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# The wisdom of John Milbank: a critical appraisal of Milbank's sophiology

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## Abstract

Despite the theological controversy surrounding 'Russian sophiology' amongst Orthodox theologians, John Milbank has claimed that it has proven to be one of the most daring theological breakthroughs within twentieth-century theology. He further considers it to be a fecund avenue of theological and philosophical reflection that has the potential to effectively communicate his central theological arguments in a new idiom. However, many of the positions which Milbank adopts within his sophiology prove to be controversial. This article offers a critical appraisal of Milbank's sophiology, drawing particular attention to several theological aporias it appears to generate and leave unresolved.

**Keywords:** Sergius Bulgakov; John Milbank; Radical Orthodoxy; sophiology; Wisdom

John Milbank's particular conception of participation metaphysics' rise to prominence, when contextualised within the Radical Orthodoxy 'narrative', is easily documented and understood: the emergence of an autonomous 'secular reason' has resulted in Christianity and its theology being confined to a dubious space within the 'secular metanarrative', where its claims to truth are then rigorously policed by a supposedly 'objective' and 'universal' reason debunked of all transient prejudices. Secularity governs the 'objective' public spheres (e.g. politics, academia and reason itself), while religion, and all other 'questionable practices', are to be strictly contained within the private and subjective realms, which are only tolerated because of the secular commitment to individual liberty. According to Milbank, generally speaking, all liberalism can be characterised by these rudimentary tendencies and assumptions.

Why does theology find itself in this context? The genesis of secular reason, as conceived by Radical Orthodoxy, is the result of the theological failures of the church herself; most notably in post-Aquinas scholasticism. It is not necessary to rehearse the entire Radical Orthodox reading of Christian theological history, for we can simply note that there are some reoccurring 'villains' within the narrative.<sup>1</sup> For instance, it all begins with the Franciscan scholastics, John Duns Scotus (1266–1308) and

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<sup>1</sup>For a comprehensive example of their approach to the history of Christian theology see: Connor Cunningham, *The Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology* (London: Routledge, 2002); see also Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp.121–67.

William of Ockham (c.1280–1339), when they depart from Aquinas in adhering to a kind of natural theology, which predicates being of Creator and creature univocally.<sup>2</sup> This decision projects God and the world ‘onto the same stage’ of univocal being, where their difference must then be dialectically accounted for, which subsequently produces mutually exclusive spheres local to each, which reaches one of its culminations in Kantian philosophy, according to Milbank. Hence, from the initial opposition of God and the world, there emerge the dialectical distinctions of the natural and the supernatural, reason and revelation, works and faith, philosophy and theology and, eventually, the *secular and the sacred*. According to Milbank, modern theology is characterised by its acceptance of these distinctions and its willingness to work from within the boundaries marked out for it. Milbank would cite liberal Protestantism as well as Karl Barth’s theology as typical examples.<sup>3</sup> Milbank’s theological project is an ambitious attempt to reverse this process and question the secular foundations of reason itself.

After his ‘diagnosis’ of modernity, we are led back to Milbank’s theological prescription: participation. If being is predicated analogically of Creator and creature, then God’s difference and transcendence are no longer in competition with creation, and God is (following Augustine of Hippo) the One who is, and must be, simultaneously *superior summo meo* and *interior intimo meo*. And, since God is the only One who can *be* in this way, all other instances of being become radically dependent, ontologically, on God, to the extent that, as Augustine further claims: ‘unless you were *within* me, I would have no being at all’.<sup>4</sup> Such an affirmation is also indicative of the fragile nature of finite being, thus revealing created existence to be the supreme instance of divine grace. Therefore, all things participate – through the gift of finite being – in the divine *esse*; all things that exist (only excluding those things which are sinful and, therefore, privative and non-existent) are inherently related to God *through* their very existence. Milbank is then able to demonstrate from the metaphysics of participated being that there can be no finite space (political, philosophical or otherwise) that is not already saturated with divine presence; the traditional dichotomies, outlined above, can therefore no longer be supported. Put simply, there is no longer any space left for the purely secular.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup>See John Duns Scotus, *Cognitio Naturalis de Deo I, II*, in *John Duns Scotus: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Allan Wolter (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), pp. 20–4; William of Ockham, *Quodlibetal V: I*, in *William of Ockham: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Philotheus Boehner (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1990), pp. 97–102.

<sup>3</sup>For a classic example of this taking place, see Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Schubert Ogden (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1984), pp. 1–45. In the case of Barth, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer appears to have recognised, Barth rejects the liberal project to the extent that he refuses the task of ‘abridging the Gospel’; however, by his conservatism (‘positivism of revelation’) he also affirms and retreats more deeply into these isolated spheres that have been allotted to theology by liberalism itself. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1953), p. 89.

<sup>4</sup>Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* 1.2, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup>Milbank’s position is not entirely novel to British theology. John Henry Newman appears to outline a similar conception of metaphysical participation in his conception of knowledge as its own end; neither is it foreign to political theology, as Eric Voegelin outlines a similar ontology in order to combat political totalitarianism. See John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 25–91; Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1997), p. 30. Milbank frequently praises theologies and philosophies that have questioned the typical dichotomies outlined in the text. Most consistently, he appeals to Henri de Lubac’s conception of the natural and the supernatural (see John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005)); and philosophers such as F. H. Jacobi and J. G. Hamann in their rejection of autonomous reason removed from faith (see John Milbank,

One might suppose that such a *révolution théologique*, as Adrian Pabst has called it, would have either been ignored or scorned, were it not for the cultural fertility provided by the postmodern climate, of which Milbank is well aware, and which he is keen to exploit.<sup>6</sup> In this context, theology is supposedly left in a state of 'sceptical relativism' in which all narratives have been confined to the same epistemological plane of ungrounded faith, implying that their only claims to truth can be substantiated by how persuasive the respective narratives ultimately turn out to be.<sup>7</sup> Milbank claims that the task of Radical Orthodoxy has, in reality then, changed little from liberal theology, only now persuasiveness does not occur through the 'apologetic mediation of a supposedly neutral human reason', but through faith in the intrinsic beauty of the 'Christian *logos* itself'.<sup>8</sup>

Milbank's typical method for expressing his central themes of participation and gift have been through his reading of the *analogia entis*, although he is quite clear that this 'analogy is predicated upon the metaphysics of participated being' and not vice versa.<sup>9</sup> However, as Milbank's thought evolves, he begins to discover various tensions in his theory of ontological participation and is seemingly forced to find new ways of addressing these issues, which he does by utilising the theological positions of Russian sophiology.

While he acknowledges his intellectual debt to the 'Russian masters', Milbank makes it emphatically clear that he has no interest in merely restating what they have already proposed, but seeks rather to tease out and creatively extend their speculations 'in my own idiom, which will not hesitate ... to extend Sophiological reflection beyond the conclusions arrived at by the great Russian masters'.<sup>10</sup> And, this is precisely what he does, giving birth to what has quickly come to be considered as Milbank's own unique sophiology. Yet the question remains: why sophiology? What tensions and aporias within Milbank's current ontology direct him to turn to Russian sophiology? What solutions does sophiology offer?

In 2003 Milbank first wrote of the importance of the 'Russian Sophiological tradition' in a context in which he believed it could aid him through a particular theological/ontological dilemma concerning God's relationship to creation. There is no mention of sophiology in Milbank's first two major works (*Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* and *The Word Made Strange*). This appears to be due to the fact that here Milbank is principally concerned with expending his intellectual efforts on diagnosing what is wrong with modernity, how it has gone wrong, and what he can do to rectify it. Although he intimates his theological response to the problems he has identified (by insisting that there can be no finite world independent of God, since in all of its modes it is because it participates in the being of God), he does not fully address all of the theological issues that will eventually grow out of this central position. This occurs a little later, when Milbank begins to comprehensively

'Knowledge: the Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi', in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 21–38; cf. John Milbank, 'Hume versus Kant: Faith, Reason, and Feeling', *Modern Theology* 27/2 (2011), pp. 276–97.

<sup>6</sup> John Milbank, *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (London: SCM, 2009), p. 337.

<sup>7</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 46. David Burrell appears to agree with Milbank on this point. See David Burrell, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 115–20.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

acknowledge and come to terms with the theological tension lying at the base of his 'ontology of participation'. It is this same tension on which the axis of Milbank's own sophiology will later consistently turn: if God is all (ontologically speaking) that *is*, and if creation is other to God, then how can creation properly exist? The attempt to avoid the possible pantheistic implications of participation metaphysics, whilst ensuring that such avoidance would not further substantiate the conception of an independent finite world grounded in secularity, is a crucial theme in Milbank's ontology and the central issue that his sophiology will eventually attempt to address by finding a mode of mediation for these positions. This dynamic is fundamental to clarifying the context in which Milbank will go on to utilise sophiology:

The task here is to think through this paradox ... In some fashion ... [God] is eternally humanity as well as God. This is an aspect of what some *Russian theologians* have deemed the 'Sophiological' mystery of God being eternally more than God, even though there is nothing more than God, and creation is not necessitated.<sup>11</sup>

Milbank first attempted to respond to this ontological aporia in *Truth in Aquinas*. According to Milbank, the ontological tension can be somewhat resolved by affirming that the very existence of God includes an immanent expression of 'mediated otherness' within God's dynamic 'life' as trinitarian 'relation'; creation can then simply be conceived as an agapeic overflow of God's own gratuity:

Aquinas details God's presence to creatures, under the heading of divine substance. This drastically indicates that God's omnipresence simply is God himself, and that there cannot really be any being 'other' than God. Such omnipresence is seen as the direct effect of divine goodness ... *For only this impossible self-exteriorization will explain how there can be something other to God participating in God, when God is in himself the repletion of being.*<sup>12</sup>

As he first outlined in *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank also appeals to de Lubac's notion of the supernatural in order to shed some light on this difficulty.<sup>13</sup> In 2005, in his short book on de Lubac, Milbank writes:

de Lubac's theory of the supernatural seeks to remain with the paradox that God who is all in all yet brings about a not-God to share in his nature. Here de Lubac is close to the mystery that God is the God who can be outside himself – and therefore is the God who elevates creatures into deity.

However, it is on this precise point that Milbank again mentions sophiology, stating that this is a 'notion explored more rigorously by the Russian Sophianic tradition, especially Bulgakov'.<sup>14</sup> In the same work he also goes on to state that Bulgakov is 'one of the two truly great theologians of the twentieth century'.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, p. xii; emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup>Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, p. 37; emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup>Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 220–30.

<sup>14</sup>Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, p.77.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 104.

In 2006, in the preface to the second edition of *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank again attempts to address the ontological tensions in his theory of participation. This time he appeals to thinkers such as Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) who emphasise the ‘paradoxical’ relationship between God and creation that is characterised by their ‘coincidence’ as ‘opposites’. He also explicitly states that ‘the modern Russian tradition of Sophiology has also fundamentally to do with the problematic that I am indicating here’.<sup>16</sup>

In *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Milbank focuses on the theme of paradox within ontological participation. He abandons the ‘principle of non-contradiction’ and attempts to offer some theological and philosophical justification for this decision. Yet the main reason for this move is precisely to try to uphold the paradoxical ontology of participation that is so crucial to this theology. Milbank therefore reaches the point where he needs to ground and express his paradoxical ontology, which he attempts to do by utilising the Russian sophiological tradition.

According to Milbank, we should not consider this ontology to be a speculative anomaly, as there seems to be a persistently paradoxical, yet fundamental, notion of ‘otherness’ emerging within Christian doctrine more generally, where *difference* must be upheld at the very same time that *identification and unity* must also be maintained. Theologians must distinguish between God and creation whilst avoiding pantheism and dualism. For example; the ‘distinctiveness’ of the persons of the Trinity must be acknowledged, yet without compromising their unity. Similarly, a divine and human nature must be distinguished in Christ, yet without separation or division. Even the slightest adjustment to the ‘paradoxical nature’ of this notion of otherness would result in a whole host of dialectical dichotomies: modalism or tritheism, monophysitism or Nestorianism, pantheism or dualism, and so forth. Therefore, Milbank contends that this paradox is a form of *mediation within otherness that attempts to sustain identity within difference*. We are therefore left with an inexpressible mystery within theological attempts to conceive of ‘otherness’ and identity between God and creation: it cannot occur but it simultaneously must. There must be difference, and there must be identity; and although both need to be distinguished, neither can imply ontological incongruence. At this theological threshold, Milbank is convinced that the sophiological speculation of the ‘Russian masters’ is the most promising attempt to think through, and subsequently express, this notion of paradoxical mediation within the theme of participation. And, like his ‘predecessors’, he remains convinced that the biblical figure of Wisdom is in a position to provide theology with a persuasive expression of this form of mediation, which he hopes will be able to ‘tackle the problem of a necessary but seemingly impossible mediation that lurks within traditional speculative theology’ by embodying a mysterious and paradoxical relationship, apparent within otherness, that is grounded in the non-competitive and peaceful conception of the same, which is revealed in Christ, the God-Man, and which is ultimately locatable within the Trinity itself.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. xxvii.

<sup>17</sup>John Milbank, ‘Sophiology and Theurgy: The New Theological Horizon’, in Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider (eds), *Encounter between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World through the Word* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 50. Brandon Gallaher has recently lent support to Milbank’s reading of Bulgakov. He claims that Bulgakov’s understanding of Wisdom is grounded in his philosophy of antinomy (антиномия) and that his sophiological speculation ‘quickly evolved into a metaphor for understanding the tension between God and the world’. Brandon Gallaher, ‘There is Freedom: The

In order to be in a position to express this paradoxical conception of participation, Milbank requires a mediatory figure that is at once both created and divine, and thus an embodiment of the paradox that Milbank wishes to uphold. This is precisely where Sophia comes in:

The important thing to note is that one can take Sophiology as the attempt to think through the place of mediation ... where, it would seem, there cannot possibly *be* any mediation and yet, without it, everything threatens to fall apart ... One could say that Sophia names a *metaxu* which does not lie between two poles but rather remains simultaneously at both poles at once. As such it does not subsist before the two poles, but it co-arises with them such that they can only exist according to a mediated communication which remains purely occult, a matter of utterly inscrutable affinity.<sup>18</sup>

In order for his reconception of ontological participation to work successfully, Milbank therefore must locate this paradoxical form of mediation within God. That is, he must demonstrate that within the triune life of God, there is an otherness that includes identity – which Milbank conceives as Sophia – that mediates the identity and difference of the divine persons as well as the divine essence and persons themselves; a relationship which is then participated in (to various degrees) by the rest of creation:

One sees the Sophianic principle of ‘impossible mediation’ operating most supremely in the case of the divine Trinity. *The same principle* is then participated in, in various modes, by the creation, by humanity, by the incarnate Logos, by the Mother of God, by the Church, and by what one might call the liturgical-economic process.<sup>19</sup>

Milbank is convinced that this form of mediation must originate and be grounded within God’s own mode of relating to God’s self as triune relationship in order for it to be successful. Thus, after identifying this paradoxical dynamic within the divine Trinity itself, Milbank will then seek to show that all other forms of relating (namely, between God and creation), in whatever mode, must also be inherently connected to, and an integral part of this original mediation within the Trinity. Therefore, the main purpose of Milbank’s sophiology is to account for this form of mediation within the Trinity, and then to elucidate its place in God’s relationship to creation generally: his relationship to creation through Christ, the ‘ontological interaction’ between God and the world within ‘theurgy’, and God’s relationship to creation through the church (including its Mariological dimensions). All of this is achieved for Milbank through the figure of Sophia.

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Dialectic of Freedom and Necessity in the Trinitarian Theologies of Sergii Bulgakov, Karl Barth, and Hans Urs von Balthasar’, D.Phil. diss., Oxford University, 2010, p. 46; see also Jonathan Seiling, ‘From Antinomy to Sophiology: Modern Russian Religious Consciousness and Sergei Bulgakov’s Critical Appropriation of German Idealism’, Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2008.

<sup>18</sup>Milbank, ‘Sophiology and Theurgy’, p. 50.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

### 'Impossible mediation' within the Trinity: Sophia as the divine essence

Milbank's first use of the figure of Sophia occurs within his attempt to ground paradoxical participation or 'otherness' within the divine Trinity itself, where Sophia is adopted in order to provide a form of mediation between the persons of the Trinity: a certain 'something' if you will, that guarantees their essential unity whilst upholding their hypostatic distinction – which, following Bulgakov, Milbank suggests can be conceptualised as Sophia: 'If there were in no sense a shared "something" (*homoousios* if one likes) involved in substantive relations, then the engendered would be sheerly "other" to the engendering and the proceeded to the proceeding.'<sup>20</sup>

However, Milbank notes that the traditional conception of mediation for the divine hypostases via the divine essence itself harbours a further need of mediation in order to uphold 'its' distinction from 'its' inherent relations at the 'intersecting point' of their total unity, and therefore also of the persons themselves:

Via this point of intersection between relation and essence in the person, the engendered is in some sense the unengendered and the proceeded is likewise in some sense the proceeding. It follows then, that there is in a certain fashion a dynamic substantive mediation between essence and relations which involves also a mediation between the persons themselves.<sup>21</sup>

As Milbank indicates, any concept of such a mode of mediation would at once threaten to usurp the harmony of the Trinity; for, seemingly, it would either need to be another hypostasis (thus suggesting a quaternity as opposed to a Trinity) or some higher essential process of which the persons would be mere modifications. Instead, following Bulgakov, Milbank suggests that this form of mediation could be characterised by its 'hypostaticity': 'something' (an essence) that already approaches the personal, or is defined by its power to personify, without actually being an hypostasis itself. As he puts it, 'what is common to the three persons cannot itself be exactly impersonal, even if it is also not exactly in itself a person: therefore it is at once an essence and yet something already approaching the personal.'<sup>22</sup>

Thus, slightly elucidating Bulgakov's rather complicated notion of 'hypostaticity', Milbank suggests that we can conceive of this mediation as 'the power to characterize', which is Sophia: the divine world or content (in the Bulgakovian sense) that gives personal shape to the hypostases and thus both identifies them whilst also distinguishing them: 'The possessable and the transferable character of all persons, human and divine, rather derives initially from the "shape" that they derive from the objective world ... Personal character arises from the subjective alteration of objectivity.'<sup>23</sup> According to Milbank, following the suggestions of Bulgakov, this relationship between essence and its characterising hypostasis is common to all intellectual beings, human and divine: 'hence even the infinite persons of the Trinity cannot be personal ... simply in themselves and as relational, unless they are always mediating and are equally mediated by an objective personifying power'.<sup>24</sup> Here, Milbank is grappling with the German

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

philosophical theme of the subject/object relationship, albeit through Bulgakov's theological lens.

Interestingly, Milbank flirts with the possibility of this mediating principle being a 'self-grounded hypostasis' but rather surprisingly rejects this option on the basis of the authority of Bulgakov's own Kantian understanding of ontology and epistemology and their mutual relationship. Milbank therefore seems to affirm, with Kant and Bulgakov, that *being* must be epistemologically registered in a 'comprehending other' for it *to be* at all: 'as Bulgakov recognized, one cannot take Being alone to be the primary principle. What is, manifests itself, else it is unthinkable.'<sup>25</sup> But Milbank then faces the problem of positing the necessity of a 'comprehending other' that appears to be crucial and essential to God's own existence: 'if we posit an initial Being which is "one", and insist that it can only be if it shows itself, then we have immediately also to posit a "second", which is the receiving capacity'.<sup>26</sup>

After analysing attempts made by Hegel and Schelling to account for this 'comprehending otherness', Milbank concludes that both positions are marred by an agonistic process that fails to account for a peaceful notion of original and harmonious difference: 'neither Hegel nor Schelling therefore, entertained the truly radical thought of a real original difference exceeding any tensional process of development'.<sup>27</sup> In an attempt to propose an alternative to these positions, Milbank invokes the figure of Wisdom (or more specifically, its original duplication) to account for an original, yet peaceful, otherness that comprises the very existence of God:

If one does entertain this [sophiological mediation], then one can project the epistemological necessity of original twoness onto the ontological plane ... Then one is confronted with the mystery of Sophia, of original mediation ... That which *is*, is dynamic self-expressive life, but as such it is also the otherness of active reception of this dynamism. It is, indeed, super-eminently sperm and womb, forever conjoined and forever apart.<sup>28</sup>

Given Milbank's characterisation of the divine essence as Sophia, the problem of the 'comprehending other' appears to be resolved through a thoroughly trinitarian schema, without implying the necessity of the divine creation. For Bulgakov appeared to suggest that the 'comprehending other' was ultimately the creation itself, thus necessitating its

<sup>25</sup>Ibid. As to be expected, there is no acknowledgement of Kant here; instead Milbank tries to ground his position in Gregory of Nyssa's suggestion (developed in his *On Not Three Gods: To Ablabius*) that the transcendent God is known in his *dynamis* which is his self-manifestation. Although there are undoubtedly some similarities here, it seems unlikely that Nyssa would have gone on to suggest that the creation's need for God's self-manifestation in his power or economy could be reversed to imply the necessity of the creation as the comprehending other that God needs in order *to be*, as Milbank and Bulgakov would seem to imply. More recently, Quentin Meillassoux has argued against this ontological connection between knowing and being, proposing instead that being is independent of subjectivity (whether divine or human). See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2009).

<sup>26</sup>Milbank, 'Sophiology and Theurgy', p. 57.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 60–1. There are similarities here with the trinitarian ontology that Milbank outlines in *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 423–7; cf. also John Milbank, 'The Return of Mediation', in John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek and Creston Davis (eds), *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), p. 222.



own existence and blurring the ontological boundary between God (more specifically, God the Son) and the world, which appeared to merge into one single process of divine self-becoming, after the pattern of Schelling and Hegel. However, by affirming that the 'comprehending other' is a natural expression of the self-expressive love of God and locating this dynamic within the sophiological life of the divine Trinity, Milbank is able to affirm God's total aseity, and subsequently uphold the clear distinction between God the Son and the creation, as well as the pure gratuity of the creative act as unnecessary to God's own existence.

### 'Impossible mediation': God and the world

Having 'grounded' his conception of 'paradoxical mediation' within a trinitarian ontology, Milbank now has the task of showing how created existence relates to, and participates in this divine life. And although Milbank may have initially appeared to have avoided Bulgakov's conflation of God the Son and the world with his need for the 'comprehending other', his commitment to a particular conception of ontological participation may after all render all other forms of being and mediation as mere modes of this initial fundamental process at play within the divine Trinity itself. For according to Milbank: 'In the above fashion one sees the Sophianic principle of "impossible mediation" operating most supremely in the case of the divine Trinity. *The same principle* is then participated in, in various modes, by the creation.'<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Milbank is now trying to articulate the place of created otherness within the sophiological mediation of the divine Trinity, which seems an impossible and paradoxical task given the ubiquity of the process itself: 'in the case of the whole of the creation, how can it possibly exist at all? There is nothing but God, in his ubiquity. If there is also the creation as well as God, then the creation must lie within God.'<sup>30</sup> If the sophiological dynamism of the divine life of the Trinity is 'all that there is' ontologically speaking, then how is finitude to be accounted for? As Milbank has already suggested, the answer to this aporia appears to be by locating the finite within the divine life itself; hence the creation becomes another aspect to the process of othering that is the life of the Trinity itself: 'If the creation lies within God, God must inversely lie within the creation. God must be also that in himself which goes outside God ... Since God is all in all, at the bottom of that nullity which is alone proper to the creation must lie God.'<sup>31</sup> Thus, at first glance (and as it is the case with Bulgakov's own sophiology), creation is subsumed under the role of the 'comprehending other', given that the ubiquity of the 'othering process' renders no other ontological space available where such an implication would not present itself. Like Bulgakov, Milbank is thereby faced with the difficult task of attempting to account for genuine ontological difference between God and the world, when the world appears to be an integral and necessary part of the process of the divine life itself.

Milbank explicitly rejects Schelling and Hegel's dialectical account of this same dynamic, yet he is aware of how similar their proposals seem, after all. Milbank

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 62; emphasis added.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid. This is not an uncommon theme in Milbank's theology; he grapples with it at various points, and it seems to be an inherent tension in his participation metaphysics. For instance, he has also referred to it as the problem of 'the impossibility of creation' (Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, p. 63).

<sup>31</sup>Milbank, 'Sophiology and Theurgy', p. 63. Milbank also states this explicitly elsewhere, for instance: 'there can be a created exterior to God, because God's interior is self-exteriorization' (Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, p. 86).

could be said to embody Schelling and Hegel's own logic within his proposal: Hegel's affirmation that, for instance, 'otherness is not something different outside it, but its own moment ... something is *in* itself the other of itself', appears to be very close to what Milbank is here suggesting.<sup>32</sup> However, Milbank is well aware of the risks of his theological positions and is consistent in his attempts to avoid these conclusions in realising the implications of his theological logic. Milbank categorically rejects suggestions of pantheism, however, not by denying that they are the logical conclusions of his theological reasoning (as may have been expected), but by appealing to the mystery of paradox by simultaneously affirming both the conclusion of his position and its negation (something very close to Bulgakov's antinomical methodology):

Between God and creation then, there is no between. To suppose so would be idolatry. On the other hand, if the created order univocally enjoys its own existence which sufficiently possesses existence as finite being, then there is after all, by the working of an inexorable dialectic, a third term, namely 'being,' invoked as lying between God and the creation and thereby threatening idolatrously to include them both. To avoid this outcome one must rather say that all created being borrows its being from God who alone fully 'is' or is 'to be.'<sup>33</sup>

However, this divine act of 'donating existence' does little to ease the theological and ontological tensions which Milbank's sophiology has generated; as what is donated appears to be nothing else but God's own self – seemingly only confirming that creation is indeed a duplicated aspect of God's own being:

By an unforeclosed and mysteriously harmonious dialectic (unlike that of Hegel), what shares in God through its very unlikeness to God can only do so because it is also precisely like, *indeed identical with the Godhead* in its hidden heart. If nullity shares in being, then at bottom created things are God in some sense and God is in some sense created.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, Milbank can only affirm the paradoxical nature of participation and sophiological mediation, as he notes:

To avoid at this point either acosmism or pantheism ... the best we can do is to affirm both these further strange impossibilities at once. Sophia is creation in God; Sophia is also God in creation. There is not one Sophia, hovering onto-theologically between God and creation; there are two Sophias on two

<sup>32</sup>G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. T. F. Geraet (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), p. 148.

<sup>33</sup>Milbank, 'Sophiology and Theurgy', pp. 64–5.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 65. This is by no means an isolated instant confined to Milbank's sophiology. When appealing to the thought of Eckhart, Milbank argues that: 'to ensure that God is not trumped by *esse*, one must indeed face up more radically to the aporias of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*: if this doctrine insists that God is the plenitude of being and that all created being derives from God, then in some sense the ground of created being must be uncreated' (Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. xxvi). Similarly, 'Eckhart therefore claims that, while the relation of creature to Creator remains always analogical, that nonetheless the relation of the soul to God in its ground is univocal. Since there is a horizontal 'univocity' between the Persons of the Trinity who are equal in being ... within whose dynamic the souls is ultimately included' (*ibid.*, p. xxvii).

sides of the chasm, yet somehow their deep-beyond-deep affinity renders them after all but one.<sup>35</sup>

In order to affirm these paradoxical positions, Milbank is forced to abandon the ‘principle of non-contradiction’, by doing which he hopes to be able to affirm both the logical conclusion of his theological reasoning (that God and the world are at base identical), and its negation (that God always ontologically exceeds the world), and (after the pattern of Bulgakov’s antinomial method) to uphold both truths simultaneously without a final synthesis. He attempts to mediate and express this antinomy/paradox via the figure of Wisdom, who is claimed to be both God in the world and the world in God. For Milbank, ‘paradox’ is the most theologically sound strategy for avoiding German dialectical ‘tragic gnosis’ and the agonistic narratives that it can often invite between God and the world.<sup>36</sup> In this sense he is very close to Bulgakov and his post-Hegelian ‘antinomial way’, for both seemingly accept the logic of oppositional thought, yet reject any synthesising mediation: ‘the alternative ... is paradox – which one can also name “analogy”, “real relation”, “realism” (regarding universals), or (after William Desmond) the “metaxological”’.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, ‘the “paradoxical” outlook does not require to be “completed” by a dialectical one’.<sup>38</sup> According to Milbank, the appeal to paradox is a necessary radicalisation of Aquinas’ understanding of analogy, invoked to combat the ‘Scotist’ reading and subsequent rejection of it. He believes that this was initially carried out by Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa.<sup>39</sup>

However, Milbank is keen to defend his understanding of paradox and sophiology (within his commitment to ontological participation) and distinguish it from mere nonsense or a careless mistake in reasoning. To do so, he appeals to a meta-logic, deeply influenced by Nicholas of Cusa that *logically* disregards the principle of non-contradiction by appealing to the infinite. ‘Because in the infinite there is no presupposed limit, one way to speak of the infinite is to say that here all opposites coincide, all differences are also similarities, and vice versa. One can, in short, think the absolute simple infinite only as paradox.’<sup>40</sup> An almost identical method of reasoning can be found in Nicholas of Cusa’s *De Docta Ignorantia*.<sup>41</sup>

Building on these insights, Milbank further suggests that there can be no formal distinction between the finite and the infinite:

We cannot conceive of any bounds to the finite as such: we must assume that the finite ‘goes on forever’ and, moreover, that it does so as much microscopically as

<sup>35</sup>Milbank, ‘Sophiology and Theurgy’, p. 65.

<sup>36</sup>John Milbank, ‘Materialism and Transcendence’, in John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek and Creston Davis (eds), *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 404.

<sup>37</sup>John Milbank, ‘The Double Glory, or Paradox Versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek’, in Slavoj Žižek, John Milbank and Creston Davis (eds), *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (London: MIT Press, 2009), p. 112.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 164. Milbank further elucidates his admiration of Eckhart and Cusa in John Milbank, ‘Life, or Gift and *Glissando*’, *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* 1/1–2 (2012), pp. 121–51.

<sup>40</sup>Milbank, ‘The Double Glory’, p. 167.

<sup>41</sup>Nicholas of Cusa, ‘On Learned Ignorance, I:III’, in H. Lawrence Bond (ed.), *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 89.

macroscopically. This leads us to question whether there truly are any strictly finite things without qualification, outside the sphere of logical supposition.<sup>42</sup>

And similarly, even if one were to imagine an ‘independent’ finitude, this could only be possible if it were the product of a descent of the infinite: ‘if, nevertheless, something besides God impossibly exists, then this is because God in himself is an ecstatic, generating God who goes beyond God’.<sup>43</sup>

Therefore, it is clear that Milbank is proposing a theological method that is very closely related to Bulgakov’s ‘antinomism’. However, whereas Bulgakov seemed to require an abandonment of ‘traditional’ epistemological principles for an ascetic or kenotic acceptance of an encountered revelatory truth on faith, Milbank attempts to provide a ‘reasonable’ foundation for his acceptance of paradox and dismissal of the principle of non-contradiction. For, once we have accepted the reality of the infinite (and Milbank believes there are good reasons for doing so – the seemingly infinite possibilities of finitude itself for instance), which is utterly unbounded and never comprised of any sort of limit, the principle of non-contradiction can simply not be sustained. For a contradiction to occur, there must be a definitive boundary where particulars are opposed to each other, yet this is precisely what appears to be missing within the infinite itself, thereby implying that no contradiction could possibly occur ‘here’. Thus, the claim that creation is both simultaneously God and other to God, although seemingly impossible to ‘comprehend’ from our finite perspective, can be accepted as truth in light that all contradictions coincide within the infinite, where they are resolved. Although Milbank’s ‘paradoxical way’ has made some significant developments to Bulgakov’s antinomism, there still appear to be several latent tensions within his suggestions.

First, if one were to actually accept Milbank’s contention, then there would appear to be no communicable framework from which truth could be distinguished from falsity. Could Milbank’s principle be invoked solely to affirm the truth of Christian revelation? It would appear possible in principle that one could just as legitimately affirm that squared circles, although from our finite perspective they appear to be mutually exclusive and therefore contradictory, may ultimately be perfectly compatible within an unbounded infinity. Presumably, Milbank would want to draw a clear distinction between the paradoxes that he upholds and the mere mistakes or contradictions like the one just outlined. Yet, how could such a distinction be made, when both options appear possible from Milbank’s suggestions? How could we decide when to apply the principle of non-contradiction and when to ignore it? There appears to be no other reason than Milbank’s own preference. If truth claims are only regulated and constructed within a particular discourse based on choice, one runs the risk of permanently grounding truth in personal (even if communally personal, including a given state or government) motivations of power.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Milbank, ‘The Double Glory’, p. 167.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>44</sup>Perhaps, this critique further substantiates those commentators that have acknowledged certain ‘totalitarian’ tendencies in Milbank’s theology. For instance, Mary Doak has written: ‘Milbank leaves no doubt that he considers his Christian story to be superior to any and all other temporal views, and to need no correction from them ... It can only give us further pause that Milbank defends the use of violence to constrain those who would damage themselves by refusing to act in accordance with this story. Can we be so sure that a Milbankian clarity about the Christian story is an antidote to the horrors of history and not

As we have noted, the theological challenge that Milbank is attempting to address is how to account for an authentic finite existence that is not God. However, this process of reasoning nearly always generates 'the problem of finitude' where the world is accounted for as a problem or disruption within the divine to be resolved through the elucidation of a metaphysical mythology. We are able to identify this transition almost immediately in Milbank's sophiology, as soon as the problem of finitude emerges:

The heart of creation, Sophia, is somehow dragged downwards ... Thus Bulgakov declared that 'Sophia – primordial humanity – as the soul of the world' may realize the dark side of its being in exercising a blind and chaotic will. So there is, *as the Christian Gnostics intimated*, albeit in a heterodox mode, also a *fallen Sophia* to be constantly sought out and recovered through art, through good science, through the contemplation of nature – for there is something here not merely to be redeemed, but also a lost spark of beauty presently trapped under the spell of evil, that is yet for the moment missing from the plenitude of beauty as such.<sup>45</sup>

However, Milbank does attempt to avoid the mythological accounts inherent to Russian sophiology by making several subtle alterations to their proposal. First, although he does explicitly acknowledge a metaphysical fall narrative, he attempts to suggest that fallen Sophia is *not* recuperated through the history of creation, but instead argues that the fall is eternally resolved (a position that is very close to Schelling's theogony):

The eternal Adam is only the universal human hypostasizing power. The fall of man impairs this essence, but by rights this should lead to absolute extinction for both human essence and human hypostases. It only does not do so because, in some sense, when Sophia falls to become the sinister 'Achamoth' according to Bulgakov, the heavenly Sophia is 'impossibly' affected, and God cannot suffer, even for a hypothetical 'instance,' a loss to his glory. It is as if he only maintains his aseity, which of course he cannot not do, through the retrieval of languished glory.<sup>46</sup>

Milbank further reiterates this point by suggesting that the historical incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth is a formality, given that the fallen-Sophia/eternal humanity is immediately restored from all eternity, and therefore descends with Christ in his incarnation to present the ideal humanity, which has already been realised in God: 'through all eternity the essence is immediately restored. So much is this the case that, when God as the divine Son descends in the Incarnation, so also does the eternal humanity.'<sup>47</sup> However, Milbank here appears to challenge the biblical insistence on the historical tangibility of the incarnation by casting the incarnation as the revelation of knowledge of an ontological fact that has occurred from all eternity.

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simply another basis for future horrors?' Mary Doak, *Reclaiming Narrative for Public Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 32.

<sup>45</sup>Milbank, 'Sophiology and Theurgy', p. 69.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

Milbank is clearly aware of the implications of his position, and seeks to clarify it by suggesting that the historical incarnation does indeed mark the final restitution of the fallen Sophia:

The eternal divine humanity, or human essence, or Adam-Kadmon – at once the first and the second Adam spoken of by Paul – is itself eternally saved and united with God entirely because of the unique descent of the Logos at one specific point in human history. Here alone occurs the event of the final finding and retrieving of the lost and fallen Sophia.<sup>48</sup>

However, whichever option Milbank selects, there is very little difference between them, given the fact that creation *is* God insofar as creation is an integral aspect of the intra-trinitarian life of the Godhead itself, the ‘comprehending other’; whether this drama is played out and resolved within history or is eternally restored, amounts to the same thing, as in both instances God and the world appear to be a part of one fundamental process of God’s emerging self-awareness, and that is the case whether one ‘finitises’ God or eternalises the world; and it is precisely in this respect that Milbank upholds that ‘from all eternity God has always been the God-man and the Russians are right: the theanthropic exceeds even the theological’.<sup>49</sup>

I shall now explore Milbank’s christology and eschatology in the context of his sophiology.

### Sophiology in Milbank’s theurgy, theosis and christology

Although Milbank does explore alternative ways of engaging theologically with modern Darwinian theory, within his sophiology – following Solovyov and Bulgakov (and the idealist tradition before them) – he does appeal to a metaphysical fall to account for the nature of the current state of the relationship between the world and God.<sup>50</sup> Having made this move, his sophiology must now account for how the original monism is to be restored. He elucidates the nature of the interaction between God and the fallen world, which is constantly moving towards the ‘recovery’ of fallen Sophia, typified in Milbank’s conception of deification and the incarnation. Milbank’s favoured mode of engaging with such an interaction between God and the world is through the concept of theurgy.<sup>51</sup> Theurgy is a Neoplatonic principle that offers a framework for conceiving of the interaction between divinity and created reality, which itself has certain ontological presuppositions that become important for Milbank’s conception of deification.

We can already conclude from the above positions that for Milbank God and the world are ontologically bound together from all eternity through the paradoxical figure of Sophia. Yet this relationship has been disturbed (because it is contradicted by our current mode of existence and explained through a metaphysical fall narrative) and must now be healed. Before outlining the nature of this ‘healing process’, Milbank criticises the church fathers and theologians who have conceived of an ontology that

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>50</sup>John Milbank, ‘Life, or Gift and Glissando: Evolution, Vitalism and Transcendence’, in Neil Turnbull (ed.), *Radical Orthodoxy: Annual Review I* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), p. 93.

<sup>51</sup>On the topic of theurgy, see Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

would debar the type of ontological 'reunion' between God and the fallen world that Milbank wishes to uphold. For example, he categorically rejects Gregory of Nyssa's conception of *epektasis* and positions which he believes are products of it, namely the Palamite distinction between God's essence and his energies, and its more modern reformulation and adoption in Vladimir Lossky's theology. In each case, these theologians wish to uphold the Creator/creature distinction even 'after' its eschatological redemption. Milbank remains cautious of such suggestions, as it would seem to forbid his attempt to account for a complete ontological reunion between God and the fallen creation, which was once paradoxically contained within a single unity. Thus, he suggests that:

To suppose that there is even a formal division between essence and energies ... risks supposing that deification is merely an irradiation by the light of the divine energies, lying in this sought of idolatrous 'between', or false mediation, with the final divine darkness reserved.<sup>52</sup>

Milbank believes that, by attempting to uphold the divine difference, even within the creature's deified union with God, would have 'positivized the negative'.<sup>53</sup> Milbank proposes that these positions were anticipated in 'Gregory of Nyssa's almost proto-Scottish view that God is most of all uncircumscribed positive infinity, to which there corresponds, on the part of finite spirits, an "endless epectastic progress"'.<sup>54</sup> In contrast to these positions, Milbank attempts to appeal to Pseudo-Dionysius and the Neoplatonist Iamblichus, both of whom he believes to have laid greater stress on a deeper unity between God and creation. Thus he states: 'he [Dionysius] more construed God as the coincidence of bounded and unbounded'.<sup>55</sup>

The purpose of theurgy is therefore to rediscover the creature's 'lost' ontological congruence with the divine and to 'solicit' the response of divinity:

The liturgical magical procedure of theurgy, by achieving an attunement with the divine, allows us more to receive the 'excellent gift of the gods' and 'the divine care which has been denied us' ... Thus while prayer and invocation does not, indeed, change the minds of the gods, it is not simply a disguised mode of self-therapy because it permits us, through achieving the right topological, bodily and spiritual dispositions, to receive more fully the divine flow of grace.<sup>56</sup>

The role of theurgy within Milbank's sophiology appears to be very close to the 'eschatological recuperation' narratives that are apparent within Russian sophiology and Schelling's 'Philosophy of Mythology'. In the former cases, the eschatological reunion of the lost divine principle or Sophia was achieved by the teleological movement of history that stage by stage slowly 'prepared itself' for the divine descent of the incarnation where the 'reunion' would be completed. Like Bulgakov before him, Milbank insists that Mary represents the highest point of creation's receptiveness to the divine, as the highest point of theurgic interaction. Therefore, Milbank echoes

<sup>52</sup>Milbank, 'Sophiology and Theurgy', p. 71.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., pp. 72–3.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

Bulgakov in upholding the necessity of Mariology for the realisation of Christ's incarnation; Mary becomes the requisite for the descent of the Logos: 'Bulgakov acknowledged that Christ is only incarnate through the Church by means of the person of Mary.'<sup>57</sup> However, when viewed from the perspective of fallen Sophia's teleological movement towards her eschatological reunion with the original monistic whole, the need for the 'immaculate conception' simply does not arise, as God through Sophia, and human history, has graciously been moving towards this point of the fittingness of creation to receive Christ in the incarnation. Hence, this can only occur because of the fact that God is constantly becoming human:

The ascent of deification is impossible unless God constantly descends to us – meeting liturgically with our acts in time, which are our modes of being in time ... We can become God, because God is constantly becoming us. Here again there cannot be mediation, yet there must be mediation in the sense of something that abides simultaneously on both sides of an absolute rift, held together by an ineffable attunement.<sup>58</sup>

Once the fallen creation/Sophia has prepared herself for the divine descent, the historical incarnation marks the 'final finding and retrieving of the lost and fallen Sophia'.<sup>59</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Milbank is forced to reconceive the traditional Chalcedonian christology of 'two natures united hypostatically in one person' simply because there is too much distinction between divinity and humanity in this schema, within which Milbank's conception of complete ontological identity cannot be realised. According to Milbank, a 'hypostatic unity' alone 'suggests that he [Jesus] is in one aspect (the personal) the God-Man or incarnate, but in another aspect (the natural), he is not'.<sup>60</sup> At this point, Milbank invokes the figure of Sophia as a mediatory principle between the person of Christ and his two natures in order to uphold a deeper unity between the two natures. Sophia is able to perform this role precisely because she is not ontologically distinct from God or creation, although fallen Sophia is separated from God in the mode of her existence; at base there is no ontological distinction between a human nature and a divine nature within Sophia:

The two characterizing powers are *at bottom one*, since the uncreated and created Sophia are more fundamentally one in 'foundation and content' according to Bulgakov – given that God is the all and the creation itself is 'nothing but' the outgoing of God, even though God is in himself mysteriously the self-exceeding. They differ only as to their 'conditions' of respectively of eternal glory and finite becoming and for this reason the two conditions can come together in the Incarnation not just actually on the basis of the one divine hypostasis, but also transcendently on the traditional basis of the more fundamental unity and tendency to unity of the two essences taken as the two Sophias or objective characterizing powers.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 81; emphasis added.



The incarnation therefore inaugurates the eschatological ‘recuperation’ of Sophia, which can only be fully completed when absolute identity is restored. It appears that Milbank has had to modify an orthodox Chalcedonian christology, to what – for all intents and purposes – is a *monophysite* Christology, to account for this narrative. Although Milbank, like Bulgakov before him, still maintains the language of ‘two Sophias’, it appears clear that Sophia (God and the world) are *one* and simply *modally* distinguished in their respective states of being. However, a modal distinction does not appear to be enough to uphold the radical ontological difference between the Creator and the creation; especially when this modal distinction is *not* meant to be the case, but has rather occurred through the transcendental fall of Sophia, which is precisely what is to be negated in the incarnation, where the monistic totality is resumed. Thus, Brandon Gallaher is surely correct in labelling Milbank’s sophiological christology ‘a strange form of monophysite Christology’.<sup>62</sup>

Therefore, having documented the recovery of the fallen Sophia, which has culminated in the incarnation of Christ, Milbank must now elucidate the effect this has on the rest of creation and the ‘future’ of the world within this dynamic. Following Bulgakov and Schelling, Milbank suggests that the incarnation of Christ must necessarily presuppose the ‘involvement’ of the Trinity. If the Son, as substantive relationship, is incarnate in human history, then the Father and the Holy Spirit must also be, in some sense, ‘incarnate’. In order to elucidate this point, Milbank divides history into three epochs, each corresponding to one person of the Trinity: the past, or Israel, is the time of the Father; the present the time of the Son; and the future the time of the Spirit and the church:

The Father must in some fashion be ‘incarnated’ as the voice of human memory, especially as the memory of Israel? After all, if Christ is sinless, then this memory now becomes retrospectively perfected. By retrospection, the temporal source that is Israel becomes one with the eternal paternal source ... And one can also say, with Bulgakov this time, that the Church in its eschatological totality is collectively personified by the Holy Spirit.<sup>63</sup>

Therefore, the church, as the epoch of the Spirit, is the gradual ‘growing into’ the identity between God and the world that Christ represents with the unity of the ‘two’ Sophias.

### Concluding remarks

I have given a detailed account of Milbank’s adoption and use of Russian, specifically Bulgakovian, sophiology. Whilst the figure of Sophia offers Milbank a new mode of communicating the central tenets of his theology, it also appears to draw him into theological aporias that can only be resolved through metaphysical speculation and mythology, which is far closer to the philosophies of Schelling and Hegel than it is to orthodox Christian theology.

<sup>62</sup>Brandon Gallaher, ‘Graced Creatureliness: Ontological Tension in the Uncreated/Created Distinction in the Sophiologies of Solov’ev, Bulgakov and Milbank’, *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 47/1–2 (2006), p. 179.

<sup>63</sup>Milbank, ‘Sophiology and Theurgy’, p. 82.