not oppose any non-Christian culture, as a matter of principle, but that his criticism is directed against the particular cultural context in which he regards himself to be situated. The value of Milbank’s thoughts on the role of Christian theology, in determining the social order for post-Christendom societies, can only be understood against the background of his disclosure of two contemporarily widespread understandings of reality as both tending to perpetuate the imperialistic problems of Christendom.125 The first, and somewhat primary, ontology contested by Milbank pretends to mirror reality directly in and through its statements and, in

125 In sum, Milbank rejects three philosophies for their perpetuation of imperialism. Besides modern positivism and postmodernism, he also rejects phenomenology. It would, however, exceed the scope of this dissertation to engage in analysing Milbank’s opposition to phenomenology in greater detail.
so doing, denies being metaphysical. It presents its deliberations as objective truth, thereby concealing that it is but one interpretation of reality amongst others. I call this ontology modern positivism. The second, namely the postmodern understanding of reality, understands each interpretation of immanent beings as equally disconnected from the truth about reality (if such a truth exists at all), and seeks to overcome metaphysics by way of resisting the temptation to speculate about the interrelation of different immanent beings in the way, Milbank would argue, it is done by an overarching ontology. Instead, each particular immanent being is sought out in order to be appreciated in its individual difference from all others.

According to Milbank, both modern positivism and postmodernism deny the culturally specific ontology which they presuppose and upon which their entire endeavour of interpreting reality relies. Milbank regards the positivist assumption that ‘nature’ self-evidently and objectively reveals its own truth to humanity as being politically problematic. This understanding of immanent reality undermines the necessity of metaphysical discussions about the truth about the immanent world. Associating these metaphysical discussions with politics, Milbank laments that people have short-circuited the political path towards truth in modernity by promising to guarantee an access to the truth about nature by way of employing the most adequate scientific method. Metaphysical discussions about this truth are of the greatest political relevance, if the truth about reality is believed to be more multifaceted than modern positivists would allow for. Political decisions are, then, no longer imposed by those who have the power to ‘read’ nature, but politics depends upon a collective consensus of the human community about the truth revealed in nature. In brief, the problem with positivism’s pretended neutrality is that it ascribes the most central role in organising the whole of society to itself. Metaphysical speculations, as well as cultural biases, are being discarded as politically irrelevant to discussions that take place in the public forum, and modern positivism, in its political variant of secularism, exempts itself from the charge of being culturally biased, which is why it alone is permitted to organise the whole of society.

Milbank understands postmodernism not as overcoming but as perpetuating the problems of modern positivism. Postmodernism, despite its claims to abandon any ontology,
still disguisedly adheres to an overarching vision of reality.\(^{129}\) Milbank interprets postmodernism as yet another metaphysically biased position, which interprets all particular beings as equally cancelling any overarching metaphysical order among beings through their particular existence.\(^ {130}\) The problem with this philosophy is that it generalises all particular different beings to the same univocal status of being different. The refusal of an overarching ontology is, therefore, disclosed as a disguised ontology which holds that, in reality, all differences are equal. As such, this interpretation of reality must also be viewed on the same level as any ontology that affirms the political importance of metaphysical speculation concerning (hierarchical) orderings among different particular beings.\(^ {131}\)

This opposition to modern positivism and postmodernism clarifies why Milbank objects to apologetic defences of the relevance of Christian theology in secular terms, where the secular is marked precisely by these two positions. This justification risks agreeing with secularism, as determining the social order of post-Christendom societies, because it is erroneously believed that secularism is less culturally biased and more independent of metaphysical speculation than any faith-based social order could be.

Against the background of this opposition to all positions that claim some neutral access to reality for themselves, one could now expect that Milbank would assume a position which openly confesses its merely subjective and constructed status. Indeed, Milbank upholds the necessity of making the ontology through which reality is accessed explicit.\(^ {132}\) Milbank openly affirms the dependence of his own ontology upon culturally contingent conventions and influences, thus respecting the postmodern intuition that all ontologies are social constructs and are, consequently, alterable.\(^ {133}\) This is why he refuses to provide foundations that would account for the correspondence of his own ontology to reality. Instead, Milbank makes the weaker claim that one must ‘wager’ that his ontology corresponds to reality.\(^ {134}\) At the same time, however, Milbank still maintains that his ontology objectively corresponds to

\(129\) This view is brought to the extreme in what Milbank calls ontologies of violence. These ontologies present all particulars, not as harmoniously ordered, but as violently or indifferently set against each other (Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 4; Milbank, “The Poverty of Niebuhrianism,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 236-237).


\(131\) Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xvi; Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 115-116, 134-135; Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 3. Milbank refuses to interpret the constructed status of all ontologies as revelatory of their ultimate arbitrariness. When rendered into necessary arbitrariness, the indeterminacy of all human interpretations of reality would be conceived of as something ultimately determined (Milbank, “The Second Difference,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 189).

\(132\) Milbank speaks of a necessary conjecture about the whole in order to perceive any particular being (Milbank, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 42-43).

\(133\) See Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), for a critical assessment of the degree to which Milbank accepts postmodern philosophies. Hyman criticises that Milbank uses postmodern thought only in order to then re-advocate his theological meta-narrative, thereby breaking with postmodern sensibilities (30). However, Milbank is also criticised, from the opposite side, for engaging with postmodern thought to the extent that the integrity of the theological concepts he uses is violated (Laurence Paul Hemming, “What Catholic Theologians Have to Learn from Radical Orthodoxy: What Radical Orthodoxy Has to Learn from Catholic Theology,” *Louvain Studies* 28 (2003): 232-239).

the truth about reality. This characterisation of his own ontology, as simultaneously a culturally specific construct and objectively truthful, is in line with his opposition to the presumed self-evidence of postmodernism. Milbank accepts the contemporarily widespread belief that ontologies are humanly constructed, but refuses to accept that humanly constructed ontologies self-evidently deviate from reality itself. In other words, he contests the binary opposition between truth and human construction. That ontologies are constructed does not mean that they are necessarily superimposed on the true chaos of reality that can never be accessed by human thought. This conception would disguisedly elevate the observation of human construction onto the ontological level by granting it the last word about the relationship between human thought and reality. Before I explain why Milbank advocates his own ontology as better able to fulfil the central role in determining the social order for post-Christendom societies than secularism in 2.2, I will first examine where this refusal of secular justifications for the public relevance of Christian theology positions Milbank with regards to apologetics.

b) Apologetically defending Christian theology: Solving secularism’s problems

The previous section has shown that, overall, Milbank fundamentally opposes any positivist worldview, which would hold that immanent reality could be understood non-metaphysically or without the help of an ontological framework. But where does Milbank’s offer of an alternative ontology lead us regarding the question of apologetics? Milbank’s ontology has been criticised for displaying traces of fideism and a failure to rationally justify the leap of faith into Christianity he supposedly demands, due to his appreciation of postmodern non-foundationalism. Milbank’s refusal to provide foundations can be partly defended on account of his concern not to pretend to offer a neutral and self-evident access to reality. At the same time, Milbank’s equal rejection of the postmodern understanding of constructed ontologies as self-evidently deviating from the truth about reality, entails that his ontology cannot demand an entirely arbitrary leap of faith in order to be accepted. For Milbank, an overarching ontology is meant to attune people to perceive aright how particular beings in the immanent world reveal knowledge about the whole of reality.

In what follows, I argue that Milbank apologetically defends his alternative ontology by presenting it as being the cure to all of the problems that he associates with secularism. Since the problem with secularism is its concealing of the overarching ontology upon which it depends, Milbank seeks to justify the political relevance of Christian theology precisely by openly construing an overarching ontology that is meant to enhance society’s wellbeing

135 This is overlooked by those who criticise Milbank for presumably regarding truth as merely a linguistic construction and for privileging a hermeneutic of suspicion over the theological search for truth (Todd Breyfogle, “Is There Room for Political Philosophy in Postmodern Critical Augustinianism?,” in Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth, eds. Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 32-33; Jon Marenbon, “Aquinas, Radical Orthodoxy and the Importance of Truth,” in Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy, 60-61).
overall, which partly consists in freeing Western imaginations from any claims to possessing a neutral access to reality.

Against any pretended neutral access to reality, Milbank openly conjectures that the whole of reality is ordered harmoniously, which is why he refers to his vision as an ontology of peace.\footnote{Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, 5. The relation between Milbank’s ontology of peace and an adequate acknowledgement of evil will be examined in my discussion of Milbank’s understanding of grace and sin (2.3).} Adopting the postmodern appreciation of particularity, Milbank’s understanding of peace does not presuppose or seek out fundamental agreements, but peace is defined as ‘the sociality of harmonious difference’.\footnote{Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, 5.} According to his ontology of peace, particular beings belong both to a harmoniously ordered whole and exceed the whole in their very particularity.\footnote{Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, 5; Milbank, “A Christological Poetics,” in \textit{The Word Made Strange}, 129; Milbank, “Out of the Greenhouse,” in \textit{The Word Made Strange}, 261. In order not to purchase this high estimation of particularity, at the expense of the possibility to make claims about the whole, Milbank’s metaphysics builds upon Aristotelian and Neo-Platonist philosophies (Milbank, \textit{Beyond Secular Order}, 24). From Platonism, he retrieves the idea that material beings participate in their ideal perfection. However, Milbank also retrieves the Aristotelian understanding of the immanent world as an integral part of this ideal perfection. Developments in the immanent world expand the ideal forms positively (Milbank, “A Christological Poetics,” in \textit{The Word Made Strange}, 129; Milbank, “Out of the Greenhouse,” in \textit{The Word Made Strange}, 261).} The excess of particulars over the ordered whole means that Milbank’s ontology must be continuously growing.\footnote{Milbank, \textit{Beyond Secular Order}, 24. This is why those critics who think that Milbank would advocate a conservative return to a pre-modern understanding of reality in the sense of a ‘totally fixed, hierarchical, cosmic, and social order wherein all knew their place’ are mistaken (Milbank himself tells of this common misreading in John Milbank, “Faith, Reason, and Imagination,” in \textit{The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology} (London: SCM Press, 2009), 329). How this relates to questions about pluralism will be explained in 2.2.} As such, it is a cure to all fixed ontologies that undercut people’s appreciation of genuine newness or difference.

With regard to the criticism of fideism, Milbank’s critics are mistaken when they claim that the only way to see the truth of Milbank’s ontology of peace is to be overwhelmed by the whole story that theology would possess as sort of Gnostic secret knowledge.\footnote{Shakespeare, \textit{Radical Orthodoxy}, 152-153.} The mistake made by his critics is to read Milbank’s writings about a necessary wager in terms of an idealistic belief in harmony, despite the concrete evidence to the contrary.\footnote{Mathewes, \textit{A Theology of Public Life}, 132-133. In other words, Mathewes overlooks the Aristotelian influence on Milbank’s thought and focuses, one-sidedly, on his Neo-Platonism.} However, Milbank’s argument has shown that we can never reason from conflicting particulars to an overarching ontology. Supposedly conflicting particulars are not self-evidently falsifications of an overarching ontology of peace. To counter this perception, Milbank upholds both that reality is truly harmoniously ordered and that humanly constructed ontologies participate in this order to various degrees.\footnote{Milbank, “A Critique of the Theology of Right,” in \textit{The Word Made Strange}, 12; 28.} Refusing the legitimacy to reason from immanent reality to an overarching ontology, Milbank interprets immanent reality through the lens of his ontology of peace and can then indicate where real harmony is already partially realised, even if we are sometimes confronted with conflicting particulars. In this vein, Milbank speaks of a foreshadowing of ontological harmony within the churches, which renders the wager in favour of his ontology more acceptable.\footnote{Milbank, “Culture,” in \textit{Being Reconciled}, 204-205.} People must not arbitrarily accept Milbank’s
ontology, but they must instead assume for a while that it might be an account that corresponds to reality and then interpret reality through this lens. If the ontology can stand the test, then people might be convinced that it is true.

c) Ward’s appreciation of postmodernism: De-centring the secularist social order

Now that I have provided an assessment of Milbank’s rejection of public theological apologetics in secularist terms, I will introduce Graham Ward as a Radical Orthodox theologian who modifies this rejection. While Milbank’s critique is primarily directed against two (related) ontologies, Ward criticises only the first. Ward joins Milbank in criticising modern positivism, because it reads the world through an exclusively immanent frame, and denies that this reading is a culturally conditioned interpretation. Like Milbank, Ward thus objects to modernity’s assumed neutrality and concomitant imperialism in disguise. Ward calls modern positivism a myth in the sense that it naturalises that which is but a culturally specific social construct. Ward criticises contemporary culture for being deluded if it believes that the world, as it has been created by the West, is real. Concomitantly, Ward rejects modern secularism as the naturalised ontology that serves as the sole legitimate centre for the social order of many Western societies.

Furthermore, Ward then joins Milbank in the appreciation of the postmodern understanding of every human access to reality as being culturally conditioned. Ward calls

147 Ward primarily counters materialism and atomism. See Tonstad, God and Difference, (2016), 70, for a critique of Ward’s criticism of ‘ideologies of self-sufficiency’, arguing that Ward fails to name those against whom this criticism is voiced and that his theological contribution to contemporary culture is, therefore, ‘rather anemic’. For a similar critique of the vacuousness of Ward’s criticism of social atomism see also Insole, “Against Radical Orthodoxy,” Modern Theology 20 (2004): 228-229.
148 Graham Ward, Cities of God (London: Routledge, 2000), 89. Ward refers to this positivism as reading the world without ‘discernment’. See also Graham Ward, Cultural Transformation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1. Ward still maintains the same line of argumentation in his most recent work How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 64, when he relates Christianity’s crusading triumphalism in the early Middle Ages with ‘purely intellectualist’ modes of reasoning ‘that provided seminal means for the procreation of secular reason’ and advocates a proper theological combination of intellectual knowledge, liturgical practices and ethical living. He then also explains how theology as prayer shapes people’s ability of discernment in greater detail (173-180).
149 Ward, Cities of God, 69.
151 Graham Ward, The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 99. This is in stark contrast to Elaine Graham who argues that, in the wake of secularism, people live in ‘a realm in which personal autonomy, reflexivity and freedom of belief are axiomatic’, and who wants to incorporate believers into a ‘Western cultural imaginary in which the general equilibrium point is “firmly within immanence” (Graham, “Unquiet Frontier,” Political Theology 16 (2015): 38).
this postmodern non-foundationalism a ‘weak hermeneutical ontology’. However, while Milbank rejects postmodern non-foundationalism, as perpetuating the positivist myth of neutrality through concealing its foundations, Ward shows a greater belief that the postmodern weak hermeneutical ontology corresponds to reality. Ward argues that the world has entered a postmodern order and claims that Christian theologians must presuppose a postmodern ontology for their own accounts of the world. While Milbank attempts to invent an alternative ontology, to those implicitly advanced by postmodern philosophies, Ward accepts postmodernism as an overarching vision of reality and tries to show that, if correlated with Christian theology, this ontology would reach its own ends more successfully than if correlated with secularism. In other words, the most crucial distinction between Milbank’s and Ward’s projects concerns Milbank’s rejection of the postmodern ontology, where Ward accepts it and seeks to fulfil its aspirations by means of Christian theology. Postmodern philosophies must only be criticised according to the degree to which they still rely on modern metaphysics, a reliance which they aim to overcome. Ward argues that this can be achieved by way of examining the extent to which postmodern metaphysical assumptions accord with Christian theology’s analogical metaphysics.

Ward’s less antagonistic position towards postmodernism can be explained in relation to the way in which he and Milbank each problematise modern positivism. Although both agree that modern positivism is a reductive interpretation of reality, Milbank thinks that this distorted interpretation is connected to an economic and social system which is sufficiently

155 At the same time, Ward claims to remain critical of those who understand the postmodern ontology as self-evident natural law or even divine providence (Ward, Politics of Discipleship, 83).
156 Ward, Cities of God, 62. See also Ward, Politics of Discipleship, 76. Ward discusses in Cultural Transformations and Religious Practices, 19-60 that even Barth’s opposition to apologetics still remains apologetical in the sense of being deeply rooted in the culture from which he spoke. Ward similarly emphasises the same point of the cultural embeddeness of all Christian theology in How the Light Gets In more systematically as conditioning the development of the whole Christian tradition.
157 Ward’s claim that postmodern philosophies fail to successfully overcome modernity, and that a postmodern critique of modernity must come ‘from the other side of modernity’ (Ward, Cities of God, 94) should also be understood in a weaker sense than that of Milbank, despite the close affinity they share on the surface.
158 The acceptance of a postmodern ontology implies, for Ward more particularly, that realities are understood as liquid and transmutation is written into the fabric of reality (Graham Ward, “Transcorporeality: The Ontological Scandal,” in The Radical Orthodoxy Reader, eds. John Milbank and Simon Oliver (London: Routledge, 2009), 294-295; Ward, Politics of Discipleship, 83). Beings are essentially transmutable and only contingently stable and identifiable. Ward’s ontology privileges the categories of ‘becoming’ and ‘contingency’ over fixed schemes. This is also why Ward accepts that ‘[o]ur trans-global mind-sets are pluralistic, pragmatic, multicultural, and profoundly hybrid’ (Ward, “The Myth of Secularism,” Telos 167 (2014): 179). See also Tonstad, God and Difference, 65, for the more specific argument that Ward accepts the broader ‘cultural-turn to desire, sexuality, and eros’ and then ‘connects sexuality with God so that Christian theology has a response to dominant, but unsatisfactory, cultural logics of sex and desire’. According to Tonstad, however, Ward ultimately fails to criticise contemporary culture and instead imports its problems into his understanding of God (59).
159 Ward, Cities of God, 94, n.169
160 Ward, Cities of God, 13. He defines these semiotics by way of five characteristics: The cultural mediation of all knowledge, as well as the excess of meaning of material beings to human interpretations are affirmed, all acts of interpretation are regarded as partly ideological, human beings are defined in economic terms and a ‘weak hermeneutical ontology’ is presupposed (Ward, Cities of God, 20-21).
perfect as to continuously cure its own defects. In this sense, the flawed ontology is more powerful than the truth which it continues to undermine. The only way to excavate the truth from underneath the distorted ontology, and to de-centre secularism from its position of organising the societal whole, is to offer an alternative ontology that is as holistic as the currently predominant one. Ward, to the contrary, is more pessimistic about the future viability of the distorted modern positivist ontology when he claims that, without a theological critique, modernity would collapse. In other words, modernity’s untruthfulness to reality predetermines modernity to be naturally extinguished at some point, and postmodern non-foundationality is welcomed as the first sign of modernity’s collapse. Postmodernism is already understood as the de-centring of secularism.

Accepting the non-foundationalist assumptions of post-modern philosophies as true, Ward like Milbank refuses to provide a presumably neutral justification of theology’s political relevance. Where Milbank offers an alternative comprehensive account of reality, as the cure to all the problems he associates with secularism, Ward joins postmodernity in its own attempt to free Western imaginations from positivism, by way of enabling them to perceive the infinite wealth of meaning contained in the immanent world.

Accepting postmodernism as a new overarching ontology, Ward claims that ‘we’ live in a ‘constant vertigo of semiosis’. Words possess infinite possibilities of meaning. It is uncertain how precisely they relate to reality. Consequently, the Christian worldview must replace its truth-claims with weaker claims to authenticity. The Christian discourse is, thus, presented as a cultural product on the same level as any other. According to Ward, there is no assurance to be given why one system of beliefs should be better than another, but ‘[o]ur very believing rests upon a prior believing; reason gives way to persuasion’. At the same time, accepting postmodernity as more truthful to reality than modernity, Ward appreciates persuasion as the dissemination of truth produced by truth itself, while modern scientific reason presumably produces truth. In other words, it is important not to justify the public relevance of Christian faith in secularist terms, because any such justification would produce a truth that deviates from reality. Moreover, it seems as though Ward would defend a more marginal political role for Christian theology, seeing that he wants to position Christianity on the same level with any other faith tradition. It might, however, be the case that Ward would still ascribe to postmodernism a more central role in determining the entire social order than to others, which would then have to be assessed in relation to Milbank’s argument that postmodernity itself still perpetuates the tradition of Christendom imperialism. This issue will be further elucidated throughout the course of this chapter. First, I investigate in greater detail where Ward’s rejection of secularist justifications of theology’s public relevance leads him regarding Christian apologetics.

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161 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 195.
162 Ward, Cities of God, 94.
164 Ward, Cities of God, 91.
165 Ward, Cities of God, 71. This is more fully worked out in Ward’s Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don’t (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014).
166 Ward, Cities of God, 13.
167 Ward, Cities of God, 73.
d) Apologetically defending Christian theology: Perfecting post-modernism

The non-foundationalist repercussions of Ward’s theology have invited the criticism that Ward is more influenced by postmodern philosophies than by the Christian theological tradition. Ward is said to escape the theological struggle of determining orthodoxy by merely appreciating the particularity of any religion as such in a postmodern fashion. This renders Ward more vulnerable to the criticism of fideism than Milbank. All particular faith communities are judged as being equally good because they resist the dominance of secular liberalism in contemporary culture. Ward then fails to specify the criteria by which Christianity in particular could be publicly justified. In other words, he simply accepts the framework of Christian doctrines as unproblematic on the basis of the postmodern conviction that the particularity of faith traditions must be maintained against the dangers of one monolithic culture. Contrary to these criticisms, I interpret Ward’s theology as being driven precisely by the predominant concern to justify the reasonableness of Christianity in postmodern terms. In other words, Ward offers an apologetics of Christianity for what he perceives to be a postmodern mainstream culture.

Overall, Ward justifies theology’s political relevance by way of arguing that Christian theology is better able to attain the postmodern aim of overcoming modern positivism than any atheist postmodern philosophy. Ward conceives of a space that is opened up through the non-foundationalist suspension of being in possession of the truth. The Christian faith, just like any other belief system, is involved in the politics and metaphysics of organising this space. On this basis, Ward argues that atheistic postmodern culture uses this framework in a disadvantageous manner. He suspects postmodern culture of rendering non-foundationalism into a new foundation, which should be prevented by Christian theology. Christian theology should use the postmodern non-foundationalist framework in a better way;

169 Tanner, review of Christ and Culture, Modern Theology 23 (2007): 483; Smith, Introducing Radical Orthodoxy, 118-119. Ward has been said to ‘more or less ‘baptize’ poststructuralist deconstruction’ (Wisse, “Introduction to the Thinking of Graham Ward,” in Between Philosophy and Theology: Contemporary Interpretations of Christianity, 68).

170 Smith, Introducing Radical Orthodoxy, 118-119.

171 Ward criticises contemporary culture for being governed too blindly by economic forces (Ward, Politics of Discipleship, 116).

172 This is also why Ward, like Milbank, has been criticised for refusing to use non-Christian vocabulary that supposedly would be more accessible to a wider public (Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 126; 129-130).

173 Contrary to Tonstad’s criticism that ‘Ward’s trinity is a corrective projection based on what he believes is necessary to generate the ethically and imaginatively constituted human subjects he hopes to produce’ (Tonstad, God and Difference, 83), there is no understanding of God free from projections in Ward’s theology. For him, an adequate understanding of God in a particular context relies upon an apologetic correlation of contextual questions and traditional Christian understandings of God.

174 Ward opposes any nihilistic rendering of the postmodern ontology (Ward, Cities of God, 95). Not unlike Milbank, Ward associates this nihilistic interpretation with the belief in insurmountable particularity, which he criticises for risking dissolving the world into endless scattered places. At this point, Ward is in agreement with Milbank that some sort of unity, to which all particulars belong, must be believed in.

175 Ward, Cities of God, 73.

176 Ward, Politics of Discipleship, 84. For example, non-foundationalism too easily accommodates arbitrary market mechanisms, insofar as it is advantageous for free market capitalism that people have no strong commitments, as this predisposes them to be constantly persuaded by changing trends.
namely, to confront Christians with the lack of foundations of their faith continuously. As such, he strives to overcome the tendency to regard one’s own interpretation of reality as being self-evidently true. In other words, Ward’s correlation of a postmodern ontology with the Christian analogical worldview, far from resolving the instability of meaning, is actually geared to preserve it. Instead of offering an alternative vision of the whole of reality to the prevalent postmodern one, Ward apologetically defends theology’s relevance by promising that a continuous theological re-interpretation of the immanent world overcomes any reductive positivist reading of reality.

Ward’s claim that ‘[n]ature cannot be natural without the spiritual informing it at every point’, must be understood in the context of his opposition to modern positivism. His insistence that ‘[t]here is only one radical critique of modernity - the critique that denies the existence of the secular as self-subsisting, that immanent self-ordering of the world which ultimately had no need for God. The secular to be secular requires a theological warrant’, is not meant to be as exclusivist as it sounds. Instead, anyone who does not regard their own interpretation of the immanent world as the only eternally valid one would participate in the theological critique of modernity. This is why, against positivism, Ward advocates a more general re-mythologisation of materiality with the aim to ‘learn to see things otherwise’. His own Christology is then presented as one such way of escaping positivism through a re-mythologisation of reality.

At this point, leaving the postmodern level of granting to each faith tradition equal legitimacy, Ward moves to the specificities of the Christian faith. He claims that the solution to contemporary ills is to build a culture upon that which is ‘true and good and realistic’ and not on the ‘shifting sands of ephemeral human desires’. In the specific case of Christianity, to build a culture on that which is ‘true and good and realistic’ means to build a culture around Christ. For Ward, Christ orders reality in the sense that all cultural occurrences exist in Christ. Christian theologians must interpret all beings in terms of their submission to Christ. However, for Ward, this interpretation does not result in some all-encompassing ontology. To the contrary, he claims that understanding particular beings in relation to Christ

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177 In this sense, Ward wants Christian theology to transcend postmodernism (Cities of God, 70).
178 This counters the objection that Ward’s Christologically based understanding would forget that all religion is but a human way of coping with the incomprehensible vastness of the universe (Beverley Clack, “Radical Orthodoxy and Feminist Philosophy of Religion,” in Interpreting the Postmodern, 215-229). Christian faith, according to Ward, is precisely meant to reflect the incomprehensible vastness of the universe.
179 Ward, “Spiritual Exercises,” in Christ and Culture, 234. Christian theology must discern the purpose and appropriate recipient of every particular immanent being that is encountered (Ward, Cities of God, 88-89; 91).
180 Ward, Cities of God, 88.
181 Ward, Cities of God, 94 (my emphasis).
182 Ward perceives all human attempts to represent immanent reality to be the ceaseless search for the ground for a legitimate understanding of material reality (Ward, “Christology and Mimesis,” in Christ and Culture, FN 22, 41). As a ceaseless search for a legitimate interpretation of reality, representation is always in a crisis, which according to Ward must lead to either madness or faith.
185 Ward names the present crisis of democracy amongst others.
186 Ward, Politics of Discipleship, 74.
187 Wisse, “Introduction to the Thinking of Graham Ward,” in Between Philosophy and Theology, 67;
introduces some apophaticism concerning their meaning. Every particular being interpreted in relation to Christ is known only apocalyptically by a greater unknowing, instead of being unambiguously interpreted as this or that. This does not mean that the meaning of the being becomes entirely uncertain, but that in this very particular being’s relation to Christ more than one definite meaning can be perceived.

Overall, defending Christian theology apologetically for a postmodern audience, Ward is more hesitant than Milbank to pre-empt a wholeness and totality of reality prior to the eschaton. As such, Ward is closer to the position of public theologians such as Jeffrey Stout and Charles Mathewes. They agree that Christian theology affirms reality as one harmonious whole, but they deny that Christian theologians enjoy a privileged standpoint from which they can see how this harmonious whole is concretely constituted. For Mathewes, this means that Christians can believe that all reality forms one harmonious whole, but they cannot say how this is the case. Christian theology, therefore, cannot prescribe the social order for an entire society, because the theological affirmation of an ultimately harmonious reality remains unconvertible into concrete social structures to a considerable degree.

Despite this closeness to Mathewes and Stout, however, Ward’s thought could lend itself to ascribe a more central political role to Christian theology in post-Christendom societies. Ward promises to fulfil postmodern aspirations to overcome secularism’s imperialism, suggesting that everyone should perceive the infinite wealth of meaning in every particular being and, consequently, should concede that the harmonious order of reality cannot yet be fully captured by any single perspective. In contrast to Milbank’s upholding of the Christian ontology as the best overarching vision of the whole of reality, Ward advocates the adherence to particular religious ontologies as an escape route from the domination of secularism’s imperialist tendencies. Ward seems to assume that each faith tradition builds its culture on that which is ‘true and good and realistic’. This is then vulnerable to Milbank’s criticism of postmodernism: Ward assumes the most overarching perspective from which it can be seen that all particularities, except that of atheist secularism, are univocally legitimate. Since Ward moreover argues that Christian theology is better able to fulfil postmodernity’s good aspirations, he implicitly advocates Christian theology as best centre for the organisation of the whole of society.

e) Questioning the secularist social order: Consequences for public theology

In sum, John Milbank’s and Graham Ward’s criticisms of modernity’s positivist understanding of reality are important for the present discussion, because they raise awareness of some problems with these (post)modern ontologies which are related to the question about theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies. Milbank and Ward agree with the postmodern critique that secularism is forgetful of its own culturally conditioned status and illegitimately presents its universal claims as being neutral. Secularism, thus, disguisedly perpetuates the imperialism of Christendom, insofar as the notion that secularism should determine the social order, due to its alleged neutrality, is beyond discussion. Milbank then sees this pretended neutrality further perpetuated by postmodern ontologies, while Ward appreciates the postmodern, weak hermeneutical ontology as the first sign of the overcoming of secularism’s disguisedly imperialistic assumption of some self-evident neutrality. This is why Milbank constructs an alternative ontology, whereas Ward seeks to fulfil the postmodern aspirations with the help of Christian theology. Milbank is, thus, apologetic insofar as he tries to convince people of his ontology by promising that it is able to cure the problems which he associates with secularism, whereas Ward is engaged in an apologetic defence of Christianity
for a postmodern context. He shows how, from a postmodern perspective, it would be reasonable to accept Christian contributions to the organisation of the entire post-Christendom society. Highlighting that both Milbank’s and Ward’s positions are significantly determined by an apologetic interest, returns us to my criticism that public theological apologetics are predisposed to underestimate the theological significance of the secularist opposition to Christian theological contributions to public politics. The extent to which Milbank’s and Ward’s respective apologetics are also vulnerable to my criticism, is something which will be examined in the context of their respective theologies of grace in 2.3.

Milbank’s and Ward’s criticisms of the implicit assumption of the neutrality of secularism applies to public theology insofar as public theologians believe that there is something like publicly scrutinisable reasons. Radical Orthodoxy, on the contrary, negates the reality of such neutral reasons that can be separated from specific cultures, viewing the assumption of the existence of these reasons itself to be a culturally particular, namely, modern secularist view. If the existence of such a neutral rationality is not assumed, however, the justification of Christian theology’s relevance in secularist terms becomes dubious. According to Milbank, the public is not a neutral space but is, instead, the realm that is constituted by the encounter of different ontologies. This implies that Christian theology as well as any other philosophy (religious or secular) must be understood as one particular interpretation of the whole of reality amongst others.

Altogether, the argument of 2.1 shows that, in contrast to Mathewes, Radical Orthodoxy does not oppose secular justifications of the public relevance of Christian theology due to some general fear of accommodation to the surrounding culture. Instead, Radical Orthodoxy is cautious not to support the particular secularist social order, which imperialistically claims to be neutral. They disclose, as culturally specific, the very idea that there is a culturally independent common good to which people from different backgrounds collectively strive. This leads us to reconsider the public theological criticism that Radical Orthodoxy itself was imperialistic in what follows.

2.2 Dynamic universality: Justifying Christian theology as renewed centre of the social order

Although Radical Orthodoxy is in agreement with public theologians who purport that Christian theology is also politically relevant in post-Christendom societies, public theologians think of this relevance in terms of theological contributions to democratic

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190 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 106.

191 Milbank criticises Habermas’s idea of starting from within a tradition and striving towards universal reason by highlighting that there is no way to overcome the culturally specific beginnings from which one starts; even the strive for universal reason remains entirely within the tradition (Milbank, “Ecclesiology: The Last of the Last,” in Being Reconciled, 110). Although Elaine Graham finds Habermas’ new introduction of religious arguments into an overall secular public sphere similarly unsatisfactory (Graham, “Unquiet Frontier,” Political Theology 16 (2015): 37), she nevertheless assumes that all Westerners share a common secularist mind-set, an idea which she borrows from Charles Taylor (38).
discussions in a secular social order, whilst Milbank wants theology to offer an alternative understanding of the social order itself. Ward shows how Christian theology can contribute to a public realm that is organised along postmodern sensibilities. This antagonism against secularism is presumably the reason why Radical Orthodoxy has repeatedly been criticised for advocating a return to Christendom. Most particularly, his concerns the Radical Orthodox contention that the whole public would be a better place if it was understood in its relation to God, which leads us to the second public theological justification of theology’s public relevance.

As well as arguing that Christian theology can contribute to a secularly defined common good, public theologians also justify theology’s public relevance by way of highlighting the universality of Christian theological insights. This universality presumably implies that Christian theology should also contribute its insights to political discussions in post-Christendom societies. In the previous chapter, I have argued that, in relation to this justification, public theologians tend to re-ascribe to Christian theology a central political role. This conflicts with their own best intentions to imagine a less central role for Christian theology in the contemporary post-Christendom context. Nonetheless, public theologians object to the Radical Orthodox claim that Christian theology, due to its particular relation to God, possesses privileged knowledge concerning the organisation of the entire society. In order to examine the adequacy of this criticism, and to assess the differences between the Radical Orthodox and the public theological understandings of Christian universality, I will explore how Milbank and Ward understand reality in its relation to God, and how this influences their respective understandings of theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies in what follows. In both cases, that of Milbank and that of Ward, I will first explain what they mean by the Christian theological task of relating reality to God. Then, I will show the implications of these views for the political role played by Christian theology in post-Christendom societies. At the end of this second part of Chapter 2, I will reconsider the way in which public theologians understand theology’s universality, in the light of this chapter’s discussion.

a) Milbank’s expansive Christian universality: Participating in God’s ontological incomprehensibility

Milbank’s apologetic defence of his ontology is related to his understanding of God. Milbank understands God as superabundant goodness and as the self-reflexive reality in which the immanent world participates. God is at once everything in its absolute fullness as well as its original source. The immanent world participates in God, which means that the harmony of which Milbank’s ontology speaks is affirmed to exist primarily in God and by participation in this world. On the one hand, this means that Christian theologians must attend to particular immanent instances of harmony, because these are revelatory of God. On the other hand, Christian theologians must also acknowledge in some way that the harmony in God remains greater than the harmony found in this world. According to Milbank, to affirm.

194 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 12.
God, Christian theologians must affirm a reality which lies beyond their ontological comprehension and into which their ontology can, therefore, advance.\(^{196}\)

It is important, however, that Milbank interprets God’s incomprehensibility not in epistemological but in ontological terms.\(^{197}\) God’s incomprehensibility is said to be an attribute of God’s very nature. God is intrinsically superabundant and self-reflexive.\(^{198}\) Since reality is itself then imagined as being incomprehensible, in terms of expanding through continuously created newness, Christian theology does not aim to possess the final grasp of reality. A human ontology cannot eternally capture God in abstract terms that remain the same throughout history, because God continues to reveal something new about Godself through the existence of each new particular being.\(^{199}\) Consequently, what God is can never be fixed in a universal abstraction or known in advance.\(^{200}\) Instead, each finite existence, in manifesting God, is an excess to God’s very nature and must further refine and expand the human knowledge of God, i.e. theology.\(^ {201}\) In sum, the acknowledgement of God allows Milbank’s ontology of peace, then, to claim perfect knowledge of the harmonious whole of reality at present\(^{202}\), and to maintain that reality is still greater than this perfect knowledge.

Milbank cannot uphold his ontology as eternally valid, because he upholds that ontologies have to be constantly revised throughout the course of history in order to remain truthful to reality.\(^ {203}\) Milbank claims that an ontology that is directed towards truth cannot remain within its own hermeneutical circle.\(^ {204}\) From this it follows that Milbank’s positioning of his own ontology above others, is not meant to be the best option eternally. Instead, it should be understood as constituting one crucial step on the continuous path into a harmony which is still greater than the present construction. Milbank here conceives of this path

\(^{196}\) Milbank, “History of the One God,” *The Heythrop Journal* XXXVIII (1997): 393. This account of participation has been criticised by Nicholas Lash, “Where Does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy? Questions on Milbank’s Aquinas,” *Modern Theology* 15 (1999): 435. For a situating of the argument between Lash and Milbank in the wider theological debates of the 1990s and a demonstration of the degree to which Milbank’s understanding of analogy has been shaped in and through his criticism of Lash, see Paul DeHart, “On Being Heard but Not Seen,” *Modern Theology* 26 (2010): 243-277. DeHart sides with Lash against Milbank’s reading of analogy in Aquinas. De Hart is particularly critical of Milbank’s claim that humankind has direct cognitive access to God through the perception of perfection in created beings (266). DeHart agrees with Lash that using perfection terms in theological speech means that we can affirm more than we can understand (270).

\(^{197}\) Milbank, “The Force of Identity,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 201. Equally, God cannot be a self-subsistent substance because this would imply that there is an outside to God which remains unaffected by God (Milbank, “The Linguistic Turn as a Theological Turn,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 110).


\(^{199}\) Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 25.


\(^{203}\) Milbank, “The Poverty of Niebuhrianism,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 250. On the basis that reality is identified as the Good, what is truly real is always registered as pleasure (John Milbank, “Beauty and the Soul,” in *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty*, eds. John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Edith Wyschogrod (London: Trinity Press International, 2003), 24-25). The pleasure is both sensed and abstractly imagined. The abstraction of a sensed pleasure, thus, expands an ontology that is truthful to reality. See also Milbank, “A Critique of the Theology of Right,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 25-26, where Milbank criticises Jeffrey Stout’s position on virtue ethics, and argues against Stout that ontologies do not change arbitrarily, but due to irresistible reasons.

towards perfection, just as like any hierarchy, as self-cancelling insofar as it is meant to initiate people into the truth. The stages of this hierarchy are admitted to be conventional, whilst it is upheld that these conventions are not arbitrary, but are reasonable constructs. The purpose of the hierarchy is to collectively preserve ‘standards of excellence’. There must be mutual judgment about the common order and, thus, about what is right, good and beautiful. How a society hierarchises its order is then not abstractable from some presumably rational principles, but the hierarchical ordering of apparently incommensurable differences must be discussed publicly. The order discovered is never definite then, but the discussion must be ongoing and the incommensurable individual must always be allowed to exceed the ordered whole. Moreover, it should be acknowledged that, insofar as all particularities participate in God’s goodness, the hierarchical degrees in which this goodness is mediated should be regarded as equalised on the most fundamental level.

Altogether, Milbank’s ontology of peace is associated with universality precisely because it is not any fixed, abstract interpretative frame, but because it is flexible and dynamic. Milbank claims that Christian theology is the most universal in scope, because it must continue to incorporate all individual particulars, in their very uniqueness, into itself by way of relating their uniqueness harmoniously to the already existing web of relations between all other unique particulars. Since this relation of unique particulars with each other is also believed to relate them to God, Christian theology must remain open to the future. God is believed to provide ever new unique particulars, which means that the Christian theological task of constructing a harmonious whole is eternally expanding. This also means that, precisely because Milbank affirms his own ontology as universally true, new unique particulars might expand and challenge the whole in such a way that his ontology of peace must be expressed differently in the future.

b) Christian theology as the self-exceeding centre of the social order

On this basis, we can now examine the relation between Milbank’s understanding of theology’s universality to his apologetic defence of a Christian social order. In what follows, I will argue that Milbank promises to offer a better social order than secularism with regards to two issues that are related to post-Christendom. First, Milbank argues that far from undermining pluralism, his ontology is better able to celebrate plurality in its positivity than

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205 Milbank, “Politics: Socialism by Grace,” in Being Reconciled, 183. Concomitant with his criticism of postmodernity’s univocal appreciation of all differences, Milbank laments that postmodern cultures fail to appreciate both ‘hierarchical summits’ and ‘material depth’ (Milbank, “Ecclesiology,” in Being Reconciled, 107; Milbank, “On Complex Space,” in The Word Made Strange, 275). The hierarchy he proposes is, then, meant to value differences in their particularity (Milbank, “Politics,” in Being Reconciled, 183). In this vein, it should be mentioned that Milbank opposes any premodern fixed hierarchical order, which he calls ideological insofar as it naturalises an established hierarchy and fails to admit that any hierarchy is also a social convention (Milbank, “On Complex Space,” in The Word Made Strange, 283). In these ideological hierarchies, those at the top get there by chance, sheer power, capital or their ability to seduce the masses (Milbank, “Politics,” in Being Reconciled, 183).


secularism. And second, he claims that his ontology is better suited to advancing a society’s growth in the truly good at the point at which secularism is focused too one-sidedly at the restriction of damage. I will clarify both points in what follows.

Contrary to those who argue that Milbank’s ontology overwrites the reality of pluralism, Milbank shows that, one way or the other, there is an overarching ontology in any case, according to which a plurality of particulars is perceived. Whereas contemporary secularism interprets plurality as the confrontation of fundamentally antagonistic differences, Milbank understands differences as positive mediations of the good. Consequently, instead of understanding all worldviews that meet in post-Christendom societies as merely arbitrary interpretations of a reality that remains forever unknown, Milbank understands the encounter of different ontologies that constitute the public realm not to be chance encounters. Instead, he interprets these encounters as revealing bonds of sympathy between people that are more fundamental than the adherence to any particular worldview. The assumption of the existence of these bonds of sympathy at the most fundamental level of reality is no self-evident or supposedly neutral empirical observation. It is rather on the basis of his own ontology that Milbank can assume that people are really interrelated by sympathy. In the same vein, Milbank upholds that there is a true good to which all socially constructed ontologies aspire and which they materialise to different degrees. Pluralism is, then, not interpreted as chaos to be managed, but in a way in which everyone must be viewed as most fundamentally belonging to one shared human culture.

This means that Milbank conceives of ontologies on two levels: Every culture possesses an ontology in the sense of an overarching vision of how beings are constituted and interrelated. On a somewhat higher level, there is then his own ontology which embraces all others underneath itself by claiming that other worldviews make comprehensive sense of the whole of reality, but are unable to see that, on a more fundamental level, they are related to others. In this way, Milbank’s ontology of peace evaluates the pluralist public sphere positively instead of understanding it as the composition of self-enclosed communities based on equally singular self-subsistent ontologies.

With regard to the question of a society’s orientation to the common good, Milbank rejects the view that people cannot attain an overarching vision of reality, but that everyone simply relates to the whole as that which remains unknown, for this view undermines a society’s advancement towards a better future. If the overarching whole, to which all social

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213 Milbank, “Culture,” in *Being Reconciled*, 204-205


216 This distinction is missed by Milbank’s critics regularly, critics such as Graeme Smith, “Pluralism and Justice: A Theological Critique of Red Toryism,” *Political Theology* 13 (2012): 330-347, or Larsen, “The Politics of Desire,” *Modern Theology* 29 (2013): 301, who claim that Milbank is unable to appreciate true plurality due to his preference for his own ontological meta-narrative.

217 This explanation puts into question the criticism that Milbank could not envision peace between Christians and non-Christians (see for example Doak, “The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy,” *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 377).

relations belong, is believed to remain forever unknown, human beings can only be imagined as being bound together by negative restrictions on their otherwise unlimited freedom.\(^{219}\) This refusal to understand reality as a knowable web of hierarchical interrelations incurs the danger of being indifferent to the particularity of anyone and anything that occurs as long as it does not interfere with one’s own position. Milbank claims that such a conception can only confirm the liberal bourgeois world as it is. There is no possible argument for any substantial change to the social order, for no particular constellation of beings can be regarded as better than any other. Moreover, such an abandonment of ontological claims leaves room for dangerously irrational sects and cults to answer questions about objective truth and goodness.\(^{220}\)

According to Milbank, only the affirmation of God, in the sense outlined above, helps a society to advance towards perfection and not to stagnate with the status quo.\(^{221}\) A politics based on the belief that reality is abundantly good is not one aimed at the mere minimalisation of damage.\(^{222}\) If God is excessive goodness, a politics that affirms its participation in God must aim to constitute an excess to the already realised goodness. Regarding the question of how a society knows what constitutes genuine goodness, Milbank claims that both praxis and political discussions about the common good should not be understood as secondary applications of something which has already been understood abstractly. Instead, praxis and discussions about the good intrinsically belong to the real excess of goodness.\(^{223}\)

If God’s goodness itself still expands through each new mediation in the immanent world, politicians know their own aim of advancing in the common good only through the actual praxis of goodness, for this praxis further expands real goodness.\(^{224}\) In other words, political agents increasingly come to know more of the common good precisely in the instantiation of their projects.\(^{225}\) This conflicts with Stackhouse’s understanding of public theology, as the discipline that can indicate the probable direction, which history will take dependent on what fundamental worldview is adopted.\(^{226}\) Stackhouse might have an all too idealistic understanding of worldviews that cannot account for how worldviews develop their ideas through attention to historical praxes.

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221 Milbank, “A Critique of the Theology of Right,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 12. This is then also why the criticism that Milbank could better contribute to the existent democracy, if he refrained from using theological vocabulary (Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 92-94; 99), misses the point. Stout understands democracy in terms of a struggle to find a publicly acceptable compromise about the truth. Milbank’s concern is precisely to offer an alternative to this concessional understanding of democracy.
224 Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 29-30; see also Milbank, “History of the One God,” *The Heythrop Journal* XXXVIII (1997): 393; Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 12; 17. Milbank’s understanding of metaphysics contrasts Elaine Graham’s claim that those who evoke the virtue of metaphysics for the welfare of the whole public remain unhelpfully abstract, which is why she turns to practice (Graham, “Unquiet Frontier,” *Political Theology* 16 (2015): 42). Milbank helps us to see that, whilst partly depending on a metaphysical framework, every practice expands on this metaphysical framework. This understanding exhibits the influence that Maurice Blondel’s theory of action has had on Milbank’s thought.
226 Stackhouse, “Introduction,” in *Christ and the Dominions of Civilization*, 56. However, it must be stated, in Stackhouse’s defence, that he denies strict predictability of the future.
Democratic discussions about the common good should manifest a particular society’s fiction of the good and ought to be complimentary to the political praxis of goodness.  

Political discussions about the common good are seen not as secondary attempts to describe a good which exists independently; instead, the human discourse about the good co-determines the historical development of goodness, and therefore the particular direction of the excess of the truly good. Although Milbank calls this a fiction, it should nevertheless be determined as closely as possible by the good itself. To this end, the good must be allowed to act upon the people involved in these democratic discussions. In order for this to occur, one should defend one’s own particular understanding of the best project, insofar as this is accompanied by an opening up of oneself to failure and correction by the truly good, which could be better mediated by someone else.

Overall, this shows that Milbank apologetically defends theology’s central role in a pluralist post-Christendom society by promising that Christian theology is able to appreciate the positive differences of a plurality of worldviews, and to organise this plurality along the lines of an ever-expanding, good social order. This leads us to reconsider the criticism that Milbank is advocating the re-establishment of Christendom. This criticism must be further nuanced by separating the concrete church and Christian theology in Milbank’s conception. Despite Milbank’s considerable confidence in Christian theology, to serve as adequate promoter of the common good, he does not defend any simplistic return to established Christendom. He does not understand the church, in the sense of a pre-given social structure, to be the solution of all the problems that exist within society at present. Instead, Milbank offers an ontology based on material from the Christian tradition as opening up a better future than contemporary secularism does. Milbank’s church is, then, the emergence of something genuinely new; the church is the double excess of theological thinking and

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231 Milbank has received criticisms for not referring to any concrete church in his ecclesio-central theology and of privileging the constant flux of ecclesial identity (Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “The Word Made Speculative? John Milbank’s Christological Poetics,” Modern Theology 15 (1999): 426, 430; Alexander Sider, To See History Doxologically: History and Holiness in John Howard Yoder’s Ecclesiology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 190). Milbank responds that he has consciously never talked of a particular church, ‘since the Church is not particular, not primarily an institution at all, but a dissemination of love’ (Milbank, “On Theological Transgression,” in The Future of Love, 166). Milbank argues that the Christian concept of love is intrinsically elusive, and as such resists any institutionalism. Moreover, he claims that Radical Orthodoxy is not meant to give rise to a ‘rival church’, but that, being ecumenical at its heart, Radical Orthodoxy could be embodied by different denominations (John Milbank, “Alternative Protestantism: Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition,” in Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition, 25-26). This defeats all those who associate Milbank’s Radical Orthodoxy with post-liberalism, assuming that he understands the Christian church as self-contained unity, independent from the wider culture (see for example Barbieri, “The Post-Secular Problematic,” in At the Limits of the Secular, 129-161; Kathryn Tanner, Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 97-99). Part of Tanner’s misunderstanding seems to be contextual, being insufficiently aware that Milbank speaks from a British context in which, until recently, Christianity has been central to the government of the whole of society.
232 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, xiv.
practices. At the same time, Milbank ascribes to Christian theology the most central political role in post-Christendom societies, and in this sense rejects the criticism of those opponents to Christendom who deem this role to be unacceptable.

The contextuality of Milbank’s apologetic defence of Christian theology against secularism appears inasmuch as he advocates the superiority of his own Christian theology over secularism. Whether Christian theology should also be as central in the organisation of societies, which are not dominated by secularism, is a matter that would have to be demonstrated separately. One problem with Milbank’s apologetic defence concerns his quick conclusion from the observation of the failure of all attempts to date to overcome the situation in which one all-encompassing ontology determines the social order for a pluralist society that, therefore, such an overcoming is in principle impossible. In this context, Ward’s theology can be understood precisely as the attempt to appreciate anti-imperialist critiques in a post-Christendom context more sincerely, and to re-envision a Christian theology which no longer presents itself as the centre. How this is connected to Ward’s understanding of the theological relating of all of reality to God will be analysed in the following section.

c) Ward’s disruptive Christian universality: Participating in God’s epistemological incomprehensibility

My assessment of Ward’s understanding of Christian theology’s universality proceeds once more in two steps, of first explaining Ward’s conception of the Christian theological task of relating all of reality to God and of examining how this impacts upon the political role ascribed to Christian theology in post-Christendom societies thereafter.

Overall, Ward affirms that Christian theology aims for a universal vision on everything. As a comprehensive view about reality, Christian theology must be open and attentive to everything that occurs in the world. As with Milbank, the affirmation of God assures that Christian theology is not a closed system, but remains intrinsically open, for Ward. Whereas Milbank has referred to God’s ontological incomprehensibility, Ward regards a Christian ontology as being inherently open due to God’s epistemological incomprehensibility. God is the ultimately unknowable. The emphasis on God’s unknowability means that, for Ward, it is important to acknowledge the possibility of divine interventions in any Christian understanding of reality. Talk about ‘divine interventions’ suggests that Christian theological deliberations about reality might not just need to be constantly expanded, as in Milbank’s vision, but can also be corrected and revised more substantially.

Ward refers to an experience of ‘vertigo’ if reality is read through the lens of his own Christian theology. For him, to perceive an immanent being in its relation to God, is not to perceive of how it blends into a greater harmonious whole, but means to perceive of an infinity of possibilities of what it might mean. To overcome the errors of positivism,

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233 Milbank, “On Complex Space,” in The Word Made Strange, 285. Again, this excess is linked to Milbank’s argument in favour of the ontological primacy of the plenitudinous God who continues to give genuinely new instances of goodness.

234 Ward, Politics of Discipleship, 79.


Christians ought to interpret immanent beings ever anew in their relation to God.\(^{238}\) This indicates that Ward might side with public theology, regarding the question of the human oversight of the harmonious whole of reality. Whereas Christians know that a continuous fracturing of reality leads to a greater harmony, the vision of that harmony is the sole privilege of God. Christians merely trust that the instability does not ultimately lead to dissolution, but to fulfilment.\(^{239}\)

The stress of God’s unknowability means that, unlike Milbank, Ward refrains from promising that his own Christian theology more adequately corresponds to reality than its alternatives. Ward emphasises that there is no assurance that God exists, which is why he regards nihilism as being an equally legitimate interpretation of reality. According to Ward, the faithful surrender to God always remains ambiguous. It is bound to remain uncertain whether the faithful are really attracted by God or whether the desire for God is merely a human projection.\(^{240}\) For Ward, the act of faith should not resolve this ambiguity. To the contrary, living with this risk is intrinsic to the life of faith.

This identification of God’s otherness with God’s unknowability has been criticised for insufficiently examining how certain attributes of God have been positively, albeit apophatically, attributed to God in the Christian tradition.\(^{241}\) If instead of searching for the right speech about God in the contemporary context, Ward is merely concerned with upholding God’s unknowability, then everything can be attributed to the Christian God as long as it is simultaneously destabilised. At this point, Ward’s alleged denial to promise the correspondence of his theology to reality, can be turned against himself.

Correlating the postmodern weak hermeneutical ontology with Christian theology, Ward calls his vision of reality ‘the truth’.\(^{242}\) Ward returns to universal claims when he generalises that it is redemptive to follow one particular faith tradition, without ever aiming in so doing to either grasp or explain God.\(^{243}\) The faith tradition must be inhabited as a way through which reality is interpreted and engaged.\(^{244}\) Ward advocates a fideistic obedient

\(^{238}\) Ward, Cities of God, 88. This focus on God, as the power which sustains all objects, is meant to overcome the positive understanding of beings as self-contained entities, and to correspond to the postmodern understanding of beings as most fundamentally contingent and as always involved in a process of becoming (Ward, Cities of God, 87).

\(^{239}\) Ward, “Transcorporeality,” in The Radical Orthodoxy Reader, 302.


\(^{243}\) Ward, “Introduction,” in Christ and Culture, 18-19. Doctrinal propositions are one integral part of this inhabitation (Ward, “Allegoria Amoris: A Christian Ethics,” in Christ and Culture, 217). This means that those critics who claim that Ward (and Milbank) eclipse the church’s struggle to incarnate Christ in order to redeem the world by way of equating ‘intellectual virtuosity’ with redemption, are actually mistaken (Reno, “The Radical Orthodoxy Project,” First Things (February 2000), cit. by Ford, “Radical Orthodoxy and the Future of British Theology,” Scottish Journal of Theology 54 (2001): 394). The Radical Orthodox claim that a correct Christian understanding of reality is integral to the church’s task of furthering the world’s redemption does not mean that more practical ecclesial tasks have become eclipsed. It is merely stated that the interpretative framework, in which the practice is meant to take shape, is of great relevance.
following of the Christian understanding of God, and reality as narrated in Christ, because contemporary culture needs to be redeemed from its striving to control reality.\textsuperscript{245} It is in this sense that orthodoxy can ‘deliver the “salvation” promised by God’.\textsuperscript{246} This suggests that Ward’s position is more disguisedly universalist than Milbank’s.\textsuperscript{247} From his Christian perspective, Ward evaluates positivists as those who must be converted to a more adequate understanding of reality.\textsuperscript{248} Simultaneously, Ward appreciates any other (faith) tradition that equally opposes what he regards as being the major contemporary cultural ill.\textsuperscript{249} In other words, he appreciates other worldviews precisely to the extent that they overlap with his own understanding of reality. At one point, in a text about Christianity, he even claims that ‘[i]n fact, ‘Christian theology’ in this text could be replaced with any other cultural practice’.\textsuperscript{250} This means that Ward assumes that Christianity’s particularity is universal in such a way that it adequately knows what is good about other worldviews, without attending to their particularities.

Overall, on the one hand, Ward’s emphatic denial, of his possessing privileged knowledge of reality on the basis of his adherence to the Christian faith, could be said to lend itself less to the accusation of perpetuating a Christian imperialism than Milbank’s. On the other hand, however, Ward presents it as universally true that God is unknowable and that, consequently, the meaning of the whole of reality is unstable, open to change at any moment in accordance with a new divine intervention. The consequences of this understanding of universality for the political role of Christian theology in post-Christendom societies remains to be assessed in the following section.

\section*{d) Christian theology as disruptive centre of the social order}

Regarding the criticism that Radical Orthodoxy defends a remnant of Christendom, it is important to highlight that Ward calls Christianity ‘intrinsically imperialist’.\textsuperscript{251} Imperialism has always been a part of the Christian worldview, because the territory inhabited by any

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item This is not a literal following of the biblical texts, but a continuation of the interpretation of reality and God that has been initiated by the Christian scriptures.
\item That Ward assumes a universal human nature prior to culture is evident for example in his investigation of what makes humans believing beings in \textit{Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don’t}. He assumes that there is a shared human nature, ‘an anthropological a priori’ disposition to belief (Ward, \textit{How the Light Gets In}, 260), and that the different kind of beliefs humans have are variations of this more fundamental disposition.
\item Burrus, “Radical Orthodoxy and the Heresiological Habit,” in \textit{Interpreting the Postmodern}, 37. He is accused of flattening their positions into one reductionist philosophy, one which can then be defeated (43). Milbank has been criticised for the same mistake of generalising his opponents into one defeatable position (Rowan Williams, “Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision,” \textit{New Blackfriars} 73 (2007): 320; Hyman, \textit{The Predicament of Postmodern Theology}, 3).
\item Ward, \textit{Cultural Transformation}, 8.
\item Ward, \textit{Politics of Discipleship}, 84.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
present church has never been regarded as the whole of reality. Like Milbank, Ward also distinguishes between the role of the church and the role of Christian theology in a pluralist, post-Christendom society. Let me first explain Ward’s understanding of the church, and then I will examine, subsequently, Ward’s understanding of the role of Christian theology regarding the need to contribute to the entire society’s common good and to organise a democracy.

Concomitant with his understanding of God as unknowable, Ward claims that the church needs to be continuously unsettled and displaced by others in order to remain true to itself. At the same time, he refers to displacement in terms of a movement accompanying expansion. The church expands towards its eschatological end through being constantly fractured. Ward does not refer to the church’s expansion in triumphant imperialist terms, but in terms of brokenness and woundedness. This view highlights the church’s suffering due to its dependence on its surroundings. Ward stresses that the church is constantly relocated, as it lives ‘on the edge of both itself and what is other’. Ward, like Milbank, highlights that the incorporation of individuals into the church should not eliminate their unique particularity. Individual differences can be harmoniously blended into one whole, according to Milbank, whilst they effect an endless fracturing according to Ward. This suggests that, on the level of ecclesiology, Ward resists the charge of perpetuating Christendom imperialism. The integration of other cultures into the church is no longer thought of in terms of adapting the other culture to Christianity primarily, but in terms of unsettling the church through the confrontation with the other culture and, in this sense, in terms of a continuous re-modelling of the church. How Ward envisions theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies remains to be examined.

For Ward, acknowledging God as active governor and regarding Christian theology as participating in this government means, participating in the entire world’s perfection, a position not unlike Milbank’s. For Ward, however, working towards the world’s eschatological perfection does not mean interrelating unique particulars into an ever-expanding harmonious whole. Instead, each particular being is perfected insofar as its identity

253 This is why Ward’s theology has been appreciated for construing the Christian church as intrinsically open and permeable (Shakespeare, Radical Orthodoxy, 142; Doak, “The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy,” Theological Studies 68 (2007): 389-390). However, the same ecclesiology has also been criticised for no longer being able to distinguish between being human and being redeemed (Smith, Introducing Radical Orthodoxy, 257).
254 Ward, “Transcorporeality,” in The Radical Orthodoxy Reader, 299. Ward has been criticised for using the terms ‘displacement’, ‘expansion’, ‘transformation’ and ‘cancellation’ indiscriminately without specifying the degree to which these terms differently indicate similarity and difference (Tonstad, God and Difference, 73).
256 Ward, “Transcorporeality,” in The Radical Orthodoxy Reader, 302; Ward, “The Body of the Church and its Erotic Politics,” in Christ and Culture, 108. This emphasis on woundedness and suffering has been criticised for not only following a contemporary cultural trend (Tonstad, God and Difference, 70), but also for being symptomatic of an insufficient distinction between finitude and sin in Ward’s theology (74-75). I will return to this problematic in my discussion of Ward’s understanding of grace.
257 Ward, “The Body of the Church,” in Christ and Culture, 107. For example, Ward reads the circumstance that Christians are not only members of the church, but are also members of other associations as the fracturing of the church and the church’s living beyond its boundaries (Ward, Politics of Discipleship, 188).
is continuously displaced. Any stagnation, prior to the attainment of eschatological perfection, must be prevented. Perfection is, thus, understood not in terms of growth, but in terms of a dynamism in contrast to fixity.\(^{260}\) While Milbank understands the perfection of a being in terms of its excess to the expanding whole, Ward’s displacement of immanent beings towards their perfection in God means to continuously disrupt the whole.

This emphasis on displacement figures into how Ward envisions a Christian theological contribution to democracy. Whereas Milbank defends a Christian social order by promising to ensure a positive evaluation of pluralism, Ward argues that Christian theology can help to achieve true plurality through stirring dispute and contestation.\(^{261}\) Liberal tolerance should be replaced by dispute, which is why a theologically grounded assertion of one’s own position, as well as a clear naming of one’s opponent, is needed.\(^{262}\) In other words, whereas Milbank suggests that Christian theology can enhance democracies through ensuring that discussions are directed towards growth in the truly good, Ward promises to rejuvenate democracies by ensuring that everyone gets to participate in the discussion, and in this way to counter the widespread fatigue with politics. Again, this would, however, re-ascribe a central role to Christian theology in the social order, since it is Ward’s Christian conviction that this dispute and contestation would lead to greater harmony and not to warfare.

In sum, Ward’s understanding of the political role played by Christian theology in a post-Christendom context must be appreciated for taking into account, more than Milbank does, that the re-establishment of an overarching Christian social order has become problematic.\(^{263}\) He, thus, shows greater respect to those contemporaries who, for various reasons, object to any such project. However, Ward’s affinity with postmodern philosophies might render him vulnerable to Milbank’s criticism of the latter. Ward follows postmodernism in perpetuating an implicit overarching ontology, tending to value worldviews that are structurally similar to his own over those that are genuinely different. Moreover, Ward’s position ends up re-ascribing the most central role in organising post-Christendom societies to Christian theology. As in the case of public theology, this is connected to Ward’s apologetic approach. He defends the political relevance of Christian theology in a postmodern context to the effect that Christian theology is advocated as best able to organise the entire society.

e) Questioning secularism’s understanding of universality: Consequences for public theology

Overall, both Milbank and Ward offer ways of understanding Christian universality in dynamic terms that, on the level of ecclesiology, serves to evade the criticism of advocating a return to Christendom. Both Milbank and Ward understand the church to be a community of people that must continuously adapt its organisation and structure in accordance with insights derived from surrounding cultures. Nevertheless, both Milbank and Ward remain within the

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\(^{260}\) Ward distinguishes his position from nihilism: According to his theology, the displacement of the meaning of immanent beings does not mean that this meaning vanishes, but that it is preserved in the eschaton.


problems of Christendom insofar as they apologetically defend Christian theology as being best able to organise the entire society. Milbank re-envisions a Christian social order; Ward holds Christian theology responsible for organising the encounter between different worldviews in such a way that the social order of the whole will continue to be disrupted and, in this way, correspond to his own theological vision of reality.

Appreciating Milbank’s positive and harmonious evaluation of pluralism, I remain sceptical regarding the question of whether this Christian theological understanding of pluralism should be used apologetically to defend Christian theology’s public relevance and to effectively re-ascribe the most central political role in post-Christendom societies to Christian theology. This apologetic defence risks undermining the theological relevance of criticisms of Christendom imperialism and the opposition to theological contributions to public politics. In the course of this dissertation, I will introduce arguments as to why Christian theologians should use this positive understanding of pluralism as a hermeneutical lens for their interpretation of reality, whilst not demanding the acceptance of this hermeneutic lens by non-Christians as well.

For now, it can be observed that public theologians are so concerned with not re-establishing a position of Christian hegemony that they tend to co-opt a secularist dismissal of a more positive understanding of pluralism. They say that Christianity must be identifiable as one particular tradition amongst others in a post-Christendom context. This would, supposedly, be an adequate adaption of Christianity to ‘the realities of pluralism’. The discussion above has made clear that there is no neutrally given understanding of the reality of pluralism, but that pluralism must be interpreted from the perspective of some particular ontology. A closer investigation of the public theological understanding of pluralism shows that the sub-discipline tends to operate within a secularist ontology of violence, one which might be too fixed and might inhibit a society’s growth towards eschatological perfection.

Many public theologians rely on Max Stackhouse’s engagement with pluralism, who at first glance seems to be in agreement with Milbank when he claims that a shared framework is necessary for meaningful public debate to take place. However, for Stackhouse, this shared framework is not an alternative ontology to the prevalent one; he thinks of a normative framework that can guard a society against potential disorder, thus exhibiting an underlying belief in what Milbank calls ‘ontologies of violence’. As a theological ethicist, Stackhouse understands faith traditions to be endowed with a restraining

264 Thiemann, Constructing a Public Theology, 19, cit. by Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 103-104.
265 Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 71; see also 103-104; see also Jeffrey Stout, “Pragmatism and Democracy: Assessing Jeffrey Stout’s Democracy and Tradition,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 78 (2010), ed. Jason Springs: 441, who equally regards contemporary pluralism as ‘a given’ that must be considered in political discussions about justice.
266 This also challenges Elaine Graham’s claim that it is impossible to dis-invent secularism in the sense of no longer being aware that there are a plurality of beliefs and unbeliefs (Graham, “Unquiet Frontier,” Political Theology 16 (2015): 38). Radical Orthodox theologians could challenge Graham by arguing that there is not just one perspective on the co-existence of different beliefs, but that the different beliefs inform the way in which this co-existence is viewed.
267 Max Stackhouse, “Commentary: Public Theology and Democracy’s Future,” 2004 Templeton Lecture, The Review of Faith & International Affairs 7:2 (2009): 50. Stackhouse’s identification of theology with ontology is also evidenced in his claim that theology must necessarily speak publicly because it is ‘an argument regarding the way things are and ought to be’ (Max Stackhouse, “Public Theology and Ethical Judgment,” Theology Today 54 (2006 [sic.]): 165, cit. by Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, xxiii).
function of the spiritual powers which otherwise lead the world towards chaotic destruction. He speaks of ‘globalising powers’ in the face of which complex civilisations must be generated, restrained or guided. On this basis, public theology is then presented as being endowed with the task of managing pluralism, which is understood as real chaos without this management. Following Milbank, we could retort that the existence of these antagonistic powers, which need to be restrained by public theology, is far less evident than Stackhouse might assume.

Where Stackhouse wants Christian theology to establish the normative framework for post-Christendom societies, Elaine Graham assumes that there are shared norms regarding intelligibility, truth, and reciprocity on the basis of which issues can be publicly analysed. Christian theology should defend its contributions on the basis of these ‘publicly intelligible’ criteria. The problem with this presupposition is that it uncritically accepts the nation state or the prevalently dominant culture as being able to provide the guidelines for political and civic actions. Both Milbank’s and Ward’s arguments have made us aware that such a unified vision might not be presupposed in the contemporary context. According to Milbank, these norms might simply be restrictive and, in this way, exhibit the lack of a common vision oriented towards societal growth. According to Ward, these norms might be understood too unambiguously and theology’s task would be to reopen people’s imaginations to different norms.

Overall, the problem with the public theological interpretation of pluralism is first that it (unconsciously) accepts the supposedly neutral overarching understanding of difference, as antagonistic, and in this way returns to an implicitly imperialistic positioning of all particular differences underneath its own overarching gaze. And second, this understanding of pluralism is politically problematic as it tends to subscribe to the regulative power of the nation state as necessary means by which to restrict the otherwise antagonistic plurality of worldviews. Once any assumption about pluralism has been dismantled as being culturally specific, Milbank’s understanding of pluralism, as intrinsically harmonious, offers itself as a better alternative Christian theological understanding of plurality in the post-Christendom context. However, what remains problematic is Milbank’s unconcessional advocacy of a privileged position for Christian theology.

Thus far, it has only been argued that Milbank and Ward both fail to envision a less central political role being played by Christian theology in post-Christendom societies than it

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268 Stackhouse, “Introduction,” in *Christ and the Dominions of Civilization*, 36. See also Stackhouse, *Globalization and Grace*, 152, in which he presents the Christian interpretation of the world as fallen as being self-evident.


270 Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 98. Stout negates the existence of these shared commitments of a whole society (Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 112-113). He claims that theologians can contribute their insights to the public forum, in the hope of attaining mutual understanding, nevertheless. Mathewes also contends that Christian theology must hope that reality forms a harmonious whole without being able to indicate what this means concretely (*A Theology of Public Life*, 74-75; 132-133).

271 Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 110. Graham builds here upon David Tracy’s work.

272 Elaine Graham, for example, refers to a ‘shared purpose’ that is related to some ‘common citizenship’ (Graham, “Unquiet Frontier,” *Political Theology* 16 (2015): 45).

273 This universality is also apparent when Graham, drawing upon Charles Taylor, refers to certain commonalities ‘we’ moderns supposedly all share (Graham, “Unquiet Frontier,” *Political Theology* 16 (2015): 34). It might be questioned who this ‘we’ is, and if anyone has ever been modern in the way Graham assumes.
used to play in previous eras. However, I have not yet argued why such an advocacy of Christian theology, as being central to the social order, should be objected to. Since my hypothesis is that the objection should come from the perspective of Christian theology itself, it is now time to analyse the theological underpinnings of Milbank’s and Ward’s respective arguments. Whereas it has already been made apparent that the central role played by Christian theology is associated with the theological task of relating all of reality to God for both, how they envision all of reality as participating in God must be examined more closely. In terms of Christian doctrine, this issue can be elucidated by analysing Milbank’s and Ward’s respective understandings of grace, sin, and redemption. The question concerns the degree to which they regard non-Christian positions and insights as mediating the world’s graced relation to God, in how far they regard them as sinful rejecting their relation to God and in how far Christian theology is believed to participate actively in the world’s redemption through also relating non-Christian insights to God.

2.3 Completing plural aspirations for grace: Fulfilling the theological significance of the public

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Milbank has been repeatedly criticised for prematurely discarding the theological significance of non-Christian interlocutors274, while Ward is most frequently applauded for being the Radical Orthodox author who displays the most amicable stance towards non-Christian dialogue partners.275 Milbank’s critics say that he is bound to overlook the theological significance of other worldviews, given that he simply overwrites everything else with his Christian ontology.276 Instead of seeing how they might contribute to the harmony he advocates, dissonant voices are simply being excluded.277 Ward, on the contrary, is said to acknowledge that theological sensibilities resurface in late-modern culture and that the sacred re-appears within the post-Christendom context.278 Nevertheless, Ward has been criticised for stopping half-way in his respect for the theological significance of non-Christian insights. Ward’s theology, not unlike Milbank’s, is also primarily aimed at the transformation of contemporary culture by an apologetic ‘defense of the Christian faith’ against the dominant cultural currents.279 In this vein, he allegedly does not sufficiently allow

278 Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 124.
Christian theology to be informed and corrected by insights drawn from the surrounding context. The continuous negotiation between Christian theology and its surrounding context is one-sidedly presented in terms of a theological address to the cultural ‘malaise’, more than it is in terms of a reciprocal exchange between worldviews.

These criticisms have been connected to Milbank’s and Ward’s supposedly erroneous understandings of grace. They presumably associate grace with Christian theology one-sidedly and, thus, overlook how grace is also mediated by non-Christian positions. Overall, I argue that Milbank’s and Ward’s understandings of grace are more nuanced than their critics admit. The first part of my respective expositions of Milbank’s and Ward’s theologies of grace consists of explaining how each understands non-Christian positions as aspirations for grace. For Milbank, these are already good and can be perfected by Christian theology, whereas non-Christian aspirations for grace are neutrally open, according to Ward, and can be completed through Christian theology. In the second part of my exposition of Milbank’s and Ward’s respective understandings of grace, I turn again to their advocacy of theology’s central political role in post-Christendom societies. One might suspect that their relatively positive understanding of non-Christian positions, as aspirations for grace, might allow one of these positions to take centre-stage without leading to societal disaster. This is why I examine Milbank’s and Ward’s respective understanding of sin, showing how their promise to overcome secularism by way of Christian theology depicts secularism as being sinful primarily. I conclude my discussion by way of criticizing the way in which both of their respective positions are marked themselves by that which they define as being sinful and their shared failure to differentiate sufficiently between Christ’s fulfilment of nature’s aspiration for grace and Christian theology’s sinful, and thus often failed, furthering or completion of Christ’s redemption.

a) Milbank’s self-excessive grace: Perfecting non-Christian goods

Milbank understands grace in terms of a gratuitous excess. Grace always effects more than the filling of a lack. Grace is the structure of ‘outcome exceeding occasion’, This structure applies to both the grace of creation and the grace of Christ: The occasion for creation was to create another to God, but the outcome was creatures who were open to deification. The occasion for Christ’s Incarnation was to redeem humankind from sin, but instead of merely reinstating the original state of creation, human nature now became united with God. Highlighting the consistent structure of grace, Milbank focuses primarily upon

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280 Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 108. Burrus observes that Ward presupposes the authority of traditional Christian orthodoxy despite, contemporary cultural currents (such as feminism) that put certain doctrines into question (Burrus, “Radical Orthodoxy and the Heresiological Habit,” in *Interpreting the Postmodern*, 38, FN 5). Although Ward argues that theological discourse must be critically assessed by cultural studies, since it is in a way one cultural phenomenon amongst others (Ward, “Radical Orthodoxy and/ as Cultural Politics,” in *Radical Orthodoxy? - A Catholic Enquiry*, 102), I will side with Burrus’s criticism in the remaining part of this chapter.

281 Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 128.


285 Milbank, “Incarnation,” in *Being Reconciled*, 66-70
the continuity of all that which Christian theologians understand as grace. At the same time, however, and in line with the aforementioned explanation of Milbank’s understanding of the excessive goodness of reality, grace is not to be understood in terms of an abstract, general principle but in terms of the very specific gift or talent which individuals receive from God. Consequently, Milbank stresses explicitly that the content of grace cannot be circumscribed by theology because grace can be mediated by the yet unknown stranger. This allows for unknown variations of the content of grace, which defeats the accusation that Milbank cannot conceive of how non-Christians are moved genuinely differently by God’s grace than Christians.

To the contrary, Milbank applies his understanding of grace in terms of ‘outcome exceeding occasion’ to the encounter between Christians and non-Christians. Reconciliation between two, presumably conflicting, positions does not mean settling for a compromise, but involves searching for a new disclosure which is more extreme than both positions. This would mean that if Christian theologians seek to renew their tradition, through receiving non-Christian insights, then these insights can never be directly applied, but the renewal must be found in the excess to both positions once they are harmoniously blended.

Accordingly, Milbank argues that his ontology is not a wishful return to some prior age, but that he renews traditional Christian understandings of reality by incorporating all which is good and valuable in those criticisms voiced by modern secularists. In other words, Milbank acknowledges that even those positions, which he dismisses, contain some truth which must expand his own vision of the harmonious whole. In line with an understanding of grace’s fulfilling of the natural desire for grace, Milbank does not advocate any wholesale dismissal of secularist ontologies, but aims to show how the secularist discourse remains less perfect without the help of Christian theology. The embrace by Christian theology does not destroy non-Christian positions, but must manifest the arrival of grace to them. When Milbank claims that, from the perspective of his Christian ontology, any secular realism is unable to ‘understand the world aright’, this does not mean that they are entirely erroneous, but that they remain partial. When his critics suggest that Milbank

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287 Milbank, “Can Morality Be Christian?,” in The Word Made Strange, 227. Milbank refers to a non-identical repetition of God’s grace in each individual gift.
289 Milbank, “The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy,” in Radical Orthodoxy? – A Catholic Enquiry 44.
290 Milbank, Beyond Secular Order, 4.
292 Milbank explicitly understands this disintegration of other ontologies not as violent invasions, but as a gift of grace to them (Milbank, “Can Morality be Christian?,” in The Word Made Strange, 221). He argues that all apparent violence must be judged on whether it strengthens or weakens humanity. Milbank’s ontology is, thus, aimed at beneficially invading other worldviews, which is why Milbank seeks to persuade rhetorically by positive attraction and not by coercion. This then also repudiates the criticism that Milbank has been too greatly influenced by the arguments he seeks to combat (DeHart, “On Being Heard but Not Seen,” Modern Theology 26 (2010): 248-249; 271). He is said to be so determined to negate his opponents’ positions that his position is predominantly the negative image of their own. This is not a problem on the basis of Milbank’s understanding of grace. The defeated position and his own must constitute an excess, one which resembles but surpasses both.
293 Milbank, “The Poverty of Niebuhrianism,” in The Word Made Strange, 244.
should not interpret his opponents as rejecting, but as distorting the truth, Milbank is likely to agree.

From the perspective of Milbank’s theology of grace, it only follows that other positions are not treated as integral wholes which need to be preserved. Instead, how they blend with Milbank’s own account of reality into something new must be examined. However, his understanding of grace leaves us with the question as to why Milbank seeks to replace the secularist social order with his theological alternative. The way in which he discards secularism suggests that, on this more overarching level, Milbank does not focus primarily on all that is good in secularism, but on the problems with secularism that need to be overcome by Christian theology. This approach would better chime with an understanding of grace as filling a lack than with grace in terms of the excessive fulfilling of an already good nature. The issue can be clarified through a closer analysis of the way in which Milbank understands how grace overcomes sin.

b) Overcoming the sin of pride: Depending on the grace of Christian theology

According to Milbank, the Fall originated in the human refusal of God’s immeasurable grace and love. More precisely, Milbank associates this refusal with humankind’s prideful mistrust in the overall goodness of God and reality. Due to the abundance of grace, there is an uncertainty concerning what precise grace one will receive and what precise grace one will pass on in every encounter with others. Sin, then, involves mistrusting the goodness of reality insofar as people refuse the risk involved in the gift-exchange of unknown goods. It is sinful to read the unknown ‘as source of threat [...] rather than potential or gift’.

Regarding the effects of sin, Milbank upholds that sin has no effect on God. The real superabundance of goodness exists perfectly in God, despite the Fall. God continues to relate to all of reality. Rejecting any ontologisation of evil, evil is not regarded as a necessary part of reality, but as a contingent occurrence in the world. However, the Fall has an effect on human nature and, consequently, upon reality’s relation to God. Milbank associates sin with the distortion of the human desire for God. Subsequent to the Fall, people no longer mediate only the superabundance of goodness, which is why there are now ‘impossible interval[s]’ in nature which do not participate in God’s grace.

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296 Milbank, “Grace,” in *Being Reconciled*, 150.
297 Milbank, “Grace,” in *Being Reconciled*, 150. This also explains why Milbank agrees with Luther that the Augustinian understanding of original sin as pride should be buttressed by interpreting this pride as originating in an even more fundamental fear (Milbank, “Can Morality be Christian?,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 230).
299 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xviii. Milbank claims that only the doctrine of the Fall allows him to maintain the claim that reality is good and harmonious and to acknowledge, this notwithstanding, the reality of evil (Milbank, “Out of the Greenhouse,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 263; Milbank, “Grace,” in *Being Reconciled*, 149).
301 Milbank, “The Second Difference,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 182. Milbank situates these impossible intervals between the economic and the immanent Trinity. The logic seems to be that the
graced reality. Nature, in the sense of immanent history, is an apocalyptic mixture of grace and evil. Evil is the opposing force that continues to distract the harmonious whole.

Grace, then, overcomes sin by restoring the distorted desire for God. This is mediated whenever people are moved by the superabundant goodness of reality, despite all of their inhibitions and incapacities. So, in order to overcome evil, people need to take the hopeful risk that the harmony, and not the opposing force, will ultimately win. Human policies based on grace need to continuously determine the precise evil that inhibits a fuller realisation of the Good. Every evil must be traceable in terms of a lack of integration into the harmonious whole. More fundamentally, however, Milbank stresses that Christian politics are not primarily oriented at the elimination of evil, but at the advancement of a society in the truly good. Consequently, a Christian interpretation of reality must commence with redemption and not with evil. In other words, Christian theologians must take the risk of reading world history always through the interpretative lens that, ultimately, all reality is graced and, thus, harmonious. Historical occurrences of evil or of suffering cannot be understood as falsifications of the ultimate goodness of reality. Disregarding what happens, Christians cannot deny that God relates to the world, as this most overarching outlook is not just one more fact which could be verified or falsified by empirical evidence.

Concerning the question of how Milbank’s understanding of grace and sin influences his understanding of the relation between Christian theology and non-Christian positions, it must first be stressed that it is precisely his understanding of grace in terms of self-excess that allows Milbank to advocate Christian theology as centre of a not exclusively Christian society. Milbank argues that even though non-Christians and Christians rely equally upon, and participate in, God’s grace, this participation in redemptive grace does not oblige people to become Christian. Instead, those who become Christians constitute an excess to the ongoing work of redemption. Analogously to grace’s relation to sin, Christianity must be more than the filling of a lack. This means that Christians and non-Christians could likewise participate in the social order that corresponds to Milbank’s theology of grace.

At the same time, however, concerning the fallen world, Milbank highlights that God did not redeem humankind from sin by way of any supernatural intervention, but by tracing a way towards redemption in Christ. Apart from Christ, people might not see that they are related to God, and even if they do see this, they might not be able to respond to God’s grace in their actions. This does not imply that all non-Christians only intrude sinfully into the graced harmony, but it means that only those who read reality in relation to Christ, i.e. Christian theologians, possess the restored vision of how true harmony will be achieved. This economic Trinity is different from the immanent Trinity, because the former is the manifestation of the latter in a sinful world.

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302 Milbank, “The Poverty of Niebuhrianism,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 244.
306 The political reasons for this opposition to any ontologisation of evil is best explained in Milbank, “Can Morality Be Christian?,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 219-32.
308 Milbank, “Incarnation,” in *Being Reconciled*, 68.
310 Milbank, “Foreword,” in *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 17-18
claim constitutes the first theological reason for Milbank to advocate a theological social order for post-Christendom societies too.

Secondly, his apologetic defence of a Christian social order, against the strict secularist opposition to theological involvement in politics, can be related to Milbank’s interpretation of secularism as being primarily sinful and Christian theology as being primarily graced. In correspondence with his understanding of grace and sin, Milbank calls sinful any ontology that posits good and evil as being on the same ontological level. This is an understanding that denies the human dependence on grace. Humans are imagined as being able to choose freely between good and evil, which means that the goodness of the world would depend on human choice. This is precisely the way in which secularism organises a society, focusing primarily on people’s freedom, not on people’s dependence. At this point, Milbank’s theology of grace is not so much the excess to the secularist conception as it is its overcoming.

The first theological problem with Milbank’s theological rationale for a Christian social order concerns Milbank’s failure to see that, in apologetically defending Christian theology against the secularist opposition to theologically informed political involvement, he perpetuates his own understanding of sin in terms of ‘proud mistrust’. Milbank presents his Christian theology as being the cure for all problems with secularism, instead of taking the hopeful risk that, despite its many shortcomings, this secularist opposition to Christian theology still mediates God’s grace. In other words, his defensive apologetics prevents Milbank from perceiving the grace that might be mediated by the vehement opposition to Christian theological contributions to politics in post-Christendom societies. Milbank’s persistent focus on the failure of secularism could, then, be read as Milbank’s proud attempt to save the world by his own efforts. This problem can be related to a more fundamental theological problem with Milbank’s position, namely that he insufficiently distinguishes between Christ’s redemption, including the restoration of the human vision, and the Christian theological sinful participation in this redemption. He fails to acknowledge that, as sinners, Christian theologians still fail to see clearly the way towards redemption that has been traced in Christ. Kathryn Tanner will be introduced in Chapter 3 and Edward Schillebeeckx in Chapter 4 as two theologians who are.

311 Milbank, “Evil,” in Being Reconciled, 8. For Milbank’s rejection of those readings that interpret the Fall as the free choice for evil see Milbank, “Evil,” in Being Reconciled, 15-16; Milbank, “Can Morality be Christian?”, in The Word Made Strange, 224.

312 Milbank, “Evil,” in Being Reconciled, 8.

313 For a similar criticism that Milbank’s solution ‘imitates the errors of that which it attempts to replace’ see Insole, “Against Radical Orthodoxy,” Modern Theology 20 (2004): 224. However, Insole associates the problem with Milbank’s imitation of postmodern constructivism, which Insole then suggests could be overcome by focussing on empirical reality to a higher degree (227-228). I, to the contrary, follow Milbank in asserting that any access to empirical reality depends upon one’s ontology, but argue that precisely if reality is assessed through the lens of a Christian ontology of peace, then theologians would have to trust in secularism’s goodness to a higher degree than Milbank does. Furthermore, Insole then advocates a certain form of political liberalism, in its supposed neutrality, as being the best form of government (237), whereas I agree with Milbank that there is no such neutrality, and argue for different reasons why liberalism should be evaluated more positively.

314 A similar criticism concerns Milbank’s inability to appreciate ‘theologically significant inactivity’ as for example in practices of lament (Kevin Derksen, “Milbank and Violence: Against a Derridean Pacifism,” in The Gift of Difference: Radical Orthodoxy, Radical Reformation, eds. Chris H. Huebner and Tripp York (Winnipeg, Manitoba: CMU Press, 2010), 38, FN 33).
more sensitive to the continuous failure of Christian theological attempts of seeing how Christ’s redemptive work can be further realised on earth.

c) Ward’s kenotic grace: Accepting non-Christian goods

The greatest theological difference between Ward’s and Milbank’s understandings of grace is that while Milbank understands grace in terms of self-excess, Ward understands grace in terms of a simultaneous double-movement of kenosis and completion. This once more appertains to the grace of creation as well as to the grace of the Incarnation. After a brief exposition of both graces, I will consider the implications for the way Ward can appreciate the theological significance of non-Christian positions and then move on to an examination of the way in which this influences his apologetic defence of theology’s central political role in post-Christendom societies (section d).

While Milbank understands creation as excessive surplus to God, Ward understands creation as the kenotic self-emptying of God, which is ‘extravagant and costly’. God created a void to be filled. Although Ward denies the existence of a void as such, because the movement of kenosis is immediately accompanied by a movement of completion, the understanding of creation in terms of God’s kenosis still allows Ward to conceive of there being a ‘place for suffering as a passion written in creation’. There is a risk of suffering, even prior to the Fall. The risk is not only a risk for humankind, but it is even a risk for God. This indicates that Ward gives more room to thinking about some positive lack than Milbank does. For Ward, the lack is in order to be completed. For Milbank, to the contrary, the nothingness which comes into existence with creation is really nowhere. Ward refers to the movement of kenosis and completion in terms of a suffering (the opening up to the other) which at the same time glorifies (the completion). Milbank criticises these kenotic theologies that account for suffering and evil in reference to God’s providential creation, because by presenting evil as part of a greater good, the gravity of evil is diminished.
In a similar vein to his kenotic understanding of creation, Ward understands the Incarnation in Christ as incomplete, and therefore as in need of further completion by the church. In his argument, Ward differentiates between the divine Logos and the Logos as it is incarnated in the life of Jesus Christ. The divine Logos is the perfected and completed human nature that exists in God. This perfect human nature is incarnated in Jesus only initially, and must still be brought to its completion through the continuous integration of all other human beings into itself. The Incarnation is not fully accomplished before all of humankind has reached its perfection. The church’s continuous imitation of Jesus Christ, for the further completion of the Incarnation, must be an interplay between subjection to Christ and interpretative freedom. This means that Ward does not regard the church as one-sidedly depending on God’s offer of redemption, but as actively and creatively completing the redemption once begun in Christ. He argues that ‘something of what it is to be God [...] comes about by an identification with what is human’.

Overall, Ward conceptualises grace differently than Milbank. Milbank understands grace in terms of excess, while Ward thinks of grace in terms of self-emptying completion. For Ward, God is already the completion of all goodness in Godself which God, however, abandoned for the creation of the world. Whereas the fullness of goodness is with God, the world is merely the secondary appearance of this goodness. Whatever is good in the world does not coincide with what is good in God, but the worldly goodness must be made to coincide with God’s goodness through the world’s return to God. That creation was a risk for both God and creation means that the return of creation to God is a completion for both God and creation. Whereas Milbank conceives of the return in terms of an excess for both God and creation, Ward refers to the return in terms of self-identification within difference.

(Milbank, “Logos: Pleonasm, Speech and Writing,” in The Word Made Strange, 78). Because finitude is nothing of itself, the movement of finite beings through time means that the finality of each moment is cancelled out by the next (Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” in The Future of Love, 339). In this sense, finitude continuously becomes nothing, whilst infinity draws all creatures into itself. Similar to Milbank’s understanding, Ward also interprets the continuous cancelling of finitude as ‘the mark of God within creation’ (Ward, “Allegoria Amoris,” in Christ and Culture, 188). However, Ward reads this cancelling out in terms of dispossession and self-denial. Whereas for Milbank there is nothing that is left behind, there is something of which God is continuously dispossessed for Ward. This is related to Ward’s understanding of the Cross about which he argues that here grace has integrated that which is other into itself (Ward, “The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ,” in Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology, 170-171). Christ’s patient endurance of evil is now a new grace (Ward, “Allegoria Amoris,” in Christ and Culture, 188).

322 Milbank, to the contrary, would affirm Jesus as the complete Incarnation of the Logos and all further human imitations as the excess to this Incarnation.
325 This is connected to Ward’s understanding of the Incarnation as revelatory of God’s participation in human life on the one hand, but also of the participation of human life in God on the other (Ward, “The Body of the Church,” in Christ and Culture, 105-106; “The Schizoid Christ,” in Christ and Culture, 75; Ward, Politics of Discipleship, 186-187).
This conception of grace, in terms of God’s kenotic self-emptying, would entail that non-Christian positions must be regarded as the grace of equally ‘empty’ material, which can be taken up by Christian theology in order to complete the world’s redemption. Ward, thus, argues that “[t]he secular age, [...] is neither good nor bad in and of itself. Rather, it is just the time we have been given to redeem”.329 Non-Christian positions are not regarded as evil or sinful, but as incomplete. Likewise, God and the Incarnation of the Logos are incomplete, which seems to position Christian theology even more centre-stage than it was in Milbank’s theology of grace. Christian theologians are responsible for the redemption of the world as well as for the completion of God.330

Whereas this conception of grace explains Ward’s treatment of postmodernism, in the sense of an aspiration for grace which is completed by Christian theology, it does not explain why Ward opposes a secularist social order for a post-Christendom society. In the following section, I argue that Ward does not present Christian theology as the completion of secularism, but as its overcoming, which again can be elucidated through an investigation of Ward’s understanding of sin and grace’s overcoming of sin.

d) Overcoming the sin of domination: The disruptive grace of Christian theology

For Milbank, sin was the mistrust in the fundamental goodness of reality and the proud belief that the goodness of reality depends upon humankind, instead of acknowledging humankind’s own dependence on God’s grace. If, according to Ward, creation itself is ambiguous, mistrust in the goodness of reality cannot be sinful. If worldly reality is a mixture of emptiness and completion, then a certain mistrust, regarding that which one will receive by opening oneself up to the world, should be legitimate. For Ward, then, sin is ‘the lust to dominate’.331 The attempt to dominate and control reality is disobedient to God, because God created reality in a manner that is ambiguous and uncontrollable.

Ward depicts the overcoming of the lust to dominate in terms of an unconditional opening up of oneself to the reception of grace, in whatever shape it is given. Ward associates the Fall with a situation of being lost, in which we still live, and theology’s redemptive task is to begin with losing oneself in this fallen world.332 Affirming Christ in some way as objective redeemer of the world, Ward argues that the suffering of immersion into the world can only be born ‘insofar as Christ as the pioneer of our faith has borne all things and brought all things in submission to him’.333 At the same time, however, Ward immediately emphasises that the human recognition of Christ is integral to Christ’s work of redemption.334 If Milbank places a strong emphasis on the active theological effort to redeem the world from sin, Ward places an even stronger emphasis on the same point. According to Ward, humanity’s sinful lust to dominate reality must be re-oriented through following Christ’s privilegeing of grace over

330 That it is indeed primarily Christian theology, and not the church, is suggested by Ward’s argument that the world is further redeemed through the re-narration of the Christian narrative that has begun with the writing of the Gospels (Ward, “Christology and Mimosis,” in Christ and Culture, 42-44).
332 Ward, How the Light Gets In, 149-155.
security and stability.\textsuperscript{335} That this is more a duty than a gift is apparent in Ward’s suggestion that Christ’s suffering is redemptive. Christ’s suffering manifests the redemptive freedom of living without precisely knowing what is going on.\textsuperscript{336} Whereas Milbank has claimed that Christians can open themselves up to the historical mixture of grace and sin, because they know that grace will annihilate sin eventually, Ward claims that people must open themselves up to the mixture of good and evil in history, because they will redeem the world from sin in this way. Instead of speaking of an inherent attraction to grace, Ward refers to a conversion to grace, which can only occur if one is already transformable.\textsuperscript{337} In other words, human beings must be of a certain kind (namely transformable) before they can receive grace.

Ward then continues to equate this human transformability with vulnerability. Vulnerability is associated with exposing oneself to the exterior world. One’s own boundaries must be transgressed towards the not-yet-fully-known. Since reality is understood as being most fundamentally ambiguous, participation in the movement of grace demands a continuous self-abandonment as contrasted to self-protection, fear, or narcissism.\textsuperscript{338} In other words, people must sacrifice certain dispositions in order to receive grace.\textsuperscript{339} The sacrificial self-abandonment simultaneously bestows grace onto others, insofar as one draws their suffering into oneself.

Regarding the question of how the above exposition impacts upon the way in which Ward ascribes a central political role to Christian theology, it is important to highlight that Ward does not view non-Christians as entirely un-graced. He explicitly argues that only God can see who rightly imitates Christ and who truly belongs to the ecclesial community of the saved.\textsuperscript{340} Moreover, non-Christians could be acknowledged to be moved genuinely differently by God’s grace, depending on what the ambiguous world offers. The only people who can be definitively called un-graced are those who prevent the open reception, i.e. modern positivists with their firm definitions that are being presented as self-evident, and political secularists who likewise present their own political order as being best due to its supposed independence from specific cultural influences.

Ward’s apologetic defence of theology’s political relevance for post-Christendom societies then takes a different route to that of Milbank. Milbank’s positive understanding of grace stressed a prior dependence upon God’s offer of grace for any active human completion of God’s redemptive work. Ward’s emphasis on the ‘continual self-abandonment’\textsuperscript{341} for human participation in grace, on the contrary, downplays any sense of theology’s joyful reception of non-Christian insights. Instead, Ward defines faithfulness as that which remains when nothing appears to be given and when one solely lives for a future that others can enter into.\textsuperscript{342} Ward argues that in order to receive grace, there must be a lack and a sense of dissatisfaction with what one has.\textsuperscript{343} Theologians should ‘scream into the darkness “Save

\textsuperscript{335} Ward, “Suffering and Incarnation,” in \textit{Christ and Culture}, 255.
\textsuperscript{343} Ward, \textit{Politics of Discipleship}, 266.
me”. Accordingly, Ward evaluates the present situation in terms of us ‘all’ being able to ‘[..] see that the world is fucked up’ and us ‘all still hoping for something that can stop it from being so fucked up’. In other words, Ward’s interpretation of the current state of the world, as remarkably un-graced, helps his apologetic defence of theology’s task to complete the world’s redemption once begun in Christ. Ward’s universalising ‘we’ at this point of interpreting the contemporary situation as particularly problematic, is remarkable.

On this basis, Ward then explains how situating oneself within the Christian narrative can help people to develop a habit of opening themselves up to the ambiguous reality for the further redemption of the world. To ‘speak of, through and by revealedness’ redeems people from the sinful lust to dominate. Events in the contemporary context must be related to the Christian narrative in order to ‘open up a space between what we think we know and what is true’. The narrative must be followed faithfully and imaginatively without there being any final understanding. The Christian narrative, thus, serves to dislodge fixed and settled understandings of the world in order to let the superabundance of the truth shine forth. Adhering to the Christian narrative forges a way for people through the world that prevents them from providing final explanations or definitions. Reversely, also cultural references to Christ from non-ecclesial contexts, perhaps uttered by non-Christians, are theologically significant for Ward. There is, then, no final explanation or reason as to why the specific Christian narrative should be followed, but Ward shows how the Christian narrative can be followed as one possible way of preventing any domination and control over reality. Theologically systematising thought is also not meant to finally render the Christian tradition manageable, but to form disciples of the ‘Unsearchable’ God whose works are ‘incomprehensible’.

At the same time, however, Christian theology is defended as being best able to see how the secularist social order ought to be overcome and would, as such, replace secularism’s central position. Here, it is not clear how Ward’s account of how people can live in the world, without dominating reality through their explanations, would escape becoming the dominating

344 Ward, How the Light Gets In, 165.
346 Tonstad has also claimed that Ward’s strong emphasis on necessary suffering undermines an adequate conceptualisation of the gratuity of grace (Tonstad, God and Difference, 81-82).
352 The constant flux of orthodoxy must be acknowledged, instead of replacing one reified understanding of God with another (Ward, “Receiving the Gift,” Modern Theology 30 (2014): 84). This is why Ward has been criticised for evading the problem of identifying what constitutes a true revelation according to the Christian tradition (Smith, Introducing Radical Orthodoxy, 109-113, FN73).
353 Ward, How the Light Gets In, 130-131.
354 Besides this situating of oneself within the Christian narrative, Ward also names prayer as a way to learn to open oneself up to the ambiguities of history (Ward, Cultural Transformation, 59-60; Ward, “Affect,” Radical Orthodoxy Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics Vol. 1 (2012): 74-75). Ward is also quick to point out here that ‘prayer is not a safe place, in the sense that it is not a stable place. Prayer requires a surrender of control’ (Ward, Cultural Transformation, 60).
355 Ward, How the Light Gets In, 32; 3-34.
explanation of how to best live in the world. Like Milbank, Ward risks perpetuating the sin he wants to overcome on the most overarching level, because he is so concerned with defending theology’s political relevance for post-Christendom societies apologetically, which he strongly associates with theology’s ability to solve societal problems.

Moreover, Ward also fails to differentiate between Christ and theology’s sinful completion of Christ’s work. Overall, Ward’s theology leaves the impression that we live in a fallen reality and that Christianity is endowed with the task of redeeming the world from its sinfulness. On the basis of Ward’s understanding of Christ as only the incomplete incarnation of the divine Logos, it becomes impossible to indicate where and how Christians fail in completing the redemption initiated by Christ. If Ward suggests that Christian theology should scandalise people in a Christ-like manner, Ward does not account for how not only the Christ-likeness but also the sinfulness of Christian theologians might cause their deliberations to be scandalous. Even when Ward admits that theological language can be impacted by sin, he exempts liturgical acts and language from this sinfulness, claiming that in the celebration of the Eucharist theological language is being ‘made to appear pure, innocent, and free from ideology’. The confession that theological language is impaired by sin is then nearly undone when he continues to deny any strict distinction between the church’s liturgy and theological reflection upon this liturgy, arguing that both are indissolubly interwoven.

Ward’s strong focus on the Christian duty to suffer for the world’s complete redemption, and his presentation of vulnerability and fracturedness as something which Christians have to attain heroically in order to redeem the world, leads to the question of whether Christians should not instead acknowledge to always already be vulnerable and fractured because they are sinful. Should the argument not rather go this way: Christians should open themselves up to grace, because only in this way can they receive the gift which cures them of their sin?

If I argue that Ward depicts the world too one-sidedly as being fallen, or that he associates Christian theology too one-sidedly with the promise of the whole world’s redemption, it must be acknowledged that Ward also seeks to distance his own theology from any nostalgic reproaches that might be voiced against Milbank’s project due to the latter’s focus on the lapse from Christian orthodoxy in the late Middle Ages. Ward still claims to interpret history, despite this lapse, in terms of ‘an ongoing adventus’ of Christ’s salvation, not as the advance towards history’s apocalyptic end. At this point, Ward distinguishes between Christ and the church, arguing that, however much the church has failed, it cannot quench the Christian hope for the entire world’s salvation. Importantly for this dissertation, Ward here refers to Schillebeeckx’s trust in the reality of salvation outside of the church, as well as to Schillebeeckx’s call on theologians to actualise the universality of Jesus’ message in changing situations. Ward, at this point, weaves Schillebeeckx’s position into his own theology, interpreting this actualisation of Jesus’ message in terms of a call upon theologians to relate the contemporary situation to the biblical narrative of Jesus. Together, Ward’s argument suggests, then, that the church’s past failure can be redeemed by the hope of contemporary Christian theologians who believe in the world’s salvation nonetheless. In this

357 Ward, How the Light Gets In, 34.
358 Ward, How the Light Gets In, 122-123.
359 Ward states his uncertainty about the extent to which these are justified in reference to Milbank’s work (Ward, How the Light Gets In, 71).
360 Ward, How the Light Gets In, 72.
362 Schillebeeckx, Jesus in Our Western Culture, 40, cit. by Ward, How the Light Gets In, 130-131.
way, Ward fails to acknowledge the way in which the church’s past failures also impair the vision of what contemporary Christians should rightly hope for. In this respect, Ward’s position does not constitute an alternative to Milbank’s who similarly does not advocate a return to some idealist past, but who instead focuses on problems in the past and present in order to voice his theological promise of a better future. The difference merely appertains to their respective promises.

My exposition of Schillebeeckx’s theology, in Chapter 4, will provide a more distinct alternative. I will interpret the passages in his work referred to by Ward as suggesting that Christ’s universal salvation, despite the church, is a reality here and now, which Christian theologians must attend to in order to gain new hope. The task of Christian theologians is then not to promise a better future, but to discern how the contemporary situation mediates the reality of redemption, and to name this redemption in reference to the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

If the emphasis was not so much laid on the Christian theological ability to redeem the world, and more upon the Christian theological dependence on the redemption which has already been offered, then Ward’s theology of grace would still provide some helpful insights. It could be learned from Ward that in their opening up to grace, theologians might also receive the sin and suffering of a fallen world with the concomitant risk of being drawn right into it. Contrary to Ward, it should then be emphasised that this is not something which theologians must do, but something which they can dare to do precisely because they can trust that grace will raise them up again eventually. On this basis, then, Ward’s repeatedly criticised and strong reliance upon postmodern philosophies should be applauded. Trusting in the superior power of grace, Christian theologians do not have to be afraid of the shortcomings of atheist postmodernism, but should be concerned primarily with receiving aright the grace that postmodern thought can offer. This would also be a cure for both Milbank’s and Ward’s anxiety with overcoming all of the world’s sinfulness by way of Christian theology. Instead of pointing to the other’s failures, and to the way in which Christian theology can repair them, a focus on grace might allow Christian theologians to be with others in their failures.

e) Questioning univocal abstractions from grace: Consequences for public theology

It is now time to assess the roles attributed to grace and Christ in contemporary public theological literature, in light of the discussion above. Public theologians have referred to Christology, thus far, mainly in reference to questions concerning ontology and apologetics. Ontological references concern the claim that the revelation in Christ leads to a

363 Ward does acknowledge Christian theology’s partiality and its liability to errors. However, he clearly associates these errors with fear as ‘the affective heart of sin’, and the perpetuation of the ‘violences of denominationalism and sectarianism’ (Ward, How the Light Gets In, 117; 143-144). This indicates that Ward is not sensitive to the way in which the entanglement in sin might also impair his own vision of the exact sin, the problem which needs to be overcome.

greater insight into the workings of the world, whereas apologetic references appeal to the
curch’s mission to publicly confess Christ.

As most prominent representative of the ontological public theological interpretation
of Christ, Max Stackhouse abstracts universal knowledge from the revelation in Christ. The
existence of a divinely established order of the world is presupposed and it has been claimed
that society must mirror this order as perfectly as possible in order to flourish.\(^{365}\) It has been
abstracted from Old Testament revelation that covenantal relationships are the essential basis
of any democracy.\(^{366}\) Christ is, then, interpreted as revealing that love is the inner spirit of
covenantal relationships. Public theology’s apologetic references to Christ are closely
connected to this ontological interpretation of Christ’s public relevance. The public
theological claim that witnessing to Christ in secular democracies should take the form of
witnessing to universally intelligible core values that promote the common good is a concern
closely connected to the claim that the revelation in Christ provides universal knowledge.\(^{367}\) A
more explicit witness to Christ is dismissed as this is associated with Christianity’s search for
a privileged place in society. Instead of advocating that the social order should be explicitly
Christ-centred, public theologians argue, on the basis of the biblical identification of Christ
with truth, that they seek to recognise Christ wherever truths are spoken in the democratic
forum.\(^{368}\) ‘It would [...] be arrogant to assume that one knows in advance which human
voices are speaking truly’.\(^{369}\) Similarly, Graham argues that the Incarnation has revealed that
‘the practical – the human – discloses, embodies and shows forth the theological’.\(^{370}\) God’s
grace is primarily revealed in activities of healing and caring for others.\(^{371}\) Christ is here
interpreted as the transformer of culture who urges Christians to cooperate constructively in
an incarnational manner for the sake of the world’s redemption.\(^{372}\) ‘The primary expression of
public theology, then, will be in practical demonstrations that authentic faith leads to
transformation, as a matter not just of interpreting the world but changing it’.\(^{373}\) This argument is meant to present doctrinal expressions only as secondary additions to this primary
theological language of practice.\(^{374}\)

The problem with these understandings of Christ is that, contrary to public theology’s
intentions, they do not overcome Christendom imperialism. The public theological account
suggests that the positions of non-Christians are still being evaluated according to that which

\(^{365}\) Deirdre Hainsworth and Scott R. Paeth, “Introduction,” in Public Theology for a Global Society:
Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse, x.

\(^{366}\) Stackhouse, “Public Theology and Democracy’s Future”, The Review of Faith & International

\(^{367}\) De Gruchy, “Public Theology as Christian witness,” International Journal of Public Theology 1
(2007): 26. De Gruchy explicitly opposes the aspiration to convert people to Christianity through
one’s witnessing to Christ; presumably because he associates such aspiration with Christendom
imperialism.

\(^{368}\) Stout, Democracy and Tradition, 110.

\(^{369}\) Stout, Democracy and Tradition, 111-112.

\(^{370}\) Elaine Graham, “Health, Wealth or Wisdom? Religion and the Paradox of Prosperity,”


\(^{372}\) Mathewes also understands the churches’ public task primarily as one of witnessing in the sense of
repeating the pattern of Christ’s life and death (Mathewes, A Theology of Public Life, 138). Christian
engagement in politics then becomes primarily a resistance to the imperialistic domination of any
power structures, and a search for God who remains greater than all of them (159-161).

\(^{373}\) Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 215.

Christian theologians abstract from the revelation in Christ.\textsuperscript{375} It is not at all clear how Christian theologians would further the world’s redemption and transform the world to what they believe is good if they were confronted with non-Christians who understand the terms ‘good’ or ‘a healed human nature’ differently. If these apologetic defences of Christian involvement in public politics can indeed convince non-Christians, because the word ‘Christ’ is being avoided, then this seems to depend upon the similarity between what Christians and non-Christians understand to be ‘core values’ to a large extent.

At this point, public theologians might highlight the importance of conversation between conflicting positions. Jürgen Habermas argues that, in secularised pluralist societies, a plurality of groups should each transcend their own particular perspective in order to arrive at a more expanded common vision.\textsuperscript{376} However, this whole agenda remains entirely within the bounds of one particular interpretation of the Christian tradition as is evidenced in the public theological elaboration that all religions are undergirded by something deeper than themselves.\textsuperscript{377} ‘Religions’ are seen as organising the immanent world, including their own societies, according to what they perceive as being the ideal laws of reality.\textsuperscript{378} On this basis, it is then argued that there are abstract universals, such as integrity, justice, and truth, which can function as objective measures against which each particular religion could be assessed.\textsuperscript{379} Overall, this argument favours abstraction over unique particulars in exactly the same way in which the abstraction of core values was favoured over the unique particularity of Christ. The logic of the argument, thus, remains entirely within the logic of one particular Christology. If Christ is interpreted in an abstract way, then Christian theology can once again be placed at the centre for the organisation of a not-exclusively Christian society. That other faith traditions might see the world, and the relation between concrete reality and abstract universals, radically differently is something ignored by this position. Instead of appreciating the theological significance of non-Christian positions, this public theological Christology tends to have everyone conform to its own theological position in disguise.

**Conclusion**

Overall, Milbank’s and Ward’s theologies are of great value for the discussion about theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies because they challenge the self-proclaimed neutrality of secularism. This has shown that public theology’s acceptance of the secularist social order risks disguisedly perpetuating Christendom’s imperialism.

\textsuperscript{375} For an argument that Stackhouse’s references to God depict God as extraordinarily passive and as always substitutable by something else see Philip Ziegler, “God and Some Recent Public Theologies,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4 (2002): 137-155.


\textsuperscript{377} Stackhouse, “Introduction,” in *Christ and the Dominions of Civilization*, 16.

\textsuperscript{378} Stackhouse, “Introduction,” in *Christ and the Dominions of Civilization*, 17.

Challenging secularism’s fixed understanding of universality, which tends to evaluate all cultures according to some univocal standard, Milbank then offers an alternative Christian social order. Milbank apologetically defends his alternative, theologically informed, social order by promising to guarantee the harmonious, enriching co-existence of a plurality of cultures within the same society, as well as the entire society’s growth in the truly good. In sum, Milbank’s apologetic approach leads him to advocate a Christian social order as the replacement of its secularist counterpart. Although Milbank argues that Christian theology can evaluate all other worldviews positively, on the basis of its understanding of grace, he presents secularism as being entirely opposed to Christian theology. On the most overarching level, concerning who should determine the social order, he presents Christian theology not as a perfection of secularism, but as its overcoming and replacement. With this move, Milbank undermines that human sinfulness also impacts upon the theological vision of redemption. Whereas some have criticised Milbank for failing to read ‘the history of the church [... as] a history of redeemed failures’380, my criticism suggests that Milbank presents the history of the church as one big failure. The problem is that he claims to see how contemporary theology can redeem this failure all at once. An acknowledgment of the impairment of the theological vision would question the legitimacy of promising that a Christian social order would enhance the whole of society.

Ward equally seeks to replace the secularist social order, but understands postmodernism as already breaking with the secularist imperialism in disguise. He then seeks to complete postmodern aspirations with the help of Christian theology. Fixed understandings of universality are continuously being displaced through attention being paid to unique particulars that break with the universal abstraction. Whereas Ward respects the criticism of Christendom imperialism more than Milbank does, he partly fails in overcoming it insofar as he repeats and perpetuates postmodernity’s concealed universalism, measuring any other worldview in accordance with the standard set by his own. I have argued that this is again connected to Ward’s apologetic defence of Christian theology against secularism, directed towards a postmodern audience. The displacement of the secularist social order becomes a replacement of secularism by Christian theology as the new centre, one which organises how different cultures can live most harmoniously in one shared society. Ward’s account could also be helped through acknowledging the impacts of sin onto the theological vision, particularly regarding any ability to see how the work of redemption once begun in Christ will be completed.

The theological weakness of Milbank’s and Ward’s positions concerns their insufficient differentiation between Christ and Christian theology. They reason too quickly from Christ’s redemptive work to theology’s participation in that work. Christian theology’s central political role in post-Christendom societies is, then, too one-sidedly defended in connection to the promise of contributing positively to the entire society’s political life. On the one hand, this paints the contemporary situation very bleakly, thereby downplaying the Christian focus on thankfulness and joy for the redemption that has already been won by Christ. On the other hand, Milbank and Ward risk downplaying the traditional importance of confessing theology’s own deep involvement in sin and our continuous reliance upon Christ’s forgiving grace. In other words, Milbank and Ward both lack a more substantial theology of failure and, for this reason, all too triumphantly present Christian theology as the faith tradition endowed with the task of universal redemption.

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I have argued that the apologetic defences of Christian theology, against the secularist opposition of theology’s political involvement in post-Christendom societies, permeate public theology as well as the alternatives advanced by both Milbank and Ward. This apologetic approach hinders all of them from appreciating the grace that might be mediated by this secularist opposition. Although I have already hinted at the difference an acknowledgment of Christian theology’s sinfulness would make to Milbank’s and Ward’s respective visions of a Christian social order, the exact relation between acknowledging Christian theology’s entanglement in sin, restraining from defending apologetically a central political role for Christian theology in post-Christendom societies, and interpreting the secularist opposition to such a role as mediating God’s grace remains to be elucidated in more detail.

Thus far, it might be assumed that Christian theology’s entanglement in the sin of the world would disallow theology to play a central political role in any society as a matter of principle. My own contention is, however, that Christian theology’s political role must be discerned ever anew in each context with regard to the measure by which grace is mediated by Christian theology on the one hand, and the surrounding society on the other. My hypothesis is that receiving the post-Christendom criticism is a grace for Christian theology and exposes Christian theology’s own sinful implications in Christendom imperialism in Western Europe at this moment in time, and that, therefore, Christian theology should refrain from seeking to play a central political role in this context. In order to advance my argument, I will now turn to two representatives of Christocentric approaches to the question of Christian theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies. These two thinkers both provide reasons as to why theology’s political contributions should never be central in a non-exclusively Christian social order. Their arguments have to be assessed in order to differentiate my understanding of theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies from their own.
CHAPTER 3:

CHRISTOCENTRISM:

PRINCIPLED REJECTIONS OF APOLOGETICS AND CHRISTENDOM

It has become clear that, contrary to the criticism of Radical Orthodoxy’s alleged return to Christendom, Radical Orthodoxy is not concerned with a nostalgic return to pre-modern times, but seeks instead to envision a better social order than the currently prevalent secularist one. Milbank discloses how atheist alternatives are still implicitly promoting some version of imperialism, insofar as their own position’s cultural contingency is denied and an unjustifiable neutrality is propagated. Milbank goes on to apologetically defend his Christian ontology of peace as something that promises a more peaceful social order than any of its secularist counterparts. Ward, in contrast, conceives of postmodern positions as already initiating a successful overcoming of modern imperialism and reconfigures his theology accordingly as a fulfilment of this aspiration. In so doing, he still perpetuates a problematic postmodern form of universalism, one which celebrates particularity as such, but which secretly judges the particularity of others according to the univocal standards set by one’s own position.

Much of secularist thought’s imperialism in disguise, as criticised by Milbank, has been discovered to also be operative in a great deal of public theological literature — Max Stackhouse’s influential thought being one eminent example. Public theologians frequently accord a central role in the politics of post-Christendom societies to Christian theology. In this sense, both Radical Orthodoxy and a great deal of public theology can be criticised for insufficiently recognising the theological significance of the opposition to any Christian theological involvement in secular politics. In light of my assessment of Milbank’s theology, it should be conceded that the post-Christendom context does not, as such, present us with one new social order, but that the establishment of a truly anti-imperialist, pluralist social order still demands much political discussion. The possibility that Christian theology would play the most central role in also organising post-Christendom societies cannot simply be discarded on the grounds that we now live in a post-Christendom context. Milbank argues that the evaluation of Christendom, as something either good or bad, depends on how Christian theology uses its power and that any power used for the sake of love should be welcomed.381 This stance, however, has invited criticism from within the ranks of Christian theology, which is why this chapter presents Christian theological reasons for the rejection of any ‘remnant of Christendom’.382 My own assessment of Milbank’s and Ward’s understandings of grace has already cast some doubts, regarding the Christological underpinnings of their respective rationales for ascribing a central political role in post-Christendom societies to Christian theology.

I will now move to the second theological position against which public theology seeks to distinguish itself as an emerging theological sub-discipline. As briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, public theologians reject post-liberal theological responses to the post-Christendom context, as well as those stemming from Radical Orthodoxy. First, I will turn to John Howard Yoder who has convinced many that, on Christological grounds, Christian theology cannot determine the social order for a non-exclusively Christian society. I will then introduce Kathryn Tanner who, like public theologians, Milbank and Ward, advocates her Christian theology as a contribution to the wider society’s search for solutions to contemporary political problems. However, her emphasis on the church’s sinfulness and liability to failure renders this advocacy less triumphalist. In contrast to all of the other theologians introduced thus far, who focus so greatly on the church’s active participation in Christ’s redemptive work that the church is being presented one-sidedly as a positive influence on the surrounding society, Tanner to a greater extent highlights the way in which the church fails in accomplishing its own mission. She, thus, opposes any sectarian understanding of the Christian church not only because this could paralyse the church’s political engagement, but also because such a sectarianism downplays the importance of external criticism for the correction of the church. The extent to which Tanner not only accounts for the sinfulness of the church, but also for the effects of sin on her own theological vision, is something that remains to be investigated in this chapter.

My presentations of Yoder’s and Tanner’s Christologies are structured similarly. First, I will explain their Christologies, with a particular focus on how their Christological arguments are related both to their stance towards apologetic defences of theological engagement in politics and their rejection of the necessity for Christian theology to play a central role in the politics of post-Christendom societies. Yoder is presented as rejecting Christendom and apologetics for post-liberal reasons, interpreting them to be a danger to Christianity’s integrity. Tanner, on the contrary, embraces a postmodern form of apologetics and rejects any remnant of Christendom because this might deflect theological attention away from acknowledging God’s grace, as it is mediated outside of the Christian tradition, often in spite of the church. In the second part of my presentations of both Yoder and Tanner, I will proceed by examining how each conceives of the ways in which God’s grace is mediated by non-Christian positions more precisely, paying particular attention to the question of the degree to which these can challenge their own understanding of Christian theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies.

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384 Tanner explains that she distanced herself from her post-liberal roots precisely because she believes that the churches must be challenged by developments in the public spheres instead of simply demonising the extra-ecclesial public in a sectarian manner (Tanner, “How my mind has changed,” *The Christian Century* 127 (2010): 44-45). For a more extended discussion of post-liberal ecclesiologies see Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 104-110. Tanner argues here that post-liberal theologians, following the lead of George Lindbeck, acknowledge non-Christian cultural influences on Christianity, whilst simultaneously upholding a distinct and self-contained Christian identity.

385 Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 68.
§ 1 John Howard Yoder

3.1 Problematising Christian universality: Against apologetics for theology’s integrity

John Howard Yoder’s theology is important for the present discussion because he provides some considerable Christological reasons that challenge the very idea that Christian theology could provide the social order, or the overall ethical guidance, for a pluralist society. As one of the most renowned theological critics of Christendom, Yoder offers two main objections to apologetic defences of a central political role for Christian theology in a non-exclusively Christian society. The first concerns God’s freedom, while the second concerns human freedom. Both are related to God’s self-revelation at the Cross, to which any Christian political position should conform; this is a contention that will be unpacked throughout the course of this presentation.\(^{386}\)

First, Yoder rejects any apologetic defences of theology’s political relevance for a pluralist society where this justification takes the form of promising to contribute to the entire society’s common good. One problem with these justifications is that they risk replacing Christianity’s proper orientation toward its eschatological goal with secular concerns.\(^{387}\) Due to God’s freedom, the goal to which Christians aspire might be less foreseeable than a promise of contributing to the achievement of the wider society’s goals would demand.\(^{388}\) And second, a central political role for Christian theology in a pluralist society would imply the imposition of Christian rules onto non-Christians, thereby undermining human freedom, most particularly the necessarily free assent to the Christian faith.\(^{389}\) Christian politics could not be imposed onto non-Christians because, Yoder claims, Christian discipleship primarily consists in the free assent to suffer for the further redemption of the world.\(^{390}\) Yoder’s Christology, thus, poses two main challenges to both public theology’s and Radical Orthodoxy’s apologetic defences of theology’s central political role in post-Christendom societies: the integrity of Christianity might be undermined, and the freedom of non-Christians might be disrespected. As an alternative, Yoder claims that the Christian faith demands the nonviolent subordination to the ruling social order, not the establishment of a Christian social order or the apologetic defence of theological contributions to the existing social order.\(^{391}\)

Both these criticisms must be assessed with reference to possible counter-criticisms from public theology’s side. Yoder’s first criticism that Christian theologians should not be concerned with contributions to the common good, as it is defined by the surrounding society, is vulnerable to the public theological criticism of post-liberal sectarianism. When Yoder

\(^{386}\) Yoder, Politics, 129-131.
\(^{387}\) Yoder, Politics, 238. John Milbank has in this context been criticised, from the Radical Reformist angle, for justifying coercion in the name of peace (Chris K. Huebner, “Radical Orthodoxy, Radical Reformation: What Might Milbank and Mennonites Learn from Each Other?,” in The Gift of Difference, 214).
\(^{388}\) Yoder, Politics, 238.
\(^{389}\) Milbank’s advocacy to reinstall a Christian social order has been criticised precisely for undermining the religious freedom of non-Christians, who would be bound to live within Christian social structures despite their non-believing in Christ (Doak, “The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy,” Theological Studies 68 (2007): 376).
\(^{390}\) Yoder, Politics, 237.
\(^{391}\) Yoder, Politics, 209.
claims that ‘the very existence of the church is its primary task’, this seems to be at odds with the public theological conviction that, in a post-Christendom context, ‘[t]he salvation of the world, and not the survival of the Church, is and should be the guiding principle of public theology’. However, Yoder’s stance cannot be as easily connected to the withdrawal from political engagement as the public theological criticism might suggest. Quite the contrary, most contemporary scholars reject sectarian readings of Yoder’s theology and appreciate the contemporary political relevance of Yoder’s Christology. In the first part of this chapter (3.1) it will become apparent that, for Yoder, being pre-occupied with the integrity of the church is not a form of sectarian self-centredness, but the church’s integrity is meant to complete the entire world’s redemption. In other words, by way of directing theological reflection at the church’s integrity, Christian theology indirectly contributes to the surrounding social order — indirectly in the sense that, due to their different convictions, non-Christians might not recognise this as comprising a positive contribution.

Yoder’s second criticism, concerning the imposition of Christian politics onto non-Christians, can be connected to the public theological criticism of overlooking the way in which God’s grace is mediated by non-Christian positions. Yoder’s strict distinction between Christian theology, whose ethic is determined by a commitment to Jesus Christ, and the wider society whom Christian theologians must call to faith in Christ is as vulnerable as Radical Orthodoxy to the public theological criticism of downplaying the importance of non-Christian mediations of God’s grace. The Christian churches, as exemplary communities of restored humanity, and the Christian theologians who work within their bounds might be arrogantly presented as superior to anyone else, and would as such be immunised from any...

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392 Yoder, Politics, 150.
393 Graham, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 223.
non-Christian criticism.\(^{397}\) On the contrary, however, Yoder’s theology has been characterised as particularly open to self-criticism.\(^{398}\)

In the first part of my exposition of Yoder’s theology (3.1), I will explain Yoder’s political Christology in greater detail in order to critically assess the extent to which it indeed constitutes a legitimate challenge to any central political role being attributed to Christian theology in post-Christendom societies. Here, I explain both the Christological rationale for Yoder’s rejection of apologetic defences of theological contributions to the politics of post-Christendom societies as well as his alternative understanding of the church’s political role. The second part of my exposition of Yoder’s theology (3.2) then serves to analyse the extent to which Yoder is able to appreciate non-Christian mediations of grace. Here, I relate Yoder’s position to the discussion of the previous two chapters in order to highlight those aspects of his thought that are valuable for this dissertation, and to distance myself from Yoder’s post-liberal principled rejection both of apologetics and of theology’s central political role in any not exclusively Christian society.\(^{399}\)

\(a\) Incarnation: God’s free ordering of reality

Yoder’s rejection of Christendom is related to the particular way in which he correlates divine and human freedom. His kenotic understanding of the Incarnation leads Yoder to understand God’s freedom in terms of unpredictability, and he strongly associates human freedom with ethics. Yoder interprets the Incarnation in terms of Jesus Christ revealing the perfect world order.\(^{400}\) However, due to his kenotic understanding of Christ’s divinity, Yoder differentiates between Christ’s perfect ordering of history and God’s perfect ordering of reality. At the Incarnation, the divine Son empties Himself out into the humanity of Jesus, and thus simultaneously leaves the ordering of the cosmos to the Father and the Spirit. It is then the Son’s self-emptied humanity which is exemplary to the rest of humankind. The human Jesus is the one who rightly orders the world, precisely by renouncing divine dominion over the world.\(^{401}\) Jesus in his humanity, and not God in God’s divinity, should be exemplary for any Christian politics. The connection between the ethical focus in this presentation of Jesus as exemplary for the rest of humankind and Yoder’s appreciation of God’s freedom is clarified in his argument’s biblical underpinnings.

Yoder draws from the Old Testament command to ‘Be Holy as I am Holy’ (Lev. 19:2) in order to argue that knowledge of God is only necessary insofar as it aids the human ethical imitation of God.\(^{402}\) Believing that people attempted to follow this command, he conceives of a whole Jewish tradition of imitating God which culminates in Jesus who

\(^{397}\) Due to the emphasis on ethics, the churches’ superiority is associated with their ‘radically Christocentric rule of life’ in post-liberal cases (Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 116) (my emphasis).


\(^{399}\) Others have criticised Yoder for inferring from the historical failure of Constantinianism that Christendom principally conflicts with the core of Christian faith (Doerksen, *Beyond Suspicion*, 144-145). Consequently, he is said to erroneously undermine any reading of Christendom as a positive template for the church’s mission in society (148).

\(^{400}\) Yoder, *Politics*, 140-141. Yoder draws on Col. 1:15-17. Jesus is Lord over history (157).

\(^{401}\) Yoder, *Politics*, 234-236.

\(^{402}\) Yoder, *Politics*, 114.
perfectly imitates God to the effect that God is most adequately known in Jesus. In the aftermath of the Incarnation, imitating God means to be a follower of Christ. Yoder then moves on immediately from the Incarnation to ethics and claims that Christian theology defines a perfect human life as the imitation of God in Christ. Read in light of Yoder’s kenotic understanding of the Incarnation, the imitation of the human Jesus prevents any idolatrous imagining of God’s ordering of the cosmos, who remains free from human expectations. At this point, Yoder’s Christology remains reconcilable with a central political role being taken up by Christian theology, even in post-Christendom societies, since his argument suggests that following Christ is the best for all human beings universally. The second public theological justification of theology’s public relevance operates through this exact logic.

However, Yoder’s definition of a faithful following of Christ leads him to disassociate theology’s universality from justifications of theology’s central political role. Despite the universal exemplary nature of Jesus’ humanity, people must follow this example voluntarily. It is precisely Jesus’ free acceptance of his suffering and death which must be imitated by the rest of humankind. In my exposition of Yoder’s theology of the Cross, I will explain how both aspects, that of freedom and that of suffering, are the reason of Yoder’s rejection of apologetic defences of theology’s political relevance in post-Christendom societies, particularly in their interrelation.

b) Cross: Rejecting apologetics for Christianity’s integrity

I will now turn to Yoder’s theology of the Cross in order to clarify Yoder’s emphasis on the free human choice to follow God’s rule. This will elucidate how Yoder’s kenotic understanding of the Incarnation is related to the way in which he understands divine and human freedom. This section presents that which people are freed from, and that which people are freed for, when following God’s freedom, according to Yoder. Yoder’s understanding of divine and human freedom serves as the basis through which to explain his principled rejection of any apologetic defences of Christian theology’s contributions to what the wider society regards as being the common good.

Regarding the question of what humankind is freed from, Yoder understands the Cross as freeing humankind from sin. According to Yoder, sin consists in the idolisation of social structures to the effect that obedience to God is prevented. It is sinful, namely idolatrous, to obey social structures as though they were in charge of the order of reality. At the Cross, Jesus was redeemed from sin insofar as he obeyed God alone, even though the Roman social structures were inimical to God’s ordering of reality at the time of his crucifixion. People’s sinful absolutisation of these social structures was reversed precisely through Jesus’ freely chosen nonconformity. This nonconformity shows that, in reality, these social structures are not absolute. The Cross triumphs over the Fall because Jesus confirmed here that ‘he was free

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403 Yoder, Politics, 99.
404 Yoder, Politics, 113-114.
405 Yoder, Politics, 10; 99.
406 Yoder, Politics, 130-131.
407 Yoder, Politics, 95; 131. Yoder claims that this is the only consistent New Testament definition of a faithful imitation of Christ.
408 Yoder, Politics, 141-142.
409 Yoder, Politics, 234.
from the rebellious pretensions of the creaturely condition’.\textsuperscript{410} Whereas this might suggest that Yoder celebrates freedom for its own sake, and always prefers freedom in the sense of unpredictability over structured order, it must be stressed that he also upholds some positive definition of God’s rule and, therefore, some positive orientation for human freedom.

Regarding freedom’s orientation, Yoder explains that Jesus’ freedom consisted in his choice for obedient faithfulness to God’s rule of love.\textsuperscript{411} Obedience to this love implied that, in spite of his knowledge of the sinfulness of the surrounding social order, Jesus did not strive to replace this order violently by some revolutionary enforcement of a new social order. Yoder writes that Jesus’ single-hearted directedness towards God’s love put him at the mercy of his neighbours.\textsuperscript{412} At the Cross, it becomes apparent that leaving the ordering of the cosmos to God means, at the same time, leaving the ordering of history to other humans.\textsuperscript{413} That God did not intervene reveals that God does not rule over humankind by sovereign power. To the contrary, the Lordship of both Son and Father is a nonviolent servanthood that respects people’s freedom not to obey. This means, however, that God’s nonviolent rule does not so much respect human freedom as it respects people’s sinfully binding themselves to social structures that limit their freedom.

Thus far, Yoder’s theology of the Cross shows that people’s following of God is meant to free them from sin. Sin is the unfreedom of uncompromisingly following the established social order, even if this conflicts with God’s rule of love. Love is understood in terms of a rule of strict nonviolence, suggesting that Jesus followed God’s rule of nonviolence as a new principle which demands obedience in any circumstance. The following of the rule is established as that which prevents the tendency to cling to a pre-established order. On this basis, Yoder rejects any apologetic defence of Christian theological contributions to the common good, because Christian theology must uphold the coincidence of means and ends. Yoder argues that Christ’s obedience to God’s nonviolent rule was not meant to guarantee a perfect social order. To the contrary, Christ’s principled nonviolence demanded his renouncing his goal of establishing a peaceful society.\textsuperscript{414} When peace could not be established by peaceful means, Jesus gave himself and his mission over to Roman rule instead of ensuring the attainment of his goal within the immanent world. The overarching end to which Jesus was directed was not the establishment of his reign on earth, but he was single-mindedly oriented towards the eschatological goal of peace.

That there might be a disparity, between humanly set goals and the eschatological goal, is related to God’s freedom. Christ’s Resurrection reveals the unpredictability of the effects of God’s rule in history, which means that God’s rule is not calculable with reference to immanent laws of causes and effects.\textsuperscript{415} By already promising to achieve a certain goal in

\textsuperscript{410} Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 145.
\textsuperscript{411} Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 234.
\textsuperscript{412} Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 236.
\textsuperscript{413} Yoder’s interpretation of the doctrine of kenosis has been interpreted as an undoing of Adam’s prideful longing for God-likeness (Kroker, “Is a Messianic Political Ethic Possible?,” \textit{Journal of Religious Ethics} 33 (2005): 149). However, regarding Yoder’s argument concerning the human calling to imitate God, it might be more correct to say that Adams’ sin is to imagine God according to human likeness, and that Christ revealed that people should long to be like the true God.
\textsuperscript{414} Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 237. Milbank agrees that the practice of peace must at the same time be the way to the end and the end itself (Milbank, “Foreword,” in \textit{The Gift of Difference}, xvii). However, he has been criticised, from the Radical Reformist angle, for justifying coercion in the name of peace (Huebner, “Radical Orthodoxy, Radical Reformation,” in \textit{The Gift of Difference}, 214).
\textsuperscript{415} Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 238-239.
the immanent world, Christian theologians would compromise their faithfulness to God’s surprising rule. As followers of Christ, Christian theologians should, thus, not be as concerned as public theologians presuppose they are about their desire to ‘make things move into the right direction’.\footnote{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 228; 238.} Focussing their attention on the successful attainment of immanent goals could distract Christian theologians from being oriented to their proper eschatological goal. Yoder argues here that the goal to which Christians aspire should never be established as ‘itself a good in the name of which evil may be done’.\footnote{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 238.}

The theological inability to promise the achievement of a positively set goal is furthermore heightened by the manner in which Yoder understands Jesus’ free and nonviolent subordination to his crucifixion, not only as paving the way to redemption, but as redemption itself: ‘The cross is not a detour or a hurdle on the way to the kingdom, nor is it even the way to the kingdom; it is the kingdom come’.\footnote{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 51.} In other words, the true goal of nonviolent peace which Christians hope for might radically differ from anyone’s expectations.\footnote{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 86.} Whereas people had expected that God would save the world, no one had expected that salvation would manifest itself at the Cross. Yoder, thus, stresses that people could know that Christ’s nonviolent subordination to his crucifixion accords with God’s rule only at the Resurrection and that nonviolence is, therefore, ultimately more powerful than any dominating rule.\footnote{It has been argued by others that Yoder emphasises this understanding of the Resurrection as presupposition for the continuation of the story that has begun in Jesus Christ more in several other of his writings than he does in \textit{The Politics of Jesus} (Carter, \textit{Politics of the Cross}, 100-105).} Faith in Christ’s Resurrection, thus, renders any apologetic defence of theology’s positive contributions to politics to those who do not believe in the Resurrection impossible.

In sum, Yoder thus rejects any theological promise of contributing positively to political projects, as they have been defined by a society, because for want of a sufficiently positive image of its goal, Christian theology solely possesses positive knowledge of the means by which the world will reach its proper eschatological goal. Christianity’s eschatological goal, then, cannot be apologetically defended in the public forum because God’s laws of redemption differ from the laws governing the immanent world, which means that the effectiveness of the Christian rule of nonviolent love cannot be verified or argued over in terms of immanent causes and effects. Christian theologians should be primarily concerned with the world’s redemption, but they must admit that the consequences of their commitment to this redemption remain unpredictable to a great degree. Theologically informed political action should only be oriented towards the principle of nonviolence, which could be unattractive to those who do not believe in the superior power of powerlessness. Thus far, the argumentation suggests that, like other post-liberal theologians, Yoder rejects apologetic defences of Christian theological contributions to the common good for the sake of safeguarding Christianity’s integral orientation to its proper goal.

\footnote{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 228; 238.}
\footnote{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 238. Even if public theologians were to deny that they would ever resort to evil means in order to pursue the common good, it must be recalled that Yoder defines following a pre-established order instead of following God’s rule as sinful. This would imply that every means is evil where it is used to achieve a pre-set goal, because it restricts one’s obedience to God’s free rule who could direct history in a different direction.}
\footnote{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 51.}
\footnote{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 86.}
c) Ecclesiology: The church’s duty to redeem society

We should now turn to the possible public theological objection to Yoder’s Christology: The strong separation between secular society’s goals and Christianity’s goals in Yoder’s Christology could lend itself to advocate an apolitical withdrawal of the churches from political engagement in the surrounding society. To the contrary, I argue that Yoder presents theology’s political relevance in terms of its replacement of a goal-oriented with a rule-oriented politics, defining adhering to its political rule, in order to complete the whole society’s redemption, as comprising one of the church’s primary tasks. According to Yoder, God does not redeem the world by a purely supernatural intervention, but the church must continue to redeem history in imitation of Christ.\footnote[421]{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 222-223.} Yoder emphasises Christ’s primary role in this redemptive work, something important regarding my criticism of Milbank and Ward for conflating Christ and church. Christ is the one who actively defeats all that which remains sinful, whilst Christians need only to distance themselves from sin.\footnote[422]{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 149. This is why it has been argued that Yoder stresses the priority of grace and emphasises that the church’s task is not so much to build the Kingdom as it is to meet it and to respond to Christ’s prior work of redemption (Alain Epp Weaver, “After Politics: John Howard Yoder, Body Politics, And the Witnessing Church,” \textit{The Review of Politics} 61 (1999): 659). I will contest this argument in my assessment of Yoder’s understanding of grace in 3.2.} They can trust that God will protect and save them in a way that they would not violently have to defend themselves against their enemies.\footnote[423]{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 80-85.} This suggests that Yoder envisions a way in which Christian theologians can criticise what they regard as a sinful social order without aiming to replace this social order with their own alternative.

Yoder’s rejection of any apolitical withdrawal from public politics by the churches is evidenced in his translation of the principle of nonviolence into a Christian political duty. Christians are asked to complete in their ‘bodies that which was lacking in the suffering of Christ’ (Col. 1:24).\footnote[424]{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 237. See Ted Grimsrud, “Jesus to Paul,” in \textit{John Howard Yoder}, 187-206 for an argument of how Yoder regards Paul as supporting and extending the politics that have been inaugurated by Jesus Christ.} Yoder identifies that which was lacking in Christ’s suffering with further suffering. Since this makes sense only to those who believe that Jesus Christ is the self-revelation of God, this universal rule can only be obeyed by those who choose to follow Christ.\footnote[425]{At this point, Yoder then distinguishes between a more general human ethics and the specific Christian ethics. The former demands of everyone a minimum degree of justice for example (Earl Zimmerman, “Oscar Cullmann and Radical Discipleship,” in \textit{John Howard Yoder}, 155-157). The two are connected in that there are hidden implications within this more general ethics and God’s providential ordering of the world, which are explicated in Christ alone (John Howard Yoder, “Jesus – A Model of Radical Political Action,” in \textit{Faith and Freedom}, 163-164). This resembles the Radical Orthodox differentiation between the extra-ecclesial public as aspiration for grace and the churches as the fulfilment of this aspiration.} Christians are called to obey amidst suffering and to trust God that a not yet discernible victory is yet to come.\footnote[426]{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 125.} Faith is an assurance of the hoped for and a conviction that the unseen exists.\footnote[427]{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 125, FN 31. See also John Howard Yoder, \textit{The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 137.} The unseen, then, is not a positive image of the eschaton, but it is the principle of nonviolence which one believes to be more powerful than one’s present suffering under other people’s dominion.
This then leads Yoder to conceive of immanent history as being apocalyptically divided into two co-existing orders. The Cross already establishes the eschatological kingdom ontologically, but as well as this new age ruled by the kenotic Christ, there is also the old age in which sinful dominion still rejects this kenotic rule. The existence of the old order is its rebellion against the true Christological order of reality. Although the Cross conforms to God’s ontological reign of peace, this does not yet effect the transformation of the social order into one harmonious whole.\footnote{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 51.} To the contrary, the Cross reveals precisely that history is not restored to ontological peacefulness by imposing this ontological vision onto the entire society.\footnote{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 86.} The Cross reveals that, although this imposition of peace might seem effective due to calculations in a fallen historical order, it is not effective in reality.\footnote{Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 239.} True efficiency is not guaranteed by effective human rule, but by God’s creative power. The old order dominates in history because God’s order is not imposing itself powerfully. The new order will only reach its final eschatological consumption once all of the old has been overcome by non-violent subordination.

In sum, the whole of this chapter’s first part has clarified Yoder’s Christologically-based opposition to any apologetic defence of theological contributions to the organisation of a non-exclusively Christian society. He argues that following Christ must be a matter of free decision, and cannot be imposed upon non-Christians. Moreover, theologians cannot promise to contribute positively to the surrounding society’s politics, because they lack a positive vision of the goal which they seek to attain and Christian political action should be guided by the rule of non-violence, instead of being oriented towards a positive goal. Any apologetic defence of theology that includes a promise of contributing positively to a better social order might violate the integrity of Christianity’s pursuit of its proper goal. Instead of following the rule of nonviolent love in order to reach Christianity’s unpredictable goal, a humanly calculable goal is fixed and the way towards it is calculated.\footnote{Yoder thus argues that Christendom did not simply shift Christianity’s accent but its direction (Yoder, \textit{The Priestly Kingdom}, 138-139).} This risks opposing God’s free ordering of reality, which is not bound by this-worldly chains of causes and effects.

It should be highlighted that Yoder is the first theologian who has been presented in this dissertation who can criticise the social order, and yet refrain from advocating a Christian theological replacement. Christian theologians ought to motivate Christians to participate patiently in Christ’s redemptive suffering under the sinful social order until it has been non-violently subverted. Yoder’s Christology, thus, presents us with a principled rejection of any central place of Christian theology in determining the social order for not exclusively Christian societies. This principled rejection shows that the strong secularist objection to any remnant of Christendom seems not to affect Yoder’s theological vision. Yoder’s rejection of apologetics, in order to safeguard Christianity’s integrity, instead suggests that he evaluates the theological significance of non-Christian insights to a lesser extent than either public theologians or Radical Orthodoxy. This evokes the question of whether Yoder’s theological vision might undermine a sufficient acknowledgement of the workings of God’s grace in unexpected places, which would confirm the public theological reservation against post-liberal theologies. In what follows I examine Yoder’s theology for an answer to this question. In light of my criticism that Milbank and Ward have insufficiently acknowledged the restrictive impacts of sin on their theologically envisioned social orders, my particular focus will be on the degree to which Yoder is open to recognising non-Christian mediations of...
3.2 Kenotic grace against Christendom: Submitting non-violently to the non-Christian social order

In this second part of my exposition of Yoder’s Christology, I turn to examine his position more critically regarding the public theological objection that his separation between the Christian community that follows Christ on the one hand, and the rebellious world which still rejects Christ’s rule on the other, might insufficiently acknowledge extra-ecclesial mediations of God’s grace. Examining the implicit understanding of grace in Yoder’s Christology, I clarify the degree to which Yoder’s Christology allows for some genuine Christian theological learning from non-Christians. Overall, I contend that Yoder is unable to acknowledge the restricting impacts that sin has on his theological vision. My discussion of Yoder’s Christology will conclude by way of connecting Yoder’s principled rejection of apologetics and Christendom, in order to safeguard Christianity’s integrity, with his failure to acknowledge any restricting impact of sin on his own theological vision.

a) Extra-ecclesial grace: The principled integrity of the theological vision

Yoder claims to respect both, the integral otherness of non-Christian communities as well as their theological relevance, against the suspicion that his strict separation between the church and the non-ecclesial public could underestimate the import of common grace.\(^{432}\) Despite his Christocentrism, Yoder does not deny that God’s grace is also mediated in a non-Christian society. He affirms that God’s continuous creative grace also acts through established social structures.\(^{433}\) In other words, God’s grace is not only mediated by the church, but also by the structures that order society in a good way.\(^{434}\) Sin does not prevent

\(^{432}\) John Howard Yoder, “Meaning after Babble: With Jeffrey Stout beyond Relativism,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (1996): 132-133. He rejects the post-liberal theological assumption that different communities in a pluralist public are fundamentally incommensurable and insists instead that it is possible to transcend the particularities of different discourses. However, this is not due to some universal perspective and language, as public theology would suggest.


\(^{434}\) Yoder has been criticised, however, for predefining the state as sinful and always as a distorted image of the true politics of the church, because the state as Yoder defines it necessarily follows an ethics of dominion (Dorothea Bertschmann, “The Rule of Christ and Human Politics - Two Proposals: A Comparison of the Political Theology of Oliver O’Donovan and John Howard Yoder,” *The Heythrop Journal* LVI (2015): 430). Consequently, the state is now being pulled towards a reality of which it can never be part (434-435). Others, however, argue that Yoder provides a theologically grounded conception of the state which might serve public theology’s engagement in and with governmental structures (James King, “Theologizing the State: What Hauerwas Could Have Learned From Yoder,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 8 (2014): 313-329). Somewhat more in support of the first interpretation, Yoder restrains from ratifying the state as such and refers merely to God’s providence as sometimes using state government for good purposes (Yoder, *Politics*, 198).
God from still creatively acting through these structures and from affecting new order.\textsuperscript{435} Contrary to the suspicion that the churches’ social structures are set up as perfect examples that always mediate God’s grace, Yoder acknowledges that the extra-ecclesial public can sometimes mediate God’s grace more truthfully than the church and can, consequently, demand the revision of ecclesial structures.\textsuperscript{436} For example, in line with the previous argument, grace might be mediated in all instances in which people are defended from adversaries without using any violence. This indirect defence could be mediated by the churches and non-Christian groups alike.

In terms of Christology, this can be explained with reference to Yoder’s assumption that the fullness of God has already been revealed in Christ on the one hand, and that the human understanding of what this means is extended over time, on the other.\textsuperscript{437} In order for the extended understanding to be truthful to the original revelation, the truth of every new event must be tested against the measure of Jesus. These Christ-like occurrences can be found in churches as well as in the non-Christian public.\textsuperscript{438}

If we ask how non-Christian worldviews can further the understanding of Yoder’s rule of non-violent love, Yoder explains that Christian theologians should penetrate into other worldviews, deeply enough to utter their own message in the words and concepts of the other.\textsuperscript{439} Contrary to public theological suspicions of post-liberal theologies, Yoder does not appreciate contemporary pluralism as the occasion that finally allows Christian theologians to concentrate on the life of the church alone as one self-sufficient community amongst others. To the contrary, Yoder appreciates the pluralist context because he believes that by penetrating other worldviews, Christian theologians may see something about the Gospel which had previously been invisible.\textsuperscript{440} One purpose of this endeavour might be to discern whether certain non-Christian practices and rules should also be obeyed by Christians or if they should be non-violently endured.

However, Yoder places Christian theology on a level above both the church and the pluralist society in which it exists, despite this acknowledgement of possible ecclesial failures and the theological significance of non-Christian worldviews. Yoder distinguishes between an overall insight into reality, which Christian theologians most completely possess, and the practical following, as well as the further explication of this insight. Christian theology must

\textsuperscript{435} Yoder, \textit{Politics}, 141-142. This resembles Milbank’s claim that God’s plenitudinous goodness is unaffected by human sin (Milbank, “Foreword,” in \textit{Introducing Radical Orthodoxy}, 17; Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, xviii).

\textsuperscript{436} Nathan Hershberger, “Patience as Hermeneutical Practice: Christ, Church and Scripture in John Howard Yoder and Hans Frei”, \textit{Modern Theology} (2015): 5-6.

\textsuperscript{437} Grimsrud, “Jesus to Paul,” in \textit{John Howard Yoder}, 188.


read reality as being ordered by a good Creator God and then judge everyone accordingly. Although this reading is partly aimed at the self-critique of current ecclesial structures and practices, Yoder fails to account for the possibility that grace could ever be mediated in a way that would demand the critical revision of his rule of nonviolent love.

Yoder’s suggestion that Christian theologians should judge other worldviews as well as ecclesial practices and structures against the standard of his principle of nonviolence is problematic, specifically in relation to his own cautioning not to pre-empt obedience to God’s freedom through pre-established structures. Seeking to free people from sinfully following social structures to the detriment of following God’s unpredictable rule, Yoder now presents us with God’s supposedly eternal nonviolent rule. Is this not equally limiting any appropriate acknowledgement of God’s unpredictable freedom? While Yoder might allow for the critical revision of ecclesial structures, and the addition of further nuances to his theology, he could not admit any new and surprising act of God in history that would demand a more substantial revision of his rule of nonviolent love. Yoder does not allow God ever to deviate from Yoder’s principle of nonviolence. This is particularly pertinent insofar as Yoder has been criticised for downplaying the importance of all biblical events that do not confirm his own Christology. How this connects to Yoder’s understanding of human freedom, which I will examine in relation to the issue of the gratuity of grace, remains to be assessed in the following section.

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441 Yoder, *Politics*, 140-41; 155.
442 Even Christ did not change these rules, but instead fulfilled them and explicated all of their implications (Yoder, “Jesus – A Model of Radical Political Action,” in *Faith and Freedom*, 164).
443 At this point, it should be mentioned that Yoder is often described as being a Biblical realist (Gayle Gerber Koontz, “Confessional Theology in a Pluralistic Context: A Study of the Theological Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr and John H. Yoder” (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston University, 1985), 173, cit. by Carter, *Politics of the Cross*, 56: 63-64; Nugent, “The Politics of YHWH,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39 (2011): 74, 87; Earl Zimmermann, “Sixteenth-Century Anabaptist Roots,” in *John Howard Yoder*, 100; Branson L. Parler, *Things Hold Together: John Howard Yoder’s Trinitarian Theology of Culture* (Harrisonburg: Herald Press, 2012), 86, 89; Joel Zimbelman, “The Contribution of John Howard Yoder To Recent Discussions in Christian Social Ethics,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 45 (1992): 376-378). He supposedly acknowledges Jesus Christ as the climax of reality, and seeks to measure everything else against the biblical witness to Jesus Christ (Carter, *Politics of the Cross*, 74). Instead of understanding the gospel accounts of Jesus Christ literally, Yoder is aware that this biblical witness also stems from a particular context. If an interpretation of the Scriptures is questioned by new scientific insights, however, it is never the reality to which the Bible refers, and always the interpretation of that reality which must be regarded as faulty and revisable. Yoder’s aim is then to read the Bible in such a way that the reality itself, to which the Scriptures bear witness, comes to speak, without being unnecessarily limited by the contemporary understanding of the world (Carter, *Politics of the Cross*, 101). Yoder’s focus on the church as the community that reads the Bible most adequately has been called ‘ecclesial epistemology’ (Doerksen, *Beyond Suspicion*, 64).
444 I, thus, align myself with those who criticise that Yoder, despite his own best intentions, is insufficiently Christocentric. Although some characterise Yoder as being an intentionally unsystematic theologian, in order to respond to Christ’s free rule, the extent to which Yoder has successfully escaped the danger of over-determining his Biblical interpretations by his particular lens, remains debatable (Doerksen, *Beyond Suspicion*, 24-25; 27-28). Concerning his interpretation of history, it is said that it is precisely because of his rejection of systematising thought that Yoder prefers ‘sweeping statements’ in support of his overall argument over detailed historical analysis (28).
b) Undermining gratuity: Imposing the theological vision on the church

The explanation of Yoder’s Christology has, thus far, suggested that he conceives of grace as God reigning for humankind, in the sense of freeing humankind from the burden of planning for the future. Grace allows people to simply follow the unpredictable God to wherever He leads them. And yet, I have argued that Yoder’s God is not as unpredictable as Yoder pretends God is. Yoder’s God is bound to conform to Yoder’s principle of nonviolent love. If we now look at the human side and investigate the extent to which humans are free to accept Yoder’s principle of nonviolent love as a grace, it is striking that Yoder’s strong stress on the ethical duty to align oneself with God’s grace has been criticised for downplaying any sense of grace’s gratuity.446 Yoder’s account insufficiently portrays grace as a free gift to be enjoyed. The gratuitous character of this grace is undermined when Yoder speaks of an ethical practice of grace that is rewarded with grace.447 According to him, ‘only one who practices grace can receive grace’.448 This binds God once again to the principle of nonviolence, not allowing God to bestow grace onto the violent, and thus refusing to understand God’s rule in terms of forgiveness.449 Accordingly, Yoder’s theology has been found to be lacking an adequate account of human limitations in the ongoing work of redemption.450 He is said to verge on the presentation of the church as ‘superhuman’.451 In my presentation of Schillebeeckx’s Christology, in the subsequent chapters, it will become apparent that an understanding of grace in terms of God’s forgiveness allows Christian theologians to discern new mediations of grace more dialectically, even in instances that on the surface deviate from their predefined theological understanding of grace.

In order to understand the implications of Yoder’s theology for human freedom, we should reconsider Yoder’s understanding of the Resurrection, primarily as necessary revelation, to enable people to follow God’s rule. People first have to be rationally convinced that redemptive grace is really in their greatest interest (eschatologically), before they can align themselves with this grace, and before they will be rewarded with grace. This emphasis on the knowledge of grace’s ultimate victory, as well as the emphasis on the necessary suffering for redemption, downplay any notion of an inherent attractiveness of grace as that which enables Christians to align themselves with God’s grace even when it is difficult at times. This then negatively affects Yoder’s otherwise high appreciation of human freedom. Once suffering is presented as a duty for the further redemption of the world, it becomes questionable to what degree this suffering can be freely accepted. To what extent does Yoder not simply present us with a new rule, which might bind the freedom of church members and close their eyes to God’s true rule which might unpredictably direct them elsewhere? It could become impossible for those educated by Yoder ever to refuse the nonviolent suffering which is demanded of them for the sake of the world’s redemption.452

447 Yoder, Politics, 62-63.
448 Yoder, Politics, 63.
449 Yoder, Politics, 62-63.
452 An examination of whether Yoder’s abuse of probably more than 100 women is itself a symptom of his theology of grace would surpass the scope of this dissertation (Rachel Waltner Goossen, “The
c) Reconsidering Yoder’s principled rejection of Christendom

In order to conclude this assessment of Yoder’s Christology, I will now return to the question of theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies, re-examining the results of my assessment in relation to the discussion of the previous chapters. The particular question addressed in this dissertation concerns those contemporaries in post-Christendom societies who oppose any theological involvement in public politics. Against this opposition, public theologians apologetically defend this involvement by way of arguing that Christian theology can positively contribute to the common good as it is defined by a pluralist society. I have argued, however, that in their apologetic countering of any opposition to theological involvements in secular politics, public theologians tend to re-ascribe to Christian theology a central political role also in a pluralist society. In this way, public theologians fail to overcome the problems of Christendom sufficiently.

The Radical Orthodox theologians Milbank and Ward both perceive secularism to be perpetuating Christendom imperialism. They then go on to defend theology’s central political role in post-Christendom societies apologetically, by promising that Christian theology is better able to overcome the imperialist aspects of Christendom than its atheist alternatives. They, thereby, neglect that the opposition to any theological involvement in secular politics could be theologically significant, and simply counter it with their own, presumably better, vision of a perfect social order. At the same time, Milbank and Ward downplay the ways in which sin could impact upon the theological vision of a social order, the acknowledgment of which would call Radical Orthodoxy’s promises concerning a better future into question.

In order to conclude my discussion of the value of Yoder’s Christology to answering the question concerning theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies, it can first be said that, in contrast to public theology and Radical Orthodoxy, Yoder questions the very possibility of defending the Christian theological involvement in secular politics apologetically. His most interesting objection to these apologetic endeavours, in reference to the present discussion, concerns Yoder’s claim that Christian theologians lack the positive vision of the goal towards which they strive. The promise of contributing towards the attainment of a set goal risks compromising Christianity’s faithful discipleship of Christ by the greater concern about the effectiveness in moving towards this goal. Yoder reminds us that Christians who are primarily called to follow God’s rule might not be as concerned with the desire to ‘make things move into the right direction’ as most advocates of a central role for Christian theology in organising post-Christendom societies might be. According to Yoder, the effects of God’s rule are less predictable, because God rules through nonviolent powerlessness, rather than through the imposition of a set social order onto others. This understanding of God as free from human expectations associates Yoder more closely with public theologians like Mathewes and Stout as well as with Graham Ward than with John Milbank. Having recently received positive attention from the side of postmodern philosophers for presumably according with an ontology that prioritises particularity over determinative laws and rules (Daniel Barber, “The Particularity of Jesus and the Time of the Kingdom: Philosophy and Theology in Yoder,” Modern Theology 23 (2007): 63-89; Nathan Kerr, “Transcendence and Apocalyptic: A Reply to Barber,” Political Theology 10 (2009): 143-152), Yoder’s understanding of Christianity’s

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453 Yoder, Politics, 230.
454 Yoder, Politics, 228; 238.
455 This understanding of God as free from human expectations associates Yoder more closely with public theologians like Mathewes and Stout as well as with Graham Ward than with John Milbank. Having recently received positive attention from the side of postmodern philosophers for presumably according with an ontology that prioritises particularity over determinative laws and rules (Daniel Barber, “The Particularity of Jesus and the Time of the Kingdom: Philosophy and Theology in Yoder,” Modern Theology 23 (2007): 63-89; Nathan Kerr, “Transcendence and Apocalyptic: A Reply to Barber,” Political Theology 10 (2009): 143-152), Yoder’s understanding of Christianity’s
would question both public theology as well as Radical Orthodoxy insofar as their promises of a better society are indicative of a positive vision and a desire to move society towards it. In the remaining part of this dissertation, I will retain this rejection of apologetic defences of Christian theology with reference to an acknowledgement that Christ might set a different goal than that envisioned by Christian theology.

However, I do not follow the way in which Yoder accounts for this difference between eschatological goals in Christ and positively set immanent goals. Yoder claims that Christian theologians do perfectly know the means by which to reach their eschatological goal. The only problem of justifying these means apologetically, against those who oppose any Christian involvement in secular politics, is that these apologetic defences risk compromising the integrity of the Christian pursuit of the proper goal set by Christ through adaptation to the goals set by the surrounding society. Yoder then rejects apologetics in principle because non-Christians will never be convinced by the attractiveness of the Christian goal, and likewise he rejects Christian theology having a central role in organising a pluralist society in principle, because such a role would always compromise the Christian pursuit of its proper goal. At this point, I contend that Yoder claims to possess too considerable a theological insight into how the world is ruled by God; a claim which I primarily contest inasmuch as Yoder insufficiently acknowledges that the Christian theological vision of the means to achieve the goal set by Christ also remains tainted by sin and is, thus, more imperfect than Yoder admits.

Accepting Yoder’s doubts, concerning the theological ability to promise to society the achievement of a set goal, I will part ways with him concerning the reasons behind these doubts. Contrary to him, I want to distinguish between the perfect goal set by Christ and the imperfect theological vision of that goal, due to theology’s entanglement in sin. Consequently, I would not principally reject apologetics and Christendom in order to safeguard Christianity’s integrity. This argument no longer holds once it has been acknowledged that Christianity’s integrity has always already been damaged by sin. Christian theology would, then, be much more on the same level as all of the other worldviews, all being most fundamentally distinguished solely from Christ’s unique perfection. Consequently, mediations of God’s grace in different ways than those envisioned by Christian theology should be appreciated to a much higher degree than Yoder’s Christology allows for, particularly as possible cures for Christian theology. Christian theologians at this point of time in Western-Europe should refrain from defending Christian theology’s positive contributions to the politics of post-Christendom societies apologetically, not due to the unwillingness to follow Christ’s rule on the part of the surrounding society, but due to the insufficient understanding of Christ’s rule on the part of Christian theology.

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nonviolent rule could be closely related to Ward’s weak hermeneutical ontology by the help of which Ward seeks not to dominate any aspect of reality. Also Yoder’s rejection of foundationalism is strikingly postmodern: Yoder rejects foundationalism because it downplays that every worldview demands people’s free assent (Yoder, “Meaning after Babble,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (1996): 134-135) (my emphasis).

Yoder, *Politics*, 230; 238.
Thus far, I have presented contemporary public theology alongside three theologians who, despite the different ways in which they have elaborated on it, all share a strong emphasis of theology’s redemptive role in relation to the surrounding society and have all run the risk of conflating God’s redemption in Christ and the Christian theological vision of this redemption. In the case of both public theologians and Radical Orthodoxy, theology’s vision of the world’s redemption in Christ was associated with the theological ability to offer solutions to contemporary societal problems, whereas Yoder offered his vision of God’s rule of the world as a blueprint for Christian political action, irrespective of the question of whether these actions solve societal problems in any way society would deem as being effective. By stressing theology’s (ethical) task of completing redemption, all of them have failed to acknowledge that, even though Christ has indeed traced the perfect way to redemption, Christian theology itself might be so closely entangled in the sin of this world that theologians could lack the vision of a perfect political order or a perfect rule by which to realise eschatological peace on earth. Although all of the theologians discussed acknowledge the church’s sinfulness and liability to fail in its practice, they do not consider the way in which sin might impact upon theology’s vision of redemption. All of the authors introduced thus far are in agreement that a theological drawing from the Christian tradition will provide an adequate answer to the question concerning Christian theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies. Against this agreement, I contend that this theological endeavour would only answer the question where the theological visions are trusted not to be themselves entangled in the sin they are meant to overcome.

I will now turn to Kathryn Tanner in order to proceed along this path towards a more humble answer concerning theology’s ability to contribute positively to post-Christendom societies’ political order at this moment of time. Tanner’s theology is insightful in its focus on the grace that remains extrinsic to the church, given by God to the church and to the world, despite the church’s many failings to receive it and to pass it on. Acknowledging human and ecclesial sin, Tanner is more hesitant than Milbank, Ward or Yoder to argue for the church’s active completion of redemption, and stresses the church’s dependence upon Christ’s uniquely perfect redemptive work, much more than the rest of them. Tanner’s Christocentrism allows her to escape the charge of advocating any ecclesial superiority, removed from public criticism and correction, over non-Christian positions. Since all of the theologians introduced thus far have acknowledged the church’s liability to failure, whilst not admitting theology’s own impairment by sin, one particular focus will be on the question of whether Tanner’s heightened emphasis on the church’s sinfulness is paired with a similarly heightened awareness of the impacts of sin on her Christian theological vision of redemption.

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In the first half of my presentation (3.3), I will explain Tanner’s Christology and ecclesiology, with a particular focus on her understanding of grace as something extrinsic to the church, in order to then (3.4) discuss her understanding of the extent to which grace is mediated by non-Christian insights and what this means for the political role of Christian theology in post-Christendom societies, compared to the arguments advanced by Milbank, Ward and Yoder.

3.3 Extrinsic universality: Self-forgetting apologetics for society’s redemption

In order to understand the political role Tanner ascribes to Christian theology in post-Christendom societies, I will commence by explaining her understanding of the Incarnation as being revelatory of the way in which grace perfects nature. Subsequently, I turn to Tanner’s conception of the Cross for an answer to the question of how grace overcomes sin. Together, this paves the way for understanding the way in which Tanner distinguishes between Christ’s uniqueness and the rest of humankind, in a way that was found to be missing in the accounts of Milbank, Ward and Yoder. Furthermore, I examine how Tanner still conceives of the church’s active participation in Christ’s redemptive work, leading to my analysis of her conception of the political role played by Christian theology in post-Christendom societies in the last part of this chapter (3.4).

a) Incarnation: God’s egalitarian bestowal of grace

Exhibiting an equally strong, but different, Christocentrism to Yoder, Tanner calls the Incarnation ‘the center of [her] theology in a most thoroughgoing way’. Not unlike Yoder, Tanner understands Christ in terms of setting a perfect example for the rest of humankind. Contrary to Ward and Yoder, however, Tanner does not understand God’s assumption of humanity in kenotic terms. She criticises kenotic Christologies for erroneously upholding a binary separation between a being’s full divinity or its full humanity. Rejecting this competitive understanding of the relation between humanity and divinity, Tanner understands

458 The underlying logic of my presentation of Tanner’s theology is: Christ is exemplary for humankind’s relation to God. The rest of humankind’s relation to God is impacted by sin, which is why Christ also heals humanity’s relation to God.
459 Kathryn Tanner, “The church and action for the World,” Scottish Journal of Theology 57 (2004): 232. However, it is striking that Tanner expressed the theme of the non-competition between God and creation already before her venture into Christology, and that it has been criticised precisely for not sufficiently considering the doctrine of the Incarnation (David A. Ford, review of God and Creation in Christian Theology. Tyranny or Empowerment?, by Kathryn Tanner, Religious Studies 26 (1990): 552), and that her Christ the Key has been described as being ‘not really about christology so much as’ it applies ‘a Christological Denkfigur to other theological loci’ (Steffen Lösel, “Book Forum,” Theology Today 68 (2011): 330). This indicates that Tanner does not contrast accessing the truth about Christ with relying upon human interpretative frameworks.
460 Kathryn Tanner, Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 9; 17.
God’s redemptive power to be fully present throughout Jesus’ fully human life.\textsuperscript{462} Calling God the self-subsistent fullness who ‘provides to the world [...] its non-divine existence, and all that it includes: life, truth, beauty, goodness in their finite forms’\textsuperscript{463} Tanner understands God as the source of the whole of reality as well as the immediate source of every particular being.\textsuperscript{464} This conception of God allows Tanner to understand Jesus’ divinity in terms of Jesus’ continuous drawing on God’s fully present redemptive power, which gradually perfected Jesus’ humanity for the world’s redemption.\textsuperscript{465} Christ’s fully human life is then


\textsuperscript{463} Tanner, \textit{Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity}, 42.

\textsuperscript{464} Tanner, \textit{God and Creation in Christian Theology}, 44. Whereas Milbank thought of the creaturely mediation of God’s immediate presence in a hierarchical way, Tanner stresses that God is the immediate source of all creatures in the same way (46). At this point, Tanner has been criticised from a Radical Orthodox perspective, for upholding this fundamental egalitarianism, not for any convincing Christological, but for liberal secular reasons (Hackett, “What’s the Use of a Skeleton Key?,” \textit{Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics} 2 (2014):197). However, the criticism could be reversed and it might be evaluated as positive given that Tanner, in contrast to Radical Orthodoxy, does not presuppose liberalism as Christianity’s unquestionable enemy.

God’s own insofar as it is lived in strict union with God.\textsuperscript{466} This understanding reverberates in Tanner’s understanding of the way in which grace fulfils human nature.

Tanner understands grace as the environment in which humankind exists, equally reaching out to all human beings from outside.\textsuperscript{467} Human nature in itself, on the contrary, is merely the empty vessel which can receive grace.\textsuperscript{468} Human nature is particularly malleable and open in order to attain divine likeness eventually.\textsuperscript{469} Being more malleable than other creatures means that anything that impresses itself upon humans becomes an element of their constitution. God’s offer of grace to the world is, thus, mediated by the development of initially empty human lives into particular positive forms. In short, humans are not by nature united or even similar to God, but they are naturally made for a relationship with God.\textsuperscript{470}

Tanner then presents sin as the denial of the world’s continuous dependence upon God as the transcendent source of its goodness. Not unlike Milbank, Tanner also understands sin in terms of humankind’s mistaken view that people are good due to their own achievements, instead of duly acknowledging that any such goodness is given to them from their graced environment.\textsuperscript{471} For Milbank, original sin was to imagine proudly that reality is a mixture of good and evil and that, consequently, reality’s goodness would be achieved by the human free choice for the good. Subsequent to the Fall, however, reality becomes a mixture of good and evil, and Christian faith is drawn upon in order to apologetically defend the Christian social order by promising to overcome this fallen situation.

Tanner, on the contrary, is more hesitant to position the effects of sin in the reality external to humankind. Even though she argues that graced reality is no longer as accessible in fallen history as it originally was, this is connected less to a change in the environment and more to a change in humankind. This change is not a change of human nature as such, in the sense of an inherited sinfulness, but the same original empty human nature when sinful is

\textsuperscript{466} This rejection of kenotic understandings of Christ proves Chris Hackett’s claim that Tanner presents humanity and divinity ‘in Christ in irreducible opposition’ wrong (Hackett, “What’s the Use of a Skeleton Key?,” \textit{Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics} 2 (2014): 198).


\textsuperscript{468} Tanner has been criticised for not sufficiently explaining the metaphysics underlying her Christological anthropology (Hefling, “Christologies and Philosophies,” \textit{Anglican Theological Review} 93:4 (2011): 696-697, 704; William Wood, review of \textit{Christ the Key}. \textit{Current Issues in Theology}, by Kathryn Tanner, \textit{Scottish Journal of Theology} 66 (2013): 366). There are divergent views on whether Tanner thinks of the Incarnation as Christ’s assumption of a general human essence in which all human beings participate or whether only the particular humanity of Jesus of Nazareth is assumed and sanctified (Crisp, \textit{Revisioning Christology}, 124). Hefling tends to read Tanner as presupposing a generic human essence which is assumed by Christ, whereas Helmer argues that Tanner refers to Christ’s assumption of an individuated nature, following the tradition of medieval and 17th century Orthodox Protestantism (Helmer, “A systematic theological theory of truth in Kathryn Tanner’s Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity,” \textit{Scottish Journal of Theology} 57 (2004): 216). My own argument suggests that, in Tanner’s Christology, Christ’s assumption of the particular human nature of Jesus effects a change in a generic human essence.

\textsuperscript{469} Tanner, \textit{Christ the Key}, 28, 37, 44-46, 137-138.

\textsuperscript{470} Tanner, \textit{Christ the Key}, 2.

\textsuperscript{471} Tanner, \textit{Christ the Key}, 34-35.
filled up with ‘the wrong inputs’ to the effect that human beings are less capable of receiving God’s grace.\footnote{Tanner, Christ the Key, 67; 70.} Tanner claims that the more people imagine themselves as the authors of their own good, the less receptive they are to the reception of new gifts of grace from God.\footnote{Tanner, Christ the Key, 70.} In this way, a human being becomes ever more estranged from its fully graced eschatological ideal. A graced life now exists ‘in competition with another potentially all-embracing [...] pattern of existence marked by futility and hopelessness’.\footnote{Tanner, Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity, 112.} In short, what could be termed Tanner’s extrinsic and non-anthropocentric understanding of grace is paired with a remarkably anthropocentric understanding of sin.\footnote{Tanner’s theology has been repeatedly criticised for insufficiently explaining the mechanism of Christ’s redemptive work (Hackett, “What’s the Use of a Skeleton Key?,” Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics 2 (2014): 206-207; Lösel, “Book Forum,” Theology Today 68 (2011): 334-335; Crisp, Revisioning Christology, 114-115; 127; Anthony D. Baker, “Convenient Redemption: A Participatory Account of the Atonement,” Modern Theology 30 (2014): 99-100, 102; Wood, “Kathryn Tanner, Christ the Key. Current Issues in Theology,” Scottish Journal of Theology 66 (2013): 366; Helmer, “A systematic theological theory of truth in Kathryn Tanner’s Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity,” Scottish Journal of Theology 57 (2004): 217); Hughes, “‘Tehomic’ Christology?,” Modern Theology (2015): 10; Henreckson, “Poessessing Heaven in Our Head,” Journal of Reformed Theology 4 (2010): 178), which is why I attempt to clarify the issue in this section.}

Until this point, Christian theology could still be defended apologetically as best being able to determine the social order of a non-exclusively Christian society, since the underlying assumption is that people are universally dependent upon God’s extrinsic bestowal of grace and everyone’s acknowledgment of this dependence might lead to the entire society’s overcoming of sin. This is why we should now turn to Tanner’s understanding of how Christ is not only the exemplary human, but how he also uniquely redeems humankind from sin.\footnote{Kathryn Tanner is said to attempt in Christ the Key to construe ‘a truly non-anthropocentric interpretation of the imago Dei’ (Hilda Koster “Book Forum,” Theology Today 68 (2011): 317). This aspect of an anthropocentric understanding of sin in Tanner’s theology is missed by Paul DeHart, “f (S) I/s: The Instance of Pattern, or Kathryn Tanner’s Trinitarianism,” in The Gift of Theology: The Contribution of Kathryn Tanner, eds. Rosemary P. Carbine and Hilda P. Koster (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 29-55, who criticises Tanner for undermining any more substantial understanding of human interiority and the human self.}

This clarifies why Tanner could be less concerned, than the theologians discussed already, with translating her understanding of how grace fulfils nature into a political program that promises to enhance the existing social order.

\textit{b) Cross: Questioning apologetics in respect of Christ’s uniqueness}

Having explained Tanner’s understanding of humankind’s dependence on God’s grace, now it is possible to move on to the way she conceives of Christ as redeeming humankind from sin. First, I will show how Tanner explains Christ’s redemption from sin in terms of an example that can be imitated by Christians, to then analysing how Tanner conceives of Christ not only as an exemplary human, but also as distinct from the rest of humankind due to his full divinity.

In accordance with her extrinsic understanding of grace, Tanner understands the Incarnation not in terms of some immediate redemption of creation, but as redeeming the
world through the course of Jesus’ life. All effects of sin, from which the world needs to be redeemed, are overcome precisely at the point at which Jesus is subjected to them, because Christ’s relationship to God reworks the situation. Christ receives the grace which God bestows onto the world and weaves it into the situation, so to speak. Jesus redeemed his own humanity and that of everyone else from the tendency to store up sinful inputs in one’s own constitution. This human tendency was redeemed precisely at the point when Jesus was exposed to the violent death of the crucifixion. Here, Jesus’ relationship to God, the transcendent source of all grace, helped him to endure the harm he had to suffer. Jesus, thus, remained open to God’s grace and did not integrate the harm done to him into his constitution. Concretely, this could mean that Jesus did not become harmful himself and did not close himself off to the full receptivity of God’s grace.

This focus on how Christ’s redemptive work was not demanded of him, in the sense of an ethical duty, but rather enabled by virtue of his relationship with God, is heightened when it comes to humankind’s participation in the world’s redemption. Tanner here strictly distinguishes between Christ and the rest of humankind, inasmuch as Christ is uniquely identified with the Word. Consequently, she argues that the whole point of Christ’s crucifixion was to redeem humankind in our stead, to the extent that no one has to suffer for redemption any longer. Christ’s divinity enabled him to redeem the whole world, insofar as

477 Tanner, Christ the Key, 260-262.
478 Tanner, Christ the Key, 262.
479 Tanner, Christ the Key, 257-258.
480 Tanner, Christ the Key, 257-257. Importantly, Tanner rejects the idea that Christ revealed a cruciform pattern of redemption (Tanner, “The church and action for the World,” Scottish Journal of Theology 57 (2004): 231-232). Instead, Jesus’ human death was redeemed by Christ, in union with God, at the point of the crucifixion (Tanner, Christ the Key, 269). This means that Tanner agrees with feminist theologies – and, I wish to add, with Schillebeeckx – that salvation has been achieved despite the Cross, not thanks to it (251). In sharp contrast to Yoder, and also to Ward to some extent, Tanner rejects any positive view of suffering (Tanner, Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity, 76).

481 Crisp claims that Tanner understands the Incarnation not as God’s response to the Fall, but as the eternal act of divine grace made visible (Crisp, Revisioning Christology, 117). However, I understand Tanner’s deliberations about the Incarnation to be suggestive of both.


483 Sarah Coakley also expresses doubts concerning Tanner’s supposed optimism regarding ‘the power of theological ideas to change political or economic structures’ (Coakley, “Why Gift?,” Scottish Journal of Theology 61 (2008): 228-229).

484 Tanner, Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity, 74-76.
his divinity rendered the effects of his salvific deeds universal. Christ effected and revealed that humankind’s environment will always be filled with God’s grace. People’s sinful stocking up of themselves with sinful inputs can be undone by the grace of redemption, and will not stop God from offering grace.

This focus on Christ’s unique and eternally effective work of redemption sheds new light on the discussion concerning apologetic defences of Christian theological contributions to public politics, suggesting that Christians should imitate Christ’s redemptive work, but that this imitation cannot be turned into an ethical duty deriving its authority from appeals to the world’s need for redemption. This disassociates Tanner’s position from those who drew upon Christianity’s duty to complete the world’s redemption in order to promise positive contributions to the entire society’s political organisation. It might allow her to appreciate the theological significance of non-Christian positions to a higher degree, inasmuch as everyone is most fundamentally regarded as a beneficiary of the redemption uniquely won by Christ. In order to analyse the way in which Tanner strikes the balance between the church’s call to imitate Christ and its dependence and receptivity of a redemption that has been uniquely won by Christ in greater detail, I now turn to the way in which Tanner describes the church’s participation in Christ’s redemptive work.

c) Ecclesiology: The church’s dependence on and active participation in redemption

On the basis of the previous discussion of Tanner’s understanding of humankind’s dependence on God’s continuous bestowal of grace, the sinful blocking of humankind’s receptivity of grace and Christ’s exemplary, as well as his unique, undoing of sin, we can now move on to Tanner’s understanding of the church’s active participation in Christ’s redemptive work. Here, Tanner’s thought exhibits two equally important features. On the one hand, the church truly participates in Christ’s divine nature to the effect that grace is no longer merely extrinsic, but becomes a part of the church’s own constitution. On the other hand, however, the church’s participation in Christ’s redemptive work proceeds precisely through acknowledging the way in which God’s bestowal of grace remains extrinsic to the church. How the two are interrelated, and what this means for theology’s apologetic promises of contributing positively to society, will be unpacked in what follows.

In accordance with Tanner’s understanding of the Incarnation, in terms of Christ’s identity with the Word, she also understands Christians as being attached to Christ and the Word in a way that means that they no longer one-sidedly depend upon the grace given to them from outside. Since the problem with sin is associated with humankind, rather than with the reality external to humankind, Tanner claims that Christ has effected ‘a new relationship

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484 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 270-271. This has earned Tanner the criticism that she illegitimately protects humankind from the ‘messiness of life’ (Hackett, “What’s the Use of a Skeleton Key?,” *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* 2 (2014): 206-208). At the same time, Tanner has been criticised, from the opposite angle, of being inconsistent inasmuch as she denies that the Word itself suffers and dies on the Cross, whereas all other aspects of Jesus’ life are assumed into the Trinity (Lösel, “Book Forum,” *Theology Today* 68 (2011): 334-335). In contrast to both critics, Tanner’s argument that no human being has to suffer for the world’s redemption does not imply any promise that human beings will not suffer in a fallen world. The human being Jesus also had to suffer, but it was not his human suffering which effected God’s graciousness. God’s graciousness took up this suffering and redeemed it. Consequently, this suffering does not enter the Trinity but transpires into nothingness, which is why it is right to say that the Word does not suffer.
of God to creatures that renders the gift of divine power to human beings more efficacious and secure than before.\footnote{485} Christ not only reveals the dependency of created reality upon God, and of humans on their graced environment, but he also effected a change within human nature. The Incarnation not only enables people to receive the grace which God continues to bestow on creation once again,\footnote{486} it also prevents the further loss of this reception, such that there could not be a second Fall from grace. Since Christ is the human being who, by nature, is in a right relation to God, he cannot lose this relationship. A person’s attachment to Christ affects the same insoluble union with God, which means that grace can now also become a part of a human being’s own constitution.\footnote{487} Following the Incarnation, people are no longer either empty or filled up with sin; they can also be filled with grace.

Through their attachment to the Word, once grace is received, Christians now possess this grace as their own in Christ. Similar to Milbank’s understanding of Christians as positively exceeding Christ, Tanner also argues that ‘Christ’s life is extended in new directions as it incorporates our lives within it’.\footnote{488} Christ’s relationship to God is imitated by the rest of humankind whenever a human being is assumed by Christ, the incarnated Word, in order to live in closest union with God.\footnote{489} However, this being filled with grace should not be imagined primarily as some storing up of grace, perfecting the human individual in terms of some personal growth. Instead, being filled with grace translates into becoming an active distributor of grace.\footnote{490} The filling up with sinful inputs is, thus, prevented through one’s primary occupation of sharing with others that which one has received. All remaining sin will be overcome once everyone bestows their received goods onto others.\footnote{491}

This argument explains why Tanner, despite her affirmation of the church’s participation in Christ’s divinity, can maintain that the church is different from non-Christian groups not due to any intrinsic quality, but only due to the free grace of God in Christ, which remains extrinsic to the church.\footnote{492} The church is different from the world insofar as it is witness to something outside itself. Any ecclesial self-concern and defensiveness is idolatrous. Everyone, Christians and non-Christians, must be viewed as someone in need of Christ’s grace most fundamentally. Active participation in Christ’s ongoing redemptive work primarily means sharing the grace one continues to receive with others. This position would suggest that, in the face of opposition to ecclesial engagement in secular politics, Christian theologians should not be concerned with defending the benefits of this engagement apologetically, but they should motivate the church to continue distributing the grace God bestows onto the world with the wider society. The church must be convincing through its outward oriented works, rather than through its self-appraising words.

Tanner, thus, still advocates a form of apologetically defending Christian theological contributions to the politics of post-Christendom societies when she seeks to attend to ‘the most pressing problems and issues of contemporary life’.\footnote{493} She wants to interpret the whole

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\footnote{486} Tanner, \textit{Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity}, 22.
\footnote{487} Tanner, \textit{Christ the Key}, 14.
\footnote{488} Tanner, \textit{Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity}, 74.
\footnote{489} Tanner, \textit{Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity}, 9.
\footnote{490} Tanner, \textit{Christ the Key}, 37.
\footnote{491} Tanner, \textit{Christ the Key}, 90.
\footnote{492} Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture}, 101-102; 113.
contemporary situation ‘in a Christian light’ through solving contemporary political problems by way of drawing upon the Christian tradition. Regarding the question of the grounds upon which this theological contributions to problems of a not exclusively Christian society can be advanced, Tanner justifies this approach by situating her theology within a postmodern context in which tradition-based arguments are not rejected a priori. Exhibiting belief in some universal intelligibility, Tanner claims that Christian arguments can be accepted or rejected regarding their plausibility, even by non-Christians. In a pluralist postmodern context, the universal legitimatisation is no longer gained by way of adhering to secular procedural norms of dialogue, but by way of offering solutions to wider societal problems, the quality of which is appreciated by all. In striking agreement with Radical Orthodoxy, Tanner then draws upon the Christian tradition in order to ‘shock and startle’ in the sense of offering ‘an escape from the taken-for-granted certainties of life by referring them to something that remained ever beyond them’. Like Milbank and Ward, Tanner looks at the past, not for any nostalgic reasons, but ‘to break out of the narrowness of a contemporary sense of the realistic’. Whereas some have criticised her, saying that her approach presupposes the impeccability of the Christian tradition, Tanner conceives of this correlation of Christian theology with contemporary problems as both at once a solution to

494 Tanner, “How my mind has changed,” The Christian Century 127 (2010): 45. Tanner parallels Milbank in his desire to attain ‘the broadest possible ecumenical vision’ (42). Similarly concerned with constructing an all-encompassing worldview, Tanner highlights that faith in Christ influences one’s whole understanding of the world (Tanner, Theories of Culture, 113; 123). Tanner also speaks explicitly of a ‘theological vision of reality’ in Kathryn Tanner, “Shifts in Theology over the Last Quarter Century,” Modern Theology 26 (2010): 39. This is why Tanner’s systematic theology has been described as a search for the totality in order to render the core of Christianity easily accessible to her readers (Helmer, “A systematic theological theory of truth in Kathryn Tanner’s Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity,” Scottish Journal of Theology 57 (2004): 206-207).

495 Like Radical Orthodox authors, Tanner is also aware that a postmodern understanding of reality is not theologically neutral. More like Ward than like Milbank, however, Tanner evaluates postmodernity as a more beneficial context than modernity for Christian theology (Tanner, Theories of Culture, 61).


497 Tanner, “How my mind has changed,” The Christian Century 127 (2010): 40-41. For example, in times when the governing system of society fails, such as the failure of market capitalism in the recent financial crisis, ‘religion’ can play the crucial role of reminding everyone that markets are meant to serve the welfare of the entire society. By holding the highest standards of universal wellbeing, religions can put markets under the pressure to work for the best of all (Kathryn Tanner, “Is Capitalism a Belief System?,” Anglican Theological Review 92:4 (2010): 632-633).

498 Tanner, “How my mind has changed,” The Christian Century 127 (2010): 43. This is also why Tanner does not explain Christian claims in secular terms, but seeks to transpose the secular grounds of arguments (Theories of Culture, 117).

499 Tanner, “How my mind has changed,” The Christian Century 127 (2010): 42. Whereas Hackett deems ultimately failed Tanner’s ‘laudable attempt of retrieving traditional Christological debates in order to refresh our contemporary thinking’ (Hackett, “What’s the Use of a Skeleton Key?,” Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics 2 (2014): 192), I hope to have shown that she has succeeded.

these problems and a (correcting) renewal of the Christian tradition.\footnote{Tanner, “How my mind has changed,” The Christian Century 127 (2010): 40. Tanner positions herself within a wider trend of theologians presently characterised by this approach in Tanner, “Shifts in Theology,” Modern Theology 26 (2010): 40.} Changing contexts and practices must continuously renew one’s understanding of the whole Christian theological system as well as of particular doctrines.\footnote{Tanner, Theories of Culture, 78.} Importantly, and in contradistinction to Radical Orthodoxy, Tanner advances her theological solutions to contemporary political problems without argumentatively relying on an inferior alternative worldview, such as secularism.

My question at this point, however, is why Tanner focuses on contemporary problems in the first place if her argument is that Christians should primarily recognise the grace that surrounds them. At this point, she leans towards a model of recognising a sinful situation and of distributing the graces that Christian theology has already stored up in its tradition. Importantly, despite her otherwise convincing focus on the church’s dependence and reception of redemption, at this point, Tanner turns this reception into an ethical task. Tanner draws upon Edward Schillebeeckx in order to argue that Christians must follow Jesus in living in union with God through their own situations.\footnote{Tanner, Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity, 74 (my emphasis).} If Christians are not responsible for the world’s redemption, but are primarily joyous beneficiaries of this redemption, we might wonder where this ‘must’ comes from. As I will argue in Chapter 4, Schillebeeckx does not understand the Christian calling to imitate Christ primarily in terms of an ethical duty. The issue of whether this imitation is interpreted in the sense of imposing an ethical duty onto the church or not will prove to be decisive for the question concerning the political role of Christian theology in post-Christendom societies.

### 3.4 Extrinsic grace against Christendom: Non-competitive self-positioning in the social order

We can now turn to analyse Tanner’s understanding of the political role of Christian theology in post-Christendom societies in greater detail, given that we have presented Tanner’s understanding of the church’s participation in Christ’s redemptive work. As in the previous discussions of Milbank’s, Ward’s, and Yoder’s theologies, particular attention will be paid to the question of the degree to which Tanner conceives of non-Christian positions as mediating grace. The more non-Christian positions are acknowledged to mediate God’s grace, the more marginal a political role could be ascribed to Christian theology. The more the emphasis is on theology’s unique insight into how the world is being redeemed by Christ, the more responsible Christian theology would see itself for the entire society’s redemption. Having already argued how Tanner understands the church as called to participate in Christ’s redemptive work, and as such bearing the promise of contributing positively to the social order, I will now explain that most fundamentally, however, she positions Christians on the same level as any other human being, namely at the level of being a sinner in need of God’s bestowal of grace, which remains extrinsic to everyone.
a) Extra-ecclesial grace: Non-competitive completion of the theological vision

The discussion above suggests that Tanner’s theology presents reality as being primordially graced, because the God on whom it depends is thought of in terms of plenitudinous positivity. She stresses that God bestows grace freely upon all creatures, Christians and non-Christians alike, and she is in agreement with Elaine Graham that this grace might find non-Christians in ways unknown to Christians. Because God’s creative grace is also active outside of the church, Tanner understands a pluralist society as being good in its own right, and not only as an aspiration for a grace that needs to be perfected in the church. Her understanding of Christ’s unique and definite realisation of redemption, thus, allows Tanner to acknowledge that God might bestow graces in ways entirely different from any pre-established theological vision of reality. Her overarching theological vision of how the world is graced would have to be modified through attendance to the concrete graces mediated by non-Christian positions.

Tanner’s understanding of non-Christian cultures as graced in their own right is consistent with the aforementioned explanation that Christian theology actively participates in Christ’s redemption of the world precisely insofar as it focuses not on itself, but on the grace which is given to it from outside. This focus on extrinsic grace is evident in Tanner’s explanation that Christian theologians and non-Christians share the same material, which they then use differently. Christianity only becomes a comprehensive way of life where theologians receive and modify the practices and beliefs of others. In this sense, Tanner calls Christianity ‘essentially parasitic’.

Regarding the modification of this extrinsic grace, Tanner, like Radical Orthodox theologians, contends that Christian theology participates in Christ’s redemption of the world through relating non-Christian material to God. Contrary to Milbank and Ward, however, who laud themselves for being able to make more sense of reality than positivism through relating reality to God, Tanner in her acknowledgement of Christ’s unique realisation of redemption, argues that in relating insights from non-Christian cultures to God, ‘Christianity does not need to keep the upper hand [...] the Word does’. This orientation to God is manifest, then, not primarily in the perfection of non-Christian material by Christian theology, but in the modification of extra-ecclesial material which should be critical of both the extra-ecclesial public as well as of the church. It is noteworthy, however, that in associating this relation of non-Christian material to God with theology’s imitation of the way in which Christ redeemed the world, Tanner again implicitly promises to contribute positively to society as a Christian theologian. As in the case of Yoder, the concrete positive outcome of this redemptive activity

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504 Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 101.
505 Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 101. Tanner claims that God’s grace is active in non-Christian acts whenever they exhibit the same purifying and loving effects as Christian acts (Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 64). At another point, however, Tanner talks of a non-Christian culture’s ‘openness to grace’ rather than its mediation of grace. For a detailed and nuanced examination of aspects within capitalism that could be understood as mediating grace see Tanner, “Is Capitalism a Belief System?,” *Anglican Theological Review* 92:4 (2010): 617-635.
506 Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 112. (This is partly to differentiate her ecclesiology from post-liberals who understand Christianity in terms of a self-contained and independent society, 111).
507 Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 113.
508 Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 147 (see also p.114).
509 Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 114.
might not be foreseeable, since it is left to the unpredictable God, but theologians should be convinced that they do something good.

Tanner’s non-competitive theology, although harmonising in a similar way to that of Milbank, then promises to achieve a more peaceful pluralist society in a slightly different way. Tanner uses her ontological framework of non-competition not in order to defend the superiority of Christian theology over alternative worldviews apologetically, but in order to approach others in such a way that any apparent conflict between the two worldviews is overcome. At this point, Tanner’s non-contrastive conception of God translates into a ‘non-competitive’ conception of Christianity’s relation to non-Christians. The goal of any conversation between Christians and non-Christians is not agreement, but mutual understanding. For such a peaceful encounter, God’s grace must be imagined to be bestowed equally upon everyone, even if this materialises in different shapes. However, this way of approaching each other should not be defended triumphantly as the best solution to all conflicts in society. The point is rather that, where we are interpreting reality through the lens of Tanner’s theology, Christians would not strive to attain this privilege of imposing their own understanding of a peaceful conversation onto everyone, but they would only assume this hermeneutics because they see themselves as already equally privileged with all other recipients of grace. Tanner thus promises to achieve a more peaceful society not by way of installing a new social order or new ethical guidelines for everyone, but by way of ensuring that Christians contribute their best share to a peaceful co-existence.

Whatever Christian theologians understand about the non-Christian position, through and after this conversation, can then be integrated into the Christian tradition. The systematic whole of Christian theology is not meant to exclude, per definition, all those particulars which do not fit into this whole. Tanner would rather prefer these particulars to modify the theological vision. On this basis, we can then understand Tanner’s integration of secular non-anthropocentric philosophies or liberal positions into her theology. Whereas some have criticised this as simplistic accommodation of Christian theology to some secular trends, this criticism in turn fails to recognise the grace that is mediated by non-anthropocentric or

510 The same hermeneutic also applies to an understanding of seemingly conflicting Christian doctrines. Tanner’s systematisation has been said to be driven by her desire to provide the necessary conceptual ground on which the otherwise rather confusing uncertainty of Christianity’s primary sources can stand (Hughes, “‘Tehomic’ Christology?,” Modern Theology (2015): 3-4). Tanner is then praised for the consistency in which she applies her method but criticised for unduly restricting the depths of Biblical literature.

511 Tanner, Economy of Grace, 22-29. Tanner here relates economics to questions of societal organisation by critically building on Pierre Bourdieu’s understanding of societies as fundamentally economic. Whereas he understands this in the sense of societies being organised along the competition over privileged positions, Tanner claims that if Christians organise the distributions of goods according to the concept of grace this would constitute a fundamental critique of such competitive social orders.


513 For the way in which Tanner imagines such a Christian approach to conversation to proceed in practice see Tanner, “Respect for Other Religions,” Modern Theology 9 (1993): 1-3; 13.

514 Tanner, Theories of Culture, 98. Although Tanner contrasts her approach with that of Milbank, Tanner similarly claims that Christian theology only emerges through the continuous integration of material from outside into itself. That Tanner misunderstands Milbank’s position as exemplifying the post-liberal approach to culture has been mentioned in chapter 2.

515 Tanner, Theories of Culture, 76. Tanner associates such an understanding of Christianity as self-contained unity with a modern understanding of culture (95).
liberal philosophies. Due to Tanner’s positive understanding of grace, the integration of new contextual insights into Christian theology should be internally diversifying.\(^{516}\) Tanner’s nuanced integration of non-anthropocentric thought into Christian theology is not based on the assumption that this secular philosophy was neutral; its culturally specific status is fully acknowledged. Refraining from universalising non-anthropocentrism as the only adequate interpretation of reality, Western Christian theologians can receive non-anthropocentric philosophies as a welcome incentive to confessing Christianity’s centuries-long history of sinfully measuring everything according to the standard set by oneself.\(^{517}\)

Overall, the argument, thus far, suggests that Christ first reveals the world’s continuous dependence upon the reception of goods from beyond its own stores, and second, that humankind is healed from sin through distributing the goods one receives with others equally. In this sense, faith in Christ can be associated with the promise that every human being will be healed from sin if all occurrences are, once again, read in their relation to God as their transcendent source.\(^{518}\) This understanding of grace is reflected in the Christian approach to conversation with non-Christians on the one hand. The different gifts of grace mediated by the conversation partners should be appreciated in their unique positivity, rather than being merged into something else. For the same reason, Christian theology should receive non-Christian contributions through understanding the other position as much as possible, without demanding the conversion to Christianity of those who made these contributions. In this way, Tanner upholds Christian theology’s all-encompassing vision of how the world is being redeemed in Christ and, nevertheless, couples this with a rejection of placing Christian theology at the centre of the social order. The centre must remain Christ, whose superabundant offer of grace surpasses that which Christian theology could adequately mediate.

\textit{b) Appreciating gratuity: Acknowledging the church’s sinfulness}

It has become apparent that Tanner can argue for a Christian harmonising vision of the whole of reality without advocating Christian theology as the best governing centre for the whole of society. On the one hand, others might have an equally harmonising all-encompassing vision, and on the other, the emphasis should not erroneously be laid on Christianity itself, but on God’s grace which enables Christian theologians to attain this harmonising vision. However, how exactly Tanner acknowledges the impact of sin on non-

\(^{516}\) Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture}, 158. Tanner, in this vein, understands Christianity’s universality in terms of a breaking open of narrow cultural bonds (146). In terms of church membership, Christianity is not one more social group amongst others, but it is the overarching group which blurs the distinction between all others because anyone can join the Christian church (Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture}, 100).

\(^{517}\) Tanner claims that Christian theologians should not be too quick to universalise their arguments about dialogical openness, because Christianity, more than any other faith tradition, has violated this dialogical openness in the past (Tanner, “Respect for Other Religions,” \textit{Modern Theology} 9 (1993): 4). At the same time, Tanner tends to universalise Christian particularity to general religion in Tanner, “Is Capitalism a Belief System?,” \textit{Anglican Theological Review} 92:4 (2010): 617-635, in which she examines the relation between ‘religion’ and market capitalism. Her claim that ‘religions’ expect the most universal wellbeing of all of humankind is problematic, because not every ‘religion’ might express its beliefs in this way, and what is understood as universal wellbeing might differ greatly, to the effect that other faith traditions might not be as compatible with the mechanisms of market capitalism as Christianity.

Christian positions, as well as on the Christian theological vision, has not yet been fully explained. I will first explain how the sinful church is related to Christ, according to Tanner, and then I will draw out the implications of such a view for the way in which the church is related to the non-Christian public in terms of both what the church can receive from outside as well as what it can offer. In the final section of this chapter, I assess the degree to which Tanner also acknowledges that her own theological vision has become impaired by sin, and how this affects theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies.

Despite Tanner’s paralleling of Milbank’s understanding of Christians as positive excess to Christ, they part ways at the point when this becomes central to Milbank, and it becomes much less central for Tanner. Whereas Milbank focuses on the church’s excess to God’s goodness, Tanner focuses primarily on the restoration of created goodness, and regards the question of what God might ‘gain’ to be only of a secondary importance.\(^{519}\) She stresses more that received grace is not primarily returned to God, but is passed on to other creatures.\(^{520}\) This is not to say that a human return of grace to God, and thus an excess of divine goodness, is impossible.\(^{521}\) However, Tanner stresses that such a return is not the norm, but that it is the surprising and exceptional excess of the already good healing of sinful human nature. At this point, Tanner distinguishes between Christ’s perfect humanity and the sinful humanity of Christians. ‘Ever struggling against our own sinful impulses, we never exhibit Christ’s own perfect humanity’.\(^{522}\) Consequently, the Christian bestowal of goods onto others is, in most cases, defective. The church’s participation in Christ’s redemptive work does not always constitute an excess to the goodness of the gift received, but the gift is usually distorted.\(^{523}\) We are always giving back in a lesser form what God gave to us; the goods are always damaged to some degree or other by fallible and sinful creatures’.\(^{524}\) In this vein, Tanner confesses that ‘[t]he history of Christian thought comprises indeed one of the most comprehensive and detailed accounts of human failing ever assembled’.\(^{525}\)

Most fundamentally, Tanner views all people, Christians and non-Christians alike, as sinners in need of God’s grace. ‘Christians remain threatened by sin despite their acceptance of salvation in Christ; they have reason to continue to pray for God’s forgiveness’.\(^{526}\) In

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\(^{520}\) Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, 70.


\(^{522}\) Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 97. This nuances the criticism that Tanner unduly underestimates the sinfulness and shortcomings of humankind in her conception of how human beings can participate in God’s bestowal of grace onto others (Plantinga Pauw, “Ecclesiological Reflections on Kathryn Tanner’s Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57 (2004): 225-226; Helmer, “A systematic theological theory of truth in Kathryn Tanner’s *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity,*” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57 (2004): 217; Bender, “Christ, creation and the drama of redemption,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62 (2009): 152, FN 12; Hackett, “What’s the Use of a Skeleton Key?,” *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* 2 (2014): 209). That Tanner would derive too easily an unproblematic notion of human gift exchange from God’s unconditional giving is a common criticism. She is said to thereby downplay the risks and costs that are involved in any such unconditional giving on the human level. Whilst sufficiently highlighting the continuous human failure to adequately mediate the Trinitarian gift-exchange, Tanner explains that she does not focus on sin and finitude in her theology, because this might compromise the call on Christians to participate unconditionally in God’s gift exchange (Tanner, “The church and action for the World,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57 (2004): 232).


\(^{524}\) Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, 68.


\(^{526}\) Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 100 (see also p.110).
contrast to all the other theologians introduced thus far in this dissertation, she argues that due to sin, Christians are ‘as much outsiders as insiders to a life in Christ’. This means that Christians cannot promise to perfect the extra-ecclesial public in any direct way by their own good works, but that they can only participate in the redemption of the world as ‘graced sinners’. God’s action must always purify and surpass Christian action. In what follows, I will first investigate the extent to which Tanner’s association of the church’s sinfulness with shortcomings in its activity in comparison to Christ’s perfect activity impacts upon her understanding of the church’s relation to the extra-ecclesial public. Then, in the last part of this chapter, the extent to which Tanner also conceives of sin’s impact on theology’s vision, concerning what activity is best in a given situation, will be examined.

First, the church’s relation to the extra-ecclesial public is meant to accord with God’s merciful justice. According to Tanner’s theology of grace, gifts are not to be distributed according to some supposedly just measure of what the recipients deserve on the basis of their active contribution to the common good, but gifts should be bestowed in accordance with someone’s need, irrespective of what they may return. Tanner stresses that no human failure can ever alter one’s standing in the covenant with God in Christ, who intercedes for them and continues to justify them despite themselves. God bestows ‘merciful gift[s] of what is undeserved’ and expects nothing in return. The proper human response to this offer is to participate in this merciful gift-giving onto the world. This means that Tanner’s understanding of the extra-ecclesial public, as good in its own right, does not disacknowledge the extra-ecclesial public’s sinfulness. It is, rather, in accordance with Tanner’s understanding of God’s mercy that she can mercifully focus on the extra-ecclesial public’s goodness, rather than on its shortcomings. No sinfulness would ever undo the fact that the extra-ecclesial public is primarily an expression of God’s faithful bestowal of grace.

Second, Tanner’s anthropocentric understanding of human sinfulness, and her understanding of grace as external to humankind, translate into a high degree of appreciation of the beneficial purpose of social structures. Economic and social structures that channel human self-interest into a mutually beneficiary way are necessary presuppositions to realising Christianity’s hope for a universal community of love. Tanner, thus, favours an economic system which is structured in such a way that individual benevolence becomes virtually unnecessary. At this point, Tanner seems to associate sin more with shortcomings concerning human actions than with an impairment of people’s visions. It is, in some ways, easier to envision beneficial social structures than to move individuals to good actions. If the theological vision was equally admitted to be impaired by sin, humanly envisioned social structures could not be exempted from the effects of sin and could not be presented as the solution to sinful human inclinations so easily. To clarify the issue, I conclude by reflecting on the way in which Tanner conceives of sin as also impacting upon any theological vision and on what this means for Christian theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies.

527 Tanner, Theories of Culture, 101.
528 Tanner, Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity, 63.
c) Reconsidering Tanner’s theological solutions for societal problems

Regarding the question of the degree to which Tanner admits the impact of sin on her own theological vision and the possibility of divine corrections as being mediated elsewhere, it is important that Tanner distinguishes between God and human ideas about God.\textsuperscript{534} She seeks to focus on God and not on Christian theology’s own ideas. She is wary not to elevate anything human onto God’s position and wants that Christians obey God alone. Similar to Ward and Yoder, Tanner conceives of God’s freedom from theological ideas about God in terms of unpredictability.\textsuperscript{535} The consistence of God’s free grace can only be determined in retrospect, not in advance.\textsuperscript{536} However, also in retrospect, God’s guidance of the Christian tradition is not identifiable with any concrete aspect of Christian history.\textsuperscript{537} Again, the argument seems to distinguish the theological tradition of ideas, symbols and practices from Christ who won the world’s redemption. The Christian tradition, just as the rest of the world, depends entirely upon Christ’s redemption.\textsuperscript{538}

Yet, at the same time, Tanner maintains that in any historical period, Christian theologians must make judgments and openness to God’s correction means that Christians must acknowledge the possibility that God might nevertheless move in a different direction in the future.\textsuperscript{539} On this basis, Tanner parallels Milbank’s work in constructing an all-encompassing systematic vision, against the background of which all particulars can be assessed.\textsuperscript{540} She views it as being every Christian’s responsibility to engage in such an endeavour to the effect that Christianity should be ‘a genuine community of argument’ characterised by its common openness to correction and edification by others, and its shared hope to be faithful disciples of Christ.\textsuperscript{541} The rule of this community must be humility. Tanner attempts to leave God entirely outside of her own theological system, as an external judge. Her acknowledgment of theology’s entanglement in sin implies that, for Tanner, ‘being genuinely open to the Word[,] always involves opening oneself to the risk of failure’.\textsuperscript{542}

In this context, Tanner argues that, acknowledging their sinfulness, Christian theologians must be willing to submit to the judgments of others.\textsuperscript{543} It is precisely the seriousness of sin on all sides of a debate which renders the prospect of mutual correction a salutary gift.\textsuperscript{544} This understanding of the Christian position, as potentially wrong or at least incomplete, allows Christian theologians to receive insights from non-Christians as enrichments or corrections.\textsuperscript{545} This need for correction from non-Christians is then also why

\textsuperscript{534} Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture}, 126.
\textsuperscript{535} Tanner refers to Christ’s Cross and Resurrection as reversing human expectations.
\textsuperscript{536} Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture}, 138.
\textsuperscript{537} Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture}, 136.
\textsuperscript{538} Tanner, \textit{Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity}, 63.
\textsuperscript{539} Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture}, 155.
\textsuperscript{540} Tanner, \textit{Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity}, xiii-xix. Tanner argues that attempting to build the theological openness to God into the theological system risks pointing more to the human activity of being open than to God (Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture}, 151).
\textsuperscript{541} Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture}, 123-124.
\textsuperscript{542} Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture}, 151.
\textsuperscript{543} Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture}, 125-126. For an appreciation of Tanner’s emphasis on the church’s continuous need for reform in faithfulness to its own tradition and in dialogue with the surrounding culture, which is also influenced by Christ’s redemptive work, see Healy, “Practices and the New Ecclesiology?,” \textit{International Journal of Systematic Theology} 5 (2003): 291.
\textsuperscript{544} Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture}, 154-155.
\textsuperscript{545} Tanner, “Respect for Other Religions,” \textit{Modern Theology} 9 (1993): 3.
Tanner opposes the idea of an entirely Christian culture. At the same time, Christian theologians are also called to criticise the wider society, and transform it primarily for society’s sake, not in order to convert people to Christianity. This returns us to the issue concerning whether God could ever offer a new grace that breaks with Tanner’s own theological vision. Acknowledging the human liability to sin, Tanner cannot present her extrinsic view of grace as being the definite and eternal truth about reality.

However, Tanner insufficiently engages with the problem that theology’s entanglement in sin might distort the theological vision to such an extent that theologians might not even know what exactly should be evaluated as being problematic in their own, as well as in non-Christian, positions. Tanner’s primary focus on societal and ecclesial problems in need of a solution, and not on the graces which are already being received, is indicative of her confidence that Christian theology is able to know and point out sin. This confidence contrasts my own hypothesis that the very opposition to any theological involvement in secular politics might mediate a grace and reveal a sin to Christian theology, which Christian theologians could not have seen from their own distorted perspective. Such a move would be inconceivable from the perspective of Tanner’s theology, because her theology would commend this opposition to theological contributions to secular politics as being more on the side of a societal problem that needs to be overcome than on the side of a solution. Since Tanner understands closing oneself off from the reception of grace to be sinful, and since grace is believed to be mediated equally in all positions, it is difficult to acknowledge how someone could ever legitimately reject any position, and thus also how anyone could legitimately reject theological contributions to post-Christendom politics. It would be difficult to acknowledge the positive theological significance of the secularist opposition to theological contributions to secular political debates, because this opposition would be prejudged to reveal the sinful refusal of accepting the grace inherent in the theological contribution from the outset.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced two different Christocentric approaches to the question concerning the political role of Christian theology in post-Christendom societies; in so doing I have related to public theology’s conscious distinction of their own discipline from post-liberal responses to the question. Public theologians reject the post-liberal stance where it exhibits an illegitimate concern with Christian integrity to the detriment of engaging in the struggle of translating Christian theological insights into publicly accessible terms, and where it entails any sectarian withdrawal from political engagement in post-Christendom societies. My own discussion, found in the first two chapters, has pointed in the direction of ascribing a less central political role in contemporary post-Christendom societies to Christian theology than those apologetically defended by public theologians on the one hand, and by Radical Orthodoxy on the other. Moreover, I have argued that both public as well as Radical Orthodox theologians have tended to conflate Christ’s redemption with the theological task of completing this redemption, over and against which I have expressed my preference for a more Christocentric position.

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546 Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 102-103.
In this chapter, it has become clear that Christocentric responses to the post-Christendom context, and the ascription of a humbler political role to Christian theology, do not necessarily imply a sectarian withdrawal from the political arena. Yet, I have distanced myself from Yoder’s post-liberal position by way of rejecting his principled opposition to both apologetics as well as to Christendom. I prefer a Christocentric approach to the question of theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies not in order to safeguard Christianity’s integrity, but in order to acknowledge the way in which the Christian theological vision of redemption is impaired by sin. Yoder’s doubts that Christian theologians might not possess a positive vision of a political goal, on the basis of which they could promise to contribute positively to the society’s common good, is helpful for my own approach, but according to different reasons than those advanced by Yoder. According to Yoder, Christian theologians positively know that the principle of nonviolent love will guide them towards their true, but unknown, eschatological goal. Against this, I maintain that, impaired by sin, Christian theologians also lack the positive vision of how to reach their goal. This renders any theological promise of contributing positively to the completion of the world’s redemption to be even more questionable than it is in Yoder’s theology.

Against this background of three currently prominent approaches to the question of theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies (that of public theologians, that of Radical Orthodoxy, and that of post-liberal theologians), I then turned to Kathryn Tanner as someone whose theology points in the direction which I seek to pursue. She acknowledges the difference between Christ’s unique realisation of redemption and the sinful furthering of Christ’s redemptive work by the church and Christian theology to a greater extent than the others. We part ways, however, at the point at which Tanner still offers Christian solutions to greater societal problems. By taking the acknowledgement of the impacts of sin onto the theological vision one step further, I would like to suggest that at this particular moment in time, in a post-Christendom context, Christian theologians might be better advised to refrain from offering their solutions to problems of the greater societal whole.

It might furthermore be summarised that none of the theologians introduced thus far has been able to appreciate the theological significance of the vehement opposition to Christian theological involvement in secular politics. Public theological and Radical Orthodox apologetic defences of Christian theology against this opposition have tended to re-ascribe a central political role to Christian theology in post-Christendom societies. Tanner has apologetically defended Christian theological engagement in secular politics by way of demonstrating its ability to solve societal problems, and Yoder principally agrees with those who oppose theological contributions to secular politics, independent of their specific arguments. I will argue, in the remainder of this dissertation, that the theological significance of the opposition to Christian involvement in politics should not be discarded too quickly. Instead, Christian theologians should discern the grace mediated by this opposition, given that it partly confronts Christian theology with being itself a societal problem that demands a solution. In the following chapter, I present Edward Schillebeeckx as a theologian who is not so much concerned with apologetically defending theology’s positive impact on society as he is concerned with continuously receiving the grace discernible in non-Christian positions; I will then examine where this leads us regarding the question concerning Christian theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies.
CHAPTER 4
EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX:
REJECTING APOLOGETICS IN FAVOUR OF
CONTEXTUAL MEDIATIONS OF GRACE

Throughout the course of the previous chapters, I have begun to question public theology’s aspiration to apologetically defend Christian theological contributions to political discussions in post-Christendom societies. These defences are also directed against those secularists who vehemently oppose any explicitly faith-based involvement in secular politics. The problem with public theology’s apologetic reaction to this opposition is that it implicitly re-inscribes a central role for Christian theology in post-Christendom societies. Christendom imperialism is not overcome, but is perpetuated in a new guise. Both John Milbank and Graham Ward challenge the opposition to Christian theological contributions to secular politics even more fundamentally, revealing certain problems with the secularist social order which is why they offer two different theologically informed social orders as better alternatives. Again, their apologetic defences of Christian theological involvement in secular politics is coupled with the re-ascription of a central political role being played by Christian theology in post-Christendom societies. I have related this upholding of a remnant of Christendom, by both public theology and Radical Orthodoxy, to problems in their respective Christologies, specifically the insufficient differentiation between Christ’s offer of redemption and the Christian theological ability to mediate this offer.

John Howard Yoder was presented as a post-liberal theologian who, for Christological reasons, rejects both apologetics as well as Christendom as a matter of principle. I have argued that this rejection is too fixed, assuming an integrity on the part of Christian theology, which predisposes him not to recognise the specific theological significance of the secularist opposition to theological contributions to post-Christendom politics. Kathryn Tanner also rejects Christendom principally, but not in order to safeguard some presupposed theological integrity, but because she acknowledges the sinfulness of the church. Due to this sinfulness, non-Christian criticisms must be received as a welcome gift for Christianity. At the same time, Tanner still apologetically defends Christian theological contributions to secular politics by promising to solve contemporary societal problems.

I have argued throughout this work that, regarding the question of appreciating the theological significance of non-Christian positions, all theologians introduced thus far fail to understand the way in which the secularist opposition to Christian theological contributions to politics could mediate God’s grace. In the cases of public theology, Radical Orthodoxy and Tanner’s theology this is connected to their apologetic defences against this opposition. The secularist opposition is predefined as theology’s antagonist who must be shown to be wrong. Whatever is good and theologically significant in this opposition is, thereby, undermined. The problem with John Howard Yoder’s position is that he separates, in too sharp a manner, between Christian theology’s integrity and the sinfulness of non-Christian positions. Non-Christian positions can only mediate grace insofar as they overlap with his predefined understanding of grace.

I have argued that this failure to recognise the theological significance of the vehement secularist opposition to theological contributions to secular politics is connected to the insufficient acknowledgement by all of the theologians introduced thus far that sin entails not
only the church’s continual failure to practice that which theologians recommend, but that sin also entails an impairment of the theological vision of how the world’s redemption is further exceeded or completed, and of how political problems are best solved.

§ 1 Instead of Apologetics: Schillebeeckx’s Realistic Grace Optimism

Against this background, I will now introduce Edward Schillebeeckx’s Christology as a contribution to this discussion about theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies. First, I present Schillebeeckx’s extra-ordinarily positive reception of atheism throughout his career. This sets Schillebeeckx apart from all of the abovementioned theologians, as he does not engage with atheism by way of apologetically defending Christianity against those who have turned their back to it. Instead, he is concerned from the outset with understanding the grace that is mediated by the arguments of those who have left the church. Then, I turn to the objections that have been voiced against Schillebeeckx’s positive stance towards atheism; namely, the charges of being naively optimistic and of naturalising grace. Schillebeeckx’s ‘grace optimism’ is said to assume too easily that atheists still follow the guidance of God’s grace, thereby neglecting the way in which they also sinfully reject God’s grace. In other words, Schillebeeckx is reproached for insufficiently criticising atheism’s shortcomings.

On this basis, I argue that far from being naively optimistic, Schillebeeckx interpreted atheism through a hermeneutic that combined a grace optimism with a pessimistic anthropology. The rest of this chapter proceeds by explaining how this hermeneutic is related to Schillebeeckx’s Christology, centring on Christ’s Resurrection. In the same vein, I contest the most widespread interpretations of Schillebeeckx’s work, which associate his understanding of grace with creation. I contend that Schillebeeckx’s primary focus on the grace of redemption means that he does not neglect the world’s fallenness, but that he has a certain soteriological understanding of how grace overcomes sin, which is also manifest in his engagement with atheism and which distinguishes him from Milbank, Ward, Yoder and Tanner. In the second part (4.4) of my exposition of Schillebeeckx’s Christology, I explain Schillebeeckx’s high regard for the mediated character of grace. This distinguishes him from post-liberal theologies and elucidates further how Schillebeeckx can help us to recognise the specific theological significance of the secularist opposition to theological contributions to political discussions in post-Christendom societies. Finally (4.5), I argue why Schillebeeckx rejects apologetic defences of theology against this opposition, contrary to public theology and Radical Orthodoxy. In the subsequent and final chapter, I trace how Schillebeeckx continuously modified his own theology with regard to what he conceived of as non-Christian mediations of grace in order to propose a way in which Schillebeeckx’s theology could be retrieved for today’s political contexts.

4.1 Schillebeeckx on the theological significance of atheism

Edward Schillebeeckx’s thought can further the present discussion insofar as his theologically nuanced interpretation of atheism is revisited in relation to the research question posed here. I first examine Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of atheism as he developed it in the course of his theological career, highlighting that throughout, Schillebeeckx’s approach to atheism was marked by a merciful attitude. He always emphasised first what he appreciates
about atheism before he would criticise what he conceives of as being its shortcomings. Moreover, I will argue that, while Schillebeeckx understood atheism, from the outset, as a welcome critique that could correct the church’s practical failures, at the end of his career he also tended to interpret atheism as a critique of the shortcomings of the Christian theological vision itself.

\textit{a) Early career: Atheism’s and Christianity’s entanglement in structural sin}

By 1945, Schillebeeckx’s reflections on atheism were already very nuanced. By this point, he conceived of atheism and Christianity as two equally intelligible interpretations of the social context at the time. More precisely, Schillebeeckx associated atheism with a pessimistic outlook and Christianity with an optimistic outlook.\textsuperscript{547} His reconciliatory approach to atheism is especially evidenced in the late ‘50s when Schillebeeckx welcomes the new situation, in which Catholicism began to lose its cultural hegemony, as a possible opportunity for Catholicism to receive anew God’s grace.\textsuperscript{548} Relating this positive evaluation of Catholicism’s more marginal role in Dutch society to his understanding of grace, Schillebeeckx distinguishes between an atheist’s search for God’s absence, which might lead people to God, and a theological search for God’s presence which might distance people from God.\textsuperscript{549} The reverse side of this optimism, regarding the future to which atheism could lead, is Schillebeeckx’s rather bleak interpretation of the current state of the church.

Schillebeeckx argues that many contemporaries discard Christianity because Christians fail to visibly bear witness to the grace they proclaim with their words.\textsuperscript{550} He claims that for Christianity to be convincing, people must encounter someone whose life confronts them with the plausibility that life can be transformed into something more beautiful.\textsuperscript{551} In other words, rather than searching in atheism for the sin that led people to abandon Christianity, Schillebeeckx presents the church’s own imperfections as an occasion for people’s embracing of atheism.

A few years later, Schillebeeckx presents the relation between ecclesial and atheist sinfulness on a structural level. He then argues that while previously people were socially pressured to practice Christianity, this has now turned into the social pressure not to practice

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\textsuperscript{547} Edward Schillebeeckx, “Christelijke Situatie III. - Naar een oplossing: Bovennatuurlijk Exclusivisme,” \textit{Kultuurleven} (1945): 601-602. Schillebeeckx positively judges atheism to be one possible, but not necessary, result of his surrounding culture’s development towards conscious criticism and self-reflection.


\textsuperscript{551} Schillebeeckx here refers to the biblical account of the murderer dying next to Christ on the Cross who was converted by looking into Christ’s eyes, discovering in them a depth to which his own heart was capable.
Christianity. Schillebeeckx refuses to associate the de-Christianisation of a majority of his surrounding culture with personal sinful rejections of God. Arguing that God alone will judge the extent of sin of each individual atheist, he asks Christian theologians to trust in God’s mercy with regard to atheists’ entry into heaven. At the same time, Schillebeeckx calls on his fellow Christians not to cease striving to be holy as their heavenly Father is holy. He understands the church not as a community of the perfect, but as the institution in which people can strive towards perfection, a perfection which is achieved according to the measure that people accept the real church. This move is indicative of Schillebeeckx’s reception of atheism as a challenge to the church. The church’s sinfulness, which led to atheism, can be healed if the church can understand the atheist criticism aright and directs itself accordingly.

Two particular aspects of Schillebeeckx’s early thoughts about atheism are remarkable in relation to this dissertation’s discussion. Firstly, he understands atheism and the church to be involved in the same structural sin of coercion, and secondly, he acknowledges that God’s grace moves both Christians and atheists despite this structural sin. Consequently, the theological significance of the path pursued by atheists in their rejection of Christianity cannot simply be discarded on the grounds that their overall outlook is damaged by sin. Schillebeeckx does not yet reflect, however, on the implications of his interpretation of atheism for theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies.

b) The ‘60s: Interpreting atheism through a hermeneutic of a realistic grace optimism

Throughout the ‘60s, Schillebeeckx further developed his reflections on the theological significance of atheism. In what follows, I will explain his engagement with

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atheism in this period in reference to Schillebeeckx’s statement that in the ‘60s, Christianity underwent a greater crisis than ever before.\textsuperscript{557} Acknowledging this crisis, Schillebeeckx rejects any alarmism and argues that, although society will not automatically move in the right direction, theologians should trust that throughout the ages, some theologians have fallen prey to a crisis of faith, whereas others guided the Christian faith safely through it. Schillebeeckx then calls on Christian theologians to embrace a ‘realistic grace optimism’.\textsuperscript{558} Reiterating his previous argument, Schillebeeckx still contends that Christians should trust that those who have left the church in order to follow an integral humanism may not find God, but that God will always find them. He argues that atheist reactions against Christianity can be remedies for the Christian faith if Christians continue to listen to God’s revelation in the Bible and in contemporary reality. In what follows, I will explain Schillebeeckx’s approach to atheism in the ‘60s in relation to his attempt to guide the church through its crisis. This will show how Schillebeeckx’s grace optimism enabled him to criticise what he perceived of as being problematic about atheism and to still receive atheism as a welcome incentive for the church’s redirection towards grace.

In 1962, discussing the theological significance of sociology, Schillebeeckx argues that what sociologists term ‘church decline’ can be theologically understood as a cleansing of the church.\textsuperscript{559} The church is now presented with the opportunity to appear less as an institution of dominating power and more as an attractive place in the midst of this world.\textsuperscript{560} At the same time, Schillebeeckx interprets church decline as being indicative of his culture’s maturing to a greater trust in the universal immanence of God’s grace.\textsuperscript{561} Combining both aspects, Schillebeeckx interprets contemporary church decline as the negative preparation for a renewed sacramental appearance of the church. Again this is indicative of an optimism regarding the future, and a rather bleak assessment of the church’s present state.

Schillebeeckx then reiterates his earlier contention that those who leave the church should not be regarded as sinful. Now he even argues that, to the contrary, Christians are sinful if they fail to change their apostleship and pastoral care in faithfulness to God and in accordance to the new economic and social situation.\textsuperscript{562} He interprets the contemporary situation as one in which people have discovered their full humanity. And yet, Schillebeeckx refrains from affirming atheism on the whole, but instead retains a critical distance therefrom. He argues that contemporary atheists, for a certain time, erroneously think that God is not greater than humanity and, therefore, assume that human beings can be satisfied within the immanent sphere. He understands this attitude as being marked by a sinful weakness. Nevertheless, he is quick to highlight that this sinful weakness is not able to undo the grace

\textsuperscript{557} Edward Schillebeeckx, “Leven in God en Leven in de Wereld,” in \textit{God en Mens} (Bilthoven (Holland): Uitgeverij H. Nelissen, 1965), 72.

\textsuperscript{558} Schillebeeckx, “Leven in God en Leven in de Wereld,” in \textit{God en Mens}, 115.


which is operative in the world as an unconscious desire prior to the reception of the sacraments.  

Arguing that Christians should acknowledge the mundane world from within their relationship with God, Schillebeeckx calls on them to respect nature as developing according to its own rules, and to take up nature into their dialogue with God. He stresses that, in being lifted up towards God, nature remains integral. Immanent values, such as humanisation are evaluated as good, and Christians are called to collaborate with non-Christians for the further realisation of these values. Overall, this suggests that Schillebeeckx is convinced that allowing atheism to develop its full potential would help to overcome both the shortcomings of atheism and the sinfulness of the present church.

In 1965, in this vein, Schillebeeckx understands the Anglican bishop John A. Robinson’s (a)theology as an incentive to renew Christian theology. He regards atheism as revelatory of a partial truth, which had remained hidden in Christendom. Schillebeeckx then reconnects this partial truth to the affirmation of God in order to render it more dynamic. At this time, Schillebeeckx conceives of the relation between atheism and Christianity in terms of the former as providing positive images of God, and the latter as correctly directing these images towards God. The structure is still that of Christian theology perfecting atheism’s already good aspiration for grace. Schillebeeckx could be interpreted, at this point, as seeking how atheism is able to restore the sinful theological vision.

Around the same time, Schillebeeckx more negatively judges some variants of atheism as ideological interpretations of secularisation. To counter this ideology, Schillebeeckx seeks to show that secularisation could also be understood from within Christianity. Taking

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564 Schillebeeckx, “Dialoog met God en Christelijke Seculariteit,” in *God en Mens*, 160. For example, Schillebeeckx welcomes the secularist intuition that sins against other creatures must be healed through reconciliation with the respective creature. Understanding this readiness to repentance as already being a grace from God, he also understands the reconciling approach towards the other as an undoing of the sin with respect to God. And yet, Schillebeeckx claims that the sinner’s communion with God is only fully restored in the explicit personal encounter with Christ in the church (Schillebeeckx, “Leven in God en Leven in de Wereld,” in *God en Mens*, 147-149).
566 Schillebeeckx published two articles in response to Robinson’s (a)theology (Schillebeeckx, “Leven in God en Leven in de Wereld,” in *God en Mens*, 66-149; Schillebeeckx, Schillebeeckx, “Dialoog met God en Christelijke Seculariteit,” in *God en Mens*, 150-166).
567 This partial truth is that love lies at the deepest level of reality (Schillebeeckx, “Leven in God en Leven in de Wereld,” in *God en Mens*, 149; Schillebeeckx, “Leven in God en Leven in de Wereld,” in *God en Mens*, 84.).
568 Schillebeeckx, “Leven in God en Leven in de Wereld,” in *God en Mens*, 72-73; 79-80. Schillebeeckx argues that the atheist understanding of the world, as a closed horizon, is officially regarded as a heresy because profane reality is loosened from the greater whole to which it belongs. Like Radical Orthodoxy later, Schillebeeckx here also understands atheism as a consequence of the fideist absolute separation of God from the world, which makes a godless world possible (Schillebeeckx, “Leven in God en Leven in de Wereld,” in *God en Mens*, 147).
the atheist interpretation of the world seriously, Schillebeeckx claims that Christian theologians must show that the secular existence itself contains elements that point to an absolute mystery. Developing this thought a bit further, in 1969, Schillebeeckx wants to present Christian theology as a humanly meaningful interpretation of reality.\textsuperscript{571} The way in which Schillebeeckx seeks to counter ideological variants of atheism, then, still reflects his early distinction between atheism and Christianity along the lines of pessimism and optimism. He argues that, as much as Christians can be with atheists in this world, Christians cannot accept the latter’s interpretation of the world as unredeemed and their understanding of life as directed towards death.\textsuperscript{572} In contrast to this interpretation, Christian life must always be a saving presence in and with the living God. This does not undo the misery which gave rise to the atheistic pessimism, but it shows that pessimism is not the only self-evident conclusion to be drawn from this misery.\textsuperscript{573}

Overall, and throughout the ‘60s, Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of atheism still followed the structure of detecting atheism’s aspiration for grace and theology’s completion of this aspiration. It is striking, however, that for Schillebeeckx, interpreting atheism as aspiration does not lead him to focus primarily upon that which atheism is lacking, but on that which is already good. Even in treating atheism as one ideological whole, Schillebeeckx argues that each element within atheism can be redeemed from this ideology by taking it up into the church’s lived communion with God. This communion with God is not to replace that which it has taken up, but to appreciate it in its integrity. This reception of atheism, then, still accords with Schillebeeckx’s early distinction between atheists being entangled in sinful social structures that restrict their freedom, and God’s grace as being stronger than these sinful social structures in the sense that grace can still move individual atheists in a good direction. In accordance with this distinction, atheists could not be converted to Christianity by subverting the ideological social order at once, because this move would neglect the grace which is mediated in this social order despite its sinfulness. Instead, Schillebeeckx suggests that we ought to discern how the individual elements of existence in this sinful social order still mediate God’s grace. Moreover, theologians have to attend to atheism’s good aspiration for grace in order to restore the shortcomings of their own theological vision. Once repaired, this theological vision could then still be advocated, as being the best framework for the entire social order.

c) Late career: The political relevance of theology’s realistic grace optimism

Reflections about the relation between Christianity, secularisation, and atheism remain of great concern for Schillebeeckx, even in the ‘70s.\textsuperscript{574} During this time, Schillebeeckx begins

\textsuperscript{573} Schillebeeckx, “Diaaloo met God en Christelijke Seculariteit,” in \textit{God en Mens}, 166. Schillebeeckx speaks of worldly fiascos entering the mystery of salvation that is wrought by Christ alone.
to engage with atheist ideology critiques\textsuperscript{575}, and thinks increasingly about Christianity’s political engagement in society.\textsuperscript{576} At the same time, Schillebeeckx devotes focused attention to Christology.\textsuperscript{577} It is in this period that Schillebeeckx commences to acknowledge the impairment of his own theological vision due to sin.

In the ’70s, Schillebeeckx relates his earlier insight that atheism reveals to Christian theology a heightened trust in the immanence of God’s grace to the domain of politics.\textsuperscript{578} He interprets this atheist insight now as a stimulus for an increased ecclesial socio-political engagement for the wellbeing of all of humankind now and in the future. Important for our discussion here, concerning theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies, Schillebeeckx now argues that theology is no longer the queen of the sciences, but that, by acknowledging the autonomy of the natural sciences, theology has become a political science.\textsuperscript{579} Other sciences must inform the theological understanding of the Christian faith and, thus, be regarded as sources of theology. Conversely, theology must be critical regarding any scientific reductive understanding of reality. Since the immanent world is regarded as being the constitutive symbol of God’s real presence, the political engagement for the wholeness of the world is at once a mediation of grace and an advance of realised salvation.\textsuperscript{580} In disagreement with the atheist denial of God, Schillebeeckx then argues for a combination of prayer and politics.\textsuperscript{581} The prayerful acknowledgment of God’s excessive gift of grace, which cannot be exhausted by the human response, should help Christians to begin always anew, despite any human failures.\textsuperscript{582} It seems that, at this later stage of his career, Schillebeeckx still relies on his early distinction between atheism as a pessimistic and

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{582} Schillebeeckx, “Stilte, gevuld met parables,” in \textit{Politiek of Mystiek}, 74; 78.
\end{thebibliography}
Christianity as an optimistic understanding of reality; he is still presenting Christianity’s political role in terms of a continuous motivator for further political engagement, also in the face of failure.

Schillebeeckx’s move, to position theology as one science amongst others, is further clarified in 1973 when he distinguishes between a crisis of the language of faith and a crisis of faith. He asserts that there is a crisis of the contemporary language of faith, which he evaluates positively. This crisis has been initiated through theology’s forgetfulness that scientific and religious language both refer to the same reality of the coming of God’s Kingdom. According to Schillebeeckx, this crisis of the language of faith should vitalise the Christian faith through remembering again that the difficulty in finding the right language to express the reality of Christ is constitutive of the Christian faith. Schillebeeckx stresses that there is no guarantee that Christian theology will succeed in experimenting with this difficulty. And yet, the risk can be taken in faithful trust in the Holy Spirit’s guidance of Christian congregations, which allows theologians to be mistaken at times.

Schillebeeckx assumes that there is an evocative surplus in the language of the surrounding culture, and the language of faith is meant to express that which remains implicit in all other languages. In this way, Christian theology is but one science amongst others, but it is also holistic, given that it assembles what all the other sciences express about the arrival of God’s Kingdom. It is noteworthy that, at this point, Schillebeeckx introduces a distinction between theology’s confession of Christ, as fulfilment of all cultural expectations, and theology’s inability to mediate this fulfilment. Theology names the surrounding society’s aspiration for grace in such a way that the fulfilment by Christ remains extrinsic to theology’s own utterance.

Also throughout the ‘80s, Schillebeeckx devoted a great deal of thought to the relation between Christianity and the surrounding society. Elaborating further on his earlier understanding of history as the medium of God’s dialogue with humankind, Schillebeeckx now develops his earlier apophatic emphasis on God’s hiddenness.

583 Schillebeeckx, “Crisis van de Geloofstaal als hermeneutisch probleem,” Concilium 9 (1973): 36. In the extreme case of Protestant dialectic theology, the crisis of the language of faith has led to a crisis of faith, because if all language of faith has become obsolete, there cannot be any living faith (41).


argues that, in order to fulfil theology’s prophetic task, Christian theologians must listen to the foreign prophecy with which the world confronts it. Combining this with an apophatic stress of God’s hiddenness, Schillebeeckx claims that this foreign prophecy must partly be discerned not in positive images, but in negative contrast experiences. In these, people experience the absence of what should be, followed by a multitude of different, equally legitimate positive projects that are all aimed at overcoming the negative contrast. The theological task is, then, to discern with society the best project in each particular situation.

This already sets the path for Schillebeeckx’s most explicit discussion of the question about theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies in 1986, when he rejects any Christian exclusivism or imperialism as antithetical to the gospel. Although he maintains that theology’s support of people’s lived experience with God belongs to the most ultimate inspirations of humanism, Schillebeeckx refrains from advocating a central role for Christian theology in the determination of the social order. At this point in his career, Schillebeeckx interprets the true humanity of Jesus Christ to be both revealing and concealing God, which is why Christians cannot claim that Christ is the only path to God. Schillebeeckx fears that interpreting Christ as the sole path to God would conflict with his observation of atheists who are engaged in the struggle for a more humane future. Consequently, Christians can no longer claim that solely their faith in God’s self-revelation in Christ indicates the way to a better future.

Altogether, this brief outline of the development of Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of atheism throughout his career shows that he has continued to focus on the grace that is mediated by atheist positions, despite the latter’s overall reductive understanding of reality. This is connected to the ‘realistic grace optimism’ that is characteristic of his entire oeuvre, and his understanding of atheism as an equally legitimate pessimistic interpretation of reality. Until the 70’s, Schillebeeckx still presented Christian theology as the fulfilment of atheism’s...
aspiration for grace, with a focus on that which is good about this aspiration, not on the lack it expresses. Nevertheless, Schillebeeckx stated explicitly that atheist solutions to societal problems are to be seen as on the same level as theological ones only at the end of his career.\textsuperscript{598} He explicitly refrained from presenting Christian theology as a solution to societal problems, and advocated Christian theology as one conversation partner amongst others in common political projects of positively overcoming evil and suffering. He now wanted theology to express society’s aspiration for grace, while distancing himself from promising that theology itself could fulfil these aspirations. From one side, this can still be interpreted as being in line with Schillebeeckx’s grace optimism: God’s offer of grace is too abundant to be expressed by Christian theology alone. From the other side, however, I argue in both this chapter and the next that the \textit{particular} grace mediated in Schillebeeckx’s increasingly atheist context revealed to him the impairment of the theological vision through sin; an impairment which should be acknowledged by Christian theologians in order to guide Christian theology safely through its crisis and to restore the theological vision eventually. This is why, towards the end of his career, Schillebeeckx wrote that Christian theology must express the divine reality, but in a ‘stammering’ way.\textsuperscript{599}

4.2 A naively optimistic interpretation of atheism?

In order to advance my argument that Schillebeeckx’s theology of grace is valuable for contemporary public theology, it should first be mentioned that Schillebeeckx’s reconciliatory stance towards atheism has been criticised for not only being naively optimistic, and insufficiently critical, but also for exhibiting an erroneous understanding of grace. Contrary to this criticism, this chapter’s purpose is to argue that Schillebeeckx’s attitude towards atheism was undergirded by one consistent understanding of grace, in terms of God’s merciful forgiveness, an understanding of grace which I claim should be revitalised for answering the question concerning contemporary theology’s contributions to political discussions in post-Christendom societies.

After explaining the criticism voiced against Schillebeeckx in greater detail, I will relate this criticism to the nearly unanimous scholarly agreement that Schillebeeckx’s positive attitude to non-Christian positions is related to his theology of creation, in the sense that God’s creative grace can be trusted to be present throughout the entire society. I will argue that, if this was true, then Schillebeeckx’s critics would be justified in their opinion that he is naively optimistic with regards to atheism.\textsuperscript{600} Contrary to both, Schillebeeckx’s critics as well as those who appreciate his theology of creation, I will argue that Schillebeeckx’s theology of \textit{redemption} undergirds both his understanding of grace as well as his positive attitude towards atheism. The difference being that, grounded in a theology of redemption, Schillebeeckx does not neglect the sinfulness of humankind, including atheists. Instead, he operates with a particular understanding of how the world’s sinfulness is overcome in Christ. The Christian Resurrection faith, in the superior power of God’s forgiveness over human sin, also determines Schillebeeckx’s understanding of how societal problems are being solved.

\textsuperscript{598} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Church}, 79 [81-82].
\textsuperscript{599} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Church}, 75 [77-78].
\textsuperscript{600} Schillebeeckx has been criticised for displaying ‘an almost naive neglect of the problem of sin here’ (Robert C. Ware, review of \textit{God and Man}, by Edward Schillebeeckx, \textit{Theological Studies} 31.2 (1970): 351).
a) Objection to Schillebeeckx’s naive optimism: Naturalising grace

Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of atheism must be understood as being broadly situated within the context of discussions about the risks of naturalising grace that surrounded the Second Vatican Council. This is of particular interest for this dissertation insofar as John Milbank, building upon Henri de Lubac’s theology, accuses more liberal theologians of naturalising the supernatural. Naturalising the supernatural means that the secular world is regarded as a self-sufficient realm that can be immanently explained, and faith in God is understood as a super-addition, acceptable only by way of a fideistic leap. This idea of a natural order with its own natural end, independent of grace, is regarded not only as being unorthodox, but also as objectionable for political reasons. If such an integral natural order is affirmed, then atheism is legitimised as the most coherent understanding of immanent reality to which Christianity is merely a superfluous addition. This would mean accepting the secularist worldview as a neutral fundament upon which Christian theology can build, and the Christian faith could no longer be legitimately appealed to as a critical corrective to secular politics. De Lubac consequently upholds that nature’s aspiration for grace cannot be fulfilled without the help of Christian theology. The non-Christian world is understood only as ‘receptive readiness’ to be fulfilled in Christ. This means that Christian theology must attend to extra-ecclesial developments, but the focus of this attention is never on the world in its own right. Instead, it must be detected how precisely the world prepares itself for the reception of its fulfilment in Christ. It is noteworthy that, in the Radical Orthodox elaborations of this position at least, the perfection of nature by grace is equated with the perfection of non-Christian philosophies and politics by Christian theology.

Also Schillebeeckx has been criticised for erroneously naturalising the Christian faith. Objections have been raised regarding Schillebeeckx’s assumption that the secular

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601 By liberal, in this context I mean those theologians associated with the theological journal Concilium after Vatican II.

602 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 207: 222. The accusation is primarily aimed at Karl Rahner.


realm is sanctified by divine grace without the help of the church, and that Christian theologians merely have to point to this extra-ecclesial grace. Schillebeeckx is accused of being too optimistic regarding developments in the extra-ecclesial public. However, this criticism is reductive insofar as Schillebeeckx’s optimism, concerning the all-pervading presence of grace in the extra-ecclesial realm, is not discussed theologically. Instead, Schillebeeckx’s acknowledgement of non-Christian mediations of grace is simply being discarded as ‘inclusive formula[s] [...] simple cliché[s] or [...] a program of secularistic ideology’.

In this chapter, I will defend Schillebeeckx’s position against his critics by way of explaining the relation between his theology of grace and his optimism regarding atheism. My argument follows more observant critics whose research suggests that Schillebeeckx is as adamant in interpreting nature only in its relation to grace as de Lubac is. On this basis, it appears that Schillebeeckx’s critics misidentify the point of disagreement between their own and Schillebeeckx’s understandings of the relation between Christian theology and non-Christian understandings of the world. The disagreement does not concern the relation between nature and grace so much as it does concern the role of Christian theology in fulfilling nature’s aspiration for grace. Not unlike de Lubac, Schillebeeckx also characterises nature most fundamentally as an aspiration for grace, as has already become apparent in my above exposition of Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of atheism. However, Schillebeeckx is more hesitant to claim that the balance between the fulfilment and the postponement of this fundamental human aspiration for grace is best struck by Christian theology. Most


614 Borgman, Edward Schillebeeckx, 51. It is this craving for grace that is named by Christian theology. Also, Schreiter understands Schillebeeckx as examining the world’s expectations in order to understand Christian salvation in a contemporary context, while also highlighting that it is not the worldly expectations, but God who ultimately defines salvation (Schreiter, “Indicators of the Future of Theology in the Works of Edward Schillebeeckx,” in Edward Schillebeeckx: Impulse für Theologien im 21. Jahrhundert, 34). See Edward Schillebeeckx, “Arabisch-Neoplatonse Achtergrond van Thomas’ Opvatting over de Ontvangelijkheid van de Mens voor de Genade,” Bijdragen 35 (1974): 298-308, where Schillebeeckx explains that humans are most fundamentally a desire for God, which cannot be fulfilled by human strength but only by God’s grace. At another point, Schillebeeckx refers to an implicit directedness of all humankind towards Christ by virtue of their creation (Edward Schillebeeckx, “Kerk en mensdom,” Concilium 1 (1965): 77).
fundamentally, Christian theology must also be regarded as an aspiration for grace, on the same level with non-Christian positions.615

Before I explain Schillebeeckx’s understanding of redemptive grace, I argue in what follows that the above criticism is related, and justified, with reference to interpretations which link Schillebeeckx’s understanding of grace to his theology of creation. This link would indeed render Schillebeeckx’s theology unjustifiably optimistic at the expense of duly acknowledging atheism’s sinful imperfections.

b) Reconsidering common interpretations of Schillebeeckx’s theology: Contesting the centrality of creation

At first glance, my claim that Schillebeeckx’s assessment of atheism is based on his theology of grace accords with the observation that “[t]he strong accent on grace -- the presence and power among us -- has characterized Schillebeeckx’s theological project from its beginning. The creator God “bent towards humanity” has promised to be with us always -- even to the end of the world.”616 In this vein, it has been suggested that Schillebeeckx’s treatment of creation and grace could be taken up by future scholars in order to further contemporary discussions about a faithful collaboration between Christianity and secular culture.617

Contrary to this suggestion, however, instead of stressing the influence of Schillebeeckx’s theology of creation on his engagement with non-Christian positions, I argue that his theology of redemption is more decisive for his optimism concerning atheist mediations of grace.618 Highlighting the import of redemption, rather than creation, on his theology of grace is crucial because it means that Schillebeeckx’s optimism concerning non-Christian positions is not based on an overestimation of human nature. Instead, I will show in

615 This can be related to Schillebeeckx’s suspicion of authoritative power, which, from early on in his career, led him to reject the view that submission to the Roman Catholic Church was necessary to receive grace (Borgman, Edward Schillebeeckx, 50).


the course of this chapter that, considering the Fall and human sinfulness, Schillebeeckx works with a particularly pessimistic anthropology. By pessimistic anthropology I mean that Schillebeeckx has little trust in the success of human efforts, and continues to acknowledge the probable failure of all human projects. Yet, at the same time, he maintains the ‘realistic grace optimism’ alluded to in the above historical outline of Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of atheism. Combining his grace optimism and his pessimistic anthropology, Schillebeeckx’s theological reception of non-Christian insights reflects his conviction that ‘it is precisely this sinful world which is an object of God’s mercy,’ and in order to overcome contemporary societal, as well as ecclesial problems, Schillebeeckx searches for mediations of this mercy in his context.

That Schillebeeckx calls his grace optimism realistic can be explained with reference to his emphasis on the mediated character of grace. He stresses throughout that grace can be known from human experience in the world, in this way countering idealistic understandings of grace. Schillebeeckx calls grace an experience of the totality of reality that cannot be entirely conceptualised. In our human experiences we can experience something that transcends our experience and proclaims itself in that experience as unexpected grace. Schillebeeckx defines grace as the surplus of reality, the abundant positivity of reality. Grace is the all-encompassing reality in which all natural positivity participates. However, grace cannot be reduced to the sum-total of all natural positivity. Instead, grace can be identified at the point at which all natural positivity merges into mystery. In other words, the positivity of nature itself suggests that there is more than this natural positivity. This affirmation of more than natural positivity is what Christians call grace. In this sense, it can be known from human experiences of nature that grace transcends nature. In my subsequent presentation of Schillebeeckx’s Christology, I will clarify that this experience of reality, which Christians call grace, is a post-Resurrection experience of the world as redeemed. It is not the only self-evident experience of nature, but once nature is interpreted through a hermeneutic of redemption, Christian theologians can explain how nature is experienced as being graced. Before I demonstrate in greater detail that Schillebeeckx’s focus on Christ’s Resurrection builds the basis for his association of grace with redemption, more than with creation, I will first explain what I mean by Schillebeeckx’s combination of a grace optimism with a pessimistic anthropology.

619 Schillebeeckx understands grace not primarily as a perfection of nature but as an overcoming of sin (Schillebeeckx, Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World, trans. John Bowden, CW vol. 7 (London et al.: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 76-77; 518-519; 626-627 [87; 530; 637]). This has been rightly observed by Louis Dupré in “Experience and Interpretation,” Theological Studies 43.1 (1982): 32.

620 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 547 [557].

621 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 519 [531].

622 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 66 [78].


c) Grace optimism and pessimistic anthropology: The centrality of redemption

Towards the end of his study of the biblical understandings of grace, Schillebeeckx summarises that all gospels ‘testify at the same time both to the depth of human failure in a world of finite and sinful men [sic], and to the depth of the triumphant mercy of God in a human world which in the last resort is experienced as “God’s world”’.626 Schillebeeckx even interprets the only unforgiveable sin against the Holy Spirit as the deliberate rejection of ‘the principle of God’s mercy in Jesus’.627 In a similar vein, Schillebeeckx repeatedly stresses the fundamentally undeserved character of grace.628 A Christian understanding of grace always already includes God’s forgiveness of human sin.629 This indicates that, similar to Kathryn Tanner, Schillebeeckx understands grace not primarily as a reality within human nature but as the natural environment in which humankind always already exists.630 Schillebeeckx affirms a grace optimism inasmuch as God’s faithful bestowal of grace can be trusted, as well as a pessimistic anthropology insofar as this grace is unmerited by humans. This grace optimism is ontological, given that the superior power of all goodness and justice over all evil and injustice is acknowledged.631 Schillebeeckx calls this grace optimism ‘the mother of all

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626 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 826 [830]. Schillebeeckx highlights that due to human sinfulness, the Old Testament term *hesed* acquires the connotation of mercy and forgiveness (Schillebeeckx, Christ, 84 [96]).

627 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 626 [637]. In another place, Schillebeeckx explains that reality is always already graced and redeemed, and sin is the human rejection of their dependence on that reality (Schillebeeckx, Christ, 547 [555-556]). See also Edward Schillebeeckx, “Vergebung als Modell menschlicher Autonomie und die Gnade Gottes;” in *Die Widerspenstige Religion: Orientierung für eine Kultur der Autonomie?*, ed. Toine van den Hoogen, Hans Küng and Jean-Pierre Wils (Kampen: Pharos, 1997), 141, where Schillebeeckx defines sin as the refusal of God’s forgiving love.


629 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 76-77; 84; 627 [87-88; 96; 637].


631 Schillebeeckx argues that ‘[i]n Christ, God assures that everything will ultimately be good for those who love him’ (Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament*, 156 [266-268]); he speaks of ‘the superiority of all justice and goodness to injustice’ as ‘the experience of the absolute presence of God’s pure positivity in the historical mixture of meaning and meaninglessness’ (Schillebeeckx, Church, 94-95 [96-98]), of an ‘eternal difference between good and evil’ (136 [138]), of ascribing ‘pure positiveness [sic] to God’, and refers to God’s essence in terms of ‘a promoter of the good and an opponent of all evil, injustice and suffering’ (Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 105 [119-120]); he speaks of God’s refusal ‘to acknowledge the superior strength of evil and so with his own divine being stand[ing] surety for the defeat of evil in all its forms’ (Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 155 [178]); explaining the Old Testament term *hesed*, Schillebeeckx explains God’s relation to humankind as one not only of good will but of ‘generosity, overwhelming, unexpected kindness which is forgetful of itself, completely open and ready for “the other”’ (Schillebeeckx, Christ, 83 [94]); with regard to belief in the anti-Christ, Schillebeeckx explains that Christians must acknowledge evil as a power whilst affirming that the power of grace in Christ has the last word (Schillebeeckx, Christ, 570-571 [579-580]); he explains the Christian understanding of election as based on the conviction that ‘[l]ife is directed by God in freedom and goodness’, and that God’s love ‘turns all things to good for those who love God’. Christians affirm the ‘fundamental goodness of God’s purposes with man [sic]’ and ‘the ultimate
By a pessimistic anthropology, I mean that, in accordance with an Augustinian understanding of evil as privation, Schillebeeckx distinguishes between all goodness as deriving from God and as, therefore, ultimately lasting, and all evil as deriving from human sin. Human sin is the reason why history is a mixture of good and evil. As a combination of both an optimistic theology and a pessimistic anthropology, the superior power of grace is identified as God’s mercy at the heart of reality.

Explaining Schillebeeckx’s aforementioned trust that, despite their entanglement in sinful social structures, individuals can be moved by God’s grace, Schillebeeckx’s pessimistic anthropology does not prevent him from being optimistic regarding the human ability to continuously respond to God’s grace. He still regards every human being as being intrinsically inclined towards grace. However, this is not so much due to any optimism concerning human nature, but is rather to do with Schillebeeckx’s understanding of grace in terms of mercy. Due to God’s merciful grace, human beings participate in God irrespective of their sinfulness. That God’s grace is most fundamental means that it is always at people’s disposal, even despite any human rejection of this grace. The boundary between God and humankind is entirely on the human side. ‘The rejection of the merciful love of God is the only barrier which can be thrown up against mercy’. God’s merciful acceptance of people, despite their sinfulness, means that reality is not only good in terms of an unaffected stability. Schillebeeckx not only refers to the superior power of the good over evil, but he also claims that from a Christian perspective the whole of reality is concerned with human salvation. ‘Wherever we turn, God’s grace is always there ahead of us. His face confronts us in everything’. In other words, to attribute the origin of goodness to the merciful God means

meaning of human life’ (Schillebeeckx, Christ, 625 [635]); he furthermore explains that this promise ‘enables, allows and obliges us to give wellbeing and goodness the final say in a way that is grounded in Jesus, because the Father is greater than all suffering and greater than our inability to experience ultimate reality as a trustworthy gift’ (Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 586 [625]); he explains that this hope for the future is based upon God’s faithfulness who provides ‘certainty about the goodness of the plan of creation which is both the beginning and the eschaton [...]’. It is “very good” (Gen. 1:31)’ (Schillebeeckx, “The Interpretation of the Future,” The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism, trans. N.D. Smith, CW vol. 5 (London et al.: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 7 [7-8]).

Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 61 [71-72]. Schillebeeckx calls the Parousia Christology the mother of all Christianity insofar as it affirms that despite all appearances to the contrary, the Kingdom of God is still coming. See also Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 602 [640] where Schillebeeckx explains that the core of Christianity is that ‘[h]uman history - with its successes, fiascos, illusions and disillusions - is transcended by the living God’.


Schillebeeckx, Church, 6; 97 [6-7; 99-100]; Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 4 [20-21].


Schillebeeckx, Church, 125 [126-127].

Schillebeeckx, Church, 88 [90-91].

Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 101 [115-116]; Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 591 [628-629].

Schillebeeckx, Christ, 626 [637].

Schillebeeckx, Christ, 742 [747-748].

that there is an active relating of graced reality towards humanity. God as pure positivity actively bends towards humankind and, in this way, draws humankind into the goodness of reality. It is this emphasis on God’s mercy which allows Schillebeeckx, despite his pessimistic anthropology, to conceive of a fundamental human readiness to respond to the graced reality which surrounds them.

Before I explain the political implications of this theology of mercy, I will first examine the way in which Schillebeeckx’s grace optimism and his pessimistic anthropology are connected to his Christology. This will not only clarify the issue at hand, but will also show the importance of the mediated character of grace characteristic for Schillebeeckx’s theology. As such, my examination is not only aimed at defeating the criticism that Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of atheism is naively optimistic, but also at distancing his position from the principled rejection of Christendom advanced by Yoder. Moreover, the last part of my exposition of Schillebeeckx’s Christology is, then, a critique of both public theology’s and Radical Orthodoxy’s apologetic defences of Christian theological contributions to political debates in post-Christendom societies.

§ 2 Schillebeeckx’s Resurrection Christology

Some of the most prominent interpreters of Schillebeeckx’s theology relate his optimism regarding atheism to his understanding of creation. Christians must attend to the secular world because the Creator God is salvifically present in all of history. However, my argument in this chapter suggests that Schillebeeckx’s optimism concerning atheism is based on his understanding of redemption, and includes a particular understanding of how human sinfulness is overcome by Christ. In the following, I substantiate this claim by showing that Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of the Cross is the basis for his pessimistic anthropology, and that his grace optimism is related to Christ’s Resurrection. In my exposition of Schillebeeckx’s Christology, I follow his claim that faith in the Resurrection entails three affirmations: First, that of a new creation in which evil is definitely overcome; second, the approval of Jesus as a concrete and unique person and third, that the church has been founded by Christ. My explanation of the first implication serves to elucidate further the Christological underpinnings of Schillebeeckx’s realistic grace optimism, the second implication is related to Schillebeeckx’s emphasis on the mediated character of grace and the third implication is important regarding the question of apologetic defences of Christian theological involvement in secular politics.

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642 Schillebeeckx, Church, 73; 94 [75; 96-97]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 88-89 [100]. In Christ it has been revealed that God is universal love for all (Schillebeeckx, Church, 175 [176-177]; Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 19 [22-23]).

643 Schillebeeckx, “The Non-Conceptual Intellectual Element,” Revelation and Theology, 258 [59-61]. This also explains why Schillebeeckx claims that Christianity is more a matter of being chosen than one of human choice (Edward Schillebeeckx, “Godsdienst van en voor mensen,” Tijdschrift voor Theologie 17 (1977): 366).


645 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 609 [648-649].
4.3 The definite overcoming of evil: Combining a grace optimism with a pessimistic anthropology

This part of the chapter serves to show how Schillebeeckx’s grace optimism and his pessimistic anthropology are not related to his theology of creation, but instead to his theology of redemption. First, I argue that Schillebeeckx’s pessimistic anthropology is related to Christ’s crucifixion by sinful humankind, in order to then explain Schillebeeckx’s grace optimism in relation to Christ’s Resurrection, and to conclude by showing how Schillebeeckx’s understanding of the Incarnation is related to the Resurrection, thus stressing not only the continuity but also the discontinuity of Christ’s redemptive grace with creation.

a) Cross: Human sin against God’s grace

My explanation of Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of Christ’s crucifixion serves to elucidate the way in which his grace optimism is connected to what I have termed a pessimistic anthropology. Most fundamentally, understanding the Resurrection as ‘God’s overwhelming power over evil’, Schillebeeckx argues that the significance of the Resurrection can only be recognised in the light of the seriousness of Christ’s death. Schillebeeckx understands the crucifixion as definitive rupture between sinful humankind and God’s grace. Understanding God as pure positivity, Schillebeeckx ascribes full responsibility for Jesus’ violent death to humankind. Schillebeeckx does not exempt the church from humankind’s sinful rejection of Christ, but instead interprets Peter’s denial of Jesus as the future church’s abandonment of Christ at the Cross. Consequently, at Jesus’ crucifixion there is a real break between all of humankind and God. At the crucifixion, there is a real lack of grace in humanity, elucidating Schillebeeckx’s pessimistic anthropology. At

the moment of the crucifixion, the only human who sides with God’s grace is Jesus, who is at this point entirely isolated from the rest of humankind. In other words, Schillebeeckx relates Christ’s uniqueness not so much to the Incarnation as to the Cross.

As has been stressed repeatedly, it is central to Schillebeeckx’s thought that Jesus had not been abandoned by God on the Cross. The crucifixion reveals that ‘God is also present in human life where he is absent from human view’. Schillebeeckx interprets God’s silence at the Cross as indicative of the way in which love endures all evil. Obedience to the silent God means that Jesus continued to love his fellow humans, leaving it to the reality of love to decide upon the future. In this sense, Jesus’ ‘solidarity with God in an anti-divine situation brought us salvation’. Jesus was not primarily concerned with the consequences for his own life, because of his single-hearted trust in God. Quite the contrary, Jesus’ death revealed that his life and message were unconditional. At the same time, and in sharp contrast to Yoder, Schillebeeckx regards the Cross not as a victory, but as a failure, and claims that it is a mystery that this historical failure did not erase Jesus’ faith in God. ‘Ultimately Jesus’ death is a question to God - the God whom Jesus proclaimed’. This is why Schillebeeckx refrains from setting Jesus’ crucifixion as an ethical example to be followed by all Christians.

Consequently, the seriousness of Christ’s crucifixion means that the whole of creation could have evaporated into the nothingness from whence it came. The death of the only human who consistently aligned himself with God’s grace puts God’s continuous offer of grace more into question than anything else ever could.

b) Resurrection: God’s ontological forgiveness

In the aftermath of the crucifixion there is, then, an absolute separation between humankind and God, with the sole exception of Jesus who is reconciled to God. Consequently, humankind’s real lack of grace following the crucifixion can only be healed by Christ. At this point, Schillebeeckx’s emphasis on divine forgiveness moves to the forefront. Schillebeeckx understands the Resurrection as God’s sole initiative of mercy over the entire

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652 Schillebeeckx, Church, 124 [125-126]; Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 117 [134-135].

653 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 284 [317-318].

654 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 277[309-310] ; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 789-790; 818-819; 825-826 [793-794; 823; 830].

655 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 612 [652-653].

656 Schillebeeckx, Als politiek niet alles is, 28.

657 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 277 [309-310].

658 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 286 [319].


absurdity and meaninglessness of Christ’s death. In the Resurrection, humankind has been redeemed by Christ because Christ here forgives sinful humankind. At this moment, the whole of humankind has found mercy before God. Only in this sense of Christ’s forgiveness is it then appropriate to say that, in Christ, humanity has already risen through Christ’s suffering to glory with the Father. This does not lead Schillebeeckx to affirm some mysterious transformation of human nature in any abstract sense. It means that God continues to bestow grace onto the world despite human sin, which indicates that Schillebeeckx understands God’s mercy as a reality external to humankind.

The Resurrection is, thus, not so much the revelation of God’s creative grace as it is the revelation of God’s mercy over the sinful world. Yet, at the same time, the Resurrection is not a reaction against evil, but it reveals the persistence of goodness despite all evil. There is, thus, a continuity of grace in both creation and redemption, but the point is that this continuity is no automatism, but that the continuity has been effected by Christ’s gratuitous forgiveness of humankind in the Resurrection.

In accordance with his pessimistic anthropology, Schillebeeckx calls Christ’s forgiveness of humankind in the Resurrection a pure act of God’s grace. The Resurrection is a revelation that comes from God alone. It is the event of God being God. Not even Jesus Christ’s humanity is active at this point. The human passivity at the Resurrection, Schillebeeckx understands God’s bestowal of grace primarily as a reality external to humankind, and in this sense humankind as always living within the supernatural order, is overlooked by Stephen J. Duffy, The Graced Horizon: Nature and Grace in Modern Catholic Thought (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 162, which invalidates Duffy’s criticism that Schillebeeckx cannot account for how an infant, incapable of choice, could be called graced (165). Duffy erroneously turns Schillebeeckx’s claim that people always already live in the reality of God’s grace, either in the mode of acceptance or in the mode of sinful rejection, around and suggests that this would imply that being graced depends on the human choice for grace. Quite the contrary, Schillebeeckx’s argument suggests, seeing that people always already live in a graced environment, they are most likely to accept grace unconsciously.


Schillebeeckx, “Kerk en mensdom,” Concilium 1 (1965): 67-68. This is Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of God the Father’s appointment of the humiliated Christ at His right hand.

Schillebeeckx, “The Church and Mankind,” World and Church, 91 [117-118].

That Schillebeeckx understands God’s bestowal of grace primarily as a reality external to humankind, and in this sense humankind as always living within the supernatural order, is overlooked by Stephen J. Duffy, The Graced Horizon: Nature and Grace in Modern Catholic Thought (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 162, which invalidates Duffy’s criticism that Schillebeeckx cannot account for how an infant, incapable of choice, could be called graced (165). Duffy erroneously turns Schillebeeckx’s claim that people always already live in the reality of God’s grace, either in the mode of acceptance or in the mode of sinful rejection, around and suggests that this would imply that being graced depends on the human choice for grace. Quite the contrary, Schillebeeckx’s argument suggests, seeing that people always already live in a graced environment, they are most likely to accept grace unconsciously.

Schillebeeckx, Christ, 547-548; 763-764 [557; 766].

Schillebeeckx, Church, 127 [128-129]; Schillebeeckx, Christ the Sacrament, 156 [266-268]; Schillebeeckx, “The Interpretation of the Future,” The Understanding of Faith, 10 [11-12]; Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 97 [110-111].

Schillebeeckx, “Kerk en mensdom,” Concilium 1 (1965): 71. See also Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 328; 484; 603; 608; 610 [359-360; 525; 641-642; 647-648; 649-650]. Whereas Milbank focuses on those biblical passages that refer to Christ’s self-raising from the dead. Schillebeeckx claims that the earlier Christian tradition understood the Resurrection of Christ to be a pure act of God (Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 484; 603 [525; 641-642]).


stressed by Schillebeeckx, is precisely why the Resurrection has the greatest ontological impact. 672 The Resurrection is not one event in history amongst many, but the most all-encompassing reality. 673 The Resurrection is the greatest turning point in history and, as such, inaugurates an entirely new situation of the world. 674 The situation is entirely new, insofar as all suffering and evil has definitely been overcome. 675 And yet, Jesus Christ is the only point in which history is already eschatologically completed. 676 This means that all history can only be understood adequately in the light of Jesus Christ. 677

The implications of such a Christocentric interpretation of history are twofold. On the one hand, because of God’s mercy, the whole world has already received the promise of its final appraisal in Jesus Christ. 678 This is why Christians can trust in an ultimately good end of history, despite all remaining evil. 679 In this sense, the whole of history is already completed in Christ. 680 On the other hand, a Christocentric interpretation of history also means that history carries its own judgment within it: It has already been decided that all goodness will persist and that all evil will vanish. 681 However, the concrete shape of this goodness has not yet been determined definitively and is open to historical developments. 682 In other words, history ‘continues as usual’, but the overall reality in which it takes place has changed. 683 That the concrete shape of the eschaton is still open to developments is related to Schillebeeckx’s emphasis of the mediated character of grace, which will be clarified in the subsequent section regarding Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of Jesus’ life as anticipation of the Resurrection, as well as in 2.4 regarding Schillebeeckx’s understanding of the Resurrection as God’s affirmation of the unique person Jesus.

672 Schillebeeckx speaks of the Resurrection as a non-empirical event because it is trans-historical (Schillebeeckx, _Interim Report_, 64 [74-75]; Schillebeeckx, “The Interpretation of the Future,” _The Understanding of Faith_, 10 [11-12]; Schillebeeckx, _Jesus_, 306; 348; 491 [336-337; 380-381; 532]).
673 I, hence, disagree with those who argue that Schillebeeckx’s ‘functional Christology’ fails to maintain that in Christ God has acted decisively for the salvation of all of humankind (Kenneth Surin, “Atonement and Christology,” _Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie_ 24 (1982): 132).
674 Schillebeeckx, “Kerk en mensdom,” Concilium 1 (1965): 72; Schillebeeckx, _Jesus_, 357; 490 [390; 531-532].
676 Schillebeeckx, “The Church and Mankind,” _World and Church_, 92 [119-120].
677 Schillebeeckx, “The Church and Mankind,” _World and Church_, 92 [119-120]; Schillebeeckx, _Jesus_, 502 [541-543].
678 Schillebeeckx, “The Church and Mankind,” _World and Church_, 91-92 [118-120].
679 Schillebeeckx, _Jesus_, 122-123 [142-144].
680 Schillebeeckx, “The Church and Mankind,” _World and Church_, 92 [119-120]; Schillebeeckx, _Jesus_, 160 [182-184].
682 Schillebeeckx, “Revelation, Scripture, Tradition and Teaching Authority,” _Revelation and Theology_, 10 [14-16].
683 Schillebeeckx, _Jesus_, 491 [532].
My argument that Schillebeeckx’s understanding of grace is related to redemption, rather than creation, could be questioned by his often-cited presentation of Christ as ‘concentrated creation’. Despite this focus on the Incarnation’s continuity with creation, I will expose how Schillebeeckx’s understanding of the Incarnation is connected to the Resurrection and, thus, focuses on Christ’s overcoming of the sin of fallen creation. At the same time, my argument makes evident that far from postulating any naturally self-evident interpretation of Christ as grace for the world, Schillebeeckx is concerned with showing how Christ can be understood as grace for the world if his life is understood through a hermeneutic of the Resurrection.

Schillebeeckx’s affirmation of the transhistorical nature of the Resurrection explains why, in retrospect, Jesus’ whole life can be understood as an anticipation of the Resurrection. Interpreted through Schillebeeckx’s theology of redemption, Jesus’ actions are, at the same time, saving actions in this world and eschatological acts that overcome all evil definitely. They are, as such, already the initiation of a new world. In this sense, the Resurrection is no superaddition onto Jesus’ earthly life, but the Resurrection is this concrete earthly life itself insofar as its positivity persists despite and beyond Jesus’ death. Jesus’ whole life anticipates the Resurrection in which only grace persists, and his death is only part of this life because some still reject this grace.

This means that Schillebeeckx’s grace optimism is realistic in the sense of being connected to the concrete shape of Jesus’ life. Schillebeeckx argues that traces in Jesus’ life must account for any Christian grace optimism. God must be recognised in the concrete humanity of Jesus. In this context, Schillebeeckx understands Jesus’ life as revelatory of God’s being, as pure positivity, insofar as Jesus was never against anything but most
fundamentally in support of positive causes. Schillebeeckx explains his grace optimism in relation to Jesus who did nothing but good. Jesus was positively oriented towards God’s saving love, and only secondarily did this imply that he opposed everything that inhibited this loving grace from flourishing. Whereas the eschatological scheme of his day sought to transform people’s ethical behaviour through proclaiming God’s final judgment, Jesus transformed people’s lives through the proclamation of God’s unconditional love. In this way, Jesus’ concrete life reveals God as giver of grace towards humanity.

Interpreting Jesus’ life through the perspective of the Resurrection, Schillebeeckx holds that the salvific value of the crucifixion also only emerges when Jesus’ death is read in the context of his whole life and Resurrection. God, as pure positivity, has been revealed in Jesus’ stance towards his approaching crucifixion insofar as he overcame oppression and suffering by remaining good. Schillebeeckx, not unlike Yoder, claims that Jesus was killed due to his non-violent subordination to the ruling powers. Schillebeeckx also argues that Jesus freely accepted his death, due to his obedience to God. However, whereas Yoder presents Jesus as faithfully obeying the ethical principle of nonviolence, despite any fatal consequences, Schillebeeckx explains Jesus’ obedience to God at the Cross in terms of Jesus’ participation in the ontological reality of love. This is important because it explains why Schillebeeckx refrains from attributing any redemptive significance to suffering and from postulating any ethical duty of furthering Christ’s work of redemption.

Moreover, due to the cruciformity of grace’s triumph over evil, the Christian faith in redemption is neither obvious nor self-evident. The Cross reveals that redemption cannot only be seen where good triumphs over evil, but also where an alignment with evil is voluntarily refused. ‘Christology is God’s presence in this world, but under the sign of weakness’. Consequently, the understanding of Jesus’ life as mediation of divine grace can only be accepted on the basis of ‘a vote of confidence’. In other words, the Christian faith that grace is mediated in creation does not mean that interpreting reality as graced would be the sole self-evident interpretation of reality.

692 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 123-124 [143-145].
693 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 161; 169-170 [183-184; 192-194].
694 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 123-124; 154-155 [143-145; 177-178]. Schillebeeckx argues that Jesus’ acts of goodness were not restrained by any mundane law (Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 215 [242-243]; Schillebeeckx, Church, 584 [591-592]).
695 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 116; 122 [135-136; 142-143].
696 Schillebeeckx, Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983, 6. Schillebeeckx also calls Jesus a ‘prophet of salvation’ in contrast to prophets of doom (Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 119-120 [138-140]).
697 Schillebeeckx, Church, 126 [127-128].
698 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 282 [315-316].
700 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 132, 248; 284 [152-153; 279; 317-318]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 777; Schillebeeckx, Church, 124; 180 [125-126; 181-182]. Schillebeeckx emphasises that on the Cross, Jesus was not consoled by God’s presence and that he remained silent about the mystery that sustained him. Hilkert consequently argues that Schillebeeckx’s understanding of grace is dialectical. Due to evil, God can only be experienced indirectly as the compassionate heart of reality despite all evil (Mary Catherine Hilkert, “Experience and Revelation,” in The Praxis of the Reign of God, 60-61).
701 Schillebeeckx, Church, 124 [125-126]; Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 116 [133-134]; Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 243; 266-269; 278 [273-274; 297-301; 310-311].
702 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 533 [542].
703 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 264 [295-296].
Overall, it has now become clearer why Schillebeeckx’s grace optimism is not naïve. He is realistic, regarding human sinfulness, and works with a particular understanding of how God’s forgiving grace overcomes this sin. Due to the Cross, Christians must acknowledge their own as well other people’s sinfulness, but due to the Resurrection, Christians can trust in God’s forgiveness. Schillebeeckx does not present this understanding of reality as a self-evident implication of Jesus’ earthly life, but he shows how Jesus’ earthly life can be understood on the basis of this hermeneutical framework.

4.4 The eternal approval of Jesus as unique person: The mediated character of grace

The above discussion indicates that, with respect to the Christian faith in the reality of redemption, the Resurrection can be understood as God’s eternal act of creative grace on the one hand, and as God’s new forgiveness of human sin on the other. Moreover, how Jesus’ earthly life can then be interpreted as already an eternally persistent anticipation of the Resurrection has been shown. Whereas it could seem as though Schillebeeckx draws on the biblical Jesus in order to confirm his already established hermeneutical framework, I will now turn to the way in which Schillebeeckx also reversely emphasises the way in which any predefined understanding of grace must be modified in accordance with the concrete life of Jesus of Nazareth.704 This first section of 4.4, thus, serves to elucidate Schillebeeckx’s contention that the Christian worldview is not laid out in ideals, but in the concrete person of Jesus.705 The way will then be paved to understand the crucial role of the mediated character of grace in Schillebeeckx’s theology.

a) Understanding grace: The importance of mediation

His claim that any predefined understanding of grace must be modified in accordance with the concrete life of Jesus Christ is connected to Schillebeeckx’s second understanding of the Resurrection as an event that was entirely new, regarding the unique person Jesus.706 Christian Resurrection faith implies that, instead of vanishing at his death, Jesus was taken up into the persistent reality of redemption.707 Again, Schillebeeckx stresses that Jesus did not include himself in God’s own life at the Resurrection, but that this inclusion was God’s sole initiative.708 Jesus’ outward orientation was ‘rewarded’ by God’s legitimatisation of Jesus at the Resurrection.

704 This is important, especially regarding those who criticise Schillebeeckx for an eiegosis of his theory into the Biblical texts (Joyce A. Little, review of The Church with a Human Face, by Edward Schillebeeckx, The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly 52:1 (1988): 163).
705 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 628 [639].
706 Schillebeeckx, Church, 127 [128-129]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 514-515 [526].
707 Only at the Resurrection of Jesus did it become apparent that the historical Jesus is fully divine (Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 67 [78-79]; Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 353 [385-386]). This proves erroneous Surin’s claim that Schillebeeckx would present Jesus only as remarkably unique person, but would fail to account for the full divinity of Christ (Surin, “Atonement and Christology,” Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie 24 (1982): 146-147).
708 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 465 [505-506]. Schillebeeckx refers to Jesus’ refusal to legitimate himself at the crucifixion (464 [504-505]).
That God was fully incarnate in the concrete man Jesus means that Christian knowledge of God must be Christ-shaped.709 Jesus’ concrete life determines the Christian understanding of God.710 Even in the inadequacy of Jesus’ humanity to reveal God’s transcendent being and in thus obscuring the immanent Trinity to some extent, Jesus reveals the precise measure between God’s transcendentance and all immanent mediations of grace.711 This measure will never be surpassed until the eschaton.712 God’s bestowal of grace continues to be Christ-shaped.713 In this way, the Incarnation can be interpreted as God becoming God for humankind in the concrete person Jesus of Nazareth.714 Jesus’ life revealed that God is gracious towards humankind by nature. Acknowledging God’s changelessness, Schillebeeckx then contends that creation is also primarily God’s sharing of God’s goodness with others.715 In this way, the redemption, effected by Jesus, proceeds from God.716 However, this redemption then also returns to the glory of God, which means that Schillebeeckx conceives of a reciprocal exchange of grace between God and Jesus.717 In other words, although grace always proceeds from God, the way in which grace is mediated in this world shapes God’s own life.

This view’s implications can best be seen in reference to the crucifixion. Schillebeeckx contends that, at the Cross, it has been revealed that grace overcomes evil through

711 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 618-619 [659-661]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 624-625 [635].
712 Schillebeeckx, “Revelation, Scripture, Tradition and Teaching Authority,” Revelation and Theology, 13 [19-20].
713 Schillebeeckx, “Theologia or Oikonomia?,” Revelation and Theology, 278 [89-91]; Schillebeeckx, “The Church and Mankind,” World and Church, 95 [123-124]; Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 482; 503; 603 [523-524; 543-544; 641-642]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 3-4 [19-20]; Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 67; 117-118 [78-79; 134-137]; Schillebeeckx, Church, 128 [129-130]. This is also why Schillebeeckx regards the historical-critical method as important (Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 60 [80]). In this sense, Schillebeeckx responded to Vatican II’s search for a new Christology by offering an entirely new framework for Christology (Philip Kennedy, “Human Beings as the Story of God: Schillebeeckx’s Third Christology,” New Blackfriars 71 (1990): 126-127). Schillebeeckx widened the scope of Christology by way of relating the results of historical-critical biblical studies to classical Christology in his books Jesus and Christ (Fergus Kerr, Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 55). In “De Toegang tot Jezus van Nazaret,” Tijdschrift voor Theologie 12 (1972): 28-60, Schillebeeckx explains that he uses the historical-critical method, not as a supposedly neutral access point to Jesus Christ, but because his contemporaries asked the sort of questions about Jesus that could best be answered by historical-critical research (28-32). He stresses that the offer of grace in Christ is, however, definitely not the same in biblical times as it is now (56), which means that the results of the historical-critical method cannot simply be understood literally as answers to contemporary Christological questions.
714 Schillebeeckx, “Persoonlijke Openbaringsgestalte van de Vader,” Tijdschrift voor Theologie 6 (1966): 276; 285; Schillebeeckx, “De zin van het mens-zijn van Jezus,” Tijdschrift voor Theologie 2 (1962): 128; This is also why Schillebeeckx understands Christ’s humanity as the Father’s gift to the Son (141-143).
716 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 519 [556-557].
717 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 519 [556-557].
defencelessness. Schillebeeckx interprets the beatitudes as affirming the ultimate power of powerlessness. Far from rendering this as an ethical principle, however, Schillebeeckx’s pessimistic anthropology comes to the fore when he stresses that God alone can deliver the world from all remaining suffering and evil. The point of believing in the superior power of defencelessness is, then, not to seek to redeem the world through nonviolence, but to trust in the world’s redemption despite all the remaining evil. Altogether, both beatitudes and crucifixion suggest that understanding the world through Schillebeeckx’s realistic grace optimism does not imply that one would have to ignore the realities of unjust suffering and death. Instead, the way in which unjust evil and suffering has been overcome by Christ is revelatory of what Christians should understand by the term grace. This also paves the way for Schillebeeckx’s theological appreciation of grace’s mediated character in the contemporary context.

b) Understanding redemption: The importance of contemporary mediations of grace

In accordance with the transhistorical significance of the Resurrection, Schillebeeckx not only understands Jesus’ earthly life, but also all other human acts of genuine goodness, as eternally significant anticipations of the Resurrection. This is why the concrete shape of the eschaton has not been defined at the moment of Christ’s Resurrection, but remains open to further developments. Consequently, whereas all other theologians introduced thus far have explained how the Christian understanding of redemption can serve to solve contemporary political problems, Schillebeeckx stresses that any Christian understanding of redemption must be informed by contemporary mediations of grace.

Stressing the mediated character of grace, and opposing any idealistic understandings of redemption, Schillebeeckx claims that Christian theologians are called to express what it means that all of reality participates in Christ’s redemption in ever new situations. Any contemporary articulation of faith in Jesus Christ must be co-determined by people’s relation to the ever renewing reality of redemption. The history of salvation must enter into the Christian definition of God. This means that theologians should ‘collate, seriously and responsibly, elements in history which may lead to a new, authentic “disclosure” or source of experience’, thereby exposing the ‘unfathomable depths’ in historical events. Later interpretations of redemption, thus, widen theology’s understanding of the historical Jesus.

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718 Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 117 [134-135]; Schillebeeckx, Church, 127 [128-129].
719 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 603 [641-642]; Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 117 [134-135]; Schillebeeckx, Church, 126 [127-128].
720 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 154 [177-178].
721 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 154 [177-178].
722 Schillebeeckx, Church, 180-181 [181-183].
723 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 629-631[669-673].
724 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 162 [184-185]. Analogous to Jesus, God also integrates the dead into God’s own life (Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 119-120 [137-139]).
725 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 39; 43; 400-401 [56-57; 61-62; 436-438].
726 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 537.
727 Schillebeeckx, “Theologia or Oikonomia?,” Revelation and Theology, 280 [92-94]; Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 519 [556-557].
728 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 533 [571].
729 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 42; 192; 358-359; 434 [60-61; 217-218; 391-393; 471-472].
In short, the way in which Christ redeems the world right now cannot be known merely through studying Christological texts from the past, because God’s new offer of grace, as it is mediated in the contemporary context, further shapes the Christian understanding of redemption.\(^730\)

Whereas all other theologians introduced in this dissertation have laid the focus on how Christian theology can actively complete the world’s redemption, Schillebeeckx is the first one to say that without first recognising redemption in the contemporary context, Christian theologians cannot adequately know what they should be completing. Nevertheless highlighting the importance of naming this reality of redemption theologically, Schillebeeckx distinguishes between salvation as liberating grace, and revelation as the explicit naming of this grace in reference to God.\(^731\) Salvation is the whole of history, insofar as it derives from God, i.e. insofar as it is graced.\(^732\) God’s salvation is then primarily a reality in history, and only a conscious experience and recognition by the faithful secondarily.\(^733\) Yet, at the same time, Schillebeeckx argues that since salvation is the all-encompassing reality in which the whole world participates, salvation is never not interpreted.\(^734\) Schillebeeckx argues that Christ’s interpretation of God’s offer of salvation is uniquely original and adequate, which is expressive of his Christocentrism and indicates a somewhat humbler role for Christian theology.\(^735\)

Metaphysically, Schillebeeckx is able to appreciate God’s offer of grace in reality as a reality that surpasses human interpretation, with the help of the notion of the implicit intuition.\(^736\) This notion helps Schillebeeckx to differentiate between a noetic and a conceptual knowledge of the immanent world.\(^737\) Noetic knowledge concerns the personal contact of the knower with the reality that is known.\(^738\) Conceptual knowledge merely participates in this

\(^730\) Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 38 [55-56]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 551 [561].

\(^731\) Schillebeeckx, “Revelation, Scripture, Tradition and Teaching Authority,” Revelation and Theology, 5-6 [6-9]; Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 39 [56-57]; Schillebeeckx, Church, 7 [7]. In this sense, Schillebeeckx refuses the notion of ‘anonymous Christians’, given that the whole point of Christianity is to name that which is already good in the world and to thus perfect this goodness through the naming. For an argument that Schillebeeckx understands even the Christian naming of reality as still a divine, and not as a human, initiative see Bernadette Schwarz, “Die Widerständigkeit der Wirklichkeit als erstes Moment des Erfahrens,” in Edward Schillebeeckx: Impulse für Theologien im 21. Jahrhundert, 94-109.

\(^732\) Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 595 [633-634]. Schillebeeckx here distinguishes himself from conceiving of God’s salvific acts in terms of sporadic interventions into an otherwise neutral course of history.

\(^733\) Schillebeeckx, “Linguistic Criteria,” The Understanding of Faith, 33 [36-37]; Schillebeeckx, Church, 12 [12-13].

\(^734\) Schillebeeckx, “Revelation, Scripture, Tradition and Teaching Authority,” Revelation and Theology, 6 [8-9]; Schillebeeckx, Church, 10 [10-11].


\(^736\) Schillebeeckx has adopted this notion from the Thomist phenomenologist Dominique De Petter (Borgman, Edward Schillebeeckx, 42). According to Philip Kennedy, De Petter had the ‘single most important and enduring influence’ on Schillebeeckx’s work (Kennedy, “Continuity underlying Discontinuity,” New Blackfriars 70 (1989): 266).


noetic knowledge. This means that Schillebeeckx seeks mediations of redemption within the exterior world. There is a mysterious depth in this world, a depth which can be discovered and celebrated by Christian theology. Theologians’ environment contains a surplus in which their interpretations can truly participate. In other words, the notion of the implicit intuition helps Schillebeeckx to posit the reality of grace in the exterior world and only by participation in theological interpretations. Human interpretations of the world can really participate in grace, but they are bound to fall short of capturing the entire positivity that resides in the reality of redemption that surrounds humankind.

This means that Schillebeeckx rejects the view that all conceptual expressions equally deviate from some supposedly inexpressible reality to which they point. The inexpressible reality of redemption really does give a definite content to conceptual knowledge. There is, thus, a plurality, not a vague infinity, of truthful interpretations of the grace mediated in the world. However, for Schillebeeckx, it is important that reality itself, and not the human conceptual grasp thereof, determines the Christian understanding of redemption. The grace mediated in the contemporary context is known if theologians are aware that their interpretations fall short of the fullness of redemption experienced in their noetic contact with their environment. In other words, Schillebeeckx claims that theological interpretations should somehow reflect that they remain partial expressions of the way in which nature mediates grace.

This is not to present theological interpretations of the reality of redemption as merely decorative adornment, but Schillebeeckx understands the unity of the objective reality of salvation, and its interpretation in revelation, as redemptive. ‘God’s eschatological presence in Jesus and man’s [sic] ultimate understanding of reality are correlative’ in such a way that ‘[t]he objective being of the content of faith, and thus its intelligibility, is its saving value.’ In other words, God’s salvation in history is only completed if its significance is theologically

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744 Schillebeeckx, “Towards a Catholic Use of Hermeneutics,” God the Future of Man, 28 [41-42]; Schillebeeckx, Church, 43 [43-44].
746 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 596 [634-635].
747 Schillebeeckx, “What is Theology?,” Revelation and Theology, 110 [169-170].
recognised. For it is only in the light of revelation that a human life can be led in personal communion with God. ‘The whole purpose of the history of salvation is to be an epiphaneia of God’.\(^{748}\) The function of revelation is to glorify God through the faithful acceptance of God’s way of salvation.\(^{749}\) In this way, Schillebeeckx defines revelation as that saving event in which the reality of God visibly ‘touches’ human reality.\(^{750}\)

Overall, Schillebeeckx appeals to Christian theologians to recognise contemporary mediations of redemption. Redemption is recognised through a noetic contact with the immanent world, a contact which surpasses that which can be conceptually expressed.\(^{751}\) This emphasis on the concrete reality of redemption is important for an understanding of how Schillebeeckx’s conceives of the relation between Christian theology and non-Christian positions. For Schillebeeckx, faith in the Christian God demands attentiveness to concrete mediations of God’s bestowal of grace.\(^{752}\) Christian theologians understand their own faith only through interpreting the way in which God’s grace is manifest in the contemporary lives of people.\(^{753}\) This is why he claims that ‘an intense presence-in-the-world is a necessary condition for theology’.\(^{754}\) At the same time, Schillebeeckx’s emphasis on the superabundant positivity that permeates the exterior world leads him to deny the human ability to have an exhaustive total vision of redemption.\(^{755}\)

What it means that only Christ perfectly interprets God’s offer of salvation, whereas Christian theologians could fail to do so adequately has not yet been explained however. At this point, Schillebeeckx again highlights the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the sole standard for what Christian theologians should assess as positive when they examine their context for mediations of grace. For Christians to be oriented towards God, as pure positivity, means assembling around Christ.\(^{756}\) The ways in which Jesus’ uniquely adequate interpretation of grace restrains the interpretative openness of theological interpretations of the reality of redemption, as it is mediated in the contemporary context, will be explained in the following section.

c) Understanding mediation: The importance of continuity with Jesus Christ

The previous section has highlighted that the theological interpretation of the reality of redemption in each context is integral to Schillebeeckx’s understanding of grace. This also means that each generation’s expectations of salvation, its aspiration for grace, must be responded to with a contemporary interpretation of the world’s redemption in Christ.\(^{757}\) At the same time, Schillebeeckx is quick to highlight that a Christian understanding of Christ should never be predetermined by the contemporarily prevalent worldview or by contemporary

\(^{748}\) Schillebeeckx, “Theologia or Oikonomia?,” Revelation and Theology, 282 [95-97].

\(^{749}\) Schillebeeckx, “Theologia or Oikonomia?,” Revelation and Theology, 283 [97-99].

\(^{750}\) Schillebeeckx, “Theologia or Oikonomia?,” Revelation and Theology, 279 [91-92].


\(^{752}\) Schillebeeckx, Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983, 11.

\(^{753}\) Schillebeeckx, Church, 110 [111-112]. Schillebeeckx talks more specifically of God’s liberating love as discernible in people’s life as true mediation of God’s Kingdom.

\(^{754}\) Schillebeeckx, “What is Theology?,” Revelation and Theology, 107 [165].

\(^{755}\) Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 577-578 [614-616].

\(^{756}\) Schillebeeckx, “The Church and Mankind,” World and Church, 91 [117-118].

\(^{757}\) Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 42-43 [60-62].
expectations, but that the prevalent worldview and its expectations must be corrected with reference to the concrete Jesus of Nazareth. This again highlights Schillebeeckx’s acknowledgment of the sinfulness of humankind. What people call redemption might not coincide with God’s concrete offer. What is important for this discussion is the role Schillebeeckx ascribes to Christian theology in naming the concrete offer of redemption in a certain context correctly, and what this implies with regards to theology’s ability to complete the world’s redemption.

Schillebeeckx affirms that there is no access to the earthly Jesus apart from the Christological testimony of the early church. However, Schillebeeckx emphasises that this community of first Christians reflected what Jesus himself was and did. The new life they sensed in themselves was interpreted in remembrance of the earthly Jesus. The community of the church is not founded upon or bound together by an abstract value, but by the concrete person Jesus Christ. The decisive factor in interpreting new offers of redemption is that the interpretation remains truthful to the concrete reality of Jesus Christ. Consequently, God’s contemporary offer of salvation in Christ can only be understood through continuous engagement with the biblical reports about the primary response to this offer. It should be borne in mind that the early church stood under the sole norm of the concrete historical Jesus, who must be the abiding interpretative norm for Christianity. All new Christian interpretations must, consequently, allow Jesus Christ to have a determinate influence on them. Given that Schillebeeckx opposes a mere conceptual development of the ideas about Jesus, all interpretations must be constantly corrected with reference to the concrete reality of Jesus. Schillebeeckx contends that there is room for the human imagination, but that this imagination must always be subdued under the concrete reality of Jesus for correction.

Schillebeeckx, thus, differentiates between the concrete reality of Jesus and theological interpretations of this reality. He argues that the historical reality of Jesus contains a gratuitousness which cannot be directly conceptualised. In other words, Schillebeeckx posits the abundance of redemption in the concrete life of Jesus Christ and not in the Christian interpretation thereof. In this way, the concrete Jesus of Nazareth is the only norm for Christian faith, even if this reality is always clothed in the conceptual pre-understandings of a

758 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 46; 92-93; 437 [64-65; 112-114; 475-476]. For an explanation of the reshaping of an Aristotelian worldview with reference to Jesus Christ see Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 525-527 [563-564].
759 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 28 [44-45].
760 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 28 [44-45]. Schillebeeckx also interprets the empty tomb tradition as a way to state the identity between the crucified Jesus and the risen Christ (303 [333-334]), and as a symbol for the community of Christian believers (305 [335-336]). Similarly, Schillebeeckx does not interpret the stories about appearances of the risen Christ as proofs of the Resurrection, but as the early church’s missionary mandate (323 [354]).
761 Schillebeeckx, “The Church and Mankind,” World and Church, 90 [116-117].
762 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 537 [575-576]. Likewise, Schillebeeckx denies that there is an essential core of religious experiences in general that could be unequivocally conceptualised (551 [589-590]).
763 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 40 [58-59]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 56; 632-633 [70; 644]; Schillebeeckx, “Persoonlijke Openbaringsgestalte van de Vader,” Tijdschrift voor Theologie 6 (1966): 279.
764 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 437 [475-476]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 7-8; 51-52 [24; 65-66].
765 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 56 [70].
766 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 446 [485-486].
767 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 46 [64-65]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 623 [633].
768 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 29 [45-46].
769 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 569; 571 [606-607; 609-610].
certain time. It is this concrete reality of Christ that motivates Christians to ponder about the implications. And, since the fullness of meaning resides in the historical Jesus, later explications of that meaning must have already been implicitly present in the concrete life of Jesus of Nazareth. In this way, Schillebeeckx stresses that Christ is the only proper index for any analogical knowledge of God gained through new experiences of redemption.

Schillebeeckx then refrains from any triumphant presentation of theology’s naming of the reality of redemption, in its relation to Christ, and argues that Christian theologians must highlight that it is Christ himself and not the Christian interpretation which is redemptive, claiming that there is always some disharmony between people’s experience of redemption in Christ and the conceptualisation of that reality. Schillebeeckx highlights that the Christian conception of salvation and grace must continuously be measured against the concrete offer of redemption in Jesus Christ. This is why Christian theology must sometimes distance itself from its older interpretations, which are no longer necessary for a contemporary experience of Christ.

Consequently, for Schillebeeckx, Christian orthodoxy is not primarily marked by its philosophical coherence, but by the adequate remembrance of the reality of Jesus Christ. On the conceptual level, different Christologies cannot be unified, and it is impossible to specify some definite conceptual criteria for a truthful Christology. The only unifying factor is the experience of redemption in Jesus Christ that is bound to remain pluriform in its expressions. No single interpretation is identical with the essence of Christian faith, which is the reality of Jesus Christ itself. The pluriformity is then limited by the reality itself in which the interpretations all participate. All Christological confessions must always remember the unique life of Jesus Christ. In other words, the experience of redeemed reality in Christ must be primary, and the conceptualisation of that reality secondary.

Overall, why and how contemporary mediations of grace are central to Schillebeeckx’s theology has been explained. This distinguishes him from all other

770 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 445 [484-485].
771 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 521 [559-560].
772 Schillebeeckx, “What is Theology?,” Revelation and Theology, 93 [141-142].
773 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 32 [49-50].
774 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 6-7; 92 [22-24; 112-113].
776 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 42 [60-61]. Schillebeeckx also explains faith in the true divinity of Jesus not as the logical conclusion of the early church’s Greek ontology, but because it had been discovered in the church’s prayer. Although the ecclesial liturgy only knew of prayers in Jesus directed to the Father, many of the faithful had started to pray directly to Jesus (528 [566-567]).
777 Schillebeeckx, “The Context and Value of Faith-Talk,” The Understanding of Faith, 16-17 [17-19]; Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 35; 612 [52-53; 652-653]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 623 [633-634]. At the same time, Schillebeeckx maintains that there must be an ecumenical striving for a unified conceptualisation of that reality (Jesus, 41 [59-60]). At certain junctions one interpretative route must be pursued, even if there are legitimate alternatives (533 [571]). Only if the path taken leads to aporias is it necessary to investigate if and how the choice at the decisive church council was one-sided.
778 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 4; 38; 404; 537 [20-21; 55-56; 440; 575-576]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 4; 69-70; 623 [20; 83-84; 634].
779 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 537 [575-576].
780 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 41-42; 437 [59-61; 475-476].
781 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 30; 201 [46-47; 226-228].
782 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 29 [45-46].
theologians introduced in this dissertation. Whereas public theologians, as well as John Howard Yoder, have been criticised for an understanding of grace that is insufficiently dynamic and modifiable in accordance with new mediations, Radical Orthodoxy tries to envision a more dynamic understanding of grace. However, both Milbank and Ward introduce this dynamic by way of focusing on the contribution made by the theological interpretation to the understanding of grace in every new historical context. With this move, they tend to undervalue the way in which Christ uniquely mediates and interprets grace in favour of elevating the theological interpretation of contemporary mediations of grace onto a level beyond criticism. Tanner claims that grace is equally mediated by all positions, which is problematic insofar this understanding of grace does not allow her to perceive of the grace mediated in a position that denies the equal worth of all contributions to a certain discussion. In other words, she must interpret those who reject Christian theological contributions to secular politics as denying the equally graced status of all positions, which makes it impossible to discern the particular grace mediated in this secularist opposition. Schillebeeckx’s understanding of the way in which grace is primarily mediated in the contemporary reality of the world’s redemption in Christ and only by participation in non-Christian and Christian interpretations of that reality, promises to offer a way in which the theological significance even of the secularist opposition to theologically informed political involvement can be appreciated, the fruits of which will be shown in Chapter 5.

4.5 The foundation of the church: Ecclesial sin against apologetics

Not only interpreting the Resurrection as revelation of the superior power of grace over evil and of Jesus’ constitutive part in the reality of redemption as unique person, Schillebeeckx also calls Christ’s Resurrection the abiding foundation of the church. Schillebeeckx’s emphases of God’s sole act in the Resurrection, the superior power of grace over evil and the abiding inclusion of Jesus’ unique person in this grace are also discernible in his deliberations about the church. Whereas I have already explained how Schillebeeckx’s focus on the Resurrection relates to his simultaneous upholding of a grace optimism and a pessimistic anthropology, as well as to his appreciation of the mediated character of grace, this final part of my exposition of Schillebeeckx’s Christology returns to the issue of apologetic defences of Christian theological contributions to secular politics.

In short, I will argue that Schillebeeckx opposes apologetic defences of the church’s positive influence on society for two reasons. First, theologians cannot promise that the church contributes positively to society, because this would deny that the church is the community of those who accept God’s forgiveness on which they continue to depend. Against this, it could be objected that the church is called to imitate Christ and that this calling would oblige theologians to promise that the church will complete or exceed the whole society’s redemption. I counter this objection by way of highlighting that Schillebeeckx rejects these apologetic defences because he primarily understands the church’s imitation of Christ as a gratuitous gift, and only secondarily as an ethical duty. All that remains to be argued for, then, is why Schillebeeckx’s rejection of apologetic defences of the church’s positive influence on society does not depoliticise his theology, foregrounding at this point the political import of his understanding of redemption as God’s overcoming of sin through forgiveness, which is dealt with in the last section of this chapter.

783 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 324 [355-356].
a) Acknowledging the church’s sinfulness: Against promises of positive contributions to society

According to Schillebeeckx, the church is founded on the Resurrection insofar as it is the gathering of those people who experienced the forgiveness of their sin of rejecting Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{784} The church, thus, lives on the strength of the renewal of the lives of its members.\textsuperscript{785} Primarily, this means that the church regards its own foundation as gratuitous: No human being, apart from the risen Jesus himself, causes people to assemble in one community.\textsuperscript{786} Christians interpret their own lives as part of the Christian story, which begins with a personal experience of God that is interpreted as being initiated by Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{787} The reception of divine forgiveness is, thus, the only condition for becoming a Christian, and initiates a conversion.\textsuperscript{788}

According to Schillebeeckx, the conversion to the Christian faith is marked by the structure of an initial bewildering disintegration of one’s original worldview, and a completing reintegration of that bewildering experience into a new worldview.\textsuperscript{789} Jesus’ disciples already underwent such a conversion when they met the earthly Jesus. Their bewilderment concerned the unconditional faith in God, to which they had been invited through their contact with Jesus.\textsuperscript{790} In this contact, Jesus freed them from any anxious self-concern, which allowed them to abandon everything and commit themselves freely to God.\textsuperscript{791} Importantly, Schillebeeckx conceives of this free surrender to following Christ not primarily in terms of a duty, but as a gift. Jesus’ life enabled his disciples to trust in God’s absolutely faithful goodness towards humankind.\textsuperscript{792}

\textsuperscript{784} Schillebeeckx, “De Toegang tot Jezus van Nazaret,” \textit{Tijdschrift voor Theologie} 12 (1972): 36. This re-assembling of the disciples is the sole verification of the Resurrection. They re-assemble because the Resurrection objectively happened, not in order to invent it (Schillebeeckx, “Leven ondanks de dood in heden en toekomst,” \textit{Tijdschrift voor Theologie} 10 (1970): 436). Schillebeeckx, thus, takes a middle position between Bultmann’s subjectivism and the objectivism of those who understand the Resurrection to have been an empirically verifiable event (Kerr, \textit{Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians}, 63).

\textsuperscript{785} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Jesus}, 507 [545-546].

\textsuperscript{786} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Jesus}, 356 [389-390]. For an explanation of how Schillebeeckx’s understanding of the Resurrection decisively differs from that of Bultmann, see Erik Borgman, “Edward Schillebeeckx’s Reflections on the Sacraments and the Future of Catholic Theology,” in \textit{Sacramentalizing Human History: In Honour of Edward Schillebeeckx (1914-2009)}, eds. Erik Borgman, Paul D. Murray, and Andrés Torres Queiruga (London: SCM Press, Concilium, 2012), 16-18, and Erik Borgman, “als het ware een sacrament – Naar een theologische visie op de reëel bestaande kerk,” in \textit{Trouw an Gods toekomst – De blijvende betekenis van Edward Schillebeeckx}, ed. Stephan van Erp (Tijdschrift voor Theologie, 2010), 135-138. In these articles, Borgman criticises Schillebeeckx for inconsistently giving up his project of writing a new ecclesiology, because he despaired over the Roman Catholic Church’s malfunctioning, in the aftermath of Vatican II. Borgman, correctly, in my view, highlights that it would have been more consistent to argue that the sinfulness of the church, instead of being seen as an obstacle to the project of formulating an ecclesiology, should be acknowledged as an undeniable element of a contemporary ecclesiology.

\textsuperscript{787} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Jesus}, 321 [351-352].

\textsuperscript{788} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Jesus}, 345; 349 [378-379; 381-382].

\textsuperscript{789} Schillebeeckx, “Godsdienst van en voor mensen,” \textit{Tijdschrift voor Theologie} 17 (1977): 359; 369.

\textsuperscript{790} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Jesus}, 175; 196 [199-200; 221-222].

\textsuperscript{791} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Jesus}, 176; 197 [200-201; 222-223].

\textsuperscript{792} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Jesus}, 122-123 [142-144].
This trust was shattered at the crucifixion, for here it seemed as if human sinfulness had gained the upper hand. In this way, the disciples experience Christ’s death again as the disintegration of their previous worldview. This disintegration, and the frailty of their faith in the abundance of God’s grace, is positive insofar as it enables the disciples to understand the full implication of Jesus’ life. Only at the Resurrection did it become apparent that God’s grace overcomes all human evil, that no human failure has the last word and that God’s grace is entirely undeserved by humankind. The importance of the mediated character of grace also became only apparent at the Resurrection.

Overall, Schillebeeckx argues that the church exists because God converts people to Christianity. It is impossible to demonstrate the reasonableness of Christianity from the perspective of any other worldview conclusively, because God’s forgiveness, breaking with the logic of human calculations, is not the conclusion of any existing premises. In this sense, the Resurrection as revealing the reality of God’s merciful forgiveness demands faith. Instead of apologetically defending their faith, Christians must recognise that they are only justified by God’s unconditional mercy. Concerning any promises of contributing to the wider society’s common good, the church must primarily confess to be a community of sinners who are all equally called into this assembly by God’s unconditional offer of grace despite human sin. Christians must confess that they are bound to fail to meet their own standards, namely those set by the concrete life of Jesus. This should relativise all promises in order to achieve a better future through ecclesial efforts.

At the same time, however, by accepting God’s forgiveness, converted people are reconciled with their past in a way that gives them new confidence in the future. Converted people’s confidence concerns the approaching of God’s Kingdom despite human failures.

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793 Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 122-123 [142-144]. In contradistinction to Ward, Schillebeeckx does not interpret the disciples frailty of faith after Jesus’ death to be a total lapse of faith (Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 193; 354 [218-219; 386-387]). He claims that only Mark’s gospel presents this frailty as a total lapse. See also Schillebeeckx, “Ons heil: Jezus’ leven of Christus de verrezene,” *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 13 (1973): 152).


796 Prior to the Resurrection, the disciples could have recognised that God was active in Jesus, but they could not have called the entire person of Jesus divine (Schillebeeckx, “Jezus’ leven van Christus de verrezene,” *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 13 (1973): 150-151; Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 296; 321; 348-349; 353; 490; 607-608 [326-327; 351-352; 380-382; 385-386; 531-532; 646-648]; Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 795; 823-824 [799; 828]; Schillebeeckx, “De Toegang tot Jezus van Nazaret,” *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 12 (1972): 52).

797 Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 298; 314-315; 320; 350-353; 468; 482; 503; 603 [329; 344-346; 350-351; 508-509; 523-524; 543-544; 641-642]; Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 792-793; 798 [796: 802]; Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 65; 67 [75-76; 78-79]; Schillebeeckx, “Jezus’ leven van Christus de verrezene,” *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 13 (1973): 154. Schillebeeckx argues that the same structure in which the disciples were converted to Christianity after the Resurrection also applies to contemporary Christians (Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 289; 296; 315 [320-321; 326-327; 345-346]).

798 Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 358-359 [391-393].

799 Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 350 [382-383].

800 Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 182; 632 [207-208; 673-674].

801 Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 632 [673-674].

802 Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 631 [671-673].

Christians are reconciled with ‘God’s way of doing things’, which means that their overall outlook is based upon the faith that all that which is truly good will persist and all that is evil will vanish. The church’s conversion enables it to dedicate itself to the further realisation of redemption on earth even if the effects are not immediately seen. On the basis of their faith in the crucified and risen Christ, Christians can learn to see grace, as it is mediated in this world beyond apparent evil and suffering. ‘[B]y persevering in grace, the believer personally accepts God’s grace in Christ as a reality which is consistently affirmed, which becomes the basis of hope for resurrection […] and eschatological consummation’. This ‘[e]schatological hope makes the commitment to the temporal order radical and, by the same token, declares any existing temporal order to be only relative’.

However, the church’s political relevance should not be apologetically defended on the basis of its incessant striving towards the further realisation of God’s Kingdom on earth, because this would reverse the proper directionality of the church’s witness. Coupled with Schillebeeckx’s acknowledgment of the church’s sinfulness, the church’s incessant alignment with the reality of redemption that surrounds it could only serve as a practical witness to God’s unceasing offer of forgiveness. Others have argued that, according to Schillebeeckx, the triumph of grace must be visible in the church in order to be believable. My argument further refines this claim by highlighting that Schillebeeckx’s theology is most distinctly important for contemporary theology insofar as he imagines the church to be a visible community of merciful grace. The church, for Schillebeeckx, must not be a perfect community of the sinless. God’s triumphant grace in the church’s weakness, not in the church’s glory, manifests the reality of God in this world. People must be enabled to see that grace is effective in everyone who sincerely tries to do their best, and the reality of redemption must be recognisable in the utter generosity and gratuity that underlies this effort, despite its failings. The church’s continuous penitence is then a crucial element of the church’s witness to God’s forgiveness of all human failures. The church’s most fundamental role in society is to show in its life and praxis that the world has been redeemed by Christ, enabling people to put their trust not in human, but in divine strength.

Understanding the church as an assembly of forgiven sinners, grounded in God’s mercy, Schillebeeckx understands Christianity essentially not as a human cultural project, but as humans giving themselves over to divine deeds. The conversion to Christ ‘means to act

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804 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 631 [671-673]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 804 [808].
805 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 501 [514].
806 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 520 [532]. At this point, my interpretation of Schillebeeckx diverts from that of Ward (Ward, How the Light Gets In, 72-73), as mentioned in chapter 2.
807 Schillebeeckx, “Church, Magisterium and Politics,” God the Future of Man, 97 [160-161].
808 Schillebeeckx, Church, 181-182 [182-184].
810 Schillebeeckx, Christ the Sacrament, 147-148 [250-253].
811 Schillebeeckx, Christ the Sacrament, 149 [254-255]; Schillebeeckx, “The Church and Mankind,” World and Church, 92 [119-120]; Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 13 [30-31]; Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 91 [103-104]. Erik Borgman explains that Schillebeeckx’s conviction that Christians mediate God’s power not only in their strength but also dialectically in their weakness distances Schillebeeckx’s ‘humble humanism’ from Maritain’s ‘heroic humanism’. Consequently, Schillebeeckx claims that Christians must always keep a distance towards their own culture (Borgman, Edward Schillebeeckx, 96-97).
812 Schillebeeckx, Christ the Sacrament, 160-161 [270-273].
814 Schillebeeckx, Christ the Sacrament, 156 [266-268].
815 Schillebeeckx, “Leven in God en Leven in de Wereld,” in God en Mens, 131.
and think like Jesus [...], who, by emptying himself [...] made others rich. Since Christ’s redemption is mediated in the contemporary context, their readiness to receive forgiveness entails that Christians pursue their own thoughts less and become more open to learning from the grace that surrounds them. Regarding the question concerning theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies, this foregrounds the difference in reading Schillebeeckx’s understanding of grace in terms of redemption, rather than in terms of creation. Associating Schillebeeckx’s understanding of grace with creation, commentators claim that he would argue that Christianity is the guarantor of the humanisation and liberation of the whole world. My interpretation, in contrast, suggests that Christ alone is the guarantor and that Christians, as much as non-Christians, benefit from this undeserved divine gift. This explains also why, instead of apologetically defending how Christian theology can positively contribute to public political discussions, Schillebeeckx’s theology is more directed to correcting the sinful church. In contrast to post-liberal theologies, which turn to the church because of the sinful world’s inability to understand Christ, Schillebeeckx turns to the church as theology’s primary addressee, because he acknowledges the church’s sinfulness. He seeks to understand how non-Christian positions mediate the reality of redemption in order to strengthen, renew or to correct the church’s dedication to the further manifestation of this reality.

b) Imitating Christ: Against promises of completing the world’s redemption

It could be objected that this stress on the church’s sinfulness downplays the Christian calling to imitate Christ, and that this calling allows or even obliges theologians to promise that the church will complete or exceed the world’s redemption. However, contrary to the theologians introduced thus far who all, in their different ways, draw on this call to imitate Christ in order to apologetically defend the church as a positive influence on society, Schillebeeckx understands the church’s imitation of Christ primarily as a gift and only secondarily as a duty. According to Schillebeeckx, Christians are primarily invited to imitate Christ’s relationship to God. Instead of focussing on any duty to imitate Christ for the further redemption of the world, the focus should be on the fact that the church can imitate Christ. Jesus’ calling God ‘Abba’ is indicative of a uniquely familiar and simple relationship that demands no medium between God and humankind. The church follows Christ by responding to God in a similar way as Jesus did, addressing God as Father. Once more, Schillebeeckx interprets this address as primarily revelatory of the trustworthiness of God’s benevolence towards humankind, but also of the expectation that humankind is willing to

816 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 520 [532].
818 Schillebeeckx derives this claim from the Biblical miracle stories. People were healed, independent of either their belief or disbelief in Jesus, but only those who were redeemed accepted this healing as invitation into an interpersonal relationship with God (Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 171; 238 [194-195; 267-269]).
819 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 142; 217; 228-231; 236; 507 [163-164; 245-246; 257-261; 265-266; 545-546]. Also, the Ten Commandments are not meant to restore people’s relationship to God, but they command that every ethical action should originate in people’s relationship with God (225-226 [253-255]).
820 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 232-234 [261-264]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 529; 630 [539; 641].
align itself with this benevolent reality. Schillebeeckx calls this address the heart of Christianity.

At this point, Schillebeeckx affirms the true reciprocity between Christians and God, not only a one-sided dependence. Understanding the historical Jesus as truly divine means that God was really influenced by Jesus’ contemporaries. To encounter the earthly Jesus meant to encounter God. In this way, the Incarnation enabled people to enter into a personal relationship with God. This relationship with God is central to the Christian faith and can be repeated by every new generation. This means that Christian theologians should not present God’s absoluteness in terms of a fixed stability, but they should stress that God really reacts to humans and answers their prayers. That this imitation of Christ’s relationship to God is not primarily to be translated into a duty imposed on Christians for the further redemption of the world is again related to Schillebeeckx’s Resurrection Christology, given that it is accompanied by an emphasis on joy as the primary focus of Christian life. ‘Jesus’ whole life was a celebration of God’s reign, as well as an orthopraxis in accord with that kingdom.’ Jesus was so enthralled by God that his whole life became a celebration of God and, as such, a model for Christian orthopraxis. Schillebeeckx argues that ‘joy is a fundamental ingredient in Christian ethical action. For Christian ethics is more something that is graciously allowed than something that is firmly compelled’. This joy consists in God and humankind being each other’s happiness. Christians experience that reality is gracious towards them and return this grace in joyful celebration to God.

The church is not a ‘holy remnant’, but the firstborn of a new creation who already celebrates eschatological redemption. Christians are distinguished from non-Christians primarily inasmuch as they experience the final consummation of reality’s redemption already now. Christians should not understand themselves to be more ethically apt than non-Christians, but as particularly hopeful due to their experience of the reality of redemption. The point of liturgical celebration is, thus, primarily to praise God, to recall the reason for this

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821 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 233-234; 238; 458 [262-264, 267-268; 498].
822 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 236; 507 [265-266; 545-546].
828 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 178; 190 [202-203; 215-216]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 91-92 [102].
829 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 237 [266-267].
830 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 122 [142-143].
831 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 122 [142-143].
832 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 580 [587].
833 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 122 [142-143].
834 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 625-626 [636].
835 Schillebeeckx, Church, 153 [154-155].
836 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 179 [203-204].
837 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 548-549; 551 [558; 561].
praise through remembrance of Jesus Christ and to bid to God in prayer to be faithful to this promise of grace also in the future.\textsuperscript{838}

Schillebeeckx claims that Jesus did not primarily leave behind certain sayings, but that the church as liberation movement should be understood in the context of the church’s thankful relationship to God.\textsuperscript{839} The church is a liberation movement insofar as the crucified but risen Christ remains effective on earth in his followers.\textsuperscript{840} Schillebeeckx claims that it is not the Christian interpretation of reality, but Christianity’s continuation of Christ’s praxis that is co-redemptive.\textsuperscript{841} Importantly, Schillebeeckx understands Christ’s praxis as not primarily directed at the restoration of creation, but at the initiation of people’s contact to God.\textsuperscript{842} The restoration of creation is only the necessary means for the latter. All of Christian praxis must be motivated by redemption in this way.\textsuperscript{843} The church’s orthopraxis serves to make apparent that the salvation and liberation experienced by people brings them into contact with the reality of God.\textsuperscript{844}

In this way, the church is an integral part of Jesus’ identity, one which exceeds that which Jesus has concretely done.\textsuperscript{845} Schillebeeckx speaks of an ‘ecclesial brotherhood [sic]’ that represents redeemed humanity in Christ on earth.\textsuperscript{846} Schillebeeckx stresses that the source of this community is the relationship of each member with Christ.\textsuperscript{847} However, since all of reality has been redeemed in Christ, all worldly peace is now understood as eternally persistent, which means that the boundaries between church and world are blurred.\textsuperscript{848} Christians can read any worldly peace as participating in Christ’s redemption of reality. They are then called to celebrate and align themselves with these concrete manifestations of peace.\textsuperscript{849}

In brief, the second reason why Schillebeeckx’s understanding of the political relevance of Christian theology conflicts with public theology’s as well as with Radical Orthodoxy’s apologetic defences of theology’s political relevance concerns his understanding of theology’s specific engagement with reality as that of thankful celebration.\textsuperscript{850} Theology only enhances and perfects the secular world indirectly, insofar as human life is neither meaningful without this addition of thankful celebration, nor is it possible without complete

\textsuperscript{838} Schillebeeckx, “Revelation-in-Reality and Revelation-in-Word,” Revelation and Theology, 38 [56-58].
\textsuperscript{839} Schillebeeckx, “De Toegang tot Jezus van Nazaret,” Tijdschrift voor Theologie 12 (1972): 39; Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 31 [47-48].
\textsuperscript{840} Schillebeeckx, Christ, 792-793 [796]; Schillebeeckx, Church, 128 [129-130].
\textsuperscript{841} Schillebeeckx, Church, 166 [167-168]. Orthodoxy is intrinsic to orthopraxis, but Schillebeeckx lays the emphasis on the concrete praxis. Stephan van Erp might be the theologian who is presently most concerned to develop Schillebeeckx’s emphasis on orthopraxis into a new fundamental theology (Stephan van Erp, “World and Sacrament: Foundations of the Political Theology of the Church,” Louvain Studies 39 (2016): 109).
\textsuperscript{842} Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 172 [195-197].
\textsuperscript{843} Schillebeeckx, Christ the Sacrament, 151 [257-259].
\textsuperscript{844} Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 13-14 [30-32].
\textsuperscript{845} Schillebeeckx, Christ, 798 [802].
\textsuperscript{846} Schillebeeckx, “The Church and Mankind,” World and Church, 94 [121-122]; Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 554 [593-594].
\textsuperscript{847} Schillebeeckx, “The Church and Mankind,” World and Church, 95 [123-124].
\textsuperscript{848} Schillebeeckx, “The Church and Mankind,” World and Church, 96 [124-125].
\textsuperscript{849} Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 554 [593-594].
\textsuperscript{850} Schillebeeckx, “Secularization and Christian Belief in God,” God the Future of Man, 51-52 [82-85].
Only in this indirect way is Christianity’s ‘service to God, also a service to men [sic].’ The gratuitous joy of the Christian relationship with God must be evident in Christian lives; to argue for it would be to mischaracterise this joy. Moreover, Christian theology is politically relevant insofar as a human life that ‘dwell[s] upon the personal mystery’ retains a degree of independence from the majority opinion by way of acknowledging God as final judge over reality.

Insofar as Schillebeeckx does conceive of Christianity as adequately mediating God’s grace to the world, Christianity must exceed this surplus of positivity to the world. To this end, Schillebeeckx claims, in agreement with Radical Orthodoxy, that Christian theology must express the mystery and reality in which everyone exists, and thus be the interpretation of the whole of reality. Its specific activity is that of prophetic naming; Milbank turns this Christian interpretation of the whole of reality into an apologetic defence of theology’s political relevance by arguing that his Christian ontology translates into a particular social order that is promised to be better than its secular alternatives. According to Schillebeeckx, to the contrary, Christian theology is not directly politically useful in the way that Radical Orthodox authors present it as being. Schillebeeckx’s stress on the superabundant positivity of grace implies that theology does not fulfil any particular function that could be fully explained in secular terms. A secular answer must be found to all political problems and Christian theology should, then, celebrate the grace which made this answer possible. Whereas the world unconsciously owes its existence to the life, death, and Resurrection of Christ, the church is the place where this reality is celebrated in thankfulness. In this way, Christianity would mediate grace as the reality that exceeds the sum-total of all natural positivity.

Overall, this argumentation suggests that if the Christian imitation of Christ was rendered into a promise to contribute positively to society, then this would erroneously downplay the sinfulness of the church on the one hand, and the reality of redemption which allows the church to exist nonetheless, on the other. Primarily, Christians imitate Christ in joyfully thanking God for God’s faithful bestowal of grace. Christian theologians should remind the church of the graces by which it is surrounded and upon which it depends. The

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852 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 773 [775]. Schillebeeckx speaks of ‘religions’.
856 Schillebeeckx, “Correlation between Human Question and Christian Answer,” The Understanding of Faith, 79 [90-91].
858 Schillebeeckx, “Secularization and Christian Belief in God,” God the Future of Man, 51 [82-84].
church’s joyful celebration of these received graces then, develops into an orthopraxis for the preservation and further distribution of these graces. If the primary focus was on the church’s ethical duty to increase the world’s redemption, the church would risk overlooking the grace which already surrounds it. It is the call to imitate Christ that obliges theologians not to focus primarily on that which is still lacking perfection, but on the grace that is already mediated. Only in this way can theology build further upon the work of redemption that has already begun and can it avoid chasing its own utopian illusions. Any theological promise must acknowledge how eternity begins to take shape in the depths of the present.

c) Mediating God’s forgiveness: Mercifully criticising non-Christian politics

Regarding the criticism that such a theology of grace might render Christian theology politically superfluous and uncritical, I argue in this section that Schillebeeckx’s theology calls on the church to be critical in a merciful way. It should not be concluded from the above discussion that no consequences would be entailed by Schillebeeckx’s theology for a Christian politics. But, a theologically informed criticism of alternative political positions should accord with the way in which Christians believe that all remaining sin is overcome in Christ, and in this way Christian theology can contribute to the completion of the world’s redemption. This means that theologians should inspire the church to mediate divine mercy to others. The church must be the distinct community that shows mercy towards every human being, even in spite of their sinfulness, and bear witness to the God who loves even sinful humankind. The most important law for Christians is to be merciful and gracious in the imitation of God. Believing that God’s gracious love is stronger than any human rejection of that love, and that the whole world has already been redeemed in this sense, Christians must follow Jesus in not focusing on other people’s sinful rejection of God’s love as much as on their potential for the future.

Conversion is not initiated by confronting people with their sins, but with the redemption that already surrounds them and can be theirs if only they were to accept it.

Following Schillebeeckx’s emphasis on mercy, it is precisely God’s unconditional acceptance of people into the reality of redemption which calls sinners to repentance and transforms them. In other words, grace heals sinful nature whenever people realise that they are fundamentally accepted by God, despite their shortcomings. The transformation from sinful to redeemed human nature does not commence with the human recognition of their own shortcomings, but with the recognition that they have a legitimate place in the reality of redemption despite these shortcomings. To follow their natural inclination towards grace,

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860 Schillebeeckx opposes any apocalyptic interpretations of the present on the basis of an idealised understanding of the future (Schillebeeckx, “The Interpretation of the Future,” The Understanding of Faith, 7 [7-8]).
862 Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 91; 96; 112 [103-104; 108-109; 128-129].
863 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 209 [236].
864 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 124 [144-145].
865 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 125 [145-146]. Schillebeeckx adds that ‘[s]uch an attitude obviates all frantic searching for self-identity’ (125 [146]).
866 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 151 [173-174]. This contrasts Schillebeeckx’s theology of grace with that of Ward who argues that the recognition of one’s sinfulness is ‘a first step towards turning to God’ (Ward, How the Light Gets In, 184, n.10).
867 Schillebeeckx, Church, 117 [118-119].
humans have to put all their trust not in themselves or other humans but in the reality of God.\textsuperscript{868} Those who accept the Christian faith in God’s trustworthy mercifulness are then granted the further grace of a heightened affinity with graced reality.\textsuperscript{869} The Christian faith might help people to trust in grace more than in their own ability to further the good. A redeemed human life is then superhuman in the sense that grace lives within that life.\textsuperscript{870}

Consequently, Christianity is most crucially distinct from purely secular outlooks through its faith in the possibility of the humanly impossible.\textsuperscript{871} Whereas Milbank, following de Lubac, associates modern atheism with Christianity’s failure to sufficiently demonstrate that the Christian faith is relevant for secular life and critical of the surrounding society, Schillebeeckx associates modern atheism with the churches’ failure to nurture people’s ability to trust in God’s mercy. This is why, for Schillebeeckx, Christian theology’s primary task is not to criticise non-Christian politics for their shortcomings, but theologians must highlight that God’s grace transcends all human failures. Christian theology should not be presented as the solution to the human failure of sin, and in this way as the answer to contemporary societal problems. Instead, Christian theology must be presented in such a way that people understand that God’s love and grace are not diminished by human sin.\textsuperscript{872} In other words, Christian theology must present the reality of God, not Christian theology, as that which is most important in and for human life.\textsuperscript{873} In the following chapter, I will argue that Schillebeeckx adopted this hermeneutic of mercy in his approach to atheism, and I will reflect on how this hermeneutic should be revived in contemporary theology.

On the basis of his theology of merciful grace, Schillebeeckx’s response to oppressive regimes differs slightly from that of Yoder. Both are in agreement that such a response must be nonviolent.\textsuperscript{874} However, while Yoder claimed that Christ’s cruciform redemption imposes upon Christians the ethical duty to endure the oppression for the sake of the world’s further redemption non-violently, Schillebeeckx shifts the focus away from the Christian ethical duty to the graced environment.\textsuperscript{875} Christians should primarily bear witness to the reality of a redemption that is brought about gratuitously by God, and not by human strength.\textsuperscript{876} There is, thus, not primarily a Christian duty to redeem the world through the nonviolent resistance to oppression, but oppressors, just as all other people, must be brought to recognise that all of reality is graced and that everyone has an equal share in this grace.\textsuperscript{877} A Christian response to oppression is meant to manifest that ‘God’s mercy is greater than all evil in the world’.\textsuperscript{878} Christians must not primarily follow an ethics that promises to counter the evil of oppression, but Christians must be merciful to the sinful and, thus, make manifest that ‘human and divine justice evidently go their separate ways’.\textsuperscript{879} This again is based on the trust that good and evil are not on the same ontological level but that only the good will persist, whereas evil will

\textsuperscript{868} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Jesus}, 600 [637-638].
\textsuperscript{869} Schillebeeckx, “The Bible and Theology,” \textit{Revelation and Theology}, 121 [187-188].
\textsuperscript{870} Schillebeeckx, “The Non-Conceptual Intellectual Element,” \textit{Revelation and Theology}, 261 [64-65].
\textsuperscript{873} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Jesus}, 599 [636-637].
\textsuperscript{874} However, Schillebeeckx admits that this might sometimes involve compromises (Schillebeeckx, “The New Image of God,” \textit{God the Future of Man}, 121 [198-199]).
\textsuperscript{875} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Church}, 123; 133 [124-125; 134-135].
\textsuperscript{876} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Church}, 123 [124-125].
\textsuperscript{877} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Church}, 123; 133 [124-125; 134-135].
\textsuperscript{878} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Christ}, 592 [600].
\textsuperscript{879} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Christ}, 627 [637].
annihilate itself.\textsuperscript{880} Christianity should manifest that God’s grace is revealed in the powerlessness of the servant Christ.\textsuperscript{881} ‘Although God always comes in power, divine authority knows no use of force, not even against people who are crucifying his Christ. But the kingdom of God still comes, despite human misuse of power and human rejection of the kingdom of God.’\textsuperscript{882}

If we ask now, once again, why Schillebeeckx does not advocate this theological vision of how sin is overcome through God’s forgiveness, as a positive contribution to the politics of post-Christendom societies, promising to attain the further reconciliation among conflicting parties, we should direct our attention to how Schillebeeckx himself received the grace that has been mediated in his contemporary context into his theology. In the following chapter, I will trace the way in which Schillebeeckx received insights from atheist positions of his time through a hermeneutic of mercy, as has been outlined above. I will argue that the theological significance of these atheist positions consisted partly in reminding Schillebeeckx of the impacts of sin upon his own theological vision, which rendered it ultimately impossible for him to promise that shaping the entire social order in accordance with his theology of grace would lead to a better future.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In this chapter, I have first traced the development of Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of atheism over the course of his theological career. His reconciliatory approach towards atheism was remarkable throughout. Moreover, it was striking that Schillebeeckx understood Christianity and atheism to be entangled in the same structural sin. He believed this structural sin could be overcome through theology’s redirecting of Christianity towards God in acknowledgement of the atheist criticism of the church. In this way, until the ‘70s at least, Schillebeeckx conceived of Christian theology as the fulfilment of atheism’s already good aspiration for grace. This indicates that, until that time, Schillebeeckx shared, along with all the other theologians introduced in this dissertation, the conviction that the Christian theological understanding of redemption translates into a vision of how societal problems are best overcome. Until that point, he could still have advocated a central political role for Christian theology, even in post-Christendom societies. What restrained Schillebeeckx from doing so was his acknowledgement that atheists, despite their entanglement in structural sin, are moved by God’s abundant grace in ways unknown to Christian theologians, and that therefore they might be equally able to establish a harmonious social order. Yet, Schillebeeckx still claimed that he was able to see that this is the case, and consequently, could have promised that the adoption of his vision would lead society into a better future. This changed in the ‘70s when Schillebeeckx explicitly stressed that Christian theologians lack the vision of how society’s contemporary problems are best solved.

Common interpretations of this development either criticise Schillebeeckx, for his having a naive optimism regarding atheism, and his increasing accommodation of Christian theology to atheist thought, or they praise Schillebeeckx’s understanding of creation as allowing him to adopt a particularly amicable stance towards atheism, which should inspire

\textsuperscript{880} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Church}, 124; 136 [125-126; 138].
\textsuperscript{881} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983}, 20.
\textsuperscript{882} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Church}, 119 [120-121].
similar engagements with non-Christians in contemporary contexts. I have countered both of these interpretations by way of arguing that Schillebeeckx’s reception of atheism is not connected to his understanding of creation, but to his understanding of redemption, evidenced in his simultaneous upholding of a grace optimism and a pessimistic anthropology. His optimism with regard to atheism does, thus, not come at the expense of a sufficiently adequate acknowledgment of human sin, but was motivated by Schillebeeckx’s conviction that the world’s sinfulness is overcome precisely by being confronted with God’s forgiveness, which is more powerful than any human shortcoming. Moreover, Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of the Resurrection highlights the mediated character of grace, which explains why he evaluated the theological significance of atheism to a much higher degree than any of the other theologians introduced in this dissertation. Schillebeeckx thus invites political theologians to discern the reality of redemption, in their contemporary context, instead of promising to solve contemporary political problems with some idealistic understanding of redemption. Finally, I have explained that Schillebeeckx rejects apologetic defences of Christianity’s political relevance by way of pointing to the church’s positive influence on society, because this would risk denying the church’s sinfulness and erroneously present the church as an ethical community, rather than as the community that joyfully celebrates God’s forgiveness. I then concluded by way of explaining that Schillebeeckx’s theologically informed social critique corresponds to his understanding of redemption, most prominently manifesting the conviction that sin is overcome through forgiveness.

This chapter’s argument, as a whole, might suggest that Schillebeeckx did not advocate his Soteriology as promising a better social order than atheism, because, believing in the superabundance of grace, non-Christian positions could be equally good. In the following chapter, I will turn to an examination of the way in which Schillebeeckx’s theology was shaped by what he conceived of as mediations of grace in his context in order to explain his acknowledgment of the impairment of his own theological vision through sin towards the end of his career. In this way, I will discuss the significance of Schillebeeckx’s theology for the question of theology’s political role in the contemporary post-Christendom context more directly.
CHAPTER 5

RESTORING THE THEOLOGICAL VISION:
A NON-TRIUMPHANT CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY FOR POST-CHRISTENDOM SOCIETIES

In the previous chapter, the Christological rationale for Schillebeeckx’s remarkably unapologetic approach to those who opposed Christianity at his time was made apparent. I have argued that Schillebeeckx’s theology is characterised by an extraordinary appreciation of the mediated character of grace. His Christology suggests that theologians should be preoccupied with understanding how grace is mediated in their contexts, so that the church might celebrate the world’s redemption in Christ. Far from being naively optimistic and apolitical, I have also shown that Schillebeeckx’s grace optimism was paired with a particularly pessimistic anthropology, thus corresponding to a specific understanding of how sin is overcome by Christ. Having low expectations regarding humanity’s own capacities, Schillebeeckx focused on God’s ever-forgiving offer of grace. This highlighting of God’s prevailing grace is political insofar as utopian promises to society are prevented. The divine promise, not the human efforts to respond thereto, gives Christians the continuous courage to prevail in their political activities, as well as the flexibility to change the political course of action in the event that previous projects appear to be flawed.

Contemporary mediations of redemption are understood as God’s merciful forgiveness of the continuous failures of ecclesial and atheist political projects, and as a promise for a better future.

The relevance and appropriateness of Schillebeeckx’s unapologetic approach to atheism, for answering the question concerning theology’s political role in the contemporary post-Christendom context, remains to be investigated. Having exhibited the Christological underpinnings of Schillebeeckx’s unapologetic approach to atheism, I will now turn to the other side of the argument, explaining how Schillebeeckx’s theology is already influenced by what he perceived of as contextual mediations of grace. This chapter helps us to understand how Schillebeeckx’s Christology does not constitute a timeless blueprint for Christian theological engagement with non-Christian positions. Instead, I argue that Schillebeeckx’s realistic grace optimism led him to respond to his surrounding context in a very particular way. Consequently, a contemporary employment of his hermeneutic of the primacy of God’s mercy would entail changing certain emphases in response to new specific contextual mediations of grace. Having argued that Schillebeeckx’s Christology predisposed him to transform his theology in accordance with contemporary mediations of grace, this chapter returns to the public theological focus on the contexts of post-Christendom and pluralism. I will examine what specific insights Schillebeeckx gained from the ways in which he believed grace to be mediated in these two characteristics of the contemporary context.

First, I will respond to two existing suggestions for how Schillebeeckx’s theology should be updated to suit the contemporary context. Both contend that Schillebeeckx’s tendency to conflate the distinctiveness, either of non-Christian positions or of Christian theology, should be repaired in order to respond more adequately to contemporary questions. Against them, I will hold that Schillebeeckx’s maintained a particularly subtle distinction between his theology and non-Christian positions, which can be seen if Schillebeeckx’s understanding of grace, in terms of God’s forgiveness, is read to provide the hermeneutical

883 Schillebeeckx, Church, 141 [143-144]; Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 110 [126-127].
lens through which Schillebeeckx critically approaches non-Christian positions. Having presented Schillebeeckx’s distinct engagement with non-Christian positions as one of merciful critique, I will then set out to explore how this approach could be employed in the contemporary context by way of distinguishing it from Radical Orthodoxy in particular. To this end, I examine how Schillebeeckx transformed his own theology in accordance with all that which he perceived as grace in the end of Christendom, and in pluralism. This then paves the way to explain further my initial criticism of all other theologians introduced in this dissertation for insufficiently acknowledging the impairment of the theological vision, particularly when they promise to solve societal problems by way of theological reflection. In the third part of this chapter, I explain how Schillebeeckx’s understanding of reality, as abounding with grace, leads him to eventually acknowledge the entanglement of his own theological vision in sin when he encountered the particular grace mediated by ideology critique. This will elucidate the notion that I do not argue that Christian theologians could never promise to contribute positively to political discussions in a not exclusively Christian society. Instead, I contend that, being considerate of the specific grace that is mediated by the atheist opposition to Christian theological involvement in political discussions in post-Christendom societies, Christian theologians are invited to devote their attention primarily to the restoration of their impaired vision before promising to positively influence the entire society. In this way, the problems associated with Christendom imperialism might be overcome, eventually.

5.1 Developing Schillebeeckx’s theological approach: Adopting a hermeneutics of mercy

If I want to advance the argument that Schillebeeckx’s theology developed through the reception of what he understood as non-Christian mediations of grace in his own context, it is important to reconsider two criticisms. From the one side, Schillebeeckx has been criticised for failing to respect the true distinctiveness of non-Christian positions, and from the other side, he has been criticised for failing to uphold the distinctiveness of Christian theology. In what follows, I will briefly introduce both criticisms in order to then argue that both fail equally to recognise the subtlety of Schillebeeckx’s distancing of his Christian theology from non-Christian positions, as it is marked by a merciful critique. This subtle distinction should be maintained in any updating of Schillebeeckx’s theology for new contexts.

a) Objections: Overwriting atheism’s and theology’s distinctiveness

From a postmodern theological perspective, Schillebeeckx’s thought has recently been criticised for assuming too much continuity between Christianity and non-Christian worldviews. It has been claimed that, in order to suit the contemporary postmodern context,
Schillebeeckx’s theology would have to be updated in accordance with the postmodern assumption of irreducible particularities, instead of assuming with modernity that different positions share some underlying sameness. This objection concurs with de Lubac’s much earlier criticism that Schillebeeckx’s optimism, regarding atheism, insufficiently considers the historical connection between atheism’s positive aspects and the Christian heritage on which these might depend. Schillebeeckx is said to ignore the actual influences that Christianity has had upon the sentiments, morals and legislation of European societies, which might explain why Christian theologians detect Christ-like elements in atheism too. Both criticisms, thus, reproach that Schillebeeckx naively assumes an underlying harmonious continuity between Christianity and atheism. The correction proposed is either to re-establish the lost harmony between atheism and Christianity (de Lubac and later Milbank) or to abandon any assumptions about Christianity’s harmony with non-Christian positions, updating Schillebeeckx’s theology to postmodernity’s prioritisation of irreducible particularity over unity (Boeve).

In contrast to these critics, my reading of Schillebeeckx’s theology suggests that Schillebeeckx has never been as naively modern as these critics claim. To the contrary, my stress on the difference between a grace optimism and a pessimistic anthropology in Schillebeeckx’s thought suggests that he argues for the harmonious continuity between Christianity and atheism not due to any presupposed general human nature in the way a modern theologian might uphold it. Instead, the underlying harmony between atheism and Christianity is assumed due to Schillebeeckx’s conviction that the whole of reality has been redeemed in Jesus Christ and that both Christians, as well as atheists, live in this reality. The claim that everyone continues to receive God’s merciful bestowal of grace does not presuppose any intrinsic commonality except that from being sinners who fall short in their responses to their graced environments. Like de Lubac and Boeve, Schillebeeckx also rejects the view of modern atheism as being implicitly Christian. However, unlike de Lubac’s suggestion that atheism resembles Christianity due to some historical influences, Schillebeeckx argues that Christians might detect Christ-like elements in atheists due to their own influence upon them. Since commonalities are most likely gained from a shared environment in which both Christians and atheists live, not from some inner principle, the

887 De Lubac, A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace, 218. Concretely, de Lubac doubts Schillebeeckx’s optimism with respect to the modern project of humanisation (196).
888 Boeve, “Experience According to Edward Schillebeeckx,” in Divinising Experience, 224.
889 Boeve claims that in a pluralist context, marked by ‘irreducible plurality, the particularity of Christianity becomes constitutive of Christianity’s meaning and truth, which has to be conceived of in relation to the meaning and truth claims of other religions and worldviews without relativising one’s own claims (and the other’s) or this plurality from the very outset’ (Boeve, “Experience According to Edward Schillebeeckx,” in Divinising Experience, 222); for another argument that Schillebeeckx’s assumption about a fundamental continuity underneath all cultural discontinuities might conflict with postmodern sensibilities see Thompson, “Schillebeeckx on the Development of Doctrine,” Theological Studies 62 (2001): 320).
891 This accords with Christian Bauer’s interpretation that Schillebeeckx’s optimism, with regard to atheistic secularity, is not so much based on his optimism concerning an anonymous Christianity as to his optimism concerning an anonymous God whose grace cannot be comprehended (Christian Bauer, “Heiligkeit des Profane? Spuren der ‘école Chenu-Schillebeeckx’ (H. de Lubac) auf dem Zweiten Vatikanum,” in Edward Schillebeeckx: Impulse für Theologien im 21. Jahrhundert, 76).
appearance of a good Christian in the atheist’s environment can effect that the best of the latter will come to the fore. The same would also hold for influences of atheists upon Christians.

The same criticism, concerning the assumption of too much commonality between Christianity and atheism, has also been voiced from the other side regarding Schillebeeckx’s reception of atheistic philosophies. Here, Schillebeeckx has been criticised for undermining theology’s distinctiveness in favour of embracing atheist ideology critiques too wholeheartedly. It has been argued that, in his later work, Schillebeeckx abandoned the traditional theological interest in understanding God for a primary interest in finding a theological contribution to Critical Theory, and in analysing how ideology critiques challenge traditional theological thought. In his later theology, Schillebeeckx supposedly constructed an inductive metaphysics in the sense that he reasoned from human experience to God, and resisted providing definitive answers. In a similar vein, Schillebeeckx is being criticised for entirely conflating God’s saving activity with human liberation movements. This strand of criticisms resonates with the critiques mentioned in the previous chapter regarding Schillebeeckx’s supposed tendency to naturalise grace and to be overly optimistic with regard to atheism.

Against this criticism, I maintain that Schillebeeckx’s overarching interest in his engagement with ideology critiques remained theological. Schillebeeckx engaged with ideology critiques, like other atheist thought, through his hermeneutic of God’s abundant offer of mercy. Although the critics are right that, in his later theology, Schillebeeckx emphasised that the Christian faith in God’s merciful forgiveness of human failures cannot be deduced


895 Steven M. Rodenborn, Hope in Action: Subversive Eschatology in the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx and Johann Baptist Metz (New York: Fortress Press, 2014), 172-75. However, Rodenborn continues to argue that Schillebeeckx did not ontologise the mixture of good and evil that he observed in history (177). This means that Schillebeeckx only discerned in how far his optimistic ontology had to be refined through attendance to history (176). In other words, Schillebeeckx might have refined his metaphysics inductively but the ontological framework with which he assessed reality remained continuous.

from purely secular experiences, he maintained this faith nonetheless. Yet, as will become clear in this chapter, Schillebeeckx modified his theology continuously in accordance with the specific graces being mediated in his own context. Importantly, these modifications are, thus, not owed to any capitulation of theology to atheism, but they are concurrent with Schillebeeckx’s conviction that theologians must discern how the reality of redemption manifests itself in their contemporary contexts.

b) Appreciating subtle distinctions: Mercifully criticising atheism’s shortcomings

Both criticisms overlook the way in which Schillebeeckx maintains a subtle distinction between Christian theology and non-Christian positions. This subtlety derives from Schillebeeckx’s merciful critique of atheism. Thus, both critiques overlook that Schillebeeckx rejects modern secularity’s assumed neutrality. Schillebeeckx antecedes Radical Orthodoxy in calling modernity a mythology if it generalises that everyone lives in a secularist world, i.e. if it disguises the fact that it upholds a culturally conditioned all-encompassing ontology. This is why Schillebeeckx seeks a way to accept modern secularisation without rendering it absolute. He claims that this is possible if secularisation is celebrated within the framework of a theocentric worldview, which is akin to later Radical Orthodox projects. The overall structure of Schillebeeckx’s merciful criticisms of atheist positions consists, however, of a primary interest in learning from atheism’s good aspirations, while elaborating only secondarily on atheism’s shortcomings.

897 Schillebeeckx, “Secularization and Christian Belief in God,” God the Future of Man, 49 [79-81]; Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 600-601 [637-639].
898 See also Robert J. Schreiter, “Schillebeeckx and Theology in the Twenty-First Century,” in Edward Schillebeeckx and Contemporary Theology, 254; 259, who argues similarly that Schillebeeckx’s inductive focus concerns his interest in the historical reception of God’s grace.
899 Schillebeeckx, Church, 159-161 [160-163].
900 Schillebeeckx, “The New Image of God,” God the Future of Man, 105-106 [174-177]. This could be read as critique of Boeve’s conception of the continuity and discontinuity between Christian particularity and human universality (Boeve, “The Sacramental Interruption of Rituals of Life,” The Heythrop Journal XLIV (2003): 401-417). Boeve conceives of continuity in terms of general categories, of discontinuity in terms of the particularity of each faith tradition as that which shapes this category differently (412-414). This assumption of general categories, of which different faith traditions are particular instantiations, can be criticised for being a specifically modern Western invention, which assimilates non-Christian faith traditions a priori to the Christian worldview (Cavanaugh, “The Invention of the Religious-Secular Distinction,” in At the Limits of the Secular, 105-128).
901 Schillebeeckx, “Secularization and Christian Belief in God,” God the Future of Man, 46 [75-76].
902 This structure of criticising secularism, but still emphasising its underlying good intuition, is recurrent throughout Schillebeeckx work. See, for example, Schillebeeckx’s claim that Christian theology should receive all that is good in Enlightenment reason, without also adopting Enlightenment reason’s limitations (Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 555 [594]). The liberation of the modern subject should be celebrated without sliding into modern subjectivism (Schillebeeckx, Church, 47 [48-49]). Or, Schillebeeckx’s celebration of secular phenomenology’s focus on historicity, whilst highlighting that the human transcendence of historicity should not be lost from view (Schillebeeckx, “The New Trends in Present-Day Dogmatic Theology,” Revelation and Theology, 294; 313; [113-115; 143-145]). Schillebeeckx also criticises atheist metaphysics mercifully, insofar as he integrates them into Christian theology, not due to their supposed neutrality but because he is convinced that atheistic philosophies also respond to the reality of God’s grace (Schillebeeckx, “Correlation between Human
This means that Schillebeeckx’s theology would not legitimately be updated by simply accepting postmodernity’s postulation of irreducible particularity, as though this claim was a neutral and self-evident truth about reality.903 Contrary to those who want to update Schillebeeckx’s thought to fit the postmodern current, Schillebeeckx is dubious of any purely formal acknowledgement of pluralism and the concomitant endeavour to position Christianity as one group within this pluralist landscape.904 Such a position assumes a total vision that dissolves true pluralism into merely an epiphenomenal plurality of instantiations of metaphysical univocity: Each societal sub-group is regarded as but one more instantiation of the secularist understanding of plurality. Correcting the shortcomings of this secularist understanding of pluralism mercifully, Schillebeeckx does not elaborate on this criticism but focuses instead on his contemporaries’ preference for plurality over unity without accepting their ontologisation of this preference.908

Consequently, Schillebeeckx seeks a way in which pluralism will be continuously overcome without being dissolved.906 It must be overcome in order to focus on God as the sole absolute reality, but not dissolved because this would ignore how Schillebeeckx’s contemporaries’ preference for plurality over unity manifests the reality of redemption in his context. If the particularity of each group celebrated by postmodern philosophy would be established as the sole point of departure for dialogue907, then the pluralist ontology would be consolidated rather than over come. This is why Schillebeeckx presupposes the underlying

Question and Christian Answer,” *The Understanding of Faith*, 85 [97-98]). Regarding relativism, Schillebeeckx denies the neutrality of the statement that the absolute truth can, by necessity, not be accessed from a historical perspective (Schillebeeckx, “The Concept of ‘Truth’,” *Revelation and Theology*, 190 [6-7]). Not elaborating on this shortcoming, but mediating God’s mercy towards it, Schillebeeckx integrates the relativistic critique into his Christian theology and uses it as an aid by which to prevent idolatry (Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 66 [79]). This means that relativism is not accepted as the final truth about the world, but relativism within the world is accepted in order to uphold the Christian faith in God as the only absolute (Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 166 [167-168]).

903 Boeve, “Experience According to Edward Schillebeeckx,” in *Divinising Experience*, 222. For Boeve’s own justification of why he appreciates postmodernity’s appreciation of particularity, see Lieven Boeve, “Religion after Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 99-122. His disagreement with Schillebeeckx on this point might explain why Boeve relies, in his theological engagement with a postmodern context via the concept of ‘interruption’, on Johann Baptist Metz, not on Edward Schillebeeckx (Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York and London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007). My argument has shown that the assumption that Christians and atheists participate in the same graced reality, does not presuppose any consensus between them. This is a standard by which Boeve seems to measure the question about unity or particularity (Lieven Boeve, “Zeg nooit meer correlatie: Over christelijke traditie, actuele context en onderbreking,” *Collationes: Vlaams Tijdschrift voor Thologie en Pastoraal* 34 (2004): 204). The dividing issue between Boeve’s and my suggestion of how to correct or develop Schillebeeckx’s theology, seems to be that Boeve assumes that there is a neutral description of the context in which we find ourselves. He thus presupposes that there is a consensus amongst inhabitants of contemporary post-Christendom societies that the pluralist societies in which we live are radically particularised (215). Doubting this ‘neutral’ description of the context, I suggest that, as Christian, I can only describe the context of plurality through a Christian theological lens, and this lens suggests to me that the plurality can be thought of as harmonious, rather than as radically particularised. However, I do not thereby assume that non-Christians agree with me on this description of the context in which we live.

904 Schillebeeckx speaks of ‘a cheap form of tolerance’ (Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 161 [163]).

905 Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 161 [162-163].


harmonious reality in which any plurality participates. On the basis of this assumption, Christian theology can be challenged and expanded through a plurality of insights from non-Christians which are received as mediations of mercy. I will further elaborate upon the specific insights Schillebeeckx’s has gained from his contemporaries’ preference of plurality below, in 5.2.

In the case of ideology critique, Schillebeeckx also interprets the shortcomings of this atheist outlook mercifully. Overall, Schillebeeckx assesses his contemporary atheists’ fundamental faith that human beings are created for freedom positively. However, Schillebeeckx rejects the ‘fictitious concept of absolute freedom’ underlying the ideological critiques with which he engages. Again, Schillebeeckx denies the neutrality of ideology critique, and highlights its culturally specific foundations. Schillebeeckx warns against any absolutisation of the critical negativity of ideology critique, because this negativity itself becomes ideological if it is secretly used as an overarching vision of reality, and believed to be able to direct all human action. This is why Schillebeeckx completes ideology critique’s understanding of freedom with an acknowledgment of the origins on which freedom must build on the one hand, as well as of the end towards which freedom must be directed on the other.

Concerning freedom’s origins, Schillebeeckx combines the insights of ideology critique with a hermeneutic theology that seeks not only to deconstruct current structures, but also to preserve insights gained in the past. What has already been achieved must not be opposed as such, but just the tendency to perpetuate these achievements as the sole reality, as a result of which the realisation of further possibilities would be foreclosed. In the context of my interpretation, this would mean that theologians should admit that their insights might be incomplete and that a contemporary manifestation of the reality of redemption might lead them in a different direction. Used in this way, ideology critique is not nihilistic, but acts solely negatively against the human imaginative closure against further real possibilities. Regarding freedom’s end, the Christian understanding of liberation and the negativity of ideology critique also converge without being identical. The Christian understanding of freedom is not merely negative, but oriented to the liberation of others into the same freedom from oppression for a faithful following of God.

Instead of criticising Schillebeeckx for insufficiently distinguishing between Christian theology and non-Christian positions, and of then updating Schillebeeckx’s theology by way of repairing this alleged shortcoming, I maintain that Schillebeeckx kept a very fine distinction between Christian theology and non-Christian positions recognisable in the merciful way in which he theologically corrected whatever he regarded as erroneous in non-

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914 Schillebeeckx, “The New Critical Theory,” The Understanding of Faith, 105 [120-121].
916 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 500 [513].
Christian positions, without thereby denigrating the latter. Schillebeeckx’s theology is precisely most distinct through its focus on how non-Christian positions always already participate in God’s grace, despite their sinful shortcomings. Contemporary public theology should follow Schillebeeckx in manifesting to non-Christians that ‘God loves us without conditions or limits: for our part undeservedly and boundlessly’ in its theological approach.\(^9\)

### 5.2 Receiving the end of Christendom as grace: Redirecting theology towards God

A third suggestion of how Schillebeeckx’s theological engagement with atheism should be updated, picks up on the critical distance he maintained to atheism, but overstretches it, thereby equally missing the subtlety of Schillebeeckx’s merciful critique. The similarity of Schillebeeckx’s criticism of atheism’s feigned neutrality to that of Radical Orthodoxy has led some to claim that Schillebeeckx showed great respect for secular humanism, but sought ‘to rescue it from its atheism’.\(^{918}\) These interpretations overlook that Schillebeeckx argues that Christian theologians themselves continuously fail to manifest adequately the reality they are meant to confess, and that his overall intention is not to overcome atheism’s shortcomings, but to learn from atheism in order to overcome theology’s entanglement in sin.\(^{919}\) Schillebeeckx is concerned about the problems with any imperialist advocacy of Christian theology, as playing the most central political role in post-Christendom societies, more than he is concerned about any theological rescuing of society from its atheism.\(^{920}\) Schillebeeckx is convinced that, in the current post-Christendom context, efforts to re-establish a society in which Christianity was the unanimously accepted, all-encompassing worldview must be rejected.\(^{921}\) This is no naive accommodation of the Christian faith to secular trends and expectations. Schillebeeckx’s rejection of Christian imperialism is not motivated by any desire to defend Christianity’s relevance in a secular age, but it is based on Schillebeeckx’s evaluation of the anti-imperialist post-Christendom critique as a new mediation of mercy which should redirect Christianity towards God.\(^{922}\)

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917 Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 121 [122-123].


919 Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 4 [4]. Also Martin Poulos has recently observed that Schillebeeckx rarely rejects opposing views but ‘tends to affirm those aspects of them that he thinks are true, in order to invite them to move on together with him’ (Poulosom, *The Dialectics of Creation*, 121). I would qualify this observation by arguing that Schillebeeckx did not primarily aim at convincing atheists, but at correcting Christianity.


921 Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 4 [4-5].

922 Schillebeeckx, “The Church as the Sacrament of Dialogue,” *God the Future of Man*, 78 [128-130]; Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 16 [33-34]. For an explanation of how Schillebeeckx’s endeavour, of deciphering the way in which God’s grace is present in his surrounding context, relates to his metaphysics of the implicit intuition, and of how this is different from Milbank’s position, see Stephan van Erp, “Implicit Faith: Philosophical Theology after Schillebeeckx,” in *Edward Schillebeeckx and Contemporary Theology*, 209-223.
Concerning the theological significance of the post-Christendom context, Schillebeeckx thinks that Christian theology can no longer serve as the necessary basis for societal values and politics. God’s grace would be belittled if it was believed that separating values from their Christian roots would diminish the positivity mediated by these values. The abundance of God’s grace is revealed precisely in the fact that these values can develop in more than one positive direction. In this vein, Schillebeeckx reads his surrounding society’s capacity to self-organisation as constituting a further refinement and development of the Christian values that once underpinned a monolithic Christian culture. This reception of the theological significance of the post-Christendom context can, thus, be read as an objection to Max Stackhouse’s public theology as well as to Radical Orthodox’s triumphant presentations of Christian theology as rescuing society from all of the problems associated with atheism.

Far from downplaying the issue of human sinfulness, but also not primarily interested in correcting atheism’s sinfulness, Schillebeeckx seeks to understand how the atheist post-Christendom critique reveals Christianity’s sinfulness. Schillebeeckx, thus, discerns the way in which God’s mercy over Christianity’s shortcomings is being mediated in this criticism from outside. Schillebeeckx argues that the churches are now liberated from erroneous political alliances, a contention resembling Yoder’s positive evaluation of the end of Christendom to some extent. Like Yoder, Schillebeeckx stresses that established alliances between church and state can limit the church’s focus on the gospel, but, in contrast to Yoder, Schillebeeckx also stresses that these alliances restrict the theological awareness of extra-ecclesial mediations of God’s grace. In other words, post-Christendom critiques of Christian imperialism are received as a mercy that redirects Christian theology’s attention to the church’s dependence on the reality of redemption in which it always already exists. In this sense, Schillebeeckx regards the diaspora situation of a post-Christendom church as a purification of Christianity.

Moreover, Schillebeeckx’s position is distinct from Yoder’s insofar as Schillebeeckx does not elaborate upon the critique in order to discard the concept of Christendom as a whole. Schillebeeckx does not diagnose a principle contradiction between Christendom and truthfully following Christ. Instead, he laments that in the particular history of Christendom in the West, Christian theologians have downplayed the importance of Christianity’s God-centeredness. At this point, Schillebeeckx is in agreement with both Radical Orthodoxy and

923 Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 4-5 [5-6].
924 Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 4-5 [5-6].
925 See for example Stackhouse, Globalization and Grace, 85.
926 Schillebeeckx, “Church, Magisterium and Politics,” God the Future of Man, 87 [145-146].
927 Schillebeeckx, “The New Trends in Present-Day Dogmatic Theology,” Revelation and Theology, 315 [146-148]. Schillebeeckx mentions social revolutions against the established state politics in particular as potentially mediating people’s desire for the Kingdom of God.
929 Contrary to Yoder, Schillebeeckx claims that Christ can be followed better without the external pressures of state persecution (Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 50 [58-59]).
930 Instead of understanding the church as a service to God, God had been functionalised for the amelioration of the secular world (Schillebeeckx, “The New Trends in Present-Day Dogmatic Theology,” Revelation and Theology, 314 [145-146]). The church was preoccupied with its own self-
John Howard Yoder, that a purely immanent worldview has been consolidated during the history of Christendom, which must be regarded as insufficient in comparison to the Christian theocentric worldview. In agreement with Yoder, Schillebeeckx contends that an immanentist outlook cannot account sufficiently for the sacrifices that might, at times, be demanded from Christians for the sake of God’s kingdom. However, whereas Yoder argued that this is the case because the logic of the Cross and Resurrection surpasses the secularist ontology, Schillebeeckx laments the unintelligibility of prayer within a purely immanent ontology. He stresses that these spiritual sacrifices are only properly conceived of in light of people’s prayerful communion with God. The preoccupation with worldly wealth in Christendom was limiting, because immanent beings were too narrowly assessed in reference to some present enjoyment. Christian theology, to the contrary, must conceive of all immanent affairs as intrinsically open to God, which makes prayer to God about these issues intelligible.

Schillebeeckx then retrieves, from the post-Christendom critique primarily the incentive to remind the church of the significance of praying to God. According to Schillebeeckx, the most decisive difference between Christianity and atheism is that for Christianity the worldly reality is no longer simply the object of philosophical analysis, but also the subject of God’s personal dialogue with humankind. Christian theology must always be based on God’s address to humankind, and in this way surpasses atheist philosophies that do not consider this prayerful relationship. Against any philosophical disavowal of this interpersonal relationship as idolatrous conception of God as one being amongst beings, Schillebeeckx stresses that the interpersonal relationship between God and people in prayer does not fall short of, but transcends a human interpersonal relationship. Despite all of the inequality between humans and God, despite God’s independence from creation, Christians believe that God in God’s mysterious absoluteness really offers reciprocity to humankind. It is not up to theologians to protect God’s absoluteness argumentatively, but to confess the mysterious reality of the reciprocity between God and humankind, and to thus motivate Christians to pray.

interest (Schillebeeckx, “The Church as the Sacrament of Dialogue,” God the Future of Man, 79-80 [130-133]).

932 Schillebeeckx, “Secular Worship and Church Liturgy,” God the Future of Man, 68 [112-113].
934 Schillebeeckx, “Secular Worship and Church Liturgy,” God the Future of Man, 68 [112-113].
937 Schillebeeckx, Church, 14 [14-15]. This does not mean that Schillebeeckx would discount the importance of philosophy for theology. To the contrary, he argues that purely metaphysical thought does reveal some truth about reality (Schillebeeckx, “Theologia or Oikonomia?,” Revelation and Theology, 286-287 [102-105]).
938 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 812-813 [817].
939 Schillebeeckx, “De zin van het mens-zijn van Jezus,” Tijdschrift voor Theologie 2 (1962): 133; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 78; 82-83 [89; 94].
However, instead of triumphantly presenting theology’s appreciation of prayer over the atheist disavowal of prayer, Schillebeeckx’s reception of the post-Christendom critique as incentive for Christian theology to re-appreciate the gift of prayer is precisely why he is not concerned with any triumphant presentation of Christian theology as something that promises to rescue society from its atheism. Instead of countering atheism, Schillebeeckx is concerned with prayerfully relating to God through all of creation, including atheism.\(^941\) Prayer refers Christians back to the world which can now be interpreted as the context in which God reveals Godself. Schillebeeckx primarily re-appreciates that ‘the genuine life of faith [...] remains magnetized by a prayerful longing for encounter with God’.\(^942\) It is, consequently, Christian prayer which stimulates the church to an active commitment in the world without ever identifying this commitment as the goal at which it could find rest.\(^943\) Atheist political contributions do not have to be countered, despite all of their shortcomings, because knowing itself to be addressed by the reality of God in Christ, the church is freed from any natural fear in its political engagement.\(^944\) In prayer, Christians know that their own as well as non-Christian political efforts are bound to remain imperfect on the one hand, and that these shortcomings do not endanger the ultimate victory of God’s grace on the other. In this sense, Schillebeeckx calls prayer Christianity’s most critical element that can really change the face of the world. ‘[P]rayer – and I think only prayer – gives Christian faith it’s [sic] most critical and productive force.’\(^945\)

b) Theological appreciation of pluralism: Expanding the theological vision non-triumphantly

This reception of the post-Christendom critique as theologically significant, thus further elucidates why, despite exhibiting certain similarities with Milbank’s criticism of atheist secularism as ideological, Schillebeeckx’s rejection of the postmodern atheist interpretation of pluralism also remains distinct from the Radical Orthodox critique. Schillebeeckx also evaluates pluralism from a particularly Christian perspective, still positing God as the all-encompassing framework within which he assesses pluralism, while equally denying the neutrality of atheist understandings of pluralism. However, for Schillebeeckx, this means that atheist interpretations of pluralism are not to be replaced triumphantly, but theology must discern the way in which the atheist appreciation of pluralism, despite its shortcomings, mediates a grace for theology. Schillebeeckx receives this appreciation of pluralism as a merciful reminder for Christian theology that God’s grace is mediated in plural ways.\(^946\) He receives the secular celebration of pluralism as new positive incentive to examine critically and enlarge Christian theology through dialogue with others.\(^947\) Dialogue with non-

\(^941\) Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 805-806 [809-810].
\(^942\) Schillebeeckx, “Secularization and Christian Belief in God,” *God the Future of Man*, 50 [81-82].
\(^943\) This is why it has recently been aptly stated that, for Schillebeeckx, mysticism and politics stand in a mutually productive tension with each other (David Ranson, *Between the ‘Mysticism of Politics’ and the ‘Politics of Mysticism’: Interpreting New Pathways of Holiness within the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Hindmarsh: ATF Theology, 2014), 107). The secular realm of politics is identified as an important locus for Christian spirituality (217). See also Poulsom, *The Dialectics of Creation*, 121-26.
\(^945\) Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 813 [817].
\(^946\) Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 165 [166-167].
Christians must be entered into in order to understand the reality of redemption.948 This means that Christian theologians must assess the goodness of every non-Christian insight in reference to the revelation of God in Christ.949 In this way, Christian theology can show how the transcendent unity of all worldviews in God can be dimly seen in analogical relations within the world.950

Identifying God as pure positivity, Schillebeeckx understands the reality of God to be really mediated in all instances of goodness and as opposed by all instances of evil.951 All worldly goodness directly participates in God and is, as such, revelatory of God’s own Being.952 The theological endeavour of understanding the Christian God better, thus, demands that the theologian attends to the positivity of human history. At the same time, when relating all this worldly goodness into one coherent vision of reality, it must be respected that God’s transcendent positivity surpasses that which has already been mediated.953 Although theology can somehow already see the harmonious whole, this total vision slips ‘from our grasp into depths unfathomable’.954 At this point, Schillebeeckx refrains from elevating his theological interpretation of pluralism triumphantly over and above its atheistic counterparts in order to acknowledge God’s transcendence over his own theological vision. Schillebeeckx stresses that precisely because Christian theology relates all mediated goodness into one coherent vision of God, it must at the same time ‘slide into mysticism’.955 Christian theology cannot be presented as something superior to other interpretations of reality, because it must witness to the God who remains greater than the Christian integration of all worldly positivity into one coherent vision.

Although God cannot be known independently from any ontological framework, theology must somehow evidence in its conceptual ontology that the abundant reality of God can never be adequately captured by any vision of reality.956 As has already been observed by others, because the superior power of grace is affirmed as true, independently from human responses to this reality, Christianity would wrongly focus on itself instead of on God if it what comes to her from the world as “foreign prophecy”, but in which she nonetheless recognizes the well-known voice of the Lord’ (Schillebeeckx, “The Church as the Sacrament of Dialogue,” God the Future of Man, 76 [125-127]). Also Roger Haight has recently argued that in his theocentrism, Schillebeeckx did not fall short of, but went further than, an inclusive Christianity with regard to religious pluralism (Haight, “Engagement met de wereld als zaak van God,” Tijdschrift voor Theologie 50 (2010): 84). However, Haight relates this to Schillebeeckx’s theology of creation instead of redemption.

949 At this point, Schillebeeckx admits to be involved in an inescapable hermeneutical circle, which cannot be resolved prior to the eschaton (Schillebeeckx, Church, 161 [162-163]).
950 Schillebeeckx, Church, 165 [166-167].
951 Schillebeeckx, Church, 73 [75-76]. In Schillebeeckx’s context, human liberation was an instance of grace and human enslavement was an instance of evil.
952 Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 110 [126-127]. This indicates that, in agreement with Radical Orthodoxy, Schillebeeckx affirms that God’s ontological otherness from creation must be thought of in analogical, not in equivocal terms (Schillebeeckx, Church, 55-56 [56-57]). Schillebeeckx also claims that an equivocal understanding of God’s otherness would render Christianity politically irrelevant. (Schillebeeckx, “Secularization and Christian Belief in God,” God the Future of Man, 43 [70-71]). Doctrinally, Schillebeeckx relates the analogical understanding of God and world to the Incarnation (Schillebeeckx, Church, 125 [126-127]).
953 Schillebeeckx, Church, 73-74 [75-76].
954 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 16 [33-34].
955 Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 51 [60-61].
956 Schillebeeckx, “Theological Criteria,” The Understanding of Faith, 57-58 [63-65].
claimed that Christian theology is necessary in order to construct a better society. To affirm the reality of redemption means precisely that Christian theologians must be able to discover true goodness, also in non-Christian interpretations of reality. Consequently, Christian theology is concerned with the totality of reality, but it is itself not totalising. Christian theologians must win their own vision of reality over and over again precisely as not totalising, for such totalisation would be a disacknowledgment of the superabundance of grace. In this sense, ‘the theologian is [...] a custodian of transcendence but he [sic] does not guard it like a treasure’. Theology should not be concerned with securing a respectable position in public dialogue, but it should be entirely outward-looking, precisely because Christian theology should be primarily preoccupied with discovering how other worldviews might redirect Christianity towards God.

5.3 Receiving ideology critique as grace: Confessing theology’s entanglement in sin

This rejection of any Christian triumphalism returns us to the abovementioned issue of Schillebeeckx’s relation to ideology critique. If my argument from the previous chapters has suggested that Christian theologians should be more modest in their promises of contributing positively to post-Christendom politics, and acknowledge the impairment of their own vision by sin, it must be mentioned that Schillebeeckx’s confession of this impairment is partly owed to his distinct engagement with atheist ideology critiques of his time. In what follows, I will explain how Schillebeeckx did not capitulate to these ideology critiques, but discerned how ideology critique manifests the reality of redemption in his contemporary context, and how it should thus be received as mediation of mercy for redirecting the church towards God.

a) A Theological appreciation of ideology critique: Confessing the impairment of theology’s vision

According to my reading, Schillebeeckx discerned how the secular ideology critiques of his day mediated a mercy that reoriented Christian theology towards God, and consequently incorporated these insights into his theology. Still upholding theology’s aspiration to form an overarching vision of reality, Schillebeeckx receives from ideology critique the distinction between legitimate and distorted ontologies. An overarching

958 Schillebeeckx, “Correlation between Human Question and Christian Answer,” The Understanding of Faith, 84-85 [96-98].
960 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 566 [602-604]. Schillebeeckx speaks of ‘religion’ instead of Christianity.
962 Schillebeeckx, Church, 182 [183-184].
963 Schillebeeckx, Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983, 17.
ontology is not objectionable as such, but ideology critique shows that an ontology becomes problematic where it is used in order to consolidate the interests of a dominating group in society. Consequently, Schillebeeckx calls on Christian theologians to use ideology critique in order to be faithful to God, not to ideological human interpretations of God. In receiving ideology critique as a mediation of mercy, Schillebeeckx distinguishes between the Christian gospel, which escapes the criticism of only being a defective referent to the absolute truth, and theology’s previous proclamation of the gospel, which must now be acknowledged as partial and sometimes erroneous. The universal truth of the Christian gospel must still be affirmed, but, reflecting Schillebeeckx’s pessimistic anthropology, the Christian interpretation of this universal truth must be relativised.

It is significant for this discussion that Schillebeeckx’s engagement with ideology critiques led him to reject attempts, such as that of Radical Orthodoxy, which sought to devise a renewed theology in order to successfully overcome the problems of Christendom imperialism. Receiving ideology critique as a criticism of Christianity’s imperialist past also means acknowledging the impairment of the theological vision at present. Although Christian theology can legitimately draw upon resources from the past tradition, a purely speculative theology tends to forget that these past insights have not been accompanied by a concrete liberating practice. Schillebeeckx’s argument suggests that the sinful shortcomings of theologians from the past cannot be separated from their theologies in such a way that contemporary theologians could draw upon traditional texts as though these coincided with the truth about reality. This means that Schillebeeckx understands all of Christian theology to be entangled in sin to some extent. This sin is overcome not by way of constructing a better ideal than the concrete contemporary situation.

Theology’s entanglement in sin is solely overcome by the superior power of God’s grace as it forgives theology at present. Faith in the reality of God’s forgiving mercy should help theologians to admit their own, as well as their ancestors’ errors, and to trust in the superior power of God’s grace, despite these failures. Schillebeeckx’s reception of ideology critique does not result in an abandonment of his theology, but it refines his combination of a grace optimism with a pessimistic anthropology: God’s grace is sufficiently powerful to persist, despite theological distortions. ‘The power to realise this humanum and to bring about an individual and collective peace is reserved for God, the power of love’. Ideology critique helped Schillebeeckx to see more clearly that Christian theologians should not exempt

964 Schillebeeckx, Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983, 17. This invalidates the argument that, in his later theology, Schillebeeckx broke with De Petter’s metaphysics, because to presuppose Christianity as overarching ontology was no longer socially acceptable in the 1960s (Kerr, Twentieth Century Catholic Theologians, 59).
966 Schillebeeckx, Church, 186 [188-189]. Schillebeeckx laments the church’s ‘obsession with being right’.
967 Schillebeeckx, Christ, 66 [79].
970 Schillebeeckx, “Correlation between Human Question and Christian Answer,” The Understanding of Faith, 81 [92-93].
themselves from their own understanding of human sinfulness, erroneously siding with God’s unique power to overcome human sin.

b) Merciful distancing from ideology critique: Theology’s distinct God-centredness

This, then, also shows how Schillebeeckx’s theology remains distinct from atheist ideology critique: Schillebeeckx grounds faith in a better future theologically, whereas ideology critique does so anthropologically. Schillebeeckx’s combination of an optimistic ontology with a pessimistic anthropology is evidenced when he stresses that a Christian conception of freedom is not based on trust in human capacities. Quite the contrary, the human liability to failure renders any hope placed in a purely human redemption of the world impossible. Christian hope rests on the faith that humans are accepted by God despite their sin. Humans are not so much free by their own strength, as they are free due to God’s forgiveness, which continuously draws them away from self-enclosure towards the realisation of new possibilities. Consequently, theology’s political contributions to post-Christendom societies should not be limited to humanly realisable projects. Instead, Christian theology must direct its attention to the impossible as it is mediated in surprising ways in the public sphere. From Schillebeeckx’s Christian theological perspective, grace is not always realised in planned political projects, but it arrives as the entirely new and previously inconceivable, sometimes in spite of that which was humanly planned.

Some interpret Schillebeeckx’s theologically motivated engagement with ideology critique as a critique of atheism, inasmuch as the human devotion to secular liberation is only meaningful and fully accounted for where the superior power of grace over evil is acknowledged. Schillebeeckx indeed argues that Christian theology is able to explain that humanity’s continuous trust in the superior power of goodness, also evidenced in non-Christian political engagement, ultimately makes sense on the basis that grace has overcome all evil at Christ’s Resurrection. However, Schillebeeckx ends his engagement with ideology critique, not on the note of criticising the shortcomings of a purely atheistic outlook, but by way of reminding the church that everyone who chooses goodness over evil can be

971 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 582 [620-621]; Schillebeeckx, “Correlation between Human Question and Christian Answer,” The Understanding of Faith, 81 [92-93].
972 Schillebeeckx, Church, 130 [131-132].
973 Schillebeeckx, “Church, Magisterium and Politics,” God the Future of Man, 97 [160-161].
975 Boeve, “The Enduring Significance and Relevance of Edward Schillebeeckx?,” in Edward Schillebeeckx and Contemporary Theology, 12. See also Hilkert, “‘Grace-Optimism’?: Spirituality Today 43 (1991): 220-239, for an earlier argument that, without the perspective of faith, Schillebeeckx did not see any hope for the future of humanity. This insight is still relevant for contemporary public theological discussions insofar as Jeffrey Stout has been criticised precisely for not sufficiently accounting for his optimism regarding the achievement of better democracies (Cornel West, “Pragmatism and Democracy: Assessing Jeffrey Stout’s Democracy and Tradition”, Journal of the American Academy of Religion 78 (2010), ed. Jason Springs: 418).
regarded as thereby already implicitly affirming the reality of redemption. He appreciates that, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, these ‘people, […], refuse to be shaken in their conviction that it is not evil but goodness which has the last word’. Significantly, Schillebeeckx appreciates that atheism’s seemingly unaccounted trust in the meaningfulness of good actions mediates the superior power of God’s grace over evil. Consequently, Schillebeeckx, unlike Radical Orthodox thinkers, does not argue that secular ontologies fail to make consistent sense of reality. Instead, he makes the positive claim that theology’s overarching view of the positivity of reality frees Christians from despair, for they know that all evil that is encountered will not ultimately last.

5.4 Receiving contextual mediations of grace: Transforming the theological vision

Thus far, I have defended Schillebeeckx’s hermeneutic of God’s merciful forgiveness against alternative proposals of an adequate update of Schillebeeckx’s engagement with atheism. Importantly, Schillebeeckx was the only theologian introduced in this dissertation who was able to confess the impairment of theology’s own vision, which, as I will argue in the following section, renders him more hesitant than all of them to advocate Christian theology as being best able to solve contemporary political problems. This exposition of how Schillebeeckx modified his response to the question concerning theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies will then serve as the basis for my application of Schillebeeckx’s hermeneutics of mercy in response to contemporary political questions.

a) Recognising grace in unexpected places: Re-appreciating the cruciformity of grace

If we ask how Schillebeeckx modified his response to the question concerning theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies, in accordance with the grace that he perceived to be mediated in the atheist ideology critiques of his day, this modification

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977 Schillebeeckx, “Secularization and Christian Belief in God,” God the Future of Man, 45 [73-74]; Schillebeeckx, “Correlation between Human Question and Christian Answer,” The Understanding of Faith, 84 [96-97]. As Lieven Boeve stresses, in contradistinction to Tillich’s correlational method, Schillebeeckx does not understand the Christian revelation as a solution of the meaninglessness of human life, but the meaningfulness of Christianity must be correlated with that which is already meaningful in secularity (Boeve, “Experience According to Edward Schillebeeckx,” in Divinising Experience, 203-204).


980 Schillebeeckx, Church, 130 [131-132]. Schillebeeckx claims that the eschaton is exclusively positive, and that all that which remains evil will simply vanish, for God alone will have the last word (137).
concerns Schillebeeckx’s introduction of a second reason as to why Christian theologians cannot promise to solve political problems better than non-Christian philosophers. The first reason concerned the superabundant reality of redemption, which can never be captured exhaustively by theological concepts. The notion of the implicit intuition allowed Schillebeeckx to conceive of a noetic knowledge of the concrete reality of redemption, which always surpasses the human conceptual grasp of reality. The continuous reorientation towards one’s external environment serves to continuously expand upon and correct the theological understanding of the reality of redemption. On this basis, Christian theologians would have to admit that non-theological concepts and worldviews could equally, but differently, be able to give expression to the same abundant reality of redemption, which explains why their political projects could be equally good as Christian theological ones.

Receiving the theological significance of ideology critique, this argument is now being complicated, insofar as Schillebeeckx must admit, on the one hand, that theological statements, just as well as any other, could also deviate from the superabundant truth about reality.981 On the other hand, he also admits that empirical reality itself is shot through with sinful imperfections, which renders it impossible to prove on the basis of any noetic contact with one’s environment that the reality we live in has been definitely redeemed in Christ.982 And yet, contrary to his critics who argue that Schillebeeckx consequently abandoned this theological claim, concerning the Christian understanding of reality as redeemed, Schillebeeckx continues to interpret the world from the perspective of this conviction.983

Schillebeeckx now nuances his theology inasmuch as he modifies his notion of the implicit intuition of reality’s abundant positivity in light of his atheist contemporaries’ heightened attention to all evil in the world. Using the notion of the negative contrast experience, he now argues that the superior power of grace over all evil is not only intuited through experiences of meaning and goodness, but that the final victory of grace can also be anticipated in the confrontation with suffering and evil.984 Christian theologians are now called upon to discern God’s offer of grace not in spite of, but in the fragmentary realisation of goodness amidst evil.985 His contemporary atheists’ pessimism has, thus, helped

981 In this sense, I agree with Philip Kennedy who denies that Schillebeeckx’s later theology fundamentally breaks from his earlier thought, arguing that just as Schillebeeckx’s early theological reception of De Petter’s philosophy is based on his underlying conviction that God can be known through human experience, so is his later reception of Critical Theory (Kennedy, “Continuity underlying Discontinuity,” New Blackfriars 70 (1989): 275-276). However, I investigate how, on the basis of this persisting conviction, Schillebeeckx modified his theology in accordance with the new experience of God to which Critical Theory pointed him.

982 Schillebeeckx, Church, 5 [5-6]; Schillebeeckx, “Secularization and Christian Belief in God,” God the Future of Man, 45-46 [73-76]; Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 5 [5-6]; Schillebeeckx, Christ, 774-775 [777]. This understanding that secular experiences of reality can only be interpreted as referring to Christianity if interpreted from the perspective of Christian theology, means that those critics who claim that Schillebeeckx assumes that there is a secular experience which would compel people to believe in Christianity are actually mistaken (Antoon Vergote, “Ervaringsgeloof en geloofservaring,” Streven 52 (1985): 891-903, cit. by Boeve, “Experience According to Edward Schillebeeckx,” in Divinising Experience, 219, who criticises Vergote for the same reason, 221).

983 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 570 [608]. More precisely, Schillebeeckx rejects anthropological foundations for theology. This opposition to purely inductive reasoning from nature to God is the point at which Schillebeeckx displays a Thomist sense of fideism (Kennedy, “Continuity underlying Discontinuity,” New Blackfriars 70 (1989): 266).

984 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 7 [23-24].

985 Schillebeeckx, Church, 94; 175 [96-97; 176-177].
Schillebeeckx to pay heightened attention to the theological truth of the cruciformity of the reality of redemption, which might have been downplayed in his earlier thought.\textsuperscript{986}

Thus, for Schillebeeckx, Christian theologians bear witness to the reality of redemption, not by seeing how all evil can be overcome by Christian theology in a Radical Orthodox manner, or how societal problems are being solved by Christian theology pace public theology and Kathryn Tanner, but through sharpening their perception of the reality of redemption even when it appears in no obvious manner.\textsuperscript{987} Accordingly, whereas Radical Orthodox authors argue that the Christian ontology can further expand upon or complete the world’s redemption, and promise a better future than any atheist social order, Schillebeeckx abstains from these promises, because due to human sin the Christian vision of the whole of reality also remains fragmentary.\textsuperscript{988} On the one hand, the acknowledgment that history is interwoven with sinful elements means that Christian theologians can only see the reality of redemption beneath sin, but they cannot rationally formulate how everything is interconnected into one meaningful whole. This inability can be explained in relation to theology’s own entanglement in sin, which is why the theological resources from the past are not entirely reliable in paving the way into a better future. Redemption can, thus, only be promised insofar as grace is shown to be mediated in the remaining evil in the world and insofar as people believe that this grace will win in the end.\textsuperscript{989}

At this point, Schillebeeckx then conceives of a plurality of positive political projects to overcome the remaining evil in the world.\textsuperscript{990} He suggests that a communal discussion about the best political path to overcome the evil should commence once a plurality of groups agrees that a certain situation is problematic. Christian theologians must not be too concerned about presenting their own solution as being superior to others.\textsuperscript{991} Instead, Christian theologians must strike the right balance between witnessing to God as sole ruler of reality and to the faith that humankind freely participates in this rule.\textsuperscript{992} Christian theologians must show that humans are the active subjects of history in their public engagement, but they should not be the dictators who think that they have grasped the truth about the world and humankind.\textsuperscript{993} The positive solution chosen should be acknowledged to be decisive for the course of a society’s future, but it must not be dictated by Christian theology.

\textsuperscript{986} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Church}, 5 [5-6].
\textsuperscript{987} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983}, 20.
\textsuperscript{990} Schillebeeckx, “Theological Criteria,” \textit{The Understanding of Faith}, 58 [64-65].
\textsuperscript{991} This restraint, regarding admitting the superior insight into the concrete path that should be taken, has been criticised (Hill, “Schillebeeckx’s New Look at Secularity,” \textit{The Thomist} 33 (1969): 168-69). Hill claims that Schillebeeckx focusses too much on negative protest in order to prevent ideological distortions, and suggests that faith in the Resurrection would imply that more concrete positive insights into the divine reality must be acknowledged. However, my reading challenges Hill’s insofar as I interpret Schillebeeckx as suggesting that due to the Resurrection, all positive solutions to suffering must be acknowledged as grace. The problem for Christian theology is not the lack of positive insights, but the acknowledgment that there is an abundance of equally positive insights.
\textsuperscript{992} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Christ}, 784-785 [788].
\textsuperscript{993} Schillebeeckx, \textit{Christ}, 784-785 [788].
If we ask how we might retrieve Schillebeeckx’s hermeneutics of mercy for contemporary theology, I would first summarise the distinctiveness of Schillebeeckx’s theology in comparison to all of the others. Most importantly, public theologians, as well as Kathryn Tanner and Radical Orthodoxy, all associate theology’s political relevance with theological attempts to solve the surrounding society’s problems. Yoder rejected this approach in order to respect society’s alleged freedom to reject Christ, i.e. to be sinful. All of the theologians introduced have, thus, shared a reliance on Christianity’s surrounding societies to be relatively unredeemed in order to distinguish theology from atheist positions, and to highlight theology’s distinct political relevance with reference to its ability to solve problems in the surrounding society or to further the world’s redemption, even while the surrounding society continues to reject these efforts. Schillebeeckx showed a different way of theologically informed political engagement, summarised in his warning not to follow the present tides of a ‘cultural pessimism’. If public theology, postliberal theologies, and Radical Orthodoxy associate theology’s political relevance with Christianity’s task to further realising the world’s redemption, they are likely to rely on the world’s problematic state in order for theology to be politically relevant.

To reiterate Graham Ward’s pessimism, mentioned previously in chapter 2: ‘[…], we can all see that the world is fucked up but we’re all still hoping for something that can stop it from being so fucked up’. By stressing theology’s superior role in overcoming the world’s problems even more, Milbank similarly expresses his pessimism in the reactive hope ‘that in the current century this [the Catholic] project will be able to recover and rethink the Western tradition in a way that could even (in the face of increasing global catastrophe) prove universally pervasive’. Discontent with the present functions, for Ward and Milbank alike, as something fundamental for the theologically informed promise of deliverance. With Schillebeeckx, we could ask whether it is really as self-evident that the world is primarily marked by problems. The particular Christian interpretation of reality could, instead, suggest learning anew to perceive the reality of redemption, amidst and underneath all political problems. The focus on this realised redemption prevents Christian hope from becoming utopian on the one hand, and it prevents theology from becoming circular in the sense of inventing problems in society that it then promises to solve on the other. This is not to suggest that there are not enough political problems in the world, but Schillebeeckx reminds us that theologians should trust that the future will be a better place only if we first notice ‘the log in our own eye before we see the speck in the eyes of our neighbours’ (Matt. 7:3). Christian theology’s real political problem might be even more profound than public or Radical Orthodox theologians dare to acknowledge; namely, that we cannot even see what precisely is problematic in the contemporary post-Christendom context. Christian theology’s specific contribution might not so much be to detect problems, which atheists do not see, but to rely on
atheists’ detection of problems as well as their proposed solutions, and to discern signs of redemption in their activity.998

It is important to consider that Schillebeeckx has once more been criticised for being too naively optimistic in this regard, and updating Schillebeeckx’s theology has been proposed for the contemporary context once more through a correction of this shortcoming. Schillebeeckx’s trust that the surrounding society will react against evil has been criticised for insufficiently considering that social sin can blur a whole culture’s vision of evil and render it apathetic.999 The adequate update of Schillebeeckx’s theology proposed would, then, once more point in the direction of Radical Orthodoxy, critiquing the shortcomings of the surrounding culture and assigning to theology the task of opening up everyone’s eyes to the miserable state of the world. My interpretation of Schillebeeckx’s theology points in a different direction: If contemporary society’s vision is too blurred to recognise evil, Christian theologians should not exempt themselves from this impairment.

If there is, at present, a certain observable apathy regarding political engagement for a better future, who tells us that this is the result of indifference? Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of atheism would rather suggest that atheism’s cultural pessimism might have led to apathy because people have despaired over the evil which, at times, seems overpowering, not because they are indifferent to it. Christian theology’s role is not to overcome atheism’s political apathy, but to receive this apathy as an offer of God’s forgiveness for the church. Theologians could learn that, due to their overall optimistic Christian outlook, they might have continuously proposed solutions to evils when atheists might have seen more clearly, and acknowledged more honestly, that the negativity of evil cannot be resolved. The contemporary political apathy observed should then not be ‘healed’ by an overzealous Christian theology, but Christians should learn from this apathy to face evil in all its gravity and negativity. And yet, Christian theologians should maintain a critical distance to the atheist outlook precisely in not despairing, but in interpreting the atheist despair over evil itself as a mediation of God’s mercy towards Christianity and, as such, as a sign of hope. Christian theologians should trust that this present state of political apathy is not the last word about reality, and is not determinative for a perpetual degradation of West European societies’ political fate.

But what would such a public theological approach imply more concretely? Let us consider the current political disputes in Europe concerning the degree of hospitality with which refugees should be welcomed. Contemporary theologians might be inclined to side with all those who favour open borders and engage in rendering Europe more hospitable. This is laudable and Christian theologians should indeed not discard the grace that is clearly mediated by all those who welcome those in need. But, should Christian theologians be as quick to discard entirely the theological significance of any opposition to an open border

998 It might be objected that the contemporary context significantly differs from Schillebeeckx’s own insofar as some forms of atheism have become more oppressive and intolerant with regard to the existence of any faith tradition (Stephan van Erp, “Incarnational Theology – Systematic Theology After Edward Schillebeeckx,” in Edward Schillebeeckx: Impulse für Theologien im 21. Jahrhundert – Impetus Towards Theologies in the 21st Century, eds. Thomas Eggensperger, Ulrich Engel and Angel F. Méndez Montoya (Ostfildern: Matthias Grünewaldverlag, 2008), 64). My interpretation of Schillebeeckx suggests, however, that this should not lead Christian theologians to think about how to overcome the shortcomings of contemporary atheism, but to look more closely in order to perceive the grace mediated by this atheism, despite its shortcomings, and to reformulate Christian theology accordingly.

999 Rodenborn, Hope in Action, 321-324.
policy? My interpretation of Schillebeeckx’s hermeneutic of mercy would suggest spending time with these opponents and discerning in how far they, even in their overall mistaken view, mediate a grace that we would not have otherwise seen. Theologians should admit that they cannot understand those people’s political opinions on a purely conceptual level before they have accompanied them in their concrete lives. On the one hand, theologians should confess that, if parts of a society want to close their countries’ borders, it would be simplistic to understand these people as being entirely sinful, as problems that need to be overcome, and those in favour of an open border policy as entirely graced and as already possessing the solution that needs to be adopted by everyone. Instead, theologians should confess that the entire society is implicated in the problem that leads some to refuse any hospitality towards refugees. Most importantly, theologians should turn to the church and investigate the extent to which the church is itself part of the problem that has led some contemporaries to be so anxious about the supposed dangers of an open border policy.

In this sense, Christian theologians should not side with either position in the current societal disputes about immigration. Importantly, however, Christian theologians should not apologetically advocate their reconciliatory stance as one that should be adopted by every member of the European Union either. We should not defend our own theological position in the middle of the conflict by promising to solve the problem and to, thus, actively further the world’s redemption. Theologians would not take this position in the middle as an ethical duty in the first place. Instead, we would take this position, because the grace mediated by both positions overflows an easy dichotomisation into one completely right and one completely wrong position. Theologians would have to confess to be more dependent upon recognising the grace mediated in others than to be able to correct other people’s shortcomings with our own insights. Reversely, Christian theologians could not promise to redeem the world with the theological middle position, because the theologian would also be entangled in the sinfulness of both positions. Theologians would have to confess that due to their own entanglement in sin, they cannot see any resolution of the conflict. But we should learn to see a surplus of grace in conflicting positions once again, and heal with it our own impaired vision. Maybe one day, we will then find an entirely new and unprecedented solution to the current political problem, to be adopted by the church, and perhaps to be recognised by everyone as a grace.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown how Schillebeeckx’s theological engagement with non-Christian positions was marked by a distinctly merciful approach. His maintenance of a subtle critical distance to atheism should also guide contemporary public theology. I have argued that Schillebeeckx received his atheist contemporaries’ critique of Christendom imperialism as a merciful reminder of the church not to underestimate the importance of praying to God, and their preference of plurality over unity as merciful reminder that the church has no monopoly on grace, but that God’s superabundant offer of grace is mediated in multiple ways in this world. At the same time, Schillebeeckx maintained a critical distance to atheism insofar as he warned against the absolutisation of his atheist contemporaries’ insights and appealed to the importance of Christianity’s God-centredness. Nevertheless, evidencing the merciful intent of his critique, Schillebeeckx did not aim to present Christian theology triumphantly as promising to heal atheism’s shortcomings, but his primary interest was in correcting Christian theology with what he received as atheist mediations of God’s forgiveness. In the same manner, Schillebeeckx also engaged with atheist ideology critiques
of his time from which he learned not to exempt the theological vision from the theological claim that all human insights are impaired by sin. This shifted Schillebeeckx’s focus even more towards recognising how God’s forgiveness is contemporarily mediated in his surrounding context despite the church.

If my explanation of Schillebeeckx’s Christology, from the previous chapter, might still have been dangerously close to presenting Schillebeeckx’s openness to non-Christian positions as the best solution for the peaceful co-existence of a pluralist society universally, I have highlighted in this chapter that Schillebeeckx’s position is always already the response to a specific Christian theological mistake or one-sidedness in the past that can be corrected by way of attention to the way in which God’s forgiveness is mediated in the surrounding context. Schillebeeckx’s hermeneutic of mercy cannot be universalised, because it is the result of the specific dialogue between a Christian theologian and Christianity’s critics and is, thus, aimed at overcoming theological problems that might not be present in other positions. I have argued that this merciful engagement with the surrounding society would imply that public theologians should not offer theological solutions to political problems primarily. Instead, public theologians should learn to recognise how God’s grace is mediated in the surrounding society’s political disputes, and discern how they reveal the church’s sinful shortcomings as well as new hope that these might not ultimately foreclose a better future. This is not to distinguish Christianity and atheism as two entirely self-enclosed systems, each with their own problems. Christianity’s problems will exhibit similarities with atheism’s problems. However, if Christian theologians trust that sin is overcome through God’s forgiveness, and not by focussing on the other’s failures, but by showing to them the best version of themselves, then it is not the theologian’s duty to point out atheism’s problems before having removed the log in our own eye.
CONCLUSION

If we ask how to respond theologically to those secularists who vehemently oppose any Christian involvement in the politics of post-Christendom societies, contemporary theologians will nearly unanimously respond by promising that theology can positively influence the entire social order. This positive influence is strongly associated with theology’s ability to solve currently existing political problems. Not many might be inclined to object to what appears as such a laudable willingness to solve political problems with theological resources. Yet, in this dissertation, I have dared to ask the counter-question of whether it might be possible that, in their very eagerness to defend Christian theology’s political relevance apologetically through promising to solve the surrounding society’s problems, these contemporary public and Radical Orthodox theologians might be prematurely rejecting the grace God offers. Whereas these apologetic defenders of Christian theology implicitly understand the secularist rejection of theologically informed political engagement as something that needs to be overcome, I have revisited Edward Schillebeeckx’s Christology in order to ask whether it might not just as well be possible that these atheist opponents to Christianity follow God, and mediate a grace that Christian theologians should welcome.

If we ask about theology’s political role in post-Christendom societies, contemporary public and Radical Orthodox theologians nearly unanimously suggest that Christian theologians should solve the entire society’s political problems. Through this move, they risk overlooking the problem that Christian theology itself could present to secular politics. I have argued that contemporary Christian theologians in post-Christendom societies should confess that their entanglement in sin blinds their theological vision of a commendable solution, because they are themselves in the very midst of the problem they so sincerely hope to overcome. The primary task of contemporary public theology should, then, consist of discerning God’s forgiveness offered to theology in the contemporary context.

If we ask about the political implications of the Christian faith in Christ’s redemption of the world, most contemporary public theologians would associate this faith with an ethical duty to imitate Christ. Christians are called to imitate, complete or exceed Christ’s work of redemption, models which all translate Christ’s redemptive work into the Christian task of solving contemporary political problems. I have suggested to uphold that Christ uniquely redeems the world, and that Christian theologians should confess that they, like everyone else, are primarily sinful beneficiaries of Christ’s redemption which is most often mediated in spite of ourselves.

This is why I suggest that the strong secularist opposition to Christian theological contributions to public politics should be welcomed as a reminder of Christianity’s imperialist past, in which Christians intruded into different cultures, promising redemption and, thus, providing solutions to problems that these cultures might never have dreamed of. I interpret this reminder as an incentive to humble our current theological promises of solving contemporary political problems. Should we not be more mindful of the ways in which our theological solutions could, at the same time, be the very invention of the problem? Christian theologians should welcome any opposition to Christian theological contributions to secular politics as incentive to confess that, at this moment in history, looking back at a long and often painful history of Christendom imperialism, many of us still suffer from the long-lasting effects of Christianity’s sinful disobedience to God during its imperialist past, which tore our societies apart. How do we reconcile these societies? How do we show that our Christian faith convinces us that we still belong to our brothers and sisters who have left the church?
Both public and Radical Orthodox theologians promise that theology will redeem everyone from the pain our forefathers have afflicted upon our societies, perhaps unconsciously and without their willing it. I have suggested that Christian theologians should not promise to be society’s heroic redeemers, but that we should acknowledge to be so greatly entangled in the problem that we cannot see any solution to it clearly. At present, theology’s political contribution to post-Christendom societies might primarily consist of healing Christianity’s sinful past precisely by overcoming the church’s overzealous tendencies to solve the surrounding society’s problems. Consequently, I do not even advocate Schillebeeckx’s merciful approach to atheism as being the best remedy to reconciling a pluralist society that seems, at times, to be more marked by its many disputes and conflicts than by its harmony and peace. I cannot promise that reading one’s contemporary situation through a hermeneutics of mercy will reconcile conflicting positions. I simply suggest to my Christian readers that they may reconsider the graces they have received, and thank God and the ones who mediated them, before they lament about all that which they are still lacking. I appeal to them to sharpen their sights in order to see the grace mediated by another person’s position, which they might otherwise simply reject as being entirely mistaken.

Overall, I contest the claim that all faith-based arguments should be given equal hearing in political debates. Assessing the issue from a Christian theological perspective, and limiting the issue at hand to Christian theological claims instead of faith-based claims in general, I have argued that at the present point in time, Christian theology should contribute less actively than others its faith-based insights to political discussions in post-Christendom societies. It is time for Christian theologians to confess publicly that all we can do is look around for signs of God’s forgiveness as it is offered to us at present, and thereby receive our non-Christian contemporaries’ insights as welcome signs of hope. Christian theologians should accept this forgiveness in order to be reconciled with God and with the surrounding society eventually.
SAMENVATTING

Dit proefschrift analyseert de relevantie van Edward Schillebeeckx’ Christologie voor de vraag naar de politieke rol van het christendom in een post-christelijke context. Ik benader deze vraag uit christelijk theologisch perspectief met een bijzonder oog voor de discussies rondom natuur en genade en de Christologie. Ik lever een bijdrage aan de bestaande discussies door een alternatief te bieden voor de meest prominente en contrasterende actuele antwoorden, namelijk het antwoord van de Britse publieke theologie, enerzijds, en het antwoord van Radical Orthodoxy, anderzijds.

Hoewel ik waardering heb voor het inzicht van de publieke theologie dat de actuele post-christelijke context bijzondere aandacht verdient, grijp ik terug op Radical Orthodoxy om de publieke theologie te bekritiseren, in zoverre deze de politieke relevantie van het christendom poogt te legitimeren met behulp van een seculier kader. Hedendaagse Britse publieke theologen die vanuit de traditie van het liberale Protestantisme argumenteren, lopen het gevaar om in de neutraliteit van het secularisme te geloven. Ze passen daardoor de christelijke traditie niet enkel aan seculaire verwachtingen aan, maar behouden daarmee ook een variant van Westerse dominantie. Daarom volgt dit proefschrift de leerzamere intuïtie van de publieke theologie dat de publieke relevantie van het christendom in een post-christelijke context ook met behulp van een theologisch begrip van de genade kan worden gerechtvaardigd. Omdat de publieke theologie zich nog niet voldoende heeft verdiept in het theologisch debat rond de genade bouw ik op het gedachtegoed van Radical Orthodoxy voort. Deze theolen tonen momenteel bij uitstek de politieke relevantie van theologische discussies over natuur en genade.

De positie van Radical Orthodoxy blijft problematisch in zoverre ze Christus en de kerk ineenschuift. Dit maakt dat ze de actieve deelname van kerk aan de verlossing van de wereld meer benadrukken dan de afhankelijkheid van de kerk van de genade van Christus. Daarom grijp ik terug op de Christologie van John Howard Yoder. Hij voert belangrijke theologische redenen op om ieder soort van christelijke dominantie te verwerpen. Omdat zijn opvatting van de genade problemen blootlegt die vergelijkbaar zijn met Radical Orthodoxy presenteert ik daarna de Christologie van Kathryn Tanner. Zij slaagt er het best in om consistent de zonde van de kerk en haar blijvende afhankelijkheid van de genade van Christus te beklemtoten. Deze nadruk ontbreekt in alle andere posities.

Uiteindelijk vormt deze kritische analyse van de hedendaagse Britse publieke theologie, Radical Orthodoxy, Yoder en Tanner de voorbereiding voor mijn eigen constructieve werk. Hier werk ik systematisch uit hoe Edward Schillebeeckx’ toenmalige omgang met diens publiek een concept van genade aan het licht brengt dat genade voornamelijk als ontferming beschouwt. Schillebeeckx argumenteert vanuit een perspectief dat belangrijke overeenkomsten met de Radical Orthodoxe ontologie van vrede toont, maar deelt met de publieke theologie de afwijzing van ieder overtijfsel van de christelijke dominantie uit het verleden. Ik argumenteer dat het Schillebeeckx lukte een evenwicht tussen beide posities te bewaren omdat hij de genade als pure positiviteit opvatte. Een genade die echter zowel door de kerk als door het buitenkerkelijke publiek op vergelijkbaar imperfecte wijze bemiddeld wordt. Deze interpretatie van het buitenkerkelijke publiek als medium van Gods ontferming over de kerk en deze interpretatie van de kerk als geroepen om de fouten en fiasco’s van het buitenkerkelijke publiek met ontferming tegemoet te treden zou opnieuw moeten worden opgenomen in de hedendaagse publieke theologie.
SUMMARY

This dissertation examines the relevance of Edward Schillebeeckx’s Christology for the question of Christianity’s political role in a post-Christendom context. I approach the question from a Christian theological perspective insofar as it relates to discussions about nature and grace as well as to Christology. My contribution consists in constructing an alternative response to the presently most prominent and contrasting ones provided by contemporary British public theology on the one hand, and Radical Orthodoxy on the other.

Whilst appreciative of public theology’s awareness that the contemporary post-Christendom context deserves particular theological attention, I draw on Radical Orthodoxy in order to criticise public theological justifications of Christianity’s political relevance in secular terms. Contemporary British public theologians, operating from within the liberal Protestant tradition, risk believing in secularism’s neutrality and therefore not only accommodating the Christian tradition to secularist expectations but also maintaining a version of Western dominance. This dissertation thus takes up the more valuable public theological intuition that Christianity’s public relevance in a post-Christendom context could equally be justified on the basis of a theological understanding of grace. Since theological discussions of grace have not yet been sufficiently developed within the emerging discipline, I build on Radical Orthodox theologians, who, at present, most prominently demonstrate the political relevance of theological discussions of nature and grace.

The remaining problems with Radical Orthodoxy are associated with their respective conflation of Christ into the church, to the effect that the church’s active participation in the world’s redemption is stressed at the expense of the church’s dependence on Christ’s grace. Consequently, I draw on the Christology of John Howard Yoder who provides considerable theological reasons for the rejection of any kind of Christendom, but whose understanding of grace shares similar problems with that of Radical Orthodoxy. Kathryn Tanner’s Christology is then presented, since it most coherently stresses the church’s sinfulness and continuous dependence on Christ’s grace; an emphasis that remains underdeveloped in all other accounts introduced thus far.

Altogether, this critical assessment of contemporary British public theology’s, Radical Orthodoxy’s, Yoder’s, and Tanner’s respective understandings of Christianity’s role in a post-Christendom public paves the way for my own constructive work. This consists in systematically elaborating how Edward Schillebeeckx’s engagement with the surrounding public of his time exhibited a certain understanding of grace in terms of mercy. Arguing from the perspective of an ontological vision that bears great similarities with a Radical Orthodox ontology of peace, Schillebeeckx at the same time shared public theology’s rejection of any remnant of Christendom. I argue that he was able to balance the two because he understood grace as pure positivity, which is, however, mediated by the church as well as by the extra-ecclesial public to a similarly imperfect degree. This interpretation of the extra-ecclesial public as mediating God’s mercy for the redirection of a sinful church to God, and of the church as being called to approach the extra-ecclesial public failures with mercy, should be retrieved for a contemporary public theology.
CURRICULUM VITAE

Christiane Alpers was born in the small West-German town Bad Dürkheim on 31st August 1987, where she lived until she passed her ‘Abitur’ at the local Werner-Heisenberg-Gymnasium in March 2007. She then immediately travelled to Togo where she volunteered for six months for the humanitarian organisation Campagne des Hommes in the small town of Kpalimé, directly followed by another six-months stay at a children’s home in a suburb of the neighbouring country’s capital Accra. After her return to Germany in March 2008, Christiane Alpers first volunteered for another five months in a hospice in Ludwigshafen am Rhein, as she was interested to learn more about life and death before entering the University of Leipzig in October of the same year, to begin a Bachelor’s degree in social sciences and philosophy, with a particular focus on sociology. During her two years in Leipzig, Christiane Alpers volunteered one day a week in the soup kitchen for socially disadvantaged and homeless people Leipziger Oase and was an active member of the local Amnesty International group. During the last year of her Bachelor’s degree course, Christiane Alpers, participating in the Erasmus programme, went to Teesside University Middlesbrough. As she could not pursue her developing interest in the sociology of religion at that institution, she conducted her own little field work in local Christian churches, whilst officially following courses in sociology and criminology. In 2011, Christiane Alpers then concluded her Bachelor studies with a dissertation on how the Roman Catholic Church, on the one hand, and modern culture, on the other, can both be understood through the theoretical framework of Peter Berger’s social constructivism.

In 2011, Christiane Alpers then enrolled to volunteer for one year at the Anglican Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, where, together with three fellow volunteers, she was responsible for developing the shrine’s ministry to children and young people. As she was, by now, ever more interested in studying Christianity from the inside, Christiane Alpers then moved back to the Northeast of England in order to study theology at Durham University. After one year of intensive study, she completed her Master’s degree in Theology and Religious Studies with a dissertation on the Trinitarian theology of Rowan Williams, supervised by Dr. Marcus Pound, in August 2013.

In October of the same year, Christiane Alpers moved to the Netherlands where she began to work on her doctoral project on Edward Schillebeeckx’s Christology and public theology, as an employee at the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen. In Prof. Stephan van Erp and Prof. Christoph Hübenthal Christiane Alpers found two extraordinarily supportive supervisors of her work, who also stimulated her to immerse herself more deeply in academic culture. She participated not only in the monthly meetings and discussions of the members of the chair of systematic theology at Radboud University, in weekly Schillebeeckx reading groups with members of staff and students but also in international conferences, published articles and book reviews in New Blackfriars, Tijdschrift voor Theologie, ET Studies, The Heythrop Journal, Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie, Modern Theology and co-edited with Stephan van Erp and Christopher Cimorelli a volume on Edward Schillebeeckx and public theology, which will be published with Bloomsbury. As a PhD candidate, Christiane Alpers
also participated in the monthly NOSTER (Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion) meetings for doctoral students in systematic theology from the Netherlands, then chaired by Prof. Stephan van Erp and Prof. Marcel Sarot. From January 2015 onwards, when Stephan van Erp moved to Belgium in order to become a professor of fundamental theology at KU Leuven, Christiane Alpers started visiting Leuven on a monthly basis, to participate in the meetings of the research group *Theology in a Postmodern Context* at KU Leuven. This led not only to her being accepted as candidate for a double doctorate, from RU Nijmegen and KU Leuven, but also to the provisioning of a six-month stay in Leuven, from January to July 2016. Prior to that, Christiane Alpers had just finished enjoying a four-month research period from August to December 2015 at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, during which this dissertation has been supervised by Prof. Mary Catherine Hilkert.