THEOLOGICAL Studies

A Catholic Boost for Democracy: Politicizing Performed Solidarities

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Abstract
This article examines the contribution of Catholic political theology to contemporary discussions about a lack of solidarity in liberal constitutional democracies particularly in Europe. John Milbank's interpretation of this lack as indicating that secular liberalism has seen its day and should be replaced by a Catholic political order is presented as a viable alternative to attempts at strengthening the secular constitutional state at the pre-political level, as well as to Habermas's deliberative democratic solution. Yet, reading Milbank against himself, the author argues that a Catholic political theology, precisely because it should follow Milbank's suggestions, cannot seek to replace the present sociopolitical order. Instead, Catholic political theologians should discern where the truth breaks through in this order, where people can act in surprising solidarity with each other even if this conflicts with their political views.

Keywords
common good, constitutionalism, democracy, Jürgen Habermas, justice, John Milbank, politics and religion, Radical Orthodoxy, Joseph Ratzinger, secular liberalism, solidarity, Charles Taylor

Liberal democracy might be in peril at this moment of European and US-American history. The rise of populist movements that attract a great many, if not a majority of people, might be viewed as the symptom of the shortcomings of a system that counts ever more one-sidedly on majority votes. The widespread disinterest in the common good, surpassing narrow individual self-interest, raises the question of whether

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people are still ready to embrace the benefits and duties of democratic life in any richer sense. In this current political climate, scholars from a variety of perspectives address the question of how to repoliticize people who have become disillusioned with democracy as it is ordered in the West. Against this background, I engage John Milbank's provocative claim that secular constitutionalism is intrinsically hostile to a vibrant democracy, and needs to be replaced by a Catholic sociopolitical order. Despite Milbank's disapproval of Jürgen Habermas's model of deliberative democracy because of the latter's appreciation of the secularist separation of religion and politics, I highlight Milbank's and Habermas's common aim of democratizing the constitutional state. Both reject a (disguised) hegemonic strengthening of the Christian roots of the constitutional state, proposed by some in order to prevent its collapse under the weight of growing cultural and religious pluralism, and favor instead a more radical participation of an increasingly diverse people in political and legal negotiations.[1] They part ways, however, with regard to the question of how to motivate concern for the common good. Where Habermas favors educating people in a discursive rationality oriented at long-term interests, Milbank advocates the reorientation of democracy toward a Catholic *telos*.

In this essay, I will first show why Catholics should not be content with viewing religions as the pre-political fundament to strengthen liberal constitutionalism, and propose a more extensive discussion about the role of Catholic political theology in current efforts to reanimate Europe's democratic culture. Both Habermas and Milbank reject the view put forth by some Catholic thinkers that constitutional principles be exempted from democratic processes in order to protect minorities from being unjustly ruled by a majority. I argue that the underlying issue is how democratic debates about constitutional principles can be seen as intrinsically oriented toward justice and the common good. For Habermas, the supposedly universally acceptable aim of autonomous self-determination, on an individual and a cultural level, is meant to orient people toward justice and the common good in the continuous democratic negotiation of the constitutional state. Milbank, to the contrary, argues that a democracy must be oriented toward a more substantial common *telos*. While agreeing with certain aspects of Milbank's proposal, I shall argue that a Catholic political theology that is oriented toward Christ as its *telos* might not be able, nor should it promise, to guarantee a society's orientation toward the common good and that it must be open to the emergence of forms of solidarity that arise from outside its own political horizons.

The Lack of Solidarity in Liberal Constitutional Democracies

While the constitutional state has long been appreciated as an adequate political framework for liberal democracies, the limits of constitutional democracies have become more apparent in recent years. The idea of a constitution was originally closely linked

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1. For example, Milbank criticizes that the current system encourages people to abandon all political impact they could have at the single moment of election to an arbitrarily constituted elite; John Milbank, "Oikonomia Leaves Home: Theology, Politics and Governance in the History of the West," *Telos* 178 (2017): 77–99, https://doi.org/10.3817/0317178077. See also John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), 192–93.

to the aim of an egalitarian rule of justice and the common good among all people, in contrast to monarchic or aristocratic governments. Constitutionalism is meant to accommodate a people's self-government, by granting each citizen individual liberty and equal participation in political affairs. Yet, it has become questionable whether constitutional democracies are still sufficiently being supported by the people, or whether instead the constitution is increasingly seen to function as an alien force. The constitutional state is now in the difficult situation of not being able to enforce its liberal democratic principles, as this would be self-contradictory; in order to be legitimate, a constitution requires that people appreciate the rights and freedoms it provides and accept the responsibilities these confer. According to some, this can be assured only at the pre-political level. Here, religions are called upon to educate the people in such a way that they not only embrace and support the benefits granted by the liberal constitutional state but also cherish the solidarity needed for any political engagement beyond sheer matters of self-interest.[2] In short, religions are entrusted with the task to form a culture suited for constitutional democracies.

This argument is compatible with Catholic theologies that assume a fundamental split between democratic processes, and constitutional principles, such that the latter guards essential humanitarian values and principles that should never become the topic of democratic debate. As metaphysical realities, constitutional values and principles are believed to abide beyond positive law.[3] This reasoning easily turns into a self-promotion of Christianity, and perhaps of other Abrahamic traditions, as resting at the heart of constitutional democracies, especially if it is postulated that such a faith in the eternal validity of constitutional rights can be best upheld if humans understand themselves as gifts of a Creator rather than as self-constructed beings.[4]

The exemption of constitutional principles from the democratic rule of the people has not only invited critique from certain liberal theorists of democracy, such as Habermas, but also from some Catholic thinkers. Instead of following Joseph Ratzinger's suggestion to uphold some metaphysical (and therefore presumably undebatable) set of values in order to to prevent democratic processes from becoming unjust and exploitative, Milbank and Adrian Pabst criticize the German *Rechtstaat* for fundamentally eroding democratic expression, even if its legal rigorism is meant to avoid democratic anarchy and oligarchic oppression.[5] They put the critical question thus: "If sovereignty lies originally with the people, then how can it be so alienated that they only express this through an unquestioned sovereign centre and an unquestioned legal formalism that is self-sustaining and totally outside popular control?"[6]

2. Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 2006), 24–25, 69–70.
3. See Joseph Ratzinger, "Was die Welt zusammenhält: Vorpolitische Grundlagen eines freiheitlichen Staates," in Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2005), 42–43, 51. For the English version, see *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006).
4. Ratzinger, "Was die Welt zusammenhält," 40; Joseph Ratzinger, *Werte in Zeiten des Umbruchs: Die Herausforderungen der Zukunft bestehen* (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 62–63, 84.
5. John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 185.
6. Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 183.

Similarly, Habermas criticizes conceptualizations of the liberal constitutional state as a positive entity whose foundational validity would have to be cognitively secured through religion or any other consolidating narrative.[7] Habermas argues that democratic citizens should not subject themselves to laws merely because they fear its sanctions (by the community or by God), but rather because they can accept the law as fundamentally just because it has been democratically instituted.[8] Constitutional rights should not be upheld as an essential feature of the human species, independent of communicative processes, to be fideistically held for there to be solidarity and justice.[9] Instead, the particular interwovenness of democracy and constitutional rights should be admitted to the point that the latter exist only to the extent that people accord these rights to each other as citizens in a shared democracy.[10] It seems that both Habermas and Milbank conceive of an intrinsic link between an essentialist understanding of the constitution and the current erosion of democratic solidarity. The very essentialization of the constitution by some thinkers might contribute to the growing disinterest in democratic processes, as it attributes higher value to metaphysical claims lying beyond human deliberation than to democratically instituted laws.

Yet, their shared rejection of an essentialist conception of the constitution leads Habermas and Milbank to propose very different visions of democracy for the contemporary context. In short, Habermas reinforces the split between religion and politics, and positions the democratic procedure that legitimizes constitutional principles in the realm of politics, not of religion. Milbank, to the contrary, sees the split between politics and religion as a residue of the Reformation, responsible for the "continued discrete hegemony of the Christian outlook,"[11] by which he means a "Protestant" outlook. Looking beyond the politics-religion split, religion for Milbank is always the more encompassing realm, orienting the entire democracy, including the constitution, toward a common *telos*. Instead of concealing this fact, as in secular conceptions of politics, one should openly admit it.

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7. Jürgen Habermas, "Vorpolitische Grundlagen des demokratischen Rechtsstaates?," in Habermas und Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung*, 18, 20–21.

8. Jürgen Habermas, *Zur Verfassung Europas: Ein Essay* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 49–50; Jürgen Habermas, "Inklusion—Einbeziehen oder Einschließen? Zum Verhältnis von Nation—Rechtsstaat und Demokratie," in *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen. Studien zur politischen Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), 154–84 at 164; Jürgen Habermas, "Kampf um Anerkennung im demokratischen Rechtsstaat," *in Die Einbeziehung des Anderen: Studien zur politischen Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), 237–76 at 237.

9. Habermas, *Zur Verfassung Europas*, 21.

10. Habermas, *Zur Verfassung Europas*, 26–28. This is also why Habermas condemns any war in the name of human rights as abusive (34–35).

11. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 116. Elsewhere, Milbank writes, "Although Habermas talks in the voice of dry reason, he actually puts forward the outrageously provincial view that the basis for global human association forthwith must be universal acceptance of the Kantian critique of metaphysics!" John Milbank, "What Lacks is Feeling: Hume versus Kant and Habermas," in *Faithful Reading: New Essays in Theology and Philosophy in Honour of Fergus Kerr, OP,* ed. Simon Oliver, Karen Kilby, and Tom O'Loughlin (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 1–28 at 20. Others have called Habermas's understanding of secularity

Creating Solidarity through Liberal Democratic Deliberation

If many Western constitutional democracies currently witness a cultural lack of solidarity, Habermas does not view this as symptomatic of liberal constitutionalism as such, somehow to be cured by religion as secular liberalism's pre-political complementary other.[12] Against such proposals to religiously revivify democratic cultures, he upholds that people in pluralist democracies should not be unified by anything other than their common desire to live under a democratic rule.[13] While the secular constitutional state is meant to accommodate religious diversity by systemically granting religious communities the right of self-determination, the state, not religious communities, must unify the people.[14] The constitution is thus not seen as an extrinsic safeguard of certain religiously held essential values and principles, but as a safeguard of *political* essentials for the continuous functioning of democracy.[15] The constitution provides citizens with liberties that are intrinsically communal, thus stimulating their active democratic participation.[16] By means of the constitution people grant each other communicative

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supersessionist with regard to supposedly pre-secular stages. See Ulrike Spohn, "A Difference in Kind? Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor on Post-Secularism," *The European Legacy* 20 (2015): 120–35 at 121, 128, https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2015.1006927. See also: Thomas McCarthy, "The Burdens of Modernized Faith and Postmetaphysical Reason in Habermas's 'Unfinished Project of Enlightenment'," in *Habermas and Religion*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 115–31 at 127–28; Nicholas Wolterstorff, "An Engagement with Jürgen Habermas on Postmetaphysical Philosophy, Religion, and Political Dialogue," in *Habermas and Religion*, 92–111 at 102–3; Dustin J. Byrd, *Islam in a Post-Secular Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 67–68; and Ola Sigurdson, "Beyond Secularism? Towards a Post-Secular Political Theology," *Modern Theology* 26 (2010): 190–91, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468–0025.2009.01593.x Associating the historical emergence of an independent secular sphere with developments in Christian theology, Milbank evaluates the fragility of "the secular post-Enlightenment settlement" as primarily an internal problem within Christianity. See John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: Critique on Modern Ontology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), 116.

12. Habermas, "Vorpolitische Grundlagen," 26–28.
13. Habermas rejects the notion of a unifying Leitkultur and prefers, instead, a unifying political culture. Jürgen Habermas, "Für eine demokratische Polarisierung," *Blätter für deutsche und international Politik* 11 (2016): 35–42, https://www.blaetter.de/archiv/jahrgaenge/2016/november/fuer-eine-demokratische-polarisierung.
14. Jürgen Habermas, "'Vernünftig' versus 'wahr'—oder die Moral der Weltbilder," in *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen*, 95–127 at 125.
15. Acknowledging the problem of a loss of a shared cultural background or religious outlook as a unifying tie in a common democracy at present, Habermas introduces the idea of a constitutional patriotism as contemporary equivalent. See Habermas, "Vorpolitische Grundlagen," 24–25. By this he means the appropriation of constitutional principles not only as abstract contents, but also in relation to the concrete context of a particular constitutional state's history. See also Habermas, *Zur Verfassung Europas*, 68–69.
16. Habermas, *Zur Verfassung Europas*, 72–73; Jürgen Habermas, *Ach, Europa* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008), 46–53, 144–47.

liberties and political rights, such as the freedom of opinion, with the right of education as its necessary correlate, and the right of political participation, thus actively mobilizing all to participate in public debates about topics that concern all.[17] Simply by using their communicative and participatory rights in deliberative democratic processes, citizens are no longer oriented only toward narrow egoistic self-interest, but also toward the common good, inasmuch as they participate in the maintenance and the shaping of the constitutional state.[18] Thus the "problem" of Europe's growing multiculturalism and a certain hesitancy to appreciate liberal values and the separation of church and state on the part of some religious or populist groups might be solved, according to Habermas, not through an education of these people in supposedly European values, but through integrating them in the deliberative democratic process.[19]

Milbank lauds Habermas's intellectual integrity when the latter admits that religious resources might be important for the formation of democratic solidarity,[20] but disagrees with Habermas's contention that such resources need to be translated into secular language when entering the realm of public democratic deliberation.[21] At this point, Milbank sides with Ratzinger in the debate concerning the relation between faith and reason, opposing Habermas's respect for metaphysical truths as legitimately abiding outside the realm of reason.[22] A formal problem with this supposed Kantian epistemic humility is that it claims for itself an all-encompassing, superior knowledge, to be accepted by all others.[23] The egalitarian relativization of all religious convictions as belonging to the

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17. Habermas, "Vorpolitische Grundlagen," 23–24.

18. Habermas, "Vorpolitische Grundlagen," 22–23.

19. Habermas, *Ach, Europa*, 90–91. See also Habermas, "Inklusion—Einbeziehen oder Einschließen?," 161–63, 167–68. The constitutional liberal state should guarantee the political participation of as many as possible interested citizens through equal rights of association, participation, and communication for all, an inclusive and egalitarian electoral right, the competition between different parties, and the majority principle in decisions. Habermas, *Ach, Europa*, 140–41.

20. For reasons of fairness and egalitarian inclusion in de facto pluralist societies, Habermas allows those religious claims that can be translated into a secular, i.e. generalizable, language to contribute to political discussions. See Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 6. By secular arguments Habermas means those claims that can be rationally expected to be acceptable by every reasonable person, irrespective of their worldview. Habermas further nuances Rawls's argument that every citizen in a secular state should be able to express one's religious convictions in secular terms: Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 217. He distinguishes between politicians who should be able to express their religiously informed convictions in publicly accessible terms, and the general population of whom this could not be legitimately demanded: Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 8–9. This is why Habermas has been praised for operating with a more inclusive understanding of public reason than Rawls. See Melissa Yates, "Rawls and Habermas on Religion in the Public Sphere," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33 (2007): 880–91 at 889, https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453707081685.

21. Milbank, "What Lacks is Feeling," 3.

22. Milbank, "What Lacks is Feeling," 3–6.

23. John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 11–12; John Milbank, "Only Theology Saves Metaphysics: On the Modalities

same undecidable realm of the sublime can only be uttered from a position which some-how oversees the content of all metaphysical claims.[24] Milbank here joins those who question the liberal assumption that the split between politics and religion was eternally in support of peace in pluralist settings.[25] Those in favor of a strictly secular political realm fear that a religious majority's metaphysical convictions could decide a whole society's future—a systemic injustice in a multicultural setting, and therefore deemed to be generally unacceptable.[26] Yet, the strict split between politics and religion can also be evaluated more critically as promoting itself as a specific religious *telos* for politics, disguisedly consolidating the secular constitutional state as eternally the best political order because the metaphysical convictions and principles upon which it relies are natu-ralized and thereby so tacitly presumed that they can no longer be debated.[27]

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of Terror," in *Belief and Metaphysics*, ed. Peter M. Candler Jr. and Conor Cunningham (London: SCM, 2007), 452–500 at 457. For a critical discussion of the repeated criticism that Milbank himself would arrogantly assume for himself a God's-eye perspective, see Christiane Alpers, "Knowing God Beyond Imagining: A Critical Appraisal of the Relation between Systematic Theology and Concrete Reality in John Milbank's Thought," *Modern Theology* 33 (2017): 511–28, https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12335.

24. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 173–75.

25. Radical Orthodox theologians, among others, accuse political liberalism of abstracting religion from specific post-Reformation conflicts as a fundamental, quasi-timeless prob-lem, always and everywhere akin to violence, and of presenting the secular state as the adequate solution thereof. The complexity of the situation is reduced in order to arrive at a binary picture of religions as cause of conflict and the secular state as guarantor of peace; Ulrike Spohn, *Den säkularen Staat neu denken: Politik und Religion bei Charles Taylor* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2016), 43–45, 57. Further, William T. Cavanaugh's illustration might complement Milbank's predominantly abstract criticism of secular modernity. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Grant Kaplan, review of *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, by William T. Cavanaugh, *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 479–81, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056391007100226.

26. Böckenförde, *Der Säkularisierte Staat*, 12–15, 17, 45–46; Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in der Öffentlichkeit: Kognitive Voraussetzungen für den 'öffentlichen Vernunftgebrauch' religiöser und säkularer Bürger," in *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009), 119–54 at 125; Jürgen Habermas, "Die Dialektik der Säkularisierung," *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 52 (2008) 33–46 at 38–39; Habermas, "'Vernünftig' versus 'wahr'," 99; John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* (2006): 1–25 at 4, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2006.00241.x; Jaco Beyers, "The Church and the Secular: The Effect of the Post-Secular on Christianity," *HTS Teologise Studies/Theological Studies* 70 (2014): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2605.

27. Milbank, "Only Theology Saves Metaphysics," 456. For a similar criticism of Habermas, in particular, as succumbing to this mistake, see Spohn, *Den säkularen Staat neu denken*, 60–61. For a discussion of the continuously negotiated relation between Christianity and different European states as well as the EU as a whole, see Linda Hogan and John D'Arcy May, "Social Ethics in Western Europe," *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 154–71, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390706800108.

While Milbank at times tends to present Habermas's separation of public discourse from metaphysical convictions as something like an *a priori* split, Habermas is keen to emphasize that what abides outside the realm of discursive rationality is never known in advance but is determined in the very process of democratic deliberation, and thus always affirmed anew by the people.[28] Habermas indeed clearly differentiates between particular metaphysical outlooks, which differ from one religious community to another, and universal reason, governing the political sphere.[29] On the political level, everyone is equally expected to embrace the value of impartiality, which denotes the readiness to validate those political decisions that are deemed intersubjectively acceptable.[30] People are allowed to cherish their particular religious values on a cultural level, but are obliged to accept the standards set by religiously neutral practical reason in the field of politics.[31] Importantly, this obligation is not extrinsically imposed, but is systemically required: egalitarian universalism at the political level is meant to protect individual and cultural autonomy at the cultural level.[32] If liberal constitutional democracy currently meets certain impasses, Habermas blames capitalist economics for the present erosion of politics.[33] Many areas of life that had previously been

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28. Milbank and others criticize Habermas for unduly chastening traditional religious narratives through imposing on them the limits of secular reason; see Nicholas Adams, *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 218–19. They disagree here with those who argue that "Habermas' post-metaphysical reasoning requires theologians to make no commitments to secular claims, only to argumentation based on certain 'cognitive attitudes' or intellectual virtues," for example the demand to abandon any claim to a God's-eye perspective. Jacob L. Goodson, "Can Christian Theologians Reason Post-Metaphysically? Jürgen Habermas and the Semblance of Intellectual Virtue," in *Groundless Gods: The Theological Prospects of Post-Metaphysical Thought*, ed. Eric E. Hall and Hartmut Sass (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 2014), 81. When Habermas defines post-metaphysical reasoning precisely as that reasoning that can be accepted by all reflective people, Wolterstorff convincingly argues that such reasoning is simply non-existent, as even Habermas's own philosophy remains contested; Wolterstorff, "An Engagement with Jürgen Habermas," 106, 109.
29. Habermas, "'Vernünftig' versus 'wahr'," 124.
30. Habermas, "'Vernünftig' versus 'wahr'," 102–3.
31. Habermas, "Kampf um Anerkennung im demokratischen Rechtsstaat," 245.
32. Jürgen Habermas, *Politische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009), 209, 213–14.
33. Habermas explicitly wants the European Union to be more than the guarantee of negative peace, associating the latter, not unlike Milbank, with the current rule of liberal market mechanisms; Habermas, *Ach, Europa*, 90. Not unlike Milbank, Habermas rejects Hobbes's individualistic contract theory, as it does not acknowledge human beings as moral agents; Habermas, "'Vernünftig' versus 'wahr'," 101. Habermas also distinguishes his deliberative model of democracy from Locke's political liberalism, on the one hand, that focuses mainly on people's individual freedom and understands the democratic process mainly as an aggregation of individual opinions; Habermas, *Ach, Europa*, 141–44, and from the republican tradition that understands the democratic process as the expression of the people's will, aiming for national autonomy, on the other (142–44). See also Habermas, "'Vernünftig' versus 'wahr'," 98–99.

coordinated by democratic forms of communication are now being administered by liberal market mechanisms.[34] In line with his argument, Habermas's solution to the present lack of democratic solidarity counts on the strength of good arguments.[35] Politicians should inform citizens about immediate costs and long-term benefits so that everyone can form a rational opinion about national or European matters.[36] In sum, in order for people to be reoriented toward justice and the common good, Habermas aims at a recovery of the liberal democratic process that underlie the current economic rule.

Creating Solidarity through a Catholic *Telos*

At this point, Milbank conceives of an intrinsic link between an emphasis on individual and cultural autonomy, on the one hand, and the current rule of capitalist economy, including its relation to right-wing populism, on the other. In contrast to those political theorists who seek to revive constitutionalism in multiple ways, Milbank regards the failure of the secular constitutional state to sustain a democratically engaged culture as not accidental. He associates the current lack of political solidarity with the orientation of Western constitutions toward individual, self-interested liberty. A constitution can but protect the sheer coexistence of free individuals without any common purpose other than respecting each other's freedom, protecting each citizen's life, and maximizing life before death.[37] In this way, the constitutional state *actively* promotes a culture of narcissistic self-interest, perfectly combinable with capitalism.[38] By favoring the isolated individual as the only politically relevant subject, the liberal secular state erodes democracy from the start, as such an individual fearfully accepts the state's absolute power to protect life.[39] If a constitution is meant to safeguard peace in a pluralist society, as well as to allow everyone equally to participate in democratic processes, irrespective of their religious backgrounds, Milbank denounces this as a reductionist vision of peace, and a hindrance to those political activities that

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34. Habermas, "Vorpolitische Grundlagen," 26–27. Habermas calls Europe's ecumenically governed executive federalism a post-democratic rule; Habermas, *Zur Verfassung Europas*, 7–8.
35. Habermas, *Zur Verfassung Europas*, 43.
36. Habermas, *Ach, Europa*, 98–99, 106–7, 136, 190–91; Habermas, *Zur Verfassung Europas*, 77–78.
37. The Hobbesian legacy here is apparent. John Milbank, "Liberality versus Liberalism," in *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 242–63 at 250. For an insightful discussion of how early modern political theory secularized the Fall into a "state of nature," see William T. Cavanaugh, "The Fall of the Fall in Early Modern Political Theory," *Political Theology* 18 (2017): 475–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623 17x.2016.1214026.
38. John Milbank, "The New Divide: Romantic versus Classical Orthodoxy," *Modern Theology* 26 (2010): 26–38 at 27, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2009.01574.x.
39. Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 181.

are oriented toward communal purposes.[40] Centering politics around the value of individual autonomy discourages people from becoming politically active with regard to issues that surpass egoistic self-interest.

This criticism tends to overlook the fact that Habermas's argument is particularly geared to pair individual autonomy at the religious and cultural level with solidarity at the political level. Habermas coherently argues that each citizen is expected to vote in everyone's interest not for any religious reasons, but for the political reason that emancipated individuals can all rationally agree that living in a democracy is best suited for their emancipatory purposes.[41] In political matters, everyone should aim at reaching a consensus among the whole of society that is generalizable in the sense of being acceptable by all.[42] If one sought to govern others in favor of one's narrow self-interest, regardless of whether this is good and just, one would legitimate the arbitrary rule of the most powerful, an irrational position from the perspective of aiming at individual self-determination.

Nonetheless, Milbank's argument reveals a certain blind-spot in Habermas's proposal, namely its conceptualization of solidarity exclusively at the abstract level of the state, always aimed at all citizens. This reduces the political significance of all kinds of solidarity, occurring in intermediate associations, to the right of autonomous self-determination; in effect, people can legitimately satisfy their "fundamentally human need for loyalty and collective belonging" in any shape they want. "Unrelated to the good, to transcendence or to the universal, these have often taken, and continue to take, unpleasant, atavistic forms."[43] The current sway of right-wing populism could be interpreted as the outcome of such unfortunate pairing of the principles of autonomous self-determination, on the one hand, and abstract generalizability, on the other.

Furthermore, as noted earlier, Milbank unmasks the supposedly universal aim of autonomous self-determination promoted by Habermas as a specifically Protestant understanding of the *telos* of individual and communal life,[44] and therefore as competing with a Catholic understanding of the *telos* of life.[45] Milbank regards the positioning of Catholicism within a secularist political realm as allowing for but "a thinned-out version of the Catholic faith."[46] According to Milbank, Catholicism cannot abandon its claims to be an all-encompassing worldview, embracing therefore also the realm of politics.[47]

40. This *telos* is perfectly combinable with an orientation toward economic growth: Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 183–84.

41. The value of autonomy is intrinsically communal insofar as the individual who wants to realize oneself as a free individual, must acknowledge one's bonds with other people, including the bond of language, that precede and continuously influence any such life project. See Habermas, "Inklusion—Einbeziehen oder Einschließen?," 163–64.

42. Habermas, *Zur Verfassung Europas*, 68–69.

43. Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 185. See also Milbank, "The New Divide," 27.

44. Milbank, "What Lacks is Feeling," 20.

45. Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 180–84.

46. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 116.

47. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 118. This resonates with those who prefer Charles Taylor's understanding of a pluralist public sphere over that of Habermas, as Taylor understands religious claims not as a parallel or subsection to secular reason, but as the

Consequently, Milbank argues that Catholicism competes with secular liberalism over true universality.[48] He conceives of Catholic Christianity in terms of an alternative society, "an international society, independent of political regimes and legal codes."[49] Catholic Christianity is not just one religion among others, all aiming to coexist within a post-secular society, striving for autonomous self-determination, but universally includes every human being, in some way.[50] Presenting Catholicism and secular liberalism as competitors about true universality, and about the legitimacy to determine the *telos* of a pluralist society, Milbank speaks at times of "modern, liberal tyranny" and a "totally non-Christian reality of contemporary economic, bureaucratic, spectacular and military power,"[51] a "new democratic tyranny" that undermines key traditions, institutions, and embedded practices.[52] According to Milbank, Catholicism offers precisely the unifying *telos* that would promote solidarity in a highly diverse democracy.[53]

A Christocentric Catholic Political Theology in Search for Solidarity

According to Milbank, the key distinctiveness of the Catholic *telos* is its orientation toward metaphysical truths, whereas its Protestant counterpart is oriented toward

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overall outlook, framing one's perception of the secular realm; Guido Vanheeswijk, "The Ambiguity of 'Post-Secular' and 'Post-Metaphysical' Stories: On the Place of Religion and Deep Commitments in a Secular Society," in *Working with* A Secular Age*: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Charles Taylor's Master Narrative*, ed. Florian Zemmin, Colin Jager, and Guido Vanheeswijk (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 95–122 at 108; cf. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 22. For Milbank's overall positive critique of Charles Taylor's understanding of the history of modern secularity, see John Milbank, "Review Article: A Closer Walk on the Wild Side: Some Comments on Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22 (2009): 89–104, https://doi.org/10.1177/0953946808100228.

48. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 176. Milbank construes Christianity as "counter-empire" to the empire of capitalism (210).

49. John Milbank, "The End of Dialogue," in *The Future of Love*, 279–301 at 285–86.

50. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 122.

51. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 128.

52. Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 187. See also Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 139.

53. Many critics accuse Milbank at this point of an illegitimate return to Christendom: Christopher Insole, "Against Radical Orthodoxy: The Dangers of Overcoming Political Liberalism," *Modern Theology* 20 (2004): 213–42 at 234, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2004.00251.x; Graeme Smith, "Pluralism and Justice: A Theological Critique of Red Toryism," *Political Theology* 13 (2012): 330–47 at 346, https://doi.org/10.1558/poth.v13i3.330; Steven Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2007), 150. Yet, this criticism does not hold if one considers that Milbank argues that the choice is between either a concealed continuation of the Protestant-secular Christendom legacy and a new openly Catholic social order.

autonomous self-determination.[54] Milbank writes, "Authentic Christianity requires a re-enchantment of the cosmos and a recovery of the way in which it mediates to us the divine pattern of goodness."[55] This divine pattern of goodness is christologically dispersed in the world, to be recognized and appropriated as metaphysical truths in order to ascend from immanent depths to transcendent heights.[56] Those Catholic thinkers who are in support of Milbank's argument offer substantial arguments regarding how such a metaphysical *telos* would guarantee a society's orientation toward justice and the common good. The inclusion of metaphysical discernment in the political realm prevents the political community from turning "immanence into a project of our power to make itself absolute, as absolute as possible, and more than anything else absolved from transcendence as other."[57] The aim is to detect the rich ambiguities within immanence that reveal that the immanent is always already more than itself.[58] Charles Taylor argues that instead of asking everyone to subject their metaphysical claims to the secular procedure of discourse when entering the public spheres, people should learn to articulate their metaphysical claims in such a way that it becomes apparent that they are talking about a reality independent from themselves.[59] A society that opens its politics up to include metaphysical discussions is meant to prevent people from bending "the 'to be' in the direction of [their] own 'to be' as the only good, in an absolute sense."[60] People would learn to see how the immanent realities they discuss always already contain a truth greater than themselves and thus point toward a transcendent ideal.[61] All would be encouraged to detect traces of transcendence in reality

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54. Milbank, "Only Theology Saves Metaphysics," 456. Alasdair MacIntyre's argument is similar at this point: Mary Frances McKenna, "On the Future of Europe: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives on Pre-Political Foundations of Europe and the State from Ratzinger, Habermas, and MacIntyre," *The Heythrop Journal* 58 (2017): 1–16 at 6–9, https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12817.
55. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 118.
56. Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short *Summa* in Forty-Two Responses to Unasked Questions," in *The Future of Love*, 337–51 at 346–47. In *Beyond Secular Order*, Milbank argues why and how a Catholic social order could positively build up a culture, whereas the modern promotion of "non-teleological freedom" is bound to deconstruct continuously that which has been freely willed at a previous stage (130).
57. William Desmond, "Neither Servility nor Sovereignty: Between Metaphysics and Politics," *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, ed. Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 153–82 at 157. See also William Desmond, "Creation and the Evil of Being," in *To Discern Creation in a Scattered World*, ed. Frederiek Depoortere and Jacques Haers (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 171–206 at 197.
58. Desmond, "Neither Servility nor Sovereignty," 158.
59. Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 34–60; Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 154, cited by Vanheenswijck, "The Ambiguity of 'Post-Secular' and 'Post-Metaphysical' Stories," 111, 118.
60. Desmond, "Creation and the Evil of Being," 180.
61. Desmond, "Neither Servility nor Sovereignty," 159.

that show the human community how to transform the world into a non-utopian yet more ideal version of itself.[62] Instead of thinking of people as endowed with the empty liberty to choose for themselves what is true, everyone should be continuously encouraged to search for that which is intrinsically desirable for themselves and for society.[63]

The orientation toward truth acts here as a guarantee for the realization of justice and the common good in a pluralist society. This is similar to the way generalizable, commonly accepted ideas and principles guarantee a society's orientation toward the common good and justice in Habermas's model of deliberative democracy. A key difference concerns the most basic agreement in these two scenarios: Catholic thinkers ask for a fundamental agreement in society that there is a truth about the world, as a regulative yardstick for all policies, whereas Habermas asks for the basic agreement that no one enjoys a rational access to the truth about the world, which is why the truth cannot act as a yardstick for political deliberations. A resulting difference is that a common orientation toward the truth in Christ, understood as analogically dispersed in the world, would allow a society to appreciate unique particularities, whereas the negation of truth's mediation and accessibility seeks to reach a societal agreement upon one unique particular, to be used as the common yardstick against which all other unique particulars are univocally measured.[64]

However, instead of following Milbank and other Catholic thinkers when they seek to involve the whole society in a quest for metaphysical truths, I think Catholic political theology should rather discern the ways a society is always already participating in Christ, and therefore already oriented toward the true *telos*, even if not everyone might express it in such terms. The truth, as revealed in Christ, might not lend itself to basic agreements, and a Catholic political theology might be most distinct through its admission that a society's orientation toward the common good can never be guaranteed, but should be thankfully welcomed and received whenever it occurs.[65]

Milbank himself offers precious insights into how this can be conceived when advocating for the acknowledgment of "corporations" such as guilds, religious associations, or universities as the loci where solidarity and an orientation toward the common good are always already performed.[66] Neither individual citizens nor the state, but rather these corporations should be acknowledged as primary political agents in a democracy. Significantly for this discussion, such corporations are not unified by generally accepted abstract ideas or principles, but by common habits, practices, and traditions. Analogous to living organisms, corporations develop dynamically, in

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62. Desmond, "Neither Servility nor Sovereignty," 157.

63. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 11–12.

64. For a fascinating in-depth explanation of this difference, see Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

65. This kind of Catholic political theology might be best exemplified by Erik Borgman, *Leven van wat komt: een katholiek uitzicht op de samenleving* (Utrecht: Meinema, 2017).

66. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 271, 276; Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 186.

unpredictable accordance with the incessant interactions between individual members and the tradition in which they participate. To find agreements on abstract ideas or principles among the members of a corporation would involve a ceaseless task of distilling commonalities out of such irreducible diversity, and finding a measure between individuals who are inherently incommensurable.[67]

If we think of the truth as something primarily performed, precisely in the corporations to whose political significance Milbank suggestively points, and only secondarily as something known and expressed in more abstract terms, a Catholic political theology would not have to aim for any propositional consensus with regard to the political *telos* of a society. A Catholic theologian might rather want to discern the society's common *telos* by gathering the different interactions among all corporations into one harmonious picture, which could then be offered for political deliberation. Others, however, could not be expected to do the same, for although a Catholic theologian would want to affirm that everyone participates in Christ, not everyone could be expected to confess this. More concretely, this would mean that the narrow self-interested *telos* of right-wing populist parties would neither have to be corrected through an integration of such parties in deliberative democratic procedures nor through reorienting them toward metaphysical truths. Instead, a Catholic political theologian might look for moments in which right-wing populists performatively contradict their self-interested political propositions, when they act for the common good in surprising ways, in solidarity with those whom they abstractly despise, thus performing the truth despite their shortsighted political views.

Conclusion

I have argued that both Habermas and Milbank disagree with a religious essentialization of constitutional values and principles, and the concomitant endowment of religions with the task to save liberal constitutional democracy from the current erosion of political solidarity. Such externalization of the constitution from democratic negotiations might exacerbate the current erosion of democratic solidarity. Habermas's deliberative model of democracy shows how the emancipatory interest in autonomous self-determination rationally coincides with an interest to be actively engaged in democratic debates concerning the common good, thus to maintain and shape the liberal constitutional state in the process. Exposing the Protestant roots of the Habermasian *telos* of autonomous self-determination, Milbank calls into question the justice of such a social order in a pluralist setting. Milbank's solution to the present lack of solidarity in liberal democracies is to replace the current implicitly Protestant sociopolitical order with a Catholic alternative. Here, a society's orientation toward the common good and justice would be guaranteed through a common search for metaphysical truths in political debates, and corporations would be acknowledged as political agents at an intermediate level between the state and individual citizens.

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67. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 279.

Nevertheless, I have argued that a Catholic political theology, precisely because it should follow Milbank's suggestions, cannot seek to replace the present sociopolitical order. Instead, Catholic political theologians should discern where the truth breaks through *in* this order; where people form corporations, they can act in surprising solidarity with each other even if this conflicts with their abstract political views. The order that emerges would be one that does not presuppose any basic agreement, but corresponds always to the shifting relations and exchanges occurring in pluralist societies. The discernment of commonalities and agreements would always be a retrospective task. While the secular liberal followers of Habermas would enjoy a legitimate place in such a political order, they could not expect everyone to agree that the *telos* of autonomous self-determination is the highest political *telos* of the whole society. Perhaps, Catholic thinkers regularly discard too quickly the liberal quest for autonomous self-determination as something in conflict with a metaphysical discernment of the truth. Yet, it might not suffice to explain this quest in reference to its historical and religious roots, and to denigrate it as a deviation from the path toward the truly good.[68] For, if the truly good is primordial and superabundant, such that all our deviations still paradoxically participate in it, the question remains: What does it say about the nature of the truly good that some humans treasure autonomous self-determination as the most precious good?

Acknowledgements

Author Biography

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68. This is how McKenna interprets Habermas. McKenna, "On the Future of Europe," 10.