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## Good Cities or Cities of the Good?

### *Radical Augustinians, Societal Structures, and Normative Critique*

L A M B E R T   Z U I D E R V A A R T

CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS have a modernity complex. We had it long before disenchantment with the Enlightenment came to pervade many academic disciplines. And we shall have it long after Protestant intellectuals, ever trendy in a belated fashion, grow weary of polemics over postmodernism. To reflect on this complex will help us find bearings for the years ahead.

Toward that end, let me discuss two radical Augustinian critiques of modern society. First, I illustrate the modernity complex in Reformational thought. Next I summarize and evaluate the social critique of Reformational philosopher and legal theorist Herman Dooyeweerd. Then I turn to two texts by Radical Orthodox theologians John Milbank and Graham Ward. I conclude by indicating why Christian scholars cannot simply embrace or reject the project of modernity.

This essay incorporates parts of a talk given on the occasion of the 2000 Winifred E. Weter Faculty Award Lecture at Seattle Pacific University, April 13, 2000, in response to Janet Blumberg's lecture "*Scientia et Sapientia*: Enigmas of Science and Wisdom from Plato to Derrida." I wish to thank Al Wolters for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

## Modernity Complex

Radical Orthodoxy and Reformational thought share a concern about the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and its role in Western society.<sup>1</sup> Both schools contain a deep anti-Enlightenment strain, just as anti-intellectual undertones reverberate in North American evangelicalism. These tendencies help explain both an enthusiastic embrace of so-called postmodernism by some Christian scholars and an uninformed rejection by many others. Both sides of this post-modernism polemic play out an unresolved script from the past.

The Reformed tradition exhibits several signs of anti-Enlightenment fervor. *Unbelief and Revolution*, Groen van Prinsterer's most influential book, portrays the French Revolution as a societal disaster driven by Enlightenment apostasy.<sup>2</sup> Following Groen, Abraham Kuyper, in his famous 1898 Stone Lectures at Princeton University, depicts Enlightenment-inspired modernism as the enemy of Christianity to which only the Calvinist worldview can provide a fully viable alternative.<sup>3</sup> H. Evan Runner aims his vigorous warnings against "synthesis thinking" at uncritical borrowings from modern philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Hendrik Hart, not known as a conservative, spends most of his career criticizing an Enlightenment faith in reason.<sup>5</sup>

Calvin Seerveld, to his credit, always looks for the positive contributions of Enlightenment thought, while warning about its pitfalls. Nevertheless he regularly adopts a stance of antithesis, for example, when he points to "the

1. I use *Radical Orthodoxy* as a convenient term to indicate thinkers who have sufficiently similar projects and enough of a shared history to form what could be loosely called a school of thought. I do not wish to deny or slight the individual character of each project or the significant differences among the thinkers to whom the term applies.

2. Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, *Unbelief and Revolution: A Series of Lectures in History* (Amsterdam: Groen van Prinsterer Fund, 1975), a translation of *Ongeloof en revolutie: eene reeks van historische voorlezingen* (Leiden: Luchtmans, 1847).

3. See especially the first lecture, entitled "Calvinism a Life-System," in Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 9–40. For an extensive commentary on this book, see Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). I comment briefly on the ambivalence in Kuyper's stances toward democracy and religious pluralism in my essay "Art Is No Fringe: An Introduction," in *The Arts, Community and Cultural Democracy* (ed. Lambert Zuidervaar and Henrv Lurtikhuizen; London: Macmillan, 2000), 1–12.

4. See especially H. Evan Runner, *The Relation of the Bible to Learning* (Unionville Lectures for 1959 and 1960; Toronto: Wedge, 1974).

5. In this respect there is a deep continuity in Hendrik Hart's work between an early publication such as *The Challenge of Our Age* (Toronto: Wedge, 1968, 1974) and more recent essays such as "Conceptual Understanding and Knowing Other-wise: Reflections on Rationality and Spirituality in Philosophy," in *Knowing Other-wise: Philosophy at the Threshold of Spirituality* (ed. James H. Olthuis; New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 19–53. I comment on this essay in "Artistic Truth, Linguistically Turned: Variations on a Theme from Adorno, Habermas, and Hart," in *Philosophy as Responsibility: A Celebration of Hendrik Hart's Contribution to the Discipline* (ed. Ronald A. Kuipers and Janet Catherina Wesselius; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 129–49.

enormity of our Enlightenment evil” in order to call students to “take up [their] cross of scholarly cultural power.”<sup>6</sup> Notice, however, that he says “*our* Enlightenment evil.” Implicitly here, and more explicitly elsewhere, Seerveld acknowledges that the Enlightenment has some Christian sources and that it remains inescapably entwined with Christianity in the West.

Merold Westphal takes this even further, urging Christians to read post-Enlightenment atheists as insightful critics of idolatrous tendencies within Western Christianity: “The first task of Christian thinkers as they face the likes of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud is not to refute or discredit them. It is to acknowledge that their critique is *all too true all too much of the time* and to seek to discover just where the shoe fits, not ‘them’ but ourselves.”<sup>7</sup> Yet even Westphal’s advice falls short, it seems to me. To be sure, using the “masters of suspicion” for Lenten purposes is better than the narrow rejection practiced by too many conservative Christians and carried over into easy dismissals of postmodernism. It also improves on the open-armed acceptance voiced by more progressive Christians and continued in eager appropriations of postmodern thought. But the contemporary challenge of Christian scholarship is larger than this. We need in addition a nuanced sifting of what is intrinsically worthwhile and intrinsically problematic in supposedly secular ideas. We also need equally careful judgments about the better and worse roles these ideas play in society. Christian scholars must take seriously not only the antithesis between good and evil but also the abundance of God’s common grace. And we must do so with a view to both God’s intentions for creation and the promise of a new earth. To explore what this might mean, let us consider two radical Augustinian critiques of modern society.

## Roots of Western Culture: Herman Dooyeweerd

In a series of editorials written during the 1940s for the Dutch weekly *Nieuw Nederland*, Herman Dooyeweerd addresses the challenges of reconstructing European society after the Second World War. These articles were collected into a book translated into English under the title *Roots of Western Culture*.<sup>8</sup> The book’s subtitle indicates that Dooyeweerd sees three options for the direction that post-war reconstruction can take: pagan, secular, and Christian. Advocating the third direction, he aims to distinguish this from the “third way” advanced by the Dutch National Movement (*Nederlandse Volksbeweging*), which sought a more ecumenical

6. Calvin G. Seerveld, “The Cross of Scholarly Cultural Power,” in *In the Fields of the Lord: A Seerveld Reader* (ed. Craig Bartholomew; Carlisle: Piquant, 2000), 201, 197.

7. Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 16.

8. Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options* (trans. John Kraay; ed. Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra; newly edited by D. F. M. Strauss; Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2003). The Dutch version of this book appeared in 1959, and the first English translation appeared in 1979.

and confessionally less restricted approach. Two themes stand out in Dooyeweerd's critique of modern society and in his proposals for reconstruction, namely, his emphasis on the spiritual antithesis and his embrace of structural differentiation.

### *Spiritual Antithesis*

Dooyeweerd defines the antithesis as "the unrelenting battle between two spiritual principles that impacts the nation and indeed all of humankind."<sup>9</sup> His understanding of this spiritual struggle recalls Augustine's famous reflections on the world-historical conflict between the "earthly city" and the "city of God." Like Augustine, Dooyeweerd sees the antithesis as universal, comprehensive, and deeply spiritual. It is universal in the sense that no individual and no group stands outside this unrelenting battle. The most fundamental divide in society is not simply between, say, Christians and humanists or simply between, say, devout Calvinists and secular socialists. The divide "runs right through the Christian life itself."<sup>10</sup> The antithesis is also comprehensive: nothing in human life, society, and culture stands outside it, neither economics nor politics, neither art nor healthcare, neither schooling nor worship. And the reason why the antithesis is so universal and comprehensive is that it is deeply spiritual.

Dooyeweerd explains the deeply spiritual character of the antithesis in terms of "religious ground motives" that pervade an entire society and come into conflict with one another. He describes a ground motive as "a spiritual mainspring in human society." It is "an absolutely central driving force" that "governs temporal expressions [of human religion] and points towards the real or supposed origin of all existence. In the profoundest possible sense it determines a society's entire life- and worldview. It puts its indelible stamp on the culture, science and the social structure of a given period."<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, Dooyeweerd sees the challenge to reconstruct society after the devastations of World War II as fundamentally a struggle over which ground motives will hold sway among those that have helped shape Western civilization. At bottom, the battle lies between a spiritual orientation for which life, culture, and society are God's redeemed and redeemable creation or one for which God's creative and redemptive work are irrelevant or nonexistent. The rest of his book traces the historical origins and contemporary significance of this spiritual struggle.

### *Structural Differentiation*

Dooyeweerd's second central theme is that of structural differentiation. He introduces this theme using the term coined by Abraham Kuyper: sphere sovereignty. Kuyper understood "sphere sovereignty" to mean that there is a

9. Ibid., 4.

10. Ibid., 3.

11. Ibid., 8–9.

legitimate God-given diversity among distinct kinds of social institutions and cultural sectors and that each kind receives its own norms, authority, and tasks from God and not from any other sphere. This was especially important in Kuyper's crusade to create political space for independent schools and a free university established on Calvinist principles: they needed to be free from both state and church control. The task that Kuyper posed for Dooyeweerd's social philosophy was to articulate the legitimate authority and task of each sphere, the norms or principles governing it, and how it should relate to the other spheres.

In taking up this task, Dooyeweerd deepens Kuyper's understanding in two respects. First, Dooyeweerd argues that sphere sovereignty is not merely a societal principle but a creationwide principle. He secures this argument through an elaborate theory of modal aspects and an equally complex theory of societal structures. The result is a social theory that endorses the differentiation of institutions in the modern West but resists the secular spirit that helps drive this process. This positions Dooyeweerd's reconstructive project against both modern political totalitarianism and premodern ecclesiastical supremacy, but without aligning him with mainstream liberalism.

He also deepens Kuyper's understanding by arguing for "sphere universality" as a correlate to sphere sovereignty. Dooyeweerd recognizes that the distinctiveness of different modal aspects is not enough. "Inner connection" and "inseparable coherence" are also required.<sup>12</sup> When transferred to a theory of societal structures, this insight implies that the gradual differentiation of distinct institutions and sectors can go wrong if it is not accompanied by their integration into a larger societal cohesion. Although Dooyeweerd seems to think such cohesion can be fully attained only when society is no longer riven by spiritual conflict, that does not prevent him from applying the norm of integration in his evaluation of various societies past and present.<sup>13</sup>

### *Dilemma of Normative Critique*

Together an embrace of structural differentiation and an emphasis on spiritual antithesis sustain Dooyeweerd's critique of modern Western society. On the one hand, he claims that modern structural differentiations among, say, church, state, economy, and civil society are historical achievements worth preserving and advancing. On the other hand, he decries the secular spirit that

12. *Ibid.*, 44.

13. Nevertheless, I consider Dooyeweerd's account of societal integration to be relatively weak, and I regard it as insufficiently critical of the ways in which modern economic and technological forces of integration destroy habitats and human life. This is tied to his reliance on an unconvincing theory of *enkapsis* to compensate for inattention to the problems of societal integration in his account of modern societal differentiation. See especially Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (4 vols.; Collected Works A/1–4; Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1997 [orig. 1953–55]), 3.588–624, 653–70.

seems to permeate and propel this process, urging instead that it be imbued with a holy spirit. Nor does he make this urging a mere appeal. Rather he tries to discover in detail what the God-given norms of fidelity, justice, stewardship, and solidarity require in the institutions and cultural fabric of contemporary society. His critique of modern society is a normative critique, one that takes seriously the historical achievements of modern Western society.

All of this makes for a comprehensive and attractive social vision. Yet a certain awkwardness afflicts the way in which Dooyeweerd combines his two themes. The apparent dominance of a secular spirit since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment raises the question whether modern Western differentiation might be more deeply misdirected than Dooyeweerd recognizes. At the same time, the apparent legitimacy of modern Western differentiation raises the question whether spiritual redirection is as crucial to societal well-being as he insists. I do not think that Dooyeweerd successfully resolves this dilemma. Not surprisingly, the social critiques launched by his successors go down two different paths. Those who are distressed at the spiritual malaise of the West tend to become reactionaries who see little of worth in contemporary society. Others who are enthusiastic about modern differentiation end up whitewashing the evil that besets Western societies and that these societies inflict on others. And neither side has grasped any better than Dooyeweerd did the spiritual and societal damage done by an ever-globalizing capitalist economy.<sup>14</sup>

Here Radical Orthodoxy can offer important corrections to the Reformed tradition, for Radical Orthodoxy has deep suspicions of modern differentiation, even as it struggles to be fully contemporary in the way it articulates that suspicion. Let me briefly explore this in two texts that, like Dooyeweerd's book, take Augustine's social vision as their source of inspiration: Graham Ward's *Cities of God* and John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*. Because I assume greater familiarity with these texts on the part of my readers, my discussion will be more provocative and less summative than was my treatment of Dooyeweerd.

### **Cities of God: Radical Orthodoxy**

Whereas Dooyeweerd describes the spiritual crisis of postwar Europe as a struggle between competing religious ground motives, Milbank and Ward see it as a growing nihilism that only an analogical worldview can resist. Their diagnosis emphasizes spiritual fragmentation rather than an antithesis between

14. For the main lines of my own alternative, which addresses societal evil and the suffering that it causes, see "Earth's Lament: Suffering, Hope, and Wisdom," inaugural address given on November 21, 2003. Online: <http://www.icscanada.edu/events/convocation/>. I plan to expand it into a longer essay at a later date.

two culturally embedded and societally effective spiritual principles. This emphasis informs their own appropriation of Augustine's tale of two cities.

### *Spiritual Nihilism: Graham Ward*

The last chapter in Graham Ward's *Cities of God* is especially instructive in this regard. Entitled "Cities of the Good," this chapter rereads Augustine's *De civitate Dei* with a view to "the redemption of cyberspace." On Ward's reading of Augustine, what unites the earthly and heavenly cities—love—is also what divides them—self-love versus love of God. Until the final separation of the tares from the wheat, the two loves are inextricably bound together (*permixtum*).<sup>15</sup> Hence Ward cautions against our trying to separate God's city from the secular city. He says that none of us knows the extent to which the two cities are independent and that "none of us can know the extent to which any activity we are engaged in is a work in God" (CG 226).

Yet the city of God is "to be historically realised." Here my first question arises. Given our partial ignorance, one wonders how, *historically*, this realizing of God's city is to happen, by way of which *historical* agencies, and on the basis of which *historical* conditions. Ward answers that the requisite institutional structures and societal arrangements must emerge from "the good practices" that "responses to God's grace" call "into existence." So, to the extent that such practices already occur and have already occurred, the city of God is always already being historically realized. I take it that Ward has this "always alreadiness" in mind when he says the city of God "is immanent to the forms of all cities" and "makes possible the cities of the everyday . . . and their redemption" (CG 226).

This suggests something important about the social positioning of Ward's own theory. Apparently his theory can depict a relationship *between* the two cities to the extent that the theory inhabits *both*—and does so as a good practice in response to God's grace. Part of the goodness to such a theoretical practice is *not* to presume too much about the relationship between the two cities, other than the fundamentally Platonizing assumption that whatever goodness "cities of the everyday" display owes itself to participation in the redemptive and (always already) historically realized pattern of the city of God. So modesty and confidence embrace: epistemic modesty in making specific judgments concerning the goodness of existing institutions and structures, and ontological confidence in asserting analogy as the key to redemptive history.

More emphatically, Ward's Augustine asserts that a lust for domination characterizes the earthly city and is a "perverse imitation" of loving service in the heavenly city (CG 227). Ward's Augustine associates lust for domination with "perverse individualism" as "the source of social atomism." Likewise, he

15. Not being sufficiently expert in the study of Augustine, I leave the accuracy and fruitfulness of Ward's interpretation for others to sort out.

associates loving service with sociable communitarianism as “concern for ‘the common good for the sake of the heavenly society’” (CG 228). Yet this Augustine also resists either translating “God’s kingdom into sociological, historical and political practices” or identifying “the Church with the Heavenly city.” The reason for the second resistance is that the church’s members are themselves “subject to the same desires and temptations as those [who are] espoused to the *civitas terrena*” (CG 229).

In a sense, I have to say that this is all well and good. Reformational thinkers, too, claim that the antithesis between good and evil cuts through all human endeavors and through every human heart. But why should acknowledging the pervasiveness of evil lead to withholding judgment about current institutions and societal structures? Why would it not be instead an urgent reason to pass such judgments? And might not the hesitation to pass judgment be itself a form of sociological, historical, and indeed political judgment, one in which current institutions and societal structures as such do not count, but only the love with which people enter them and thereby participate in the city of God?

Augustine’s/Ward’s confident modesty arises from a weaving together of “the logic of analogy” with “the logic of parody and the doctrine of the fall” (CG 230). As I understand Ward’s exposition here, the fundamental norms for human life and society “were part of the order of creation.” After the fall, however, these norms became “virtual” (rather than “real”?). In the post-lapsarian condition, these virtual norms make possible their own parodies, the perverse imitations of justice and love and sociability that show up in the *civitas terrena*. The norms make their own parodies possible only by virtue of their eschatological “meaning.” And this meaning will never break fully into current society until the eschaton, although it is an open question whether, on Ward’s ontology, the eschatological city of God will or would or could ever be a current society.

Ward’s precise language is instructive: “For when love, justice, society and peace are predicates of the *civitas terrena* then they are parodies of predicates of the *civitas dei*; they find their true significance in relation to Christian eschatology. . . . The use of these terms parodically in the *civitas terrena* is made possible by the reality of what these terms mean eschatologically” (CG 230). Notice the phrase *the reality of what these terms mean*. Insofar as what the terms mean is eschatological, their meaning is not ever-sustaining creational reality or current historical reality. This implies that, prior to the eschaton, a just society cannot be truly just and that a good city cannot be truly good.

Again there is a sense in which I agree. But I do not agree that a preeschatologically just society must be perversely imitative of justice or that an ordinarily good city must be perversely imitative of goodness. I do not agree, even though I appreciate the eschatological emphasis as a corrective to, say, Reformational fixations on creational ordinances or Thomist fixations on natural law. I do not agree because I think it is a fundamental mistake in ontology to equate norms with ideals. Norms are dynamic and historically unfolding guidelines that re-

quire human responses in order to have effect. They are, in Bob Goudzwaard's words, "pointers that guide us along . . . passable roads. Apart from norms our paths run amok."<sup>16</sup> Ideals, by contrast, are static models—whether in Plato's intelligible world or in Augustine's mind of God—whose supposed effects necessarily trump all human efforts to approximate them either in theory or in practice.

An ontology such as Augustine's/Ward's threatens to render pointless conversations about "good cities"—real, current, inhabited cities that are relatively better and relatively worse in various specifiable respects. This ontology pushes Radical Orthodoxy toward talking about all cities (and no cities) as "cities of the good." All cities, in that sense, are either virtual cities or parodies of a virtual city, namely, parodies of *the* city of God. As a result, we can talk about good cities only with reference to that virtual reality, not with reference to other currently inhabited cities (see *CG* 232–33). Comparative judgments among cities, such as one makes when deciding where to live or such as citizens make when deciding how to improve their cities, are, if not precluded, then rendered pointless. For according to Augustine/Ward, only in pointing to "the theological difference" or to "trinitarian participation" can civic judgments of any sort find the transcendent anchor they need: "Only theology can . . . give to secularism a legitimacy that saves it from nihilistic self-consumption, from the atomism of *amor sui*, from the drift into the disorders of the *nihil*. Protestantism at the Reformation lost sight of this, and we now need to retrieve it" (*CG* 236). As we shall see, structural sacralization is the Radical Orthodox response to what is perceived as spiritual nihilism.

### ***Structural Sacralization: John Milbank***

An emphasis on structural sacralization pervades "The Other City," the last chapter of John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*. The chapter begins with a provocative act of renaming and rebaptizing. Milbank renames theology as "a social science" and rebaptizes it "the queen of the sciences." But it is not altogether clear which witnesses are supposed to attend this ceremony of rechristening, to coin a phrase. Are only those inhabitants of the "other city" invited who are "on pilgrimage through this temporary world" (*TST* 380) and for whom theology will be scientific queen? Or do the congregants include everyone in the academy as such, for whom theology shall be the supreme social science? Similar questions can be posed with reference to the book's subtitle: what would it mean to be "beyond secular reason," and for whom would such beyondness have significance? Or, to make my questions more pointed: Is theology to be a social science in a way that is recognizable as social science to

16. Bob Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 243. I have more to say about norms as "societal principles" in "Earth's Lament," where I describe societal principles as "historically constituted and future-oriented callings in which the voice of God can be heard and traces of a new earth can appear."

contemporary social scientists, who are wary not only of theology but also of philosophy and of any other pretenders to the academic throne?<sup>17</sup>

I have dwelled on the opening paragraph at some length because it crystallizes both the insights in Milbank's project and the issues it raises for Reformational thought. Whereas the Reformed tradition has affirmed modern structural differentiation, also in the academy, while worrying about directional secularization, Radical Orthodoxy tends to resist modern directional pluralism—the proliferation of religions and antireligions—while promoting structural sacralization. Two key issues lie between them: first, the role and legitimation of modern structural differentiation, an issue that Reformational thinkers will tend to pose for Radical Orthodoxy; and, second, the structural consequences of directional secularization, an issue that Radical Orthodoxy will tend to pose for Reformational thinkers. Both traditions are radical in their critique of what Dooyeweerd called “the pretended autonomy of theoretical thought” and, more generally, the pretended autonomy of modern persons, cultural practices, and social institutions. But only one tradition wants to be orthodox in the sense of reverting to premodern understandings of the church, society, and culture. Dooyeweerd and company have instead pushed for an “inner reformation” of modern sciences, practices, and institutions, rather than either rigid rejection or automatic accommodation.

Not surprisingly, then, Milbank's account of theology as a social science troubles my Reformational sense of propriety. While recognizing valid objections to the Eurocentric optimism in Dooyeweerd's embrace of differentiation, I remain an unreconstructed or undeconstructed modernist in this regard. Despite undeniable pathology in the development of modern Western societies, I regard the differentiation of distinct academic disciplines, cultural regions, and societal spheres as relatively good for human beings, including those on pilgrimage to and in the *altera civitas*. The same holds for modernity's concomitant relativizing of theology, religious worldviews, and ecclesiastical institutions. Milbank, I take it, would beg to differ.

In this connection he rightly resists the tendency among contemporary theologians and other Christian scholars to borrow their global theories of society and history “from elsewhere.” He urges instead that “theology itself” provide the global theory needed and that it do so “on the basis of its own particular, and historically specific faith.” This global theory must explicate “a distinguishable Christian mode of action.” Milbank ties this directly to “the Church” as a “distinct society” that “defines itself, in its practice, as in continuity

17. Obviously, this last question would offend theologians who think that, as a whole, the development of modern social sciences is on the road to perdition. But such theologians would not, or should not, rechristen theology as a (regal) social science. I am not sure whether Milbank wants to eat his secular social-scientific cake (perhaps after the rechristening ceremony?) and have it postsecularly too.

and discontinuity" with "other human societies." So theology is a (regal) social theory (and social science)<sup>18</sup> primarily as "an *ecclesiology*" (TST 380–81).

Reformational scholars will find that Milbank's insightful critique of socio-theoretical synthesis elides many crucial distinctions. First, he equates the entire project of Christian scholarship with theology. This makes theology more than the purported queen of the social sciences. In effect, theology becomes the *only* science in which faith-oriented scholarship can take place. I agree with Milbank that Christian scholars should provide a countertheory of society and history or, more modestly, should work together in that direction. But I worry that on his approach any efforts along such lines by philosophers, political scientists, or cultural theorists would immediately need to be rechristened as theology in order to fit the project of Christian scholarship.

Second, Milbank carries out a double elision at the level of social theory. First, he equates certain social institutions (churches) and a societal relationship (the worship community) with "a society." Second, he fails to distinguish between the body of Christ (ecclesia) and the reign of God (God's kingdom, in an older vocabulary). Only this double elision makes it possible to consider the church a "distinct society" and to describe Christian social theory as "first and foremost an *ecclesiology*." For Milbank, the church is not one social institution among many, nor is it one type of societal relationship among many. As a society his church, in principle, encompasses all the distinct social institutions and societal relationships that would make up a full-fledged society. Moreover, he tends to equate this ecclesia with the *civitas Dei* or, in my own terminology, with the reign of God. He thinks that God's reign occurs either only in or only through the church. That is why he can bemoan the church's failure "to bring about salvation" (TST 381) and can give inordinate world-historical weight to this purported failure: "Either the Church enacts the vision of paradisaal community . . . , or else it promotes a hellish society beyond any terrors known to antiquity. . . . For the Christian interruption of history 'decoded' antique virtue, yet thereby helped to unleash first liberalism and then nihilism" (TST 433). But was "the Christian interruption" really all that powerful? Did not other factors play an equal role, including economic, technological, and political forces that were not simply intellectual or ethical? And to what extent does the triune God really need the church in order to globally fulfill the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples ("your kingdom come, your will be done")?

18. Milbank slides between "social theory" and "social science" without seeming to note the difference. In my own usage, a social theory is a theory of society as this theory operates within one or more of the social sciences. The social sciences have theoretical components, and often these theoretical components intersect a social theory. But contemporary social sciences also have empirical components so vast that these resemble the submerged part of an iceberg. Given its almost exclusively theoretical orientation, Radical Orthodoxy (like some of Reformational philosophy before it) threatens to crash against that part of social science that the theological queen does not deign to investigate.

### *Dilemma of Critical Normativity*

Despite significant differences between Ward's and Milbank's appropriations of Augustine, with Ward being less inclined to crown theology as the supreme social science or to regard the church as the city of God, they share a stance toward normativity that characterizes Radical Orthodoxy as a whole.<sup>19</sup> This shared stance has two characteristics. First, it locates the source of societal goodness in an ideal pattern that lies outside human history. Second, it restricts the effectiveness of this pattern within human history to certain practices developed within an ecclesial community. There the central practice mediating God's ideal pattern to contemporary life and society is not the preaching of the word, as many Protestants have thought, but the celebration of the Eucharist. Both Ward and Milbank propose a sacramental approach to social critique that seems oddly out of step with contemporary realities.

Being out of step is not necessarily a bad thing. Jesus too, like the Hebrew prophets before him, was no social chameleon, although they did not stand on liturgical ceremony. The problem with a Radical Orthodox approach arises because it wishes to provide a critique of contemporary society but has few theoretical resources with which to make nuanced judgments about better and worse tendencies. Emphasizing that all cities should be cities of the good has little to say about what makes specific cities relatively good. This points up a dilemma of critical normativity. On the one hand, all social institutions and societal structures are held up to the divine pattern of "self-forgetting conviviality" (*TST* 391) or sociable love (*CG* 228) and are found wanting. On the other hand, the historically embedded and enacted ecclesial community that purportedly mediates this pattern to society as a whole has itself forgotten or ignored or rejected the pattern it was supposed to instantiate. So we are left, for the most part, with abstract norms that have little historical effect and with historical developments that have little normative promise: either a city of the good but no good cities, or potentially good cities that are never good enough.

### **The Challenge of Modernity**

Radical Orthodoxy's dilemma of critical normativity forms an obverse to the dilemma of normative critique that faces Reformational thought. Whereas

19. At the 2003 Calvin College conference where I first presented this essay, Graham Ward suggested that his approach in *Cities of God* is genealogical (à la Foucault) rather than normative (à la Habermas). I do not think this affects the point I wish to make. Here I use the terms *normative* and *normativity* to indicate a concern to ask what makes for (relative) goodness in human life, culture, and society. This concern is shared by Dooyeweerd, Ward, and Milbank and it derives in part from Augustine. All three are radical Augustinians to whom God's creating everything good remains crucial for understanding and evaluating the contemporary world.

Radical Orthodoxy makes the norms of fidelity, justice, stewardship, and solidarity historically unattainable, Reformational thought makes them too easily and nonhistorically attained. In the terms of Kuyperian theology, Radical Orthodoxy makes all grace special, and Reformational thought makes too much of it common. Our mutual difficulty is to address at a deeper level the historical dynamics of societal evil. That, it seems to me, is the greatest challenge of modernity.

A good place to begin a response would be to ask hard questions about systemic deformation. As I indicate elsewhere, "systemic deformation" refers to "a large-scale historical structure and process that permeates a society, equally affects conflicting groups within that society, and fundamentally violates human life before the face of God."<sup>20</sup> Let us suppose, as Nicholas Wolterstorff claimed twenty years ago, that the "widening gap" between rich and poor nations "is not an anomaly but a continuing basic mechanism of the operation of the world-economy."<sup>21</sup> If the effects of that mechanism persistently violate human aspirations as well as fundamental norms, then we confront a systemic deformation of global proportions. If at the same time Western ideals of freedom and democracy have turned into a way to help maintain this economic mechanism, then these ideals have become highly problematic. An appeal to them might invoke the legacy of liberation to reinforce oppression, or it might posit the fact of democracy to subvert the same. Have Western ideals become a form of false consciousness? Have they become a way to justify our own positions in a deformed system and a way to ignore what cries out for systemic transformation?

If this is how matters stand, then either endorsing modern structural differentiation or appealing to a divine pattern beyond history might hide the deepest problems in contemporary society. Hidden would be the real injustice and lack of solidarity in relationships between so-called developed and developing nations. Nor would tracing a spiritual antithesis or exposing spiritual nihilism in the West suffice as a diagnosis of this global condition. The condition exceeds the categorical confines of a radical Augustinian critique, even though saying this implies the sort of self-criticism that Augustine made central to Western Christianity.

That brings us back to the modernity complex with which this essay began. Like many other scholars today, Reformational and Radical Orthodox thinkers can see the dark side of Greek philosophy: how its notions of *logos* and order ratify a social hierarchy built on slavery and the oppression of women, for example; or how a Greek emphasis on democratic dialogue allows only some

20. Lambert Zuidervart, "Response to Johan van der Hoeven's 'Development in the Light of Encounter,'" in *Norm and Context in the Social Sciences* (ed. Sander Griffioen and Jan Verhoogt; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 40.

21. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983),

partners into the conversation. Similarly, we need to recognize that medieval wonder at God's mysteries occurred in a world where illiteracy, poverty, disease, and human servitude ran rampant and where neither Jews nor Muslims were considered to be God's children.

Against this backdrop, modernity contributes some genuine progress. The growth of modern science and technology, the demise of church control over culture, the fitful rise of political democracy and constitutional law, and even, in a qualified sense, the opening of new markets, international trade, and large-scale manufacturing—all provide welcome relief. Moreover, for all its shortcomings—and despite the religious wars that followed—the Protestant Reformation helped usher in this unprecedented transformation of society and culture as a whole. Those of us who belong to Protestant traditions can take some credit and some blame for modernity.

But, the antithetical Kuyperians and Radically Orthodox among us might ask, what about Bacon's empiricism and Descartes's rationalism? What about their dismissal of textual traditions and communal wisdom? What about their quest for absolute certainty that is methodically secured and anchored in the decontextualized human mind? What about their limiting legitimate knowledge to the natural sciences and to whatever science can support? What about Descartes's reduction of human nature to "a thing that thinks"? What about Bacon's equating knowledge with power? Surely, they say, these moves are excessive, unwarranted, even destructive. Surely, the sooner we leave foundationalism and epistemic subjectivism and scientism on the scrap heap of modern history, the better off we will be, as scholars, as participants in traditions of religion and spirituality, as citizens of the world.

Well, I want to reply, in good dialectical fashion, yes and no. So much depends—as methodological pluralists and theoretical poststructuralists and academic contextualists would have to agree. So much depends on how modern thought corrects or fails to correct medieval and classical thought. So much depends on how modern thought interacts with other trends in society and culture. So much depends on the insights and blind spots that arise because of modern thought or in opposition to modern thought.

Consider, for example, the efforts of Bacon and Descartes to construct a subject position stripped of all prior ties to textual tradition, communal wisdom, and ecclesiastical or political authority—to achieve the famous "view from nowhere." I join Heidegger or Derrida in finding these efforts misguided and internally problematic. Yet I want to make a few claims on their behalf. Historically, neither Heidegger's "being-in-the-world" nor the poststructuralist notion of subject positions would be possible without the modern construction of an epistemic subject. Culturally, modern subjectivism puts a heavier emphasis on human responsibility than one finds in medieval or classical culture, and it gives an impetus to cultural self-criticism of the sort that postmodern thinkers can only continue. And spiritually, although modern subjectivism seems to move us away from trust and reverence toward that which sustains and renews

all creation, nevertheless it also powerfully awakens us to the creative potential that God has given to even the most ordinary of human beings. In all these ways we who inhabit a postmodern culture are deeply indebted to modern thought, even as we seek ways to escape its destructive dilemmas.

So the challenge that modernity sets before us is to be postmodern without becoming antimodern and to recover medieval humility and ancient wonder without embracing the narrow parochialism and rigid stratification of a pre-modern world. Those of us who find our deepest wisdom in God's creative will, in Scripture, and in the Word made flesh must bring to this challenge the best resources of our own traditions. We shall need to bring the story of a good creation, a God who loves justice and mercy, and the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. And we shall need to observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, while turning aside, in good Lenten fashion, from the ways in which our own traditions have participated—and continue to participate—in destroying God's world.