

George Grant and Radical Orthodoxy
Ron Dart

I teach Him (Grant) now—but oddly only started to read him around 2010. So only since then any direct influence—but no doubt indirectly much before then.

(John Milbank to Ron Dart, email, 12-15-2014)

Conrad Noel continued the Headlam/Hancock sense that the church was the true society and extended earlier intuitions about the links between liturgy and social order. He surely realized the powerful links between beauty and justice, social and natural harmony.

(John Milbank to Ron Dart, email, 1-2-2015)

I

**The Dethronement of Secular Reason:
Grant and Milbank**

I remember, with much fondness, a lunch spent with John Milbank at Peterhouse (founded in 1284) in Cambridge in May 1995. I was doing, at the time, research on the Anglican High Romanticism of S. T. Coleridge and the Anglican High Toryism of T.S. Eliot. I was on my way to Little Gidding for a few days to ponder Eliot's *Four Quartets*. John Milbank had published his innovative and plough to soil tome, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (1990). Radical Orthodoxy did not exist at the time, but the seeds of the movement had definitely been sown with *Theology and Social Theory*. Needless to say, we chatted much at Peterhouse (the definitive High Church college at Cambridge—Milbank made sure I realized this was Laud's College) about Milbank's demanding read of a book and how his challenge to secular reason opened up new yet much older terrain in which to do

theology, philosophy, social theory and, in time, political philosophy. I did, a few days later, when at St. John's College Oxford, attend a lecture by Professor Patrick Collinson, who spent most of the time bashing Archbishop William Laud (but such were his puritan and protestant prejudices). I was fortunate at the time to be spending time with David Nicholls (rector of SS Mary & Nicholas Church Littlemore—The church Cardinal Newman built and where he crossed the Rubicon to Rome)—quite a different read on Laud and politics than that offered by Collinson.

It should be noted that Milbank was not particularly new on the stage in his creative dethronement of secular reason---most post- modernists had challenged the hegemony of "logo-centrism", the romantic and humanist wings of the Enlightenment had also questioned how secular reason was reductionistic and narrowed the range of thought--cutting edge scientists also doubted the ability of secular reason to deliver the goods as did those grounded and rooted in the contemplative theological and philosophical tradition of Plato-Aristotle and the Patristic Fathers of the Church (West and East). The turn, therefore, by Milbank to an older and deeper understanding of thinking was but part of a larger movement in the West to doubt the pretensions of a narrow definition of reason---needless to say, Coleridge's turn to a form of High Romantic Platonic Anglicanism meant he was engaged in the same process in the 19th century as was Eliot in his read of the wasteland of the 20th century—Milbank was, in short, standing on the wise shoulders of those Anglicans who had gone before him, although Coleridge and Eliot were not front and centre in his thinking at the time.

George Grant is considered to be one of the most important public intellectuals in the latter half of the 20th century in Canada. Grant died in 1988, but most of his thinking and prolific published writings dealt with the way secular reason revealed but concealed much.

The task of good philosophy and theology (as Grant saw it) was twofold: to free reason from its secular bondage to a narrow notion of empirical thinking and release the mind (Nous) to be open yet again to the contemplative wisdom offered by the sacred. Grant, like Coleridge, Eliot and Milbank was immersed in a much older and more comprehensive understanding of the mind as a contemplative faculty and organ of meditative insight. All of these men were acutely aware that when the secular dims and silences the sacred, the secular, in time, leads to disenchantment of nature, soul and society. The bully like tendencies of secular reason had to be opposed by a more nuanced and refined understanding of reason which was not irrational but the very waiting and attentive nature of contemplative reason. Most of Grant's vocation was given to challenging secular reason by a turn to contemplative philosophy as a constructive antidote and healing balm to the soul injuries caused by a brittle understanding of reason, intellect and thinking. I don't remember John Milbank and I talking much about Grant at our lunch at Peterhouse, but my ongoing research on Grant at the time made me think of their multiple affinities---Grant was, in many ways, the departed elder in the ancient tribe---Milbank was waxing in his recall of the old ways. Both men, in their different ways, saw in the writings of Francis Bacon the theoretical magus for both empirical rationalism and a naïve scientific utopianism---*Novum Organum* and *New Atlantis* were deeply troubling for the simple reason that reason and science were set on the throne as the new guardians of intellectual and public reality—Grant exposed this hegemony and imperial way of knowing in the 1950s---Milbank, of course, much later.

II

Athens and Jerusalem

There has been, unfortunately, a tendency amongst some

Christian thinkers to argue that Hebrew thought is integrated and holistic and Greek thinking is dualistic (spirit/mind is held high and body/matter denigrated). Needless to say, such a way of reading the Hebraic-Hellenistic mindset and worldviews are both excessively simplistic and decidedly dishonest. Both the Jewish and Greek traditions are sophisticated and complex. The fact that the early Christian tradition (West and East) was quick to heed and internalize the Greek contemplative and philosophical way meant that post-apostolic and Patristic Christianity saw much in the best and noblest of Greek thought that had a revelatory nature in a way the Jewish tradition did not. Again, the simplistic distinctions of Jewish-revelatory and Greek-rationalist approaches to reality distort both cultural heritages. The fact that George Grant and John Milbank hold high the Greek contemplative way contra secular reason speaks much about their radical (cutting to the roots) turn to the source and fount (*ad fontes*) of the historic Christian way of knowing and being. We live in a period of time in which the *vita activa* has become an opiate of sorts that drugs most against a slowing down and a seeing from another more listening and attentive stance. If secular reason has had a tendency to banish contemplative reason, then the *vita activa* has played a substantive role in marginalizing the *vita contemplativa*. The fact that both Grant and Milbank turned their gaze to the Platonic contemplative way in opposition to secular reason and the *vita activa* does, as I mentioned above, take them to a radical critique of the modern mood and ethos. There is, in fact, a sort of prophetic “metanoia” at work in Grant and Milbank’s call to a change of heart and mind.

It is one thing to urge those of faith and a deeper vision of the soul and society to question the dominant paradigm of the west that tends to define what is worth living for, where citizens should turn for meaning, what education, church and public life should look like

in a more healthy sense---the digging to the roots is but part of the prophetic task and calling. It is quite another thing to articulate the content and lived social context of an authentic and genuine faith journey.

III

Grant, Radical Orthodoxy and the Church

But there are remnants left around me...very strange remnants...in this case the Anglican church which has in it some of the ancient truth and therefore I will live within it. George Grant

I have, up to this point, mentioned, mostly, the role and significance of two Anglicans worth the heeding: George Grant and John Milbank. The 1990s was the decade in which both the thinking of Grant and Milbank continued to ripple forth. The turn and deeper meaning of Radical and Orthodox became part of the constructive recovery role of the Great Tradition, and the church (many have faulted the Radical Orthodox for not seriously grappling with the role of the Church in their theology) does come to the fore. The publication of Catherine Pickstock's *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (1997) is a fit and fine answer to such a questioning and queries. Grant, like Milbank, point the way to doing philosophy and theology that is participatory and existential---Pickstock, in her evocative tome, clarifies the unique relationship between philosophy and liturgy. Philosophy and theology are not merely about the moving around of ideas and images of God in a sort of intellectual chess game. The heart, centre and core of contemplative thought is immersion and participation in the very Being of God, and such a process is best shaped and formed by dwelling within the time tried and historic

liturgy of the life of the church—Plato, for Pickstock, is a fine and wise guide in articulating the role of liturgy in educating desires and reforming the soul and body towards the good, true and beautiful. When Pickstock is rightly read, the liturgical and ecclesial aspect of Radical Orthodoxy takes on a significant communal dimension.

Grant lived, often in an anguished way, within the life of the Anglican Church of Canada as the liberal drift ever hastened and demanded its ideological due. There could be no doubt that the broad church was winning the ecclesial and intellectual battle. The catholic party in the Anglican church was becoming more liberal at the core and centre, and classical catholic Anglicans were being marginalized. The low church was battling a rearguard fight and most within the reformed-evangelical-charismatic party were either turning on one another or lacked the substantive intellectual resources to expose the weak underbelly of liberalism. Grant saw clearer more than most what the heart of the issue was, and he named it well and wisely: a form of ideological liberalism in the church and society, culture and politics that prioritized, back of the rhetoric of tolerance and openness, a commitment to the rights of the individual to use their agency (power-will), all being free and equal, to define reality as they saw fit. Grant drew from Swift's analogy in *The Battle of the Books* between bees and spiders—bees took the pollen from that which is and created honey—spiders spun webs of reality out of their womb----the ancients were the bees, moderns the spiders. Grant enucleated, ever so clearly, how the spiders were crawling to and from in the church and society. I have landed, in more depth, on Grant and the Anglican Church of Canada in my book, *George Grant: Spiders and Bees* (chapter 8). There can be no doubt, though, from Grant's joining the Anglican Church of Canada in 1956 until his death in 1998, he unconcealed and revealed, in a succinct and compact manner a subtle seduction

in the making---in this sense, Grant read and deciphered the writing on the wall decades before many---few heard, heeded or listened to him, though.

The theological, philosophical and liturgical roots of Radical Orthodoxy do work themselves out in the praxis of the life of the church. I quoted, to begin this essay, Milbank's notion of the church as the catalyst and motivator of the new and true society. Milbank does draw, mostly, from the parochial role of the radical catholic Anglicans in his thinking such as Conrad Noel of Thaxted (where the Chesterton brothers attended when young), Headlam, Hancock, Dearmer and many others---it is this communal and social faith vision embodied and incarnated in the life of the church and community that Milbank and many from the Radical Orthodox tradition draw from---such a way of being church "links liturgy and social order...beauty and justice, social and natural harmony". There are Anglicans who know not this more radical socialist position, but it has a long line and lineage. I was fortunate for a time to live with Kenneth Leech in East London----Leech, in his life and writings, thread together a high and catholic view of the church, a sacramental socialism and a radical commitment to parish life as the vehicle of justice, peace and environmental transformation. Needless to say, such a radical vision was not new to catholic Anglicanism---*Essays Catholic and Radical: A Jubilee Group Symposium for the 150th Anniversary of the Beginning of the Oxford Movement, 1833-1983* (edited by Kenneth Leech & Rowan Williams) brings together some of the main thinkers of a tradition that Milbank and the Radical Orthodox turn to for insight and inspiration. It is, therefore, quite unfair and inappropriate to accuse the Radical Orthodox of sidelining or marginalizing the role of the church in their understanding of catholic orthodoxy---It is more apropos to argue that parish and church life are front and centre in their integrated notion of

reform and renewal. Grant, Pickstock and Milbank are all one on this pertinent point---the anarchist contra church position will not be found in such a classical mother church position.

There can be no doubt that by the late 1990s Radical Orthodoxy had become, for many, the *cause de jour* way to do theology. Radical Orthodoxy challenged both the reformed-evangelical and liberal ethos within the Anglican Communion. The rather thin, insipid and trendy form of liberal Anglicanism embodied by Bishops John Spong in the USA and Richard Holloway in Scotland simply lacked depth---Grant had faced, in his time, the same dilemma of a form of ideological liberalism that simply and uncritically capitulated to modern liberalism—thinking and the church became a plaything of the newest trends and tendencies. If the broad church seemed to lack any substantive resistance to modern liberalism, then the low church form of Anglicanism (reformed and evangelical) tended to be too Biblicist and lacked a deeper classical grounding. Grant, Milbank and Pickstock were pointing the way to a classical participatory way of knowing and living from the centre of the Christian faith that was absent in the broad and low church forms of Anglicanism---in this sense, there was some affinities with the Tractarians of the 19th century, but the Radical Orthodox should not be equated with the Anglo-Catholics—there is something more radical about them (and even more Orthodox).

The publication in 1999 of *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* summarized, in a series of compact and succinct essays, the direction John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graeme Ward were going and why. It should be noted at this point that much of the thinking of the Radical Orthodox in the latter years of the 1990s and early decade of the 21st century tended to be in the disciplines of philosophy and theology---clearings had to be made, overgrown ways of doing theology had to be pruned, a recovery and rethinking

was afoot---arts, culture, parish life, theology and philosophy were offered an alternate way of being. The mining of the ancient way was being recovered in a way that had not been done in quite the same way. Kant and Hegel were to go. The mystery of the sacred path was opened again for spiritual pilgrims---for those thirsty, the divine wells were refound. Many were the conferences, books, dialogues and debates, pro-contra, from 2000-2010 that focussed on the innovative approach of the growing adherents of Radical Orthodoxy.

IV Red/High Toryism

Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology launched, in some ways, the Radical Orthodox movement, and in 2009, *The Radical Orthodox Reader* (edited by Milbank & Oliver) summarized in a congealed and succinct manner, the ongoing relevance of the Radical Orthodox position. Many of the articles in the two books are compact arguments, from a variety of angles, for the notion of being radical and being orthodox. The 24 Theses of the Radical Orthodox brought the core ideas together in a compressed manner. We can see the important role of the church (# 15 & 17), concerns about the low church tradition (#14) and approaches to politics (#15 &20). There has been, as expected, many criticisms of Radical Orthodoxy-some of these critiques tend to begin with a caricature of a more complicated position, then dismiss the caricature---other criticisms have more weight and validity. The typical post-modern dismissal of Radical Orthodoxy can be found, for example, in *The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy* (edited by Lisa Isherwood & Marko Zlomisljic: 2012). Sadly so, most post-moderns only have the thinnest understanding of the Classical heritage (which they often caricature, then curtly dismiss). *The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy* tends to reflect more the impoverished

perspective of the writers than a more rigorous read of Radical Orthodoxy. There have also been many critiques of the Radical Orthodox from within the Modern paradigm and some from within the emerging Patristic *ressourcement* movement. There has been a generous reception by some within the Roman Catholic and Orthodox forms of Christianity, but others have their hesitant doubts. Even the reformed and evangelical clan has entered the evaluative fray: *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Jamie Smith: 2004). There can be no doubt, though, that Radical Orthodoxy has had an impact on both the living Anglican Tradition and ways of doing theology that extend far beyond the Anglican fold.

There have been hints within the Radical Orthodox tribe that there is a larger economic, social and political vision that bears fruit from their theological, philosophical, liturgical and ecclesial position, but it was not until the publication of Phillip Blond's *Red Tory: How the Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* was published in 2010 that what was implicit became more explicit. It is significant to note that the political language of Red Toryism emerged within the Canadian context in 1965 after the engaged publication of George Grant's controversial *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*. Grant lamented, in this modern jeremiad of sorts, not only the defeat of the Conservative Prime Minister (John Diefenbaker) in the 1963 election by the combined alliance of Lester Pearson (who became the Liberal Prime Minister) and President John F. Canada. Grant argued that in the defeat of Diefenbaker more than a political vision had been eclipsed (indeed died). In fact, Grant suggested, that an older way of knowing and being had disappeared in the 1963 election—Canadian High Toryism had been replaced by the incoming tidal wave of liberalism at both the level of theory and political praxis---Grant lamented in this historic, political, philosophical and theological

tract for the times the reality of such a transition and the implications of it. The fact that Grant lamented the passing away (a death of sorts of High Toryism) meant that, for many, at the political level, he must be a Goldwater republican of the sort that Russell Kirk might have applauded and approved—this was not the case, though. Grant made it abundantly clear that his understanding of the Anglo-Canadian way (of which he had significant roots) did not disparage the role of the state in bringing into being a variety of social goods such as health care, public education, social services and many other civic structures. This did not mean that Grant demeaned the role of society and the Burkean small platoon---he merely, as a High Tory, thought state and society, in a civilized country, should work together for the good of one and all (common good, commonwealth or commonweal). It was this notion that society and the state are in a living partnership to bring into being the needful goods of citizens within a country that distinguishes classical Toryism from its deviation and distortion within the republican way. After the publication of Grant's *Lament for a Nation*, the well known Canadian political theorist, Gad Horowitz, called Grant a "Red Tory". The language of Red Toryism, therefore, emerged within the Canadian context in the mid-1960s.

The publication of Blond's *Red Tory* does raise some interesting questions about the relationship between Grant, Blond and the public expression of Radical Orthodoxy thought and practise. Is Blond's (and for that matter the Radical Orthodox) understanding of Red Tory on the same page as Grant's? It should be noted that Grant would agree with the Radical Orthodox in their critique of capitalism and the rise of multinational corporations (and the role they have played in undermining historic communities). Grant was as stringent a critic of Thatcher as is the Radical Orthodox. But, when Blond juxtaposes the state to society (the former being a problem, the latter the answer), Grant would part paths with such

a move. Grant, as I mentioned above, saw society and the state working together, in principle and imperfectly in fact, in a harmonic and symphonic way. Both society and the state were imperfect means of bringing into reality goods for one and all, and each needed one another to do so. It was simply naïve to bash the large state (as another mega institution like a corporation) and idealize society. The realm of the political at the local and municipal level was as important as the higher levels---each sphere had tendencies towards imperfection, hence the need of all spheres to check and correct that inherent limitations of community, social life and the state. This means that the High/Red Toryism of Grant would have some affinities with Blond and the Radical Orthodox, but he (and other Canadian High Tories) would definitely differ with the too simplistic contrast of state and society that tends to dominate the Radical Orthodox political, civic and public vision. I should note, though, that in a variety of email exchanges with John Milbank, he is much more nuanced in his read of parish, community, society and the state than is Phillip Blond in *Red Tory*---there are certainly decided affinities between Grant and Blond in the way they see the role of the church interacting at various levels of society and the state---certainly no state is evil, society is good dualism---such is the Laudian magisterial Anglican way---radical and orthodox, catholic and publically engaged (at both the civil and political levels).

VI

George Grant and Radical Orthodoxy

Many are the affinities (implicit and explicit) between the classical Platonic Anglicanism of George Grant, John Milbank and the Radical Orthodox: 1) secular reason is dethroned and contemplative theology-philosophy rethroned, 2) the classical thinking of Plato is held high as a way of knowing and being as a corrective to either caricatures of Athens or an either-or attitude to Athens-Jersusalem

(in which Athens is demeaned and Jerusalem idealized), 3) the church, in her prophetic essence, is honoured as the bearer of the new society---this means, of course, renewal is an ongoing process in which an older classical way reverses the dominance of liberalism in society and the church, 4) the church should not be beholden, under the guise of conservatism, of serving a right of centre political, economic or social ideological construct and fiction. In fact, if the church is true to her high calling, she will transcend the tribalism of the right, left and sensible centre with a more consistent vision, in principle and practise, of the higher good of the church and society, community and the state---such are the contributions of George Grant, John Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy. Needless to say, a much longer essay (indeed a book) could be written on Grant, his differences with the Radical Orthodox, differences within the Radical Orthodox and critiques of the Radical Orthodox from a variety of directions and angles.

Amor Vincit Omnia
Ron Dart

