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"At the Same Time Blessed and Lame": Ontology, Christology and Violence in Augustine and John Milbank

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"In the chosen, wickedness is turned into blessedness through mercy and grace, for the nature of God is to do good for evil, through Jesus, our mother in kind grace … And we have all this blessedness through mercy and grace; a kind of blessedness which we might never have known if the quality of goodness which is God had not been opposed. It is by this means that we gain this blessedness; for wickedness has been allowed to rise and oppose goodness, and the goodness of mercy and grace has opposed wickedness and turned it all to goodness and glory for all those who shall be saved; for it is the nature of God to do good for evil."

— Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*[1]

Introduction

Rhetoric is, for John Milbank, the language of Christian theology. It is the means through which God is glorified and *pistis* is persuasively shared. In conceiving rhetoric as compatible with Christian theology, Milbank follows Augustine, both in that Augustine too defended the possibility of bringing together rhetoric with theology[2] and

[1] Trans. Elizabeth Spearing (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), p.139.

[2] See Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* Book IV, especially chapters 2, 6, 12.

in that Milbank's account of rhetoric is closely tied to an ontology of evil as *privatio boni* that has roots in Augustine's writings.[3] But at the same time, Milbank's understanding of rhetoric departs from Augustine's thought in one significant way: a key feature of Milbank's rhetoric is that it stands in stark contrast to dialectical reasoning, whereas the classical conceptions of rhetoric with which Augustine was familiar distinguish rhetoric from dialectic without opposing them.[4] A close examination of Milbank's work demonstrates that his rejection of dialectic is most fundamentally an ontological claim rather than a purely linguistic one; consistently with his view of language as integrally related to ontology,[5] Milbank characterizes "rhetoric" and "dialectic" as constitutive of different modes of being. In characterizing Christian theology as rhetorical rather than dialectical, Milbank's primary concern is to reject the possibility that Christianity allows violence a positive ontological status. Yet I will show in this essay that Milbank's rejection of what he calls dialectics is not, finally, Augustinian; Milbank's argument that Augustine "implicitly breaks with *all* dialectical reasoning, ancient and modern"[6] cannot be finally sustained, even on the ontological level where Milbank situates his own characterization of Augustine. Moreover, Milbank's departure from Augustine on this point is crucial because it is Augustine's allowance of a limited dialectic that ensures the centrality of Christ's redemption for Augustine's own theology. Milbank's

[3] At points following in my paper, I will sometimes refer to this ontology as the "*privatio boni* ontology."

[4] Augustine was familiar with Cicero on rhetoric, and would have known Aristotle's account of rhetoric through Cicero, who follows this account closely. Aristotle's view of rhetoric is *not* opposed to dialectic, as Milbank's is (nor does Milbank offer any textual grounds for his assertion that Aristotle's rhetoric's "mode of dialectical reasoning is imperfect," implying the logical inferiority of rhetoric to dialectic) (*Theology and Social Theory*, 348). For Aristotle, rhetoric is an "offshoot" of dialectic; it is "a branch of dialectic and similar to it." The two rely upon parallel forms of deductive and inductive reasoning; "just as in dialectic there is induction on the one hand and syllogism or apparent syllogism on the other, so it is in rhetoric" (*Rhetoric*, Bk I, chapter 2). Likewise, for Cicero, dialectic is the "counterpart" of rhetoric. See *De inventione*, tr. H.M. Hubbell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

[5] See chapters 3 and 4 of *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

[6] *Theology and Social Theory*, 389.

rejection of all dialectical reasoning therefore makes it difficult for him to sustain the Christological claims that he seeks to affirm in *Being Reconciled*.[7]

In order to develop this argument, I first provide an overview of the central difference between Augustine and Milbank on ontology and point to the theological import of this difference: in upholding rhetorical and dialectical ontologies alongside each other, Augustine simultaneously affirms *creatio ex nihilo* and a doctrine of sin that requires Christ's redemption. Milbank, in contrast, upholds the former doctrine at the expense of the latter. Having explained the theological significance of these differences between Milbank and Augustine, I turn to the thought of the individual thinkers, starting with Milbank, to underscore this argument. I begin by demonstrating that the distinction Milbank draws between rhetoric and dialectic is driven by his desire to reject a certain type of ontological claim about violence. Although rhetoric and dialectic function most immediately, for Milbank, as discursive terms for speaking about truth, he defends this distinction primarily through claims denying the positive ontological status of violence. Milbank's rhetoric and dialectics instantiate and embody competing ontologies whose key difference lies in their accounts of the possible benefits of violence: whereas dialectics presumes and perpetuates an understanding of violence as a necessity, rhetoric assumes the ontological priority of goodness over evil, and peace over conflict. Milbank appeals to Augustine to show the opposition between these two ontologies and to undergird his account of a relationship between rhetoric and dialectics according to which any claim that violence may play a positive or beneficial role in moving toward truth or goodness is dialectical and thereby incompatible with rhetoric.[8] I conclude by examining Augustine's *The City of God* in order to demonstrate

[7] *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London, Routledge, 2003).

[8] Milbank does, curiously, allow a limited positive role for political violence. It is well known that he is against pacifism (see pages 43ff of *Being Reconciled,* as well as the exchange of essays between Milbank and Hauerwas at the conclusion of *Must Christianity Be Violent?: Reflections on History, Practice, and Theology*, ed. Kenneth R. Chase and Alan Jacobs (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), pp.172-223).

how Augustine's commitment to a type of tragic dialectics alongside his rhetorical ontology enables him to affirm the necessity of Christ's atonement for overcoming sin.

Ontology in Milbank and Augustine: The Significance of These Thinkers' Differences

A close reading of *The City of God* reveals that just as Augustine's reading of Cicero (and of Aristotle mediated through Cicero) would make it unlikely that Augustine interprets rhetorical and dialectical *linguistic* claims as mutually opposed in Milbank's sense, so does Augustine establish his rhetorical *ontology* (the ontology characterized by evil as *privatio boni*) in a manner that allows for the possibility that violence may contribute in a positive (albeit limited) way to the realization of Being and Goodness. An Augustinian rhetorical ontology is not opposed to all claims of violence to offer dialectical ontological benefits because Augustine's rhetorical ontology is not isolated from a dialectical ontology.

This critique of Milbank rests upon an interpretation of Augustinian ontology as embodying a type of dialectical relationship between two types of theological reasoning. The first of these is constituted and shaped by Augustine's account of evil as *privatio boni*, what I will call the "*privatio boni* ontology." The second arises from Augustine's doctrine of sin, which grounds a tragic ontology that recognizes human inability to pursue the good. Many prominent twentieth-century theologians, such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Ramsey, have interpreted Augustine in a manner that emphasizes this second, tragic ontology at the expense of the former *privatio boni* ontology. Milbank offers an important corrective to this line of interpretation. At the

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For the purposes of this essay, however, I focus on the ontological status of violence rather than its political status.

same time, however, Milbank does not sufficiently recognize the significance of tragic ontology and the doctrine of sin for Augustine's thought. Augustine's thought represents a fusion of these two ontologies that sometimes compete and sometimes complement each other; indeed, there is a sense in which Augustine's thought embodies a relationship of dialectical tension between two theological affirmations (*creatio ex nihilo* and original sin) and their corresponding ontologies. I call this fusion of ontologies a "dialectical rhetoric," an ontology derived from a classical vision of rhetoric and dialectic as true counterparts.

Throughout my essay, I will argue that Milbank opposes his rhetorical ontology to dialectic in a manner that departs from Augustine's "dialectical rhetoric" fusion, and that this departure calls into question Milbank's ability to sustain his Christological claims ontologically. For Augustine, it is the doctrine of sin and the tragic component of ontology, rather than the *privatio boni* ontology alone, that provides the ontological basis for affirming the necessity of Christ's atonement for salvation. Milbank's early work on Christology does not make this necessity evident, and I suggest that his difficulty in affirming the insurpassibility of Christ's atonement lies precisely in his failure to recognize sufficiently that Augustine's rejection of a positive ontological status for evil is coupled with a view of sin as tragically inescapable. Milbank's more recent work on Christology in *Being Reconciled* indicates that he does indeed wish to affirm the salvific necessity and singularity of the atonement, but my essay suggests that Milbank is unable to sustain this affirmation on the basis of a *privatio boni* ontology that lacks Augustine's tragic dialectics.

Milbank's Anti-Dialectical Rhetoric: The Shape of Christian Ontology

Milbank's account of Christian rhetoric in *Theology and Social Theory* arises in the context of a broader claim about the uniqueness of Christianity in comparison to all

other narratives.[9] Milbank affirms that in functioning rhetorically, Christianity is simultaneously rejecting philosophy: from the beginning, he explains, Christianity "'took the side of rhetoric against philosophy."[10] More specifically, a claim cannot be truly rhetorical in Milbank's sense if it retains any traces of dialectical reasoning. Therefore, while Milbank commends Alasdair MacIntyre for recognizing that "positions of [Christian] faith could not be dialectically inferred or called into question but were, rather, 'rhetorically' instilled," he nevertheless criticizes MacIntyre's subsequent move of claiming that "once accepted, [Christianity] gives better answers to problems always found dialectically problematic."[11] Rhetoric, then, is a choice against dialectics, a choice that ensures that Christianity's truth is never submitted to dialectics' standard of judgment.

But what is at stake in Milbank's rejection of dialectics? Precisely what is Milbank rejecting? Milbank's rejection of dialectics is most fundamentally a denial of the view that violence holds any type of ontological status. Christianity's uniqueness, and, correlatively, its break from dialectics, lies in its denial of being to violence: "Christianity, uniquely, does not allow violence any real ontological purchase."[12] Milbank's rejection of dialectics coincides with his denial of a positive account of violence, and although he recognizes that evil and violence are not identical, his resistance to dialectics is based in his view that Augsutine's *privatio boni* ontology implies a view of violence, as well as evil, as a privation.[13] Taken by itself, this account of violence presents a view of the Christian narrative as one in which good may not be achieved through a dialectical assertion of violence, for violence lacks Being and therefore lacks goodness. Milbank's rejection of dialectics arises from and underscores

[9] *Theology and Social Theory*, 262, 399.
[10] *Theology and Social Theory*, 398.
[11] *Theology and Social Theory*, 328.
[12] *Theology and Social Theory*, 432.
[13] *Being Reconciled*, 28-30.

his denial that violence has an ontological status and can thereby contribute to good, as the following paragraphs demonstrate.

Dialectical Ontology: Milbank's Critique of Pagan Thought

That Milbank's position regarding dialectics is most fundamentally concerned with the ontological status of violence is evident in his specific critiques of dialectical ontology. Milbank resists pagan ontology and ethics, both ancient and modern, because he thinks that both of them conceive violence as playing some sort of positive and essential role in constructing Being, Truth, and Goodness. According to Milbank, pagan thought treats violence as both eternal and necessary; this depiction of the positive possibilities of violence is central to his view of dialectics.

For Milbank, dialectics is problematic because it is grounded in an "ontology of force" which assumes that violence and conflict are necessary. The *civitas terrena* is characterized by a "coercive force" derived from its origins.[14] In contrast to the City of God, Rome is founded through a violent act, an act in which violence itself initiates a conflict, and then a second act violently constrains the first in order to suppress it: "In the story which Rome tells about its own foundations, the principle of a prior violence 'stayed' and limited by a single violent hand, is firmly enshrined … Mythical beginnings of legal order are therefore traced back to the arbitrary limitation of violence by violence … "[15] Both conflict and violence, then, are essential to how the non-Christian world conceives its being.

This ontology of force that founds the *civitas terrena* is, in turn, the basis for a pagan account of virtue in which violence itself plays a constitutive role. Pagan virtue,

[14] *Theology and Social Theory*, 406.
[15] *Theology and Social Theory*, 391.

for Milbank, necessarily arises from violence. It involves a violent coercion imposed either upon members of a city by its leaders or upon the passions by an individual's reason.[16] The achievement of virtue is itself a practice of war: "Hence the word *arête* (virtue) is always the standard of a victory, and while conquest puts an end to war, it requires a preceding war, and only ends war by war."[17] Moreover, because conflict is constitutive of virtue, virtue requires the presence of dissenting forces for its practice: "The Romans, like all pagans, think there can only *be* virtue where there is something to be defeated, and virtue therefore consists for them, not only in the attainment and pursuit of a goal desirable in itself, but also in a 'conquest' of less desirable forces…"[18] Violence, then, functions positively in pagan virtue, just as violence is conceived to be beneficial in dialectics.[19] Though pagan virtue seeks to overcome conflict through restraint, conflict is also constitutive of its existence. Pagan virtue could therefore not be practiced in any realm from which conflict is absent.

The centrality of force for pagan ethics is also evident in the war in which pagans conceive virtue in relation to difference. The heroic virtue of pagans, which celebrates victory in war, involves a "closure against difference."[20] Modern thinkers, too, conceive of difference as something violently opposed to Being such that the practice of virtue would require its elimination. Unity is central to Hegel's logic, which centers on "the principle of identity A:A."[21] Difference can only contradict this identity principle, and can therefore only deny Being, which means that true Being would seek its elimination. Because philosophy associates difference with dialectics,[22] difference functions within philosophy to initiate a negative relation toward Being,[23] a relation that results in the

[16] *Theology and Social Theory*, 411.
[17] *Theology and Social Theory*, 363.
[18] *Theology and Social Theory*, 390-391.
[19] *Theology and Social Theory*, 422.
[20] *Theology and Social Theory*, 417.
[21] *Theology and Social Theory*, 155.
[22] *Theology and Social Theory*, 429.
[23] *Theology and Social Theory*, 155.

opposition of difference to Being. Pagan virtue therefore can only promote and participate in Being by constraining and eliminating difference. The necessity of this constraint constitutes a system in which a positive outcome (the achievement of virtue) occurs through violence and only through violence. The opposition between virtue and difference, then, reinforces Milbank's characterization of pagan ontology and virtue as essentially conflictual.

Because pagan ontology is grounded in a narrative of conflict, Milbank suggests, pagans perceive violence as offering possible dialectical "benefits." Indeed, just as virtue can only be achieved through violence in Hegel's system (as I noted above), there is a sense in which Hegel's perception of how truth arises through dialectics leads him to attribute a quality of necessity to the events of Christ's incarnation and passion such that it is only through self-estrangement that justice is finally accomplished.[24] Milbank is critical of the fact that both the events on the cross and Jesus' founding of a church are, according to Hegel's logic, not contingent (the result of Jesus' free choice).[25] These Christological critiques are central in Milbank's ultimate rejection of dialectical ontology; he seems to perceive Hegel's attribution of necessity to the events of Christ's passion and resurrection as the logical outcome of Hegel's "primary instrument" of "social and historical critique," the claim that "negation" or the denial of being leads to positive outcomes.[26] Yet, as I will suggest below, while Milbank's concerns about Hegel's Christology seem sound, he is too quick to answer these concerns by rejecting *all* dialectical reasoning, including that which undergirds Augustine's account of sin and redemption. Because Milbank rejects all dialectical reasoning, it is difficult for him to sustain a Christology that affirms and defends Christ's divinity in a compelling way, even though he wishes to say that Christ is divine. Milbank's anti-dialectical ontology

[24] *Theology and Social Theory*, 171-172.
[25] *Theology and Social Theory*, 165.
[26] *Theology and Social Theory*, 155ff.

does not provide sufficient warrant for arguing that God himself provides redemption to humanity.

Rhetorical Ontology and Christology: Milbank's Augustinian Christian Theses

Milbank opposes the Christian rhetorical ontology (what I call the *privatio boni* ontology) to the dialectical ontology that gives violence (or evil) a type of ontological status through which it may play a positive role in the realization of being and the achievement of virtue. Following one strand of thinking in Augustine, Milbank grounds his rhetoric in an ontology that conceives peace and goodness as metaphysically prior to conflict and violence; this view, for Milbank, is an "explication of the doctrine of creation."[27] Milbank's rhetoric, in turn, gives rise to a Christology through which the non-existence of violence is unmasked, rather than a view of the atonement as an event through which an existent violence is conquered.

Rhetorical ontology, for Milbank, recognizes that evil (and conflict) lack any true metaphysical status. Whereas violence in dialectics can function to diminish Being, just as a negative number may diminish a positive, rhetoric assigns violence an absolute value of zero. Milbank roots this conception of violence in Augustine's understanding of evil as a privation or lack of being; this conception, he explains, denies that violence has *any* ontological status (either positive or negative), and consequently overcomes the dialectical mode of reasoning:[28]

> The elimination of dialectics, or of the attribution to negativity of a certain positive influence, can only be achieved … when not only the negative, but also the conflictual, is denied any real ontological purchase … Augustine's

[27] *Theology and Social Theory,* 432.

[28] Again, this argument depends upon Milbank's view of evil and violence as "controvertible" though not identical (*Being Reconciled* 28).

> understanding of *privatio boni* included just such a denial, and it is Augustine who truly points the way to the end of dialectics, in both a Platonic and a Hegelian sense.[29]

For Milbank, then, Christianity is fundamentally nonviolent in that it allows violence no positive role in reaching the Truth; violence, for Christianity, offers no dialectical "benefits."[30] The denial that violence has an ontological quantity is the foundation for Christianity's rhetorical mode of reasoning: a "commitment to a rhetorical, and not dialectical path to the Good opens out the following implication: only persuasion of the truth can be non-violent, but truth is only available through persuasion."[31]

Milbank's rhetorical ontology gives rise to a Christology according to which Christ primarily serves to unmask the non-existence of violence and to found a community in which his followers may engage in practices that repeat Christ's non-violent practices of forgiveness and suffering.[32] It is here that I would suggest that Milbank's denial of a positive ontological status for violence begins to obscure some of the Christian affirmations he wishes to make. Milbank's critique of René Girard in *Theology and Social Theory*,[33] and his characterization of Christ's sacrifice as "effective"[34] and recognition that the Incarnation is what ensures forgiveness of sins[35] in *Being Reconciled*, make it clear that he wishes to maintain Jesus' divinity and singularity.[36]

[29] *Theology and Social Theory*, 313.

[30] *Theology and Social Theory*, 422.

[31] *Theology and Social Theory*, 398.

[32] Milbank, "The Name of Jesus: Incarnation, Atonement, Ecclesiology." *Modern Theology* 7:4 (July 1991): 311-333, pp. 314, 317.

[33] Although Milbank is critical of René Girard's Christology, the case I am making here is that Milbank does not offer any sufficient grounds for defending any Christological claims except for those he perceives in Girard: that "Jesus came to expose the secret of social violence hidden 'since the foundation of the world', and to preach 'the kingdom', as the possibility of a life refusing mimetic rivalry, and, in consequence, violence" (*Theology and Social Theory*, 393-394).

[34] *Being Reconciled*, 100.

[35] *Being Reconciled*, 70.

[36] *Theology and Social Theory*, 395ff.

However, the vision of salvation that logically follows from Milbank's anti-dialectical ontology depends upon two claims that do not readily contribute to a positive defense of these orthodox claims. First, salvation consists in the articulation of a "critique-through-practice of all historical human communities up to that point"[37] whereby Jesus reveals all temporal institutions to be inherently violent. This revelation liberates us from their power.[38] It is unclear, however, how Milbank can defend our need for such liberation when he has defined these institutions merely as lacking true being. It seems that what was lacking before Christ was simply knowledge, knowledge of "the shape of sin, and the shape of its refusal;"[39] therefore Christ "redeems" us by showing us how the world has always been rather than by accomplishing something new to alter the world's structure. Milbank's rhetorical ontology, however, seems unable by itself to support an argument that only God could give us this salvific knowledge of the way things truly are.

A similar problem arises with respect to the second component of the Christology that Milbank derives from his rhetorical ontology. It is crucial, for Milbank, that Jesus founds a community that engages in non-violent practices. Jesus' own life and death provide the Church with a shape for communal life that enables us to live properly as his body: the narrative of Christ offers us "an exemplary practice which we can imitate and which can form the context for our lives together, so that we can call ourselves 'the body of Christ' … [T]he exemplary narratives of Jesus show us the 'shape,' and the concrete possibility, of a non-violent practice."[40] Moreover, Jesus' "inauguration of a new sort of community, the Church"[41] is a key part of salvation itself. Atonement occurs only as the Church perpetuates Christ's message: "Anselm's argument is justifiable if one adds that the atonement itself, insofar as we are able to

[37] *Theology and Social Theory*, 387.
[38] *Theology and Social Theory*, 391-392.
[39] *Theology and Social Theory*, 397.
[40] *Theology and Social Theory*, 396.
[41] *Theology and Social Theory*, 387.

assimilate it, is only the continuation of the proclamation of the kingdom."[42] Here, again, Milbank's emphasis upon created *privatio boni* ontology leads him to a particular Christology that makes it difficult for him to defend Christ's uniqueness for salvation even though he wishes to do so. He attempts to draw in Anselm's affirmation "that only God incarnate could define and so endure sin"[43] as a way of ensuring this, but his own lack of a strong account of original sin (ensured in Augustine by coupling a tragic ontology with the ontology of *privatio boni*) makes it difficult to defend this claim from within his own framework and premises. If violence is non-existent by nature, it seems that humans could resist violence simply by participating, independently of God, in nonviolent practices. It is Augustine's view of sin and tragic ontology that demonstrate why this is not the case. Without this component of Augustine's ontology, Milbank is unable to develop a strong enough account of sin to necessitate Christ's divinity and the work accomplished in the atonement. Milbank presents Christ as important for salvation in that he reveals salvific practices to us. However, given Milbank's critique of Girard for not ensuring the need for Christ's divinity, it seems significant that his own argument lacks a mechanism for substantiating the same affirmation.

Milbank more explicitly affirms Christ's divinity in *Being Reconciled* and offers a more compelling account of the atonement in this work, an account that emphasizes Christ's self-giving. Yet I suggest that here, too, he minimizes the necessity of the atonement by denying that sin has even a limited type of ontological existence. Milbank interprets the apostle Paul as characterizing the powers of sin as "nothing," as "impotent, outside the divine power which they refuse."[44] But if sin's powers are truly nothing, then it would seem that the atonement is simply an act that discloses human ignorance rather than ameliorating human sin. Yet Paul also felt tormented by a thorn in his flesh[45] and recognized a sin that dwells in humans[46] and exercises power over our

[42] *Theology and Social Theory*, 396.
[43] *Theology and Social Theory*, 397.
[44] *Being Reconciled*, 100.
[45] 2 Corinthians 12: 1-8.

actions, even when we know what is right: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate…I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."[47] I contend that in these statements Paul recognizes that after the Fall, sin holds a certain type of power, a certain type of tangible (limited) existence that Christ's sacrifice effectively overcomes rather than exposes as powerless. If sin lacks some type of existence, then humans who appreciate this lack of existence intellectually should be able to will themselves not to sin. Paul's writings suggest that this is in fact not the case and thereby ensure our dependence upon God's grace and upon the work of Christ's atonement.

Dialectical Rhetoric: An Alternative Augustinian Ontology and Christology

Turning to Augustine is instructive, in part, because Milbank's departures from Augustine might plausibly suggest that Milbank is more concerned with distinguishing Christianity from philosophy in order to respond to the critiques of a contemporary discourse rather than because of particular doctrinal or theological concerns. The distinction Milbank makes between Christian rhetorical ontology and all other philosophical systems of thought is central to his argument because it enables him to show that Christianity is not subject to the critiques that Nietzsche has levied against metaphysics.[48] Moreover, it allows him to posit his non-violent "counter-ontology" as a means of unmasking the "presupposition of transcendental violence" that underlies even Nietzsche's narrative[49] and showing that this violence need not be necessary. The "specifically Christian onto-logic"[50] that Milbank articulates functions to establish

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[46] Romans 7:17, 20.
[47] Romans 7:14, 18-19, NRSV.
[48] *Theology and Social Theory*, 294-296.
[49] *Theology and Social Theory*, 296.
[50] *Theology and Social Theory*, 296.

distance between Christian creation and pagan violence (ancient and modern), and Milbank accomplishes this distance largely through rejecting dialectics because he assumes that dialectics is necessarily opposed to the 'ontological priority of peace over conflict' that he sees as the "key theme of [Augustine's] entire thought."[51]

At the same time, because Milbank's project is driven by an attempt to affirm the uniqueness of Christian *creatio ex nihilo* against the ontological presuppositions that underlie all philosophies, he minimizes those portions of Augustine's thought that would give him ontological grounding for a view of salvation that recognizes Christ as necessary for human redemption. A comparison of Milbank to Augustine suggests that Milbank's Christ can only function logically as a moral exemplar *precisely because* Milbank has rejected all dialectics without recognizing the theological implications of this rejection. Considering Milbank's ontology in conjunction with Augustine's *The City of God* shows that Milbank's anti-dialectical rhetoric neglects those elements of Augustine's thought that make Christ essential for salvation. I suspect that Milbank overlooks them because these particular elements allow for a type of conflict between Christ and sin that recognizes sin as an ontological entity.

The remainder of this essay retrieves these elements of Augustine's thought in order to augment Milbank's rhetorical ontology with an account of the relation of post-lapsarian sin to God and creatures, which leads to metaphysical conclusions that Milbank might classify as dialectical in a limited sense. It is important to note here that I do not mean to discount all of Milbank's critiques of Hegel or even of dialectical reasoning. In particular, the kind of dialectical metaphysical claims that I affirm as Augustinian would not imply, as Milbank's Hegel does, that any portion of the created order stands outside God's providence[52] or that violence has a necessary or intrinsically

[51] *Theology and Social Theory*, 390.
[52] *Theology and Social Theory*, 158.

salubrious quality. It does not assume, like Milbank's Hegel, that Christ was fated[53] to endure passions because virtue and freedom may only arise through a prior estrangement,[54] or that there is some necessity to the process of divine self-alienation.[55] Nor does the Augustinian dialectic require a "logical or causal connection" between Augustine's two cities.[56] Nevertheless, I *do* suggest here that Augustine's *privatio boni* ontology must be interpreted alongside his tragic ontology such that Augustine does not deny ontological benefits to violence (or evil), but instead he affirms that the *ways* in which violence may be dialectically beneficial are overseen by God's providence. The incorporation of this modified dialectical claim into Augustine's rhetorical ontology is important because for Augustine, Christ's redemption on the cross occurs as God channels and transforms violence so that it may play a positive role, a process in keeping with a view of providence that affirms, "Evil men do many things contrary to the will of God; but so great is his wisdom, and so great his power, that all things which seem to oppose his will tend towards those results or ends which he himself has foreknown as good and just."[57] The ontological priority of goodness ensures not that goodness may show how violence never existed, but that goodness will conquer evil when a metaphysical struggle between the two (a struggle enabled by the reality of original sin) arises. The benefit of salvation has occurred through a confrontation between Christ and a sin that curiously gained a type of existence after the Fall; it is precisely the need to overcome this sin metaphysically to which Christ's death and resurrection attest.

Milbank is not wrong to suggest that Augustine maintains an ontological priority of goodness over evil and peace over conflict. There is not an Evil in the world, of the

[53] *Theology and Social Theory*, 166-167.
[54] *Theology and Social Theory*, 171.
[55] *Theology and Social Theory*, 148.
[56] *Theology and Social Theory*, 389.
[57] *City of God* Bk. XXII, Ch. 3. All page numbers in these citations refer to the Penguin edition, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Classics, 1984).

same ontological status as goodness, which seeks to pull us away from God just as God seeks to pull us toward him: because God is the supreme existence and God creates all things out of nothing, no thing is contrary to him; the only principle which could counter him is one which does not exist.[58] Therefore sin is not a turning toward an existent evil, but rather is a disordering of our desires such that we revere lower (but nevertheless good) things in place of God the higher good: in sinning, people 'have transferred the divine honors, due to God alone, to other objects, which have no right to them.'[59] Peace likewise does have ontological priority over war;[60] peace is the final fulfillment of all our goods, and even those who engage in war are seeking it.[61] Yet at the same time, Milbank's emphasis upon this feature of Augustine's ontology threatens to undermine the import of a second, significant line of thinking in Augustine. Quite simply, Augustine has a strong account of original sin and of the corruption of this world which limits his understanding of the degree of happiness and virtue that may be achieved in this life. There is, for Augustine, tension between God who is without sin and our post-lapsarian sinful natures. While this tension is not severe enough to compromise that ontological priority of peace by suggesting that violence and sin have an ontological status comparable to that of goodness or capable of diminishing God's being, it does suggest a type of post-lapsarian (and non-eternal) ontological status for evil such that Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection are necessary in order for sin to be conquered. Because a confrontation between Christ and an existent sin is central to Augustine's account of the reconciliation accomplished through the atonement, Milbank's failure to recognize and address the existence of sin leaves him with an ontology that does not seem to support an account of Christ as the necessary means through which God and the world are reconciled.

[58] "Thus to this highest existence, from which all things that are derive their existence, the only contrary nature is the non-existent. It follows that no existence is contrary to God, that is to the supreme existence and the author of all existence whatsoever" (*City of God* Book XII, ch. 2).

[59] *City of God*, Book VIII, ch 10, p.312. See also Book XIV ch. 4, and ch. 14-15.

[60] *City of God*, Book XIX, ch. 13, p.871.

[61] *City of God*, Book XIX, ch 11, p.865ff.

Augustine is clear that human nature changed substantively after the fall. Our bodies and souls were originally ordered properly and with the capability of serving God, but after Adam's sin we find both that our desires are disordered and that our sin is punished[62] by a state of enslavement to sin[63] and by mortality: "But human nature in [Adam] was vitiated and altered so that he experienced the rebellion and disobedience of desire in his body, and was bound by the necessity of dying; and he produced offspring in the same condition to which his fault and its punishment had reduced him, that is, liable to sin and death."[64] Augustine stresses that our flesh was not originally corruptible by nature so that we were compelled to sin, but rather that our choice to sin made it corrupt: "For the corruption of the body, which weighs down the soul, is not the cause of the first sin, but its punishment. And it was not the corruptible flesh that made the soul sinful; it was the sinful soul that made the flesh corruptible."[65] After the fall, then, our natures are misdirected, and this perversion of our natures is just because there is a sense in which we all are in Adam and all chose to sin with him: "But man was willingly perverted and justly condemned, and so begot perverted and condemned offspring. For we were all in that one man, seeing that we all *were* that one man who fell into sin through the woman who was made from him before the first sin"[66]

It is precisely because of the perversion of our post-lapsarian natures that we need Christ for our salvation. Our desires for temporal things estrange us from God, and we need Christ to save us from this state: "If man comes near to God in proportion as he grows more like him, then unlikeness to God is the only separation from him, and the soul of man is estranged from that immaterial, eternal and unchangeable being in

[62] Death is a punishment for sin in that without sin, we would not have died (*City of God*, Book XIII, ch. 19, p.532). At the same time, however, Augustine supports Plotinus's view that it is compassionate for God to have granted mortality to our sinful natures, because it prevents us from living forever in the wretched state associated with our sin (*City of God*, Book IX, ch. 10, p.355).

[63] *City of God*, Book XIX, ch. 15, p.874-5.

[64] *City of God*, XIII, ch. 3, p.513.

[65] *City of God*, XIV, ch. 3, p.551.

[66] *City of God*, XIII, ch. 15, p.523.

proportion as it craves for things that are temporal and changeable. For the cure of this condition we need a mediator …"[67] In Christ, God comes to us and redeems us even as we ourselves are seeking wickedness rather than goodness: "'When we were overwhelmed by the load of our sins, when we had turned away from the contemplation of his light and been blinded by the love of our darkness, that is, of wickedness, even then he did not abandon us."[68] In this state God enables our purification and salvation by sending Christ to us: "He sent to us his Word, who is his only son, who was born and who suffered in the flesh which he assumed for our sake – so that we might know the value God placed on mankind, and might be purified from all our sins by that unique sacrifice …"[69] Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection are the means through which God, in his compassion, overcomes the sins that separate us from him: "For it is only sins that separate men from God; and in this life purification from sins is not effected by our merit, but by the compassion of God, through his indulgence, not through our power."[70] Christ therefore reconciles humanity to God, and overcomes sin and death.

Significantly, Augustine does not resist characterizing this overcoming of sin by Christ as a genuine destruction of its power rather than a simple unmasking of its lack of power. Certainly Christ acts with kindness and humility, but his actions nevertheless constitute a genuine undoing of an actual power that sin previously held over us. Because Augustine does not share Milbank's contemporary concerns to place Christianity at odds with violence, he is willing to convey this truth by speaking of Christ as destroying the power of demons to tempt us:

> The bad angels, "in their pride, those wretches, in their wickedness, sought to seduce men into misery by their boast of immortality; to prevent this, the good Mediator by the humility of his death and the kindness of his blessedness has

[67] *City of God*, IX, ch 17, p.364.
[68] *City of God*, VII, ch. 31, p.293.
[69] *City of God*, VII, ch.31, p.293.
[70] *City of God*, X, ch. 23, p.403.

> destroyed their power over those whose hearts he has purified, through their faith, and delivered from the filthy tyranny of those demons."[71]

Even more to the point, Augustine maintains that the angel who wrestles with Jacob "obviously presents a type of Christ." In discussing this typology, Augustine is comfortable in speaking of Christ as having genuinely wrestled with Israel, indicating that Israel is (in a very limited and specified sense) an authentic opponent. It may seem that his recognition that those who crucified him "seemed to prevail over him," making Israel an "apparent victor," functions to undermine the reality of this conflict. At the same time, sin did have a power that made a battle between Christ and sin legitimate and necessary, and Augustine affirms this in his discussion of the ambiguous gesture of the angel touching Jacob on the thigh and leaving him simultaneously blessed and lame: "And so the same man, Jacob, was at the same time blessed and lame—blessed in those who among this same people Israel have believed in Christ, and crippled in respect of those who do not believe."[72] In this gesture Christ undoes the genuine power of sin itself so that those who believe in him will be blessed. At the same time, however, this gesture reiterates the power of the sin that has prevailed over humanity apart from Christ, for those who do not believe in Christ remain corrupted by sin and enslaved to it. Through this image, then, Augustine shows that sin has an ontological status such that it needs to be genuinely overcome in order for humanity to be saved, and that Christ accomplished our redemption by entering into a conflict with sin that truly undoes sin's power, rather than simply unmasking its lack of power.

The redemption of the world by Christ, accomplished through God's conflict with sin, is paradigmatic for Augustine's understanding of how God may use evil beneficially. Whereas Milbank implies that Christianity functions to show how violence has no existence, Augustine suggests that after the Fall, evil has a type of ontological status that, while inferior to that of goodness, is nevertheless legitimate and will be so

[71] *City of God*, IX, ch. 15, p.360.
[72] *City of God*, XVI, ch. 39.

until the end of time.[73] We need not fear evil, not because evil has no ontological status, but because God has the power to turn it to good use: "God, who is supremely good in his creation of natures that are good, is also completely just in his employment of evil choices in his design, so that whereas such evil choices make a wrong use of good natures, God turns evil choices to good use."[74] God therefore ensures, for example, that the wicked acts of heretics, though they are genuinely wicked, ultimately strengthen and benefit the true Church: "Even so they [the heretics] undoubtedly benefit by their wickedness the genuine, catholic members of Christ, since God makes good use even of the wicked," and "makes all things co-operate for good for those who love him."[75] Even the wicked acts of the Devil, including an anticipated final battle with Christians,[76] are put to positive use by God, and in making this claim Augustine goes so far as to suggest that good things were done through God's use of the Devil that might not have been done so fully without this wickedness: "if he [the Devil] had never been unloosed his malign power would not have been so clearly seen, and the endurance of the Holy City would never have been so clearly proved in its utter faithfulness; above all it would not have been so manifest what good use the Omnipotent was to make of the Devil's great wickedness."[77] Augustine, then, presents a view of violence that may, through the power of God, have ontologically beneficial effects and through which good things may be achieved that would not have been achieved as fully apart from violence's assertions of power.

Augustine's metaphysical conclusions, then, differ from Milbank's in that Augustine couples his *privatio boni* ontology with an account of sin connected to a

[73] "Thus when we now speak of the Final Good we do not mean the end of good whereby good is finished so that it does not exist, but the end whereby it is brought to final perfection and fulfillment. And by the Final Evil we do not mean the finish of evil whereby it ceases to be, but the final end to which its harmful effects eventually lead" (*City of God*, XIX, ch. 1, p.843).

[74] *City of God*, XI, ch. 17, p.448-449.

[75] *City of God*, XVIII, ch 51, p.833.

[76] *City of God*, Book XX, ch. 8, p.912.

[77] *City of God*, Book XX, ch. 8, p.911.

modified dialectics, an admission that good may come about through violence precisely because goodness is ontologically prior. Unlike Milbank, who interprets the ontological priority of goodness as meaning that goodness unmasks evil's lack of existence and consequent inability to assert itself in a positive sense, Augustine's ontological priority of goodness functions to ensure that good has the power to re-direct evil for good purposes. The possibility that good may be accomplished even through evil is attested and ensured both through Augustine's understanding of divine providence and especially through the reconciliation achieved through Christ's death and resurrection. Augustine acknowledges the power and consequences of sin as a force that must be overcome in order for our reconciliation with God to occur. He also points to a Christian hope that lies not in proving that sin never really existed, but in recognizing that God can make good come even from the evil that tragically *does*, in a limited sense, exist.

Conclusion

Thus Augustine's *privatio boni* ontology justifies Milbank's treatment of Christianity as rhetorical, but his account of original sin grounds a tragic ontology that calls into question Milbank's corollary claim that to be rhetorical as Christianity is necessitates a rejection of all dialectical affirmations. Indeed, in rejecting dialectics, Milbank unwittingly rejects the strand of thinking in Augustine that upholds the Christian doctrine of original sin and thereby necessitates the redemption of the world in Christ. In making this move, he undermines his own intentions of showing Christianity's distinctive and interruptive character; without some limited form of dialectics, the most distinctively Christian component of theology (the divinity and necessity of the person and work of Jesus Christ) is obscured.