The Realization of Harmony in a Broken World: Reconsidering the Role of Ethics in Milbank’s Ontology of Peace

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Milbank’s Christian ontology of peace indicates a way out of the contemporary crisis of Western democracies. Milbank argues that politics should have a positive and communitarian goal, and that contemporary liberalism fails insofar as it is preoccupied with the limitation of evil, and insofar as it presupposes a fundamentally egoistic anthropology. Milbank’s alternative harmonizing vision of reality and humankind has been criticized for preemiting all too quickly a harmony which has not yet been realized, and for thereby undermining the crucial role of reactive ethical laws and human work for the realization of true harmony in a world marred by a tragic dimension. Contrary to this criticism, this article advances the claim that Milbank pays too little attention to the ways in which real harmony is already being realized in the world, which is why he presents his ontology as an ideal toward which an entire society should work, under the guidance of ethical laws. A reading of Schillebeeckx’s more positive reception of liberalism will serve to illustrate the political consequences of a position that focuses more on the already realized harmony in this world than on an ideal harmony.

KEYWORDS radical orthodoxy, ontology, reactive ethics, politics, Schillebeeckx

1. Introduction

The contemporary rise of populist parties in the US as well as in many European countries could indicate a crisis of the democratic systems in these states. People might have lost a sense of what politics is for, and professional politicians might have failed to offer political visions amongst which the most preferable could be elected. In this climate, John Milbank’s theology might be celebrated as a welcome gift. He most certainly offers us a political vision, which as a whole has
invited both critique and appraisal over the last 27 years of its emergence and development. This article’s presentation of Milbank’s political theology as an answer to the contemporary crisis of democracy will help to challenge some common misreadings of Milbank’s thought, which by one-sidedly focusing on Milbank’s (admittedly, at times, problematic) Christian triumphalism, overlook his aim of contributing constructively to the whole of society’s advancement in the common good. In short, I present Milbank’s theology as an answer to the contemporary democratic crisis, inasmuch as he criticizes the liberal political order for failing to call on people to contribute actively to democratic discussions about a common goal toward which the whole of society could strive, with the effect that such discussions are ever more absent from the political forum. With his ontology of peace, Milbank then reconceptualizes the goal of politics as such, in order to offer a vision that allows people to be actively involved in their society’s discussions about, and active realization of, the common good.¹ In this article, I will mainly focus on Milbank’s contention that contemporary liberal politics² are directed against the limitation of damage, and that such politics should be replaced by a politics that is oriented toward a society’s growth in the truly good. According to Milbank, there exists an intrinsic link between political liberalism and people’s unconsidered following of mainstream trends, mass opinion, and propaganda, insofar as liberalism defines freedom purely negatively as “unfettered choice” without any intrinsic connection to a substantial good.³ As such, Milbank blames liberalism for its “erosion of democracy.”⁴

My argument proceeds by first explaining Milbank’s claim that liberal ethics are at odds with a Christian ontology that affirms goodness as sole origin and end of all Being. He presents liberal ethics as arbitrarily assuming a fundamental antagonism amongst all beings, and as therefore inhibiting a society’s real growth in goodness. It will be explained how Milbank presents his ontology of peace as allowing for a positive orientation of politics instead of the currently prevalent reactionary model. Second, I will introduce the objection that Milbank preempts a harmony which has not yet been realized in this world, and thus undervalues the crucial role of ethics and work for the attainment of the political goal of true harmony. An appropriate acknowledgement of some tragic dimension of the present world has been found lacking in Milbank’s account by both Vincent Llyod and Rowan Williams. Milbank presumably all too easily assumes that due to the ontological harmony that is granted by God, people no longer have to work for this harmony to be mediated in this world. Such work would necessitate the existence of ethical laws, that is, of modes of liberal reactionary ethics, that channel people’s work toward the harmony which has been promised to them (in and through the resurrection of Christ). Contrary to these critiques, I will contend that far from underestimating the role of human work under the guidance of some law for a peaceful society, Milbank presents his own ontology as a new ethical ideal. His vehement reaction

² Milbank repeatedly criticizes liberalism in the political, cultural, and economic sense of the word (Milbank and Pabst, The Politics of Virtue, 1–8), and argues that the cultural liberalism of the Left and the economic liberalism of the Right are mutually re-enforcing each other (15). This article mainly focuses on Milbank’s deliberations about political liberalism.
⁴ Ibid., 55, 58.
against liberal ethics reveals that he interprets the contemporary situation as primarily tragic, which is why he offers his ontology as imaginative ideal toward which a society should work. Hence, far from underestimating the role of human work and reactionary laws for the emergence of a peaceful society, Milbank, in reaction to the liberal social order, expends a whole lifetime of work in order to advocate his ontology as framework within which ever more harmony can be realized.

My own response builds on the thought of Edward Schillebeeckx who, as will become apparent in the course of this article, argues from a perspective that resembles Milbank's ontology of peace. Nonetheless, he evaluates liberal ethics much more positively. In the third part of this article, I reverse the criticism that Milbank mistakenly preempts a harmony, which is yet to be realized by work under the guidance of ethical laws. I argue that, whereas Milbank interprets liberal ethics as a tragic threat that needs to be overcome through the guidance of his ontology of peace, Schillebeeckx seeks to understand how liberal ethics also mediate the harmonious reality, in which Christians are allowed to trust. Schillebeeckx's contribution to contemporary debates in political theology is to remind theologians that, even if the fulfillment of all merely initially, and perhaps ambiguously, realized harmony still awaits us at the eschaton, the Christian work toward this eschatological completion must begin with discerning how one's surrounding society's politics already participate in this harmony, not by interpreting this politics as a threat against which Christian theology would have to react. Finally, I rebut Milbank's criticism that liberal ethics pose an obstacle to growth in the truly good. Following Schillebeeckx, I argue that a society's growth in the truly good must be constantly reoriented toward the way in which the ontological reality of harmony is concretely realized in one's surrounding society, including, in the case of Western societies, liberal ethics. Altogether, this article complements the criticisms by Lloyd and Williams, arguing that Milbank might not as much underestimate the role of work and law for the attainment of peace as he might underestimate the importance of recognizing and celebrating the peace that has already been attained.

2. The goal of politics: excessive growth in the truly good or resistance against evil?

John Milbank claims that the ontological assumptions underlying liberal ethics fundamentally differ from those underlying Christian theological ethics. Liberal ethics assume that all beings are at least indifferently, if not even antagonistically, posed one against the other. Liberalism is based on the "disguised naturalization of original sin as original egotism." This means that human beings are presented as potentially dangerous on the one hand and as fundamentally deserving protection on the other, as can be seen at the emergence of basic and human rights in

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5 This claim can first be found in Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, where Milbank argues that secular political theory arbitrarily constructs its object, namely the secular political sphere, as "a field of pure power" (9–13).

the Enlightenment era.\textsuperscript{7} Liberalism thus depends on, and promotes, an understanding of the human as most fundamentally an isolated individual, which then becomes the “site of highest value.”\textsuperscript{8} Milbank denies the assumed neutrality of this understanding of reality, and understands it instead as one culturally conditioned and contingent ontological conjecture amongst others. Even more, Milbank interprets the most fundamental aspects of liberal ethics as “clearly post-Christian,” which is why he crafts an ethics that remains fully within the Christian tradition, as he understands it.\textsuperscript{9} The latter demands that humans, as well as any other beings, are thought of as mutually complementary and as most fundamentally harmonizing with each other.\textsuperscript{10} According to such an ontological vision, different human beings are not understood as competing about incommensurable individual well-beings, where the greater well-being of one would endanger the greater well-being of others. Instead, Milbank employs the image of the eschatological feast, for his Christian understanding of a truly communitarian happiness, in which an individual’s happiness increases the happiness of all and vice versa.\textsuperscript{11}

These two different ethics are not only different with regards to their ontological beliefs, but they result in different orientations of a society’s politics. Liberal ethics are directed toward the elimination of all evil. They are reactionary in the sense that they seek to diminish the fundamental antagonism amongst all beings. However, since this antagonism is believed to be ontological, it can only be limited, never be cured or overcome.\textsuperscript{12} From the perspective of Milbank’s Christian ontology, that affirms the priority of harmony and goodness, in contrast, there is no reason for such mistrust toward one’s fellow human beings, and no grounds for such pessimism regarding the ultimate futility of all attempts at overcoming evil definitely.\textsuperscript{13} Starting from the belief of an ontological harmony amongst all beings, any Christian ethics should begin with an “absolute surrender”\textsuperscript{14} a “total

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  \item \textsuperscript{8} Milbank, “Paul Versus Biopolitics,” 131. Milbank criticizes secular communism, such as Marxism, for still being preoccupied with isolated individuals, instead of understanding individual humans in relation to their communitarian \textit{telos} (Milbank, “Liberality Versus Liberalism,” 242). Milbank hints at this claim also when he explains that the equality of all members of the Church concerns their equal admission, by grace, into the community of the Church, rather than any equal status (Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, 407). The truly communitarian \textit{telos} of the Church is thus the continuous generation of new relationships (409). This criticism of liberalism’s dependence on and promotion of an understanding of humans as competing individuals is further elaborated in Milbank and Pabst, \textit{The Politics of Virtue}. Milbank (together with Pabst) here seeks to promote the right balance between those who are too pessimistic about the individual and optimistic about societal structures, and those who are too optimistic about individuals and too pessimistic about societal structures (26–7). He prefers a combination of genuine independence and cooperation to “the radicalism of mere collectivity” (45).
  \item \textsuperscript{9} Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, 402. Milbank here counters those who interpret early Christianity as already foreshadowing modern liberalism (403–4).
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, 5; Milbank, “A Christological Poetics,” 129; Milbank, “Out of the Greenhouse,” 261. In, Milbank and Pabst, \textit{The Politics of Virtue}, 57, it is argued that Machiavellian “virtue” should not be considered as virtuous, as it depends on an antagonistic, rather than a harmonizing anthropology.
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Milbank, \textit{Being Reconciled}, 142, 151–3, 155, 161. See also, Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, 418.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Milbank, “Paul Versus Biopolitics,” 144.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Milbank, “Can Morality Be Christian?” 129–20; Milbank, \textit{Being Reconciled}, 150; Milbank, “Paul Versus Biopolitics,” 141, 147. Milbank associates this trust in the ontological priority of goodness and harmony with the Resurrection (125, 140, 147, 149; Milbank, \textit{Being Reconciled}, 148, 151–3). He presents Paul’s deviation from a primarily reactive law as a genuinely Christian ethical revolution (Milbank, \textit{Beyond Secular Order}, 118).
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Milbank, \textit{Being Reconciled}, 154. Milbank, in that chapter, criticizes secular self-sacrificially altruistic ethics for being wrongly concerned with controlling fortune or grace (142).
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exposure” to the ways in which this harmony is mediated in the world, that is, to grace.\textsuperscript{15}

Milbank is careful to highlight that his trust in the ontological priority of grace and harmony does not naively deny the existence of evil, but he parts ways with liberalism, where liberalism ontologizes evil.\textsuperscript{16} Concomitant with the Christian understanding of the Fall, Milbank understands evil as only the secondary intrusion into a primordial harmonious reality.\textsuperscript{17} Milbank accuses liberal ethics of perpetuating this intrusion: they do not overcome evil, but they invent it in and through their reaction, in order to legitimize themselves.\textsuperscript{18} It is posited that humans are fundamentally antagonistic and therefore posing a risk, which must be attenuated and restricted by ethics.\textsuperscript{19} On the one hand, Milbank accuses such ethics of augmenting, rather than diminishing evil. By associating politics primarily with the policing of threats,\textsuperscript{20} the liberal order is not geared to diminish evil and violence, but contributes to the development of ever more refined skills on the part of the evildoers, in order to circumvent police sanctions.\textsuperscript{21} On the other hand, such liberal politics do not encourage people to contribute creatively to positive political goals other than the liberal fight against evil, because people’s assent to the liberal order is primarily motivated by fear. Everyone educated in a society in which such a liberal ontology is dominant, is likely to obey the moral law out of fear of human violence or sanction.\textsuperscript{22} Mere survival is thought of as a good worth protecting by these ethics, and this is likely to detract from alternative political questions.\textsuperscript{23} It is no longer primarily asked how a society arranges its particular survival in the best manner. Instead, people are likely to grant unconsciously ever more power over the regulation of their survival to the law and to those who are guarding it. This is, for example, illustrated in the way in which people grant power to security checks as presumably the best way of protecting them from terrorism, instead of reflecting about whether such heightened security really ameliorates the society’s overall well-being.\textsuperscript{24}

Milbank’s first criticism of liberal ethics thus concerns the concealment of its own contingency and perspective. These ethics make insufficiently clear that their definition of evil is related to but one human interpretation of reality, which could be questioned and which should be offered as a topic of political debate.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{15} Milbank, \textit{Being Reconciled}, 147.
\textsuperscript{16} See also Milbank, “Paul Versus Biopolitics,” 149.
\textsuperscript{17} Milbank, \textit{Being Reconciled}, 149, 153.
\textsuperscript{18} Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, 416; Milbank, “Paul Versus Biopolitics,” 147; Milbank, “Liberality Versus Liberalism,” 243–4.
\textsuperscript{19} Milbank, “Can Morality Be Christian?” 223–4; Milbank, “Liberality Versus Liberalism,” 244. In this vein, Milbank also criticizes altruism for needing other people’s sorrow and misery for its own existence (\textit{Being Reconciled}, 144, 149, 154). In this vein, Milbank also argues that liberalism’s dependence on an antagonistic ontology intrinsically promotes war (Milbank and Pabst, \textit{The Politics of Virtue}, 57–8).
\textsuperscript{20} Milbank, “Can Morality Be Christian?” 220.
\textsuperscript{21} Milbank and Pabst, \textit{The Politics of Virtue}, 31. In the same book, Milbank also refers to a liberal reduction of politics “to little more than managerial and technocratic bureaucracy” (14).
\textsuperscript{22} Milbank, “Liberality Versus Liberalism,” 244; Milbank, “Paul Versus Biopolitics,” 128–9.
\textsuperscript{23} Milbank, “Liberality Versus Liberalism,” 243.
\textsuperscript{24} Milbank, “Paul Versus Biopolitics,” 140. In \textit{The Politics of Virtue}, Milbank and Pabst argue that the liberal rendering of “the naturally human” as foundational for culture is inherently complacent with the logic of capitalism, and that capitalism as much produces natural scarcity as it depends on a fundamental belief in it (47–8).
\textsuperscript{25} For Milbank’s criticism of the USA’s response to 9–11 as primarily an augmentation of the sovereign power of the nation state, see Milbank, “Sovereignty, Empire, Capital, and Terror,” 223–41.
present, people might not submit to these liberal ethics because they think of them as beneficial to a society’s advancement in the truly good, but because they are anxious about their survival. This fear is, however, not grounded in reality itself, but in reality as it has been interpreted by the liberal political order, and the latter’s error is to present itself illegitimately as absolute and objective. Milbank, on the contrary, doubts liberalism’s basic assumption that humans are naturally posed one against the other and thus most fundamentally in need of protection from each other.

At the same time, Milbank does not only criticize the concealed antagonistic ontology at the basis of liberal ethics. He also claims that an ethics which is primarily oriented at reacting against evil could not lead to any real growth in goodness. His alternative ontology regards only all that which is good as original and ultimately lasting. The inexhaustibility of the good is pitted against the nothingness of evil. All that which is good continuously builds into an ever-greater whole, whereas all evil continuously evaporates into nothing. Every evil is to be overcome “out of the sources of an ontological good prior to evil.” Such an ontology would correspond to a politics which is primarily oriented at growth in true goodness. Each new political project would have to exceed the already realized good. In this way the whole of reality continuously becomes better. Evil is in the same move, but somewhat secondarily, erased, because it finds no place in the ever growing harmony of all that which is good. Political discussions would then have to be directed at how the already realized good can be ameliorated, not at how the persistent evil must be fought.

3. Critical interventions

At this point, it is important to consider some recent criticisms with regard to Milbank’s supposed underestimation of the role of work under a law for the attainment of real peace. Vincent Lloyd is generally sympathetic to Milbank’s criticism that Western liberalism presumes to make neutral claims about reality, which can never be challenged or changed by any historical occurrence. However, Lloyd disagrees with Milbank at the point at which Milbank assumes that the ontological harmony of reality would translate into a politics without law. The problem is that Milbank too easily conflates ontological harmony and concretely realized harmony in this world. Lloyd here speaks of Milbank’s “mend[ing of] the...”

28 Altogether my argument thus far shows that Graeme Smith’s argument is insufficiently nuanced and ultimately unjustified that Milbank would reject liberalism due to his bias for “exclusivist Christianity” (Smith, “You Turn if You Want to,” 251). Quite the contrary, Milbank rejects liberalism because he conceives it as politically disadvantageous for the entire society. Milbank’s positive openness to the prospect of a truly pluralist society is evidenced when he argues that Christian metaphysics should be employed to “provide us with a certain area of common vision and practice, [...] while at the same time respecting social and cultural spaces for exercised difference” (Milbank, “Sovereignty, Empire, Capital, and Terror,” 240).
30 Milbank, “The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy,” 44; Milbank, Being Reconciled, 67–9, 74, 149.
31 Milbank, Beyond Secular Order, 119. See also Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 415–6.
32 Milbank, Being Reconciled, 74; Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” 339.
33 Lloyd, “Complex Space or Broken Middle,” 232–3. Lloyd more particularly refers to Kant’s transcendental register.
34 Ibid., 234.
35 A similar criticism is voiced by Williams, “Saving Time,” 319–20. His criticism is, however, not only directed at Milbank’s political envisioning of the future but also at his historical account of the past.
middle.” Lloyd draws on Gillian Rose who understands the middle between ontological and concrete reality as a space of work. People must work continuously in order to render the concrete world identical with the real harmonious order.

Lloyd does admit that Milbank might associate ontological harmony less with difficult work than Rose because Milbank is a Christian whereas Rose is a Jew. This might explain why Milbank stresses relatively more the “already” and Rose relatively more the “not yet” aspect of real harmony. Since Christians believe that the eschaton has already arrived in the midst of history, they can legitimately assume that the ontological harmony, in which they believe, is already realizing itself now. Nevertheless, Lloyd criticizes Milbank’s harmonization of history overall for anticipating too quickly a solution to political problems, and argues that, in a not yet entirely peaceful world, any such solution would necessitate much more debate.

Rowan Williams similarly criticizes Milbank for denying that living in history means to be shaped also by privation and to partly live at the expense of each other, because the world is marked by limitations and scarcity. Like Lloyd, Williams stresses the importance of work and negotiation, in face of some inevitable contestation, for the realization of harmony: “an authentically contingent world is one in which you cannot guarantee the compatibility of goods. That’s what it is to be created.” Both these criticisms suggest that reactive laws are not merely perpetuating evil’s intrusion into an otherwise harmonious reality, but that they serve a fundamentally good purpose in a world which has not yet fully realized its harmonious eschatological end.

However, my presentation of Milbank suggests that he does not deny the necessity of political debates in order to attain a peaceful order, but he offers his ontology as better overarching framework in which these debates could take place. The debates should be oriented at real growth in harmony, which means that the contributions of other parties should not be received as potential threat to one’s own position, but as potentially expanding that which is already good within one’s own position. In this sense, the ontological harmony is both given (as overarching framework) and an end which is yet to be attained through work within this overarching framework. Milbank explicitly argues that the liberal emphasis on the necessity of a social contract, and people’s negotiation of how their desires and freedoms can best interact, should not be denied. Yet, the establishment of a perfect social contract should not be understood as highest ideal of justice, but it should be understood as a means to the yet more excellent ideal of a justice, which is not constituted through the balancing of individual wills, but which is the reality in which the whole world already participates.

Also, Williams acknowledges that Milbank does not deny the place for ethics and work altogether in his ontology, but he argues that it is difficult to see how

36 Lloyd, “Complex Space or Broken Middle,” 233.
37 Ibid., 234-5.
38 Ibid., 236.
39 Ibid., 239.
40 Williams, “Saving Time,” 322. Williams own alternative vision, which like Lloyd’s draws heavily on Gillian Rose is illustrated in more detail in Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 53-76.
41 Williams, “Saving Time,” 322.
43 Milbank, Beyond Secular Order, 118–19.
Milbank could effectively envision an ethics, whilst denying any tragic dimension of reality. In what follows I will argue that Milbank, far from denying all tragic dimensions of reality, does in fact interpret the world through all too tragic a lens. Milbank’s argument raises precisely the question why he reacts antagonistically toward liberal ethics, thus presenting them as danger for society’s growth in the truly good. I claim that, Milbank upholds his ontology as political solution to contemporary ills, because he interprets the present situation of Western societies primarily as tragic. In the subsequent critical comparison with Edward Schillebeeckx’s thought it will become apparent that Milbank assumes that the primordial reality of harmony and goodness must be protected by a truthful humanly constructed ontology, whereas Schillebeeckx affirms the ontological priority of harmony and goodness more independently of any human conceptualizations thereof. My critical examination will begin with an explanation of Milbank’s understanding of the role of an ontology in this regard.

4. The conceptualization of the ontological priority of harmony and goodness

Milbank disputes the antagonistic ontology of liberalism as vehemently as he does because he assumes that people can recognize the goodness of a concrete being only if this being is seen in the wider context of a harmonizing ontology. From the perspective of a harmonizing overarching view of reality, the goodness of a concretely existing being sticks out to such an extent that it surpasses the already attained harmony amongst all beings. In this way, the entire ontology must be extended through the recognition of the particular goodness of each concretely existing being. If the concretely existing being was perceived from the perspective of an antagonistic ontology, on the contrary, the particular goodness of this being could not be recognized. For, recognizing goodness means to see how the particular harmonizes with all other concretely existing beings and how it, in this way, expands the overall harmony. Moreover, Milbank argues that trust in the reality of harmony is most reasonable if one can trust that others also trust this reality. Thus, Milbank promises that the reality of harmony, in which Christians trust, will be ever more mediated in history the more people trust in it. As such, Milbank offers his ontological vision as the framework within which a whole society should work for the further realization of harmony in a broken world.

A reading of Milbank’s proposal in light of some of Edward Schillebeeckx’s thought can help to clarify the issue about the role of work and ethics in Milbank’s ontology. Not unlike Milbank, Schillebeeckx presupposes the ontological priority of goodness and harmony and the ultimate nothingness of evil. He does not always

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44 Williams, “Saving Time,” 321, 324.
46 Milbank, Beyond Secular Order, 19–50; Milbank, Being Reconciled, 71; Milbank, The Word Made Strange, 157.
47 Milbank, “Paul Versus Biopolitics,” 147.
48 Ibid., 151.
express this conviction in metaphysical terms, but such a metaphysical outlook is entirely consistent with Schillebeeckx’s contention that Christianity is primarily about Christ’s proclamation of the dawn of salvation, and not primarily about God’s judgment of an evil world.\(^5\) When interpreting Jesus’ life as primarily oriented to the positive goal of salvation, and as directed against evil only within this overall positive outlook, Schillebeeckx is in agreement with Milbank’s argument that a predominantly reactive ethics breaks with the example set by Christ, which should be determinative for any Christian ethics.\(^5\) In this sense, Schillebeeckx rejects any ontologization of negativity or evil.\(^5\) Moreover, Schillebeeckx also denies the presumed neutrality of liberal Enlightenment ethics and regards its deliberations as culturally conditioned and particular.\(^5\) And yet, as I will argue, Schillebeeckx evaluates secular liberalism more positively than Milbank, because he does not primarily conceive it as a threat, but he seeks to discern how it mediates the ontological harmony, in which, as a Christian theologian, Schillebeeckx is allowed to trust.\(^5\)

Schillebeeckx would not have denied that one’s overall conjecture about the nature and shape of reality influences the way in which historical occurrences are perceived and assessed.\(^5\) From the perspective of a Christian ontology of peace, such as Milbank’s, however, the point would be precisely to discern how the real harmony, in

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49 Schillebeeckx does not use the term ontology, and exhibits the faith in the superiority of goodness less systematically than Milbank. However, a close and wide reading of his oeuvre shows that the ontology explicated by Milbank is discernible in Schillebeeckx’s approach to his context. This will become apparent to some degree also in the course of this article. Some commentators argue that, around 1966, there has been a significant turn in Schillebeeckx’s theology away from his earlier reliance on the Flemish Thomist Dominique de Petter’s metaphysical to a more radically hermeneutical approach to reality (Kerr, Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians, 58–9). Daniel Thompson speaks of a turn on the level of Schillebeeckx’s understanding of what constitutes an orthodox development of the Christian tradition, which had first located this development in the sphere of doctrine and later in the sphere of human experience (Thompson, “Schillebeeckx on the Development of Doctrine,” 309). I, however, align myself with those who have argued that de Petter’s influence on Schillebeeckx remains recognizable throughout his work, and that, moreover, particularly Aquinas’ search for knowledge of God in and through creation has been a pivotal driving force behind all of Schillebeeckx’s writings (Kennedy, “Continuity underlying Discontinuity,” 264–77; Rodenborn, Hope in Action, 78–9).

Thus even Schillebeeckx observable philosophical turn from engaging more with classical metaphysics to an increasing engagement with hermeneutics and Critical Theory, is most fundamentally influenced by his Thomistic theological outlook (168).

50 Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 116–24.

51 Ibid., 123–4.


53 Schillebeeckx, “The New Critical Theory and Theological Hermeneutics,” 109–10. Schillebeeckx refers here to the Enlightenment understanding of freedom. Steven Rodenborn has recently argued that Schillebeeckx legitimized the autonomy of the secular realm theologically (Rodenborn, Hope in Action, 15). Against this reading, I align myself with those who understand Schillebeeckx’s theology as a challenge to the autonomy of the secular realm (Dupré, “Experience and Interpretation,” 32, 49). It has even been argued that Schillebeeckx’s criticism of secular freedom and modern subjectivity limits his otherwise amicable engagement with modern culture (Barwasser, Theologie der Kultur und Hermeneutik der Glaubenserfahrung, 433).

54 Schillebeeckx has been criticized for tending, in his later writings, toward a one-sided accommodation of Christianity to the secular liberation movements he was most enthusiastic about, thereby losing the critical edge of Christian theology which would have demanded to maintain a greater critical distance to such liberation movements (Dupré, “Experience and Interpretation,” 49–50). Also Lieve Boeve criticizes Schillebeeckx for risking to lose the theological dimension in his later writings (Boeve, “The Sacramental Interruption of Rituals of Life,” 401–6). I align myself with those who argue that Schillebeeckx, on the whole, successfully maintained a middle path between either accommodating Christian theology entirely to the surrounding culture or retreating into a Christian fundamentalism (Barwasser, Theologie der Kultur und Hermeneutik der Glaubenserfahrung, 18).

Stephan van Erp most explicitly defends Schillebeeckx in this regard against the Radical Orthodox suspicion of a certain naturalization of the Christian faith (Van Erp, “The Sacrament of the World,” 128–9). In Erik Borgman’s words, according to Schillebeeckx, the truth about the world is known precisely when the world is interpreted from the perspective of God’s love and grace (Borgman, “Alle dingen nieuw,” 223).

which one is allowed to trust, is concretely mediated in one’s surrounding context. Thus, if a Christian encounters a person who understands the world through an alternative ontological vision, such as liberalism, the point is not to perceive this person’s ontology as a threat, but to seek to understand how the liberal person and oneself, as a Christian, participate in a real harmony, although holding different beliefs about the truth. If Milbank accuses liberal appeals to emancipation and social justice for ignoring “the relationships that provide substance to such abstract norms,” he seems to suggest that liberals first have to change their worldview before a substantial relationship with them is possible, whereas I interpret Schillebeeckx’s approach to secular liberals as one of entering a relationship with them that provides the substance to each one’s otherwise abstract conceptions of a better political future.

Not to understand the two ontological visions as competing with each other about the truth about reality is possible, insofar as Schillebeeckx posits the real harmony to which his ontology refers primarily in the concrete world, and understands any conceptual talk about this harmony as truthful, albeit one step removed. The true harmony between different beings is, then, not primarily known through probing how another person’s conceptual utterances harmonize with one’s own. But, the harmony realizes itself in the concrete encounter between the two people, and it must then be retraced conceptually how their different ontological visions should be reshaped and expanded in order to understand the harmony that has just been realized in the concrete encounter. The concretely realized harmony surpasses the human conceptual grasp. And, thus, Christians can only claim to have truthfully expressed the concretely realized harmony with their conceptual ontology if they are conscious that the concept is only able to express but some aspects of the full positivity of the concrete encounter.

Consequently, a Christian must admit that there is also room to approach the concretely realized harmony by the conceptual means of the antagonistic ontology perpetuated by secular liberalism. The one who assesses the encounter from the liberal worldview should be trusted to have recognized a part of the concretely realized harmony, which the Christian could not have seen from his or her perspective. In other words, from the perspective of an ontology of peace, even the conceptual approach to reality through the lens of an antagonistic ontology should be able to expand the vision of the way in which the ontological harmony of peace is believed (by the Christian) to be mediated in history.

60 Schillebeeckx, Church, 8.
61 Milbank might reject the interpretation of liberalism as one worldview amongst others, as he presents liberalism as an ideology that is parasitic to all other worldviews (Milbank and Pabst, The Politics of Virtue, 14–5). Nevertheless, Milbank assumes for himself a position somewhat outside of the all-embracing sway of liberalism’s problems, from which he can criticize it, which renders reference to an encounter between what Milbank describes as genuine Christians and liberals as representatives of two different worldviews legitimate.
This is also how Schillebeeckx’s reception of insights from liberal ethics into his theology should be understood. Schillebeeckx exhibits the trust in the ontological reality of harmony that Milbank refers to, and therefore seeks to understand how his liberal contemporaries’ views might harmonize with his own in new and unexpected ways. With regard to the liberal ethics criticized by Milbank, Schillebeeckx understands the newly postulated human need of protection not primarily as indicative of an antagonistic ontology, which would conflict with his own understanding of reality. Schillebeeckx does not understand the liberal focus on the human need of protection as indicator of an irredeemable individualism, but as an indicator of the unique positivity of each particular human being. When integrating this insight into his Christian ontology, Schillebeeckx is still in agreement with Milbank in his insistence that an ethics must not be directed primarily at limiting any damage. Yet, instead of diverting the attention to his Christian ontology, as the framework which supposedly alone renders a non-reactive ethics possible, Schillebeeckx seeks to follow the positive intent of liberalism, in postulating that the positive goal of ethics should be the appreciation of the unique positivity of each individual involved in an ethical decision. This is different from orienting an ethics at the protection of each individual’s survival in a supposed antagonistic setting, since the appreciation of people’s uniqueness by far surpasses questions about survival and protection.

The difference between Milbank’s and Schillebeeckx’s positions becomes clearer when considering how each conceives of the purpose of ethical norms and laws with respect to the question of how harmony is being realized. According to Milbank, reactive laws and norms can only operate justly within the more fundamental framework of a mutual trust in harmony. For Schillebeeckx, a Christian does not have to wait until the entire surrounding society assents to the Christian ontology, but s/he can use the surrounding society’s ethical norms, not as absolute standards about what counts as good action, but as directional aids for adequate actions in a concrete situation. It is not assumed that ethical norms would ever determine the particular action that needs to be taken. Picking up the liberal ethical orientation at the concrete positivity of unique persons, Schillebeeckx argues that, primarily, an action must respond to the concrete human being with whom one is faced. This can at times demand the modification or expansion in retrospect of the already existing ethical norm.

People then do not need to be protected from each other because it would be (erroneously) assumed that they are most fundamentally each other’s enemies. On one level, Schillebeeckx’s expansion of a Christian ontology of peace with liberal ethics is geared to appreciate the concrete positivity of each individual human being beyond the, at times, limiting scope of ethical norms. And, at the same time,

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62 Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 89; Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 578. Although Milbank is quick to highlight that liberalism cannot claim to have invented “the sense of absolute worth” of every person (Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 30), one can acknowledge, with Schillebeeckx, that liberalism’s heightened emphasis of each human being’s uniqueness is not necessarily a vice.

63 Schillebeeckx, “Church, Magisterium and Politics,” 90–1.


65 Schillebeeckx, “Church, Magisterium and Politics,” 92.
Schillebeeckx’s expansion of the Christian ontology of peace with liberal ethics is already a manifestation of how the conceptual harmony can be extended through attention to the way in which the ontological harmony concretely realizes itself in the encounter between adherents to different worldviews in a particular context. Because Schillebeeckx does not regard liberal thinkers as competitors, but as mediating the fundamental goodness of reality, he expands his own vision of reality with the unique insights which they contribute.

This already indicates that Milbank reacts and fights against liberal ethics, not because, as claimed by his critics, he preempts the, not yet realized harmony in which Christians are allowed to trust. Milbank opposes liberal ethics rather because he understands his ontology of peace as a political ideal which needs to be achieved through the work of an entire society. For Schillebeeckx, the Christian theological work begins not with advancing one’s ontology of peace as ideal which renders the further realization of harmony possible, but with conceptually retracing the ontological harmony that is being realized in one’s concrete encounter with people of different worldviews. In what follows I will clarify how Schillebeeckx’s alternative position relates to Milbank’s second criticism of liberal ethics, namely that they would inhibit a society’s true growth in goodness.

5. The indestructible ontological priority of goodness as goal of politics

Concomitant with Schillebeeckx’s focus on the concretely realized ontological harmony and goodness in his context, for him real growth in goodness is not primarily dependent on orienting political actions, by help of an ontology of peace, toward an ideal good. Instead, he attends primarily to the already realized goodness and harmony as that which should orient further political decisions.66 Precisely because only all that which is good will persist, whereas all evil will vanish, he examines how the more fundamental goodness that also supports imperfect political and ethical outlooks, continues to overcome all evil.67 This is not meant to brush the evil aside and to claim that what appears as evil really is good if looked at from the right perspective. Schillebeeckx conceives of the relationship between good and evil more dialectically, whilst granting to the good ontological priority. Because evil does not have its own ground of existence it dialectically reveals something about the true goodness of reality, through the way in which it is continuously overcome.68 Attending to how goodness overcomes evil is then, for Schillebeeckx, meant to purify human conceptions of goodness ever again from distortions and to adjust them to the concretely realized goodness in a broken world. In Williams’ terms, Schillebeeckx’s ontology demands of him an attention to the tragic dimensions of life in order not to chase utopian dreams but to help a society build its projects on that goodness which has already been realized in a broken world.

67 Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 579–80; Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 175. Schillebeeckx, in this vein, argues that although good and evil are not equal ontologically, human history is a mixture of good and evil (*Church*, 172–3).
This call on Christian theologians to direct their attention to the ontologically prior goodness despite all evil means that a Christian theologian does not need to affirm the liberal ontology as a whole, in order to trust that it can harmonize with the Christian ontology of peace. Instead, it can be acknowledged that both, the liberal and the Christian ontology, are liable to perpetuate some of the present world’s evil, and indeed an examination of where and how exactly this is the case is indispensable – and, in this regard, Milbank’s work is of great value, even if his critique might remain too one-sided. Yet, the Christian theologian should not discard the liberal ontology as a whole, just because it partly perpetuates evil. The task is rather to analyze how all that is disadvantageous or even dangerous about this ontology is, nevertheless, supported by a prior good to which it is merely a secondary intrusion.

This approach is illustrated when Schillebeeckx interprets reactionary ethics as indicating, in their reaction against evil, that goodness retains ontological priority over evil. A human reaction against evil is only conceivable and possible because goodness enjoys priority.69 The reaction is then not an invention of evil as self-legitimization of liberal ethics. Although the reaction is directed against a concrete evil situation, it is grounded in a more fundamental positivity.70 The human reaction against the evil then reveals that present life circumstances remain below the level of a truly humane life.71 In this sense, any reaction against evil is always already positively directed toward the manifold diversification of the good which enjoys ontological priority over the singularity of evil. The elimination of evil is then also for Schillebeeckx not the ultimate goal of politics, but it is a means to orient oneself at that which is truly good. Also for him, there must be, next to the elimination of evil, discussions about a society’s further growth in the truly good.72 For, in contrast to the singular and destructive negativity of evil, goodness is manifold and excessive, which is why there is a wealth of possibilities to overcome evil.73 Following Schillebeeckx, liberal ethics could then only be criticized if they presented their particular reaction against evil as sole possibility and if this reaction itself was elevated to the status of being the unique goal of politics. Milbank’s theology is valuable insofar as he is very sensitive in detecting the latter error, but he is mistaken when he assumes that this must lead to a wholesale rejection of such ethics. His ontology of peace would rather demand a discernment of the precise good by which a concrete instance of a reactionary ethics is supported and toward what precise good it is directed.

Schillebeeckx then expands his Christian ontology by means of insights from philosophers associated with the liberal tradition. He uses their ethics in order to build critically on the already realized good, which necessitates an uncovering of alliances with evil in the past.74 Such examination is aimed at orienting humankind toward the truly good, in place of imaginative distortions thereof. Faith in the priority of

69 Schillebeeckx, “Secularization and Christian Belief in God,” 45; Schillebeeckx, “Correlation between Human Question and Christian Answer,” 84.

70 Schillebeeckx, “Church, Magisterium and Politics,” 93.

71 Ibid.


all goodness manifests itself precisely in a society’s continuous willingness to investigate critically if it has been entangled in evil, because such a society can assume that its own liability to failure will never quench the priority of the truly good. Precisely in this move, a society can show that its politics are built on the concretely realized good, and not on its own conceptualization thereof.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I agree with Milbank that an ontology that assumes the priority of harmony and goodness over antagonism and evil must be accompanied by a politics which is not primarily oriented at the limitation of evil but at real growth in the good. However, I have questioned if Milbank himself builds his theological thinking on the harmony and goodness as it realizes itself in history at present. His understanding of goodness might rather be a conceptual reaction against the antagonistic ontology of liberalism that he opposes. At this point Milbank’s own criticism of liberal ethics can be directed against himself: By presenting the truly good as something in need of protection through a human ontology, he invents the liberal ontology as a danger. Milbank’s theology might then resonate with some because it stirs their fear of evil, and not because people perceive his vision as potentially leading to growth in the truly good. Milbank would be better advised not to present his ontology as sole cure of political problems for only evil is singular — but as one valuable cure amongst a whole wealth of others, all responding to the truly good. By help of Edward Schillebeeckx’s thought it could be seen that from the perspective of a harmonizing ontology, the political task does not consist in proving the superiority of this ontology, but in analyzing how the true harmony, in which Christians can trust, realizes itself in their encounter with adherents to a liberal ontology. For, disregarding of how frail and erroneous an ontological conceptualization of reality might be, it will never be able to destroy the true goodness of reality. At the same time, an ontology of peace must continuously be reshaped in accordance with this concretely realized positivity. For, only if built on the concretely realized goodness can a society’s politics promise to advance in the truly good. Only then is the primary orientation for politics not the evil which should be overcome, but the truly good.

Contrary to those who claim that Milbank preempts a harmony which has not yet been realized, I thus have contended that Milbank fails to shape his conceptualization of harmony in accordance with the way in which this harmony is already realized in his context to a greater degree than he dares to trust. Milbank’s understanding of the present situation is all too tragic, which is why he introduces an ideal harmony as goal toward which the whole society should work. As counterweight to Milbank and his critics, I have introduced Edward Schillebeeckx’s

75 Schillebeeckx, Theologisch Geloofsverstaan anno 1983, 18–19; Schillebeeckx, “The New Critical Theory and Theological Hermeneutics,” 122. In other words, whereas Milbank has been criticized for not being able to read the history of the church as “a history of redeemed failures” (Hughes, “The Ratio Dei and the Ambiguities of History,” 659, Schillebeeckx shows us a way of doing exactly this.

76 Schillebeeckx, “Correlation between Human Question and Christian Answer,” 81.

77 For the most recent example of Milbank’s presentation of his theology as “the only genuine alternative” to liberalism, see Milbank and Pabst, Politics of Virtue, 3.
approach to liberalism as pointing a way forward for contemporary theologians, by attending relatively more to the already realized harmony in one’s encounter with people who hold different convictions to oneself, and relatively less to the work which needs to be done in order to accomplish some conceptually imagined harmony. At the same time, my argument also counters those who claim that Milbank’s unnuanced rejection of secular philosophies and politics is grounded in his ontology, and that a different ontology would guarantee a better, more amicable reception of not explicitly Christian insights. To the contrary, I have argued that Edward Schillebeeckx’s approach to secular liberal thinkers corresponds more to Milbank’s ontology of peace than Milbank’s own approach to liberalism. This shows that Milbank’s ontology can lead to a very high esteem for secular thought, precisely because it demands that one looks for the way in which true harmony is realized in one’s encounter with people who pursue different ideals. The question is thus if Milbank’s ontology is used as means to reach a better political end, or as conceptual lens through which contemporary reality is being assessed.

Concerning the contemporary success of popularist politics in the US and many West European countries mentioned at the beginning of this article, this would mean that instead of following Milbank in ascribing all responsibility for the problem to secular liberalism, and of promising to deliver democracies from their current crisis through the employment of a Christian ontology, Christian theologians should encounter those who hold popularist political views, and attend to the ways in which a harmony that could not have been imagined is being realized in the concrete encounter.

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For such an argument see, for example, Smith, “Pluralism and Justice,” 330–47.


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