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Idols and Grace: Re-envisioning Political Liberalism as Political Limitism

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Abstract

An Augustinian analysis of the current version of political liberalism which is increasingly dominating Western politics recognizes it as idolatrous. Nonetheless, because of the parasitic nature of evil, idolatrous human politics may be sustained by God's grace as God gives people time to respond to God and to re-order their disordered loves in relation to Godself, the supreme good. The express recognition of this function of politics enables the advocacy of political limitism, a re-thinking of political liberalism in the light of eternity, which recognizes that politics has only a limited role to play in securing human goods and that the earthly polis is not the most important society.

Keywords: idolatry, liberalism, Milbank, O'Donovan.

Introduction

The relationship between Augustine, Augustinianism and political theology is far from straightforward. The central problematic is this: if Augustine is right and there can be no "right" in a society that does not acknowledge the right of God[1] and if a society which does not love God above all other things inevitably falls into idolatry, then how should the Church understand and respond to political authority? Should the response be for the Church to seek to transform political authority, as well as or along with society, with an Idealist vision of a Christian commonwealth?[2] Should

1. Augustine, *City of God*, book XIX, chapter 21.
2. Augustine has been read in this way by, amongst others, George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Thought*, 3rd ed. (London: G. G. Harrap, 1963), 180–97 and Charles McIlwain, *The Growth of Political Thought in the West* (New York: Cooper Square, 1968), 154ff.

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the Church resign itself to the inevitable fallenness of human nature and of human politics, and seek to explain this through a Christian Realism?[3] Or is there a more nuanced way of understanding the role of political authority, which sees it as a provision of God's grace, from which neither too much nor too little ought to be expected?

Britain currently boasts in Oliver O'Donovan and John Milbank two formidable theologians who write from an Augustinian perspective. Both are controversial. Both have been accused of Idealism.[4] However, O'Donovan in *The Desire of the Nations* and Milbank in "The Gift of Ruling" put forward an account of political authority, based on a theory of evil as privation, an understanding of grace,[5] and in the light of the *eschaton*, which might be described as "political limitism." This account, with its clear assertions of idolatry and of divine grace, finds its parallel in Abraham Kuyper's understanding of culture, and offers key insights into the role of political authority.

This article proceeds by setting out the Augustinian framework which underlies the critiques which Milbank and O'Donovan offer of the idolatry to which the contemporary vision of political liberalism is succumbing in the West.[6] It then, in a second section, identifies the reasons to do with a theory of evil, an understanding of grace and of eternity, which explain how idolatrous politics may nonetheless be understood as operating as an unwitting instrument of God's purposes. In a third section, the positive vision of political liberalism, defined as political limitism, will be set out, before, finally, the question of whether O'Donovan and Milbank can sustain that vision is considered.

The Criticism of Closed Liberalism as Idolatry

Milbank sees capitalism, secularism and liberalism as a nihilistic triad, forming a closed circle which is impervious to any substantive norms.

3. Augustine is read in this way by Christopher Kirwan, *Augustine* (London: Routledge, 1989), ch. 11, and to a lesser extent by John Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptised* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), ch. 6.

4. Milbank by C. J. Insole in *The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defence of Political Liberalism* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 151 and Aidan Nichols in "'Non tali auxilio': John Milbank's Suasion to Orthodoxy," *New Blackfriars* 73 (1992): 326–32; O'Donovan by T. J. Gorringe in "Authority, Plebs and Patricians," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 11 (1998): 26–7.

5. The differences between the way Milbank, O'Donovan and Augustine understand the idea of grace may well be significant, but are only tangential to the purpose of this article and will therefore not be discussed.

6. This is not to say that all western societies are succumbing to this idolatry to the same extent or at the same rate. There may well be significant differences between the situation in, say, the UK and the USA.

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Capitalism is condemned for making "self-interest moderate self-interest without the intervention of virtue, and secur[ing] public order without the architectonic of justice."[7] Milbank sees secularism as a social vision which "acknowledges no substantive norms"[8] because by excluding God from public discourse it rules out any transcendental critique of society. The Dutch Reformed scholar Bob Goudzwaard, in *Idols of our Time*, similarly argues that contemporary society is enslaved to ideologies which have become idolatries and which inure themselves from challenge in the name of God's criteria of goodness, truth, justice and charity by subordinating and re-defining these terms.[9]

The third member of the triad: liberalism is, however, more to pin down. As Insole recognizes,[10] liberalism represents a family of related theories rather than a single definable ideology. Milbank's attack is on Kantian liberalism, which conceives of the "pure individual," whose sole defining characteristic is his or her possession "of a free will."[11] This conception finds its expression in that form of political liberalism which holds to that "closed circle of secular norms and practices" which characterizes "modern thought."[12] This closed circle, inscribed by "the formalities, dynamics and economies of power" which ever since Grotius have justified "attempts to ground ethics and political association on…the natural effort of each individual creature at self-preservation,"[13] is objectionable because it is thoroughly secularist and refuses to admit religious argument to the public square. In this article, I have termed this form of political liberalism "closed liberalism." For closed liberalism, belief in God and obedience to God are optional extras, private consumer choices. It does not matter whether God's existence is formally denied or not, so long as God's public presence is neutered.

The Exclusion of God and the Autonomy of Reason

The guiding theological insight behind Milbank's challenge to the nihilistic triad of capitalism, secularism and closed liberalism is Augustine's

7. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 197.

8. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 194. In "The Gift of Ruling: Secularization and Political Authority," *New Blackfriars* 85 (2004): 212–38 (223), it is liberalism which he describes as "lack[ing] any extra-human or extra-natural norm."

9. Bob Goudzwaard, *Idols of our Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 18.

10. Insole, *The Politics of Human Frailty*, 1–9.

11. Milbank, "The Gift of Ruling," 213.

12. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 227.

13. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 241.

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assertion that there are only two choices: true worship of the true God or idolatry. There are only two cities: the earthly city and the heavenly city. People are either committed to God as the ultimate good or they are committed to something else as the ultimate good. People are either worshippers of the true God or they are idolaters.[14] No human being can adopt a position of neutrality with regard to God. Either God's existence is acknowledged or God is denied. This question cannot be treated as an optional extra, because it is fundamental to the self-understanding of human persons both as individuals and in society.

Closed liberalism depends upon the Enlightenment idea of autonomous reason. The idea of autonomous reason posits that it is possible to conduct discourse on the basis of a universal rationality which is separate from discourse informed by religious reasons. Religious reasons represent a partial, and therefore, inferior form of discourse because they are put forward on grounds which are not shared by others in the political arena. At its most extreme, therefore, closed liberalism seeks to exclude such religious reasons from political life. Even where such reasons are permitted to be heard, however, closed liberalism demands that they be clearly flagged in order to downgrade them in the weight attributed to them in political debate.[15]

Milbank launches a full-frontal attack on the notion of the secular, on the idea that there is a neutral, objective and universal rationality to which all can subscribe regardless of their private faith commitments.[16] The "closed circle of secular norms and practices" which characterizes "modern thought"[17] is exposed as an attempt to envisage a space from which God is excluded. However, Milbank points out, despite the denial of substantive norms by secularism and liberalism, norms have to be recognized.

> Education…reveals the concealed public dimension of political life which even liberalism cannot suppress; in deciding *what* to teach, what to pass on, any society expresses its view about what is really self-fulfilling, even if it is confined, as with liberalism, to saying that the only goal is self-fulfilment.[18]

Thus secularism cannot avoid preaching capitalism, the autonomy of the individual and the irrelevance of God to public life.

14. Augustine, *De Vera Religione* 10.18.

15. D. Fergusson, *Church State and Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 187; R. Trigg, *Religion in Public Life: Must Faith be Privatized?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 33-40.

16. J. K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 50.

17. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 227.

18. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 197.

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O'Donovan's criticism begins with a demolition of the Enlightenment version of natural law. In *Resurrection and Moral Order*,[19] O'Donovan argues that creation finds its coherence in Christ and that therefore ethics are only rightly understood in the light of the Resurrection. Understandings of nature other than as creation, or of creation without reference to Christ, are distortions or incomplete visions of the truth.

Milbank's exposure of the secular in *Theology and Social Theory* is supplemented by his rejection of *natura pura* in *The Suspended Middle*.[20] O'Donovan's refusal of an autonomous natural law finds its complement in his *apologia* for a vision of Christendom in *The Desire of the Nations* which will be explored further below. For both Milbank and O'Donovan, then, there is no autonomous natural order and reason is not self-grounding.

Secularism's Idolatry of Earthly Goods

In Augustine's theology, it is the *Common Objects of Love*,[21] which shape a community and unite a society. A secularist society is focused on earthly goods to the exclusion of the heavenly good of knowing God. Milbank follows Augustine in arguing that "the ends sought by the *civitas terrena* are not merely limited, finite goods, they are those finite goods regarded without 'referral' to the infinite good, and, in consequence, they are unconditionally *bad* ends."[22] The same insight is in fact fundamental to the thought of Aquinas, who repeatedly in his writings stresses that mortal sin is choosing transitory, natural goods over the eternal good.[23] Goudzwaard is equally clear that idolatrous ideologies arise when legitimate goals have become absolutes,[24] when finite goods have been substituted for the infinite and installed in lieu of the *summum bonum*.

In the flattened perspective of closed liberalism, God or religion is not denied as a good but the claim that God is the supreme good is rejected. The liberal social order, which treats the question of God's existence as an optional extra and reduces God to the level of a private consumer good, is, in O'Donovan's words, "modernity as AntiChrist, a parodic and corrupt development of Christian social order."[25] Milbank sees secular social sci-

19. O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1994).

20. Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural* (London: SCM Press, 2005).

21. The title O'Donovan gave to his 2001 Stob Lectures, published as *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

22. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 406; original emphasis.

23. Aquinas, *ST* II-II.104.3; 118.1 ad.2; 118.5 ad.2; III.supp.97.1; *De Regno* I.10 [75].

24. Goudzwaard, *Idols of our Time*, 20.

25. O. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 275.

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ences bolstering the self-understanding of closed liberalism by seeking to understand liberal society without reference to God through offering either a heretical or a pagan vision of the liberal social order.[26]

From the above it can be seen that the Augustinian worldview of O'Donovan and Milbank collides with the self-understanding of closed liberalism. Closed liberalism understands itself to be neutral between competing conceptions of the good life, allowing the citizens of the agnostic liberal polity to choose to pursue the optional good of religion or to decline to do so, as they see fit. Milbank and O'Donovan understand closed liberalism to be the idolatrous refusal to allow God a constitutive place in political discourse. It matters not if political discourse is peppered with religious references or if God is invoked as being on "our side," provided that God is not allowed to give rise to a substantive critique of policy.

A Providential Understanding of Political Authority: Evil, Grace and Eternity

Nonetheless, despite their strident critique of closed liberalism, O'Donovan and Milbank affirm political authority. That idolatrous politics may nonetheless be used by God as an instrument for God's purposes depends on an understanding of God's work in creation, in time and with a view to eternity. Whereas Milbank stresses the ontological constraints on idolatrous human politics, O'Donovan emphasizes God's providential use of political authority for God's own purposes. The two insights are complementary, and provide a framework for explaining how political authority can be understood as both idolatrous and yet also a blessing.[27]

Political Authority, Ontological Goods and the Privation Theory of Evil

Augustine held to a privation theory of evil. He taught that evil has no independent status; it is always parasitic on the good.[28] Although it is possible for people to mistakenly identify things as good, a far more common form of idolatry is the inordinate, or the disorderly, pursuit of a genuine good. What renders closed liberalism idolatrous is not that the ends it pursues are not genuine goods. What renders closed liberalism idolatrous is that these genuine goods are sought without reference to God. In so far as a government pursues a policy of closed liberalism,

26. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 280.

27. Although I find the ontological note to be dominant in Milbank and the emphasis on providence to be the *leitmotif* for O'Donovan, this is not to suggest that there is no space in their theologies for the other emphasis.

28. Augustine, *Handbook on Faith, Hope and Love*, ch. III, para. 11.

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although it acts idolatrously, nonetheless it protects and preserves some genuine goods.

For Milbank, the continued existence of human community and political authority is a matter of ontology. In Milbank's neo-Platonic account, all being is a participation in God.[29] The human individual is "a creature, …a divine gift, …defined by his sharing-in and reflection-of, divine qualities of intellect, goodness and glory."[30] Similarly, "corporate bodies" receive "the objective and subjective gifts of created realities that are already imbued with pre-human meaning."[31]

Put another way, after the rejection of Manicheism, Christianity unequivocally affirms that God alone is God, that God alone is the supreme principle in the universe, and the world is created by God alone. The corollary of this affirmation is the recognition that evil is parasitic, it is non-being, it can only ever be a distortion or a deprivation of the good. As Milbank says in *The Suspended Middle*, Christianity teaches that "Creation, insofar as it remains in being at all, persists in some degree of goodness."[32] Human communities and political authority therefore continue to be good precisely insofar as they continue to exist and function at all.

Political authorities have to keep the peace as they regulate the disordered and competing pursuit of goods by human beings within their territories. They therefore moderate what Hobbes feared would be the even more violent and disorderly competition for goods which would occur in the absence of effective political authority. One of the dangers of political authority is, however, that it replicates that violence and competition on a larger scale.

Nonetheless, because and insofar as the lesser goods which political authorities protect truly are goods, those goods provide a measure of comfort and satisfaction. Because and insofar as these lesser goods are created goods, the Church has something important to say about their nature. Because these lesser goods are only finite goods, the comfort and satisfaction which they provide is always incomplete. The mistake which human beings make is an excessive attachment to limited, finite goods. It is a displacement of our supreme love away from God who alone is worthy of it and towards a lesser good.[33]

29. J. Milbank, "Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. J. Milbank, C. Pickstock and G. Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 26; Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy* 102.

30. Milbank, "The Gift of Ruling," 215.

31. Milbank, "The Gift of Ruling," 238.

32. Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 35.

33. There is, perhaps, potential for developing an understanding of the right enjoyment of finite goods as worship, to be distinguished from the disordered enjoyment of finite goods which is idolatry.

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In *Idols of our Time*, Goudzwaard highlights how idolatrous ideologies domesticate the criteria of goodness, truth, justice and love by re-defining these terms within their own schemes. These God-given, transcendental categories[34] represent inescapable norms. Political authority, of whatever hue, is constrained to present itself as approximating or embodying goodness, truth, justice and love. This potentially idolatrous pretension is precisely what also gives rise to the possibility of its critique in the name of God's standards against which governments will be judged in the performance of their divinely ordained tasks.

Political Authority and God's Grace

O'Donovan understands the *impossibile* of political authority to be a matter of divine providence. In *The Desire of the Nations*, his second theorem of political authority is "That any regime should actually come to hold authority and should continue to hold it, is a work of divine providence in history."[35] He argues that, in a violent world,

> God has provided us with a *saeculum*, a time to live, to believe and to hope under a regime of provisional judgment; here, too, it is possible to practise reconciliation, since God's patience waits, and preserves the world against its own self-destruction. The practical content of this interim common grace is the *political act*, …government-as-judgment.[36]

In *The Just War Re-visited*, O'Donovan appeals to common grace and argues that this operates "through government and their institutionalized judgment."[37] Governments are the recipients of God's grace for the sake of the societies which they govern, providing the judgment which such societies need in order to be sustainable. O'Donovan argues that human legal regimes exist on borrowed time, balanced precariously on a combination of power, community recognition and the need for ordered justice for as long as God providentially ordains.[38]

The persistence of divine grace despite human idolatry is a central question underlying the theology of Abraham Kuyper. In his idea of the

34. By this I do not mean that they have the nature of Platonic forms, or that they have any independent existence other than as defined by and in relation to Christ. Rather, I follow Stephen R. Holmes in holding that God's very being is the standard of goodness, truth, justice and love: *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), 66.

35. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 46, 236; idem, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 53.

36. O'Donovan, *The Just War Re-visited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6.

37. O'Donovan, *The Just War Re-visited*, 8.

38. Ibid., 121.

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antithesis, Kuyper argues that what we worship determines all other aspects of our thoughts and deeds. Thus, a scientist who is a committed atheist will be bound to interpret scientific data in an atheistic manner. Christians therefore have to construct a Christian scientific worldview to out-narrate (in Milbank's terms) their heretical and pagan counterparts. However, Kuyper did not react to the arts in the same way that he responded to the challenge of secular and anti-Christian scientific theories. In relation to the arts, these he understood to be the result of "natural gifts that flourished by virtue of common grace."[39]

As Peter Heslam summarizes Kuyper's view of culture, it resonates with Milbank's view of the parasitic nature of evil and the ontological priority of good.[40]

> Despite its corruption, creation was still under the sovereign rule of God, who restrained the destructive effects of the fall and called his followers to fulfill the cultural mandate he had entrusted to them. Human nature, once good, had not become absolutely or essentially bad as a result of the fall, even though every part of it had become corrupt—that is, warped, twisted, and misdirected. Culture, therefore, was not inherently evil but was perverted good, and the solution to the problem of Christianity and culture was not withdrawal from fallen creation in anticipation of the coming of a new order in the future, but a radical conversation and renewal of that creation in the present.[41]

Kuyper appropriates common grace, like sanctifying grace, to the Holy Spirit. The differentiation between the Spirit's work in common grace and in sanctifying grace is not intended to create another impermeable barrier of the type raised between nature and grace or reason and faith but corresponds, in the case of the distinction between Church and government, to an institutional bifurcation. Human political authorities are agents used by the triune God for the purposes of common grace and given coercive powers in order to do so. The Church is an agent of sanctifying grace, whose call is to witness to the love of God the Father, the work of God the Son and to offer the invitation which the Holy Spirit makes to repentance, faith and a new life in Christ.

Human politics is limited because political power is not the agent of salvation or sanctification, it is not the deliverer from all evil. What political authority does achieve, in however distorted and imperfect a fashion, is to allow for the preservation of genuine human goods. This preservation

39. P. S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), 215, 222, 262.

40. See also Kuyper's understanding of creation as constantly sustained by God: *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. H. de Vries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975 [1900]), 44.

41. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview*, 269.

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provides a *saeculum*, a time, for people to choose to pursue the heavenly good of the knowledge and love of God.

Closed liberalism misunderstands the nature of the political task because of its commitment to secularism. Secularism arises when the idea of the *saeculum* is lost. It arises when the notion of the *saeculum*, a time when God waits for us, is parodied in the conception of a secular space in which we are free to ignore God. As Skillen points out, "'Secular,' in the American context, now means 'not religious'."[42] The same is true in Britain. Therefore, "the secular" to which Milbank rightly objects has to be re-conceptualized as "the saecular." As in the Middle Ages, the *saeculum* has to be understood "not [as] a space but [as] the time before the eschaton."[43] The *saeculum* exists not as an autonomous reality but as a *time* within which God's loving purposes unfold.

As O'Donovan says:

> secular institutions have a role confined to this passing age (*saeculum*). They do not represent the arrival of the new age and the rule of God… [T]hey are not agents of Christ, but are marked for displacement when the rule of God in Christ is finally disclosed. They are Christ's conquered enemies; yet they have an indirect testimony to give, bearing the marks of his sovereignty imposed upon them, negating their pretensions and evoking their acknowledgment.[44]

The solution to the secular is to recognize that the *eschaton* is the end of time as we know it and the eschatological kingdom of God will find its fulfilment in God's way in God's timing. The ambiguities between good and evil which characterize the present age are the product of the fact that God has allotted each one of us *time* on this earth. This *time* is an opportunity for repentance, for faith and for obedience. It is a time in which the Holy Spirit is at work in people's lives, a work which Kuyper recognized occurs different ways before and after conversion.[45] A church which understands God's good gift of time in this way will respond to it in expectant mission, in seeking to gather within its fold those who are turning to God. Such a church, engaged in hopeful but constant mission, will recognize the fragility and complexity of its own community, the extent to which it falls short of its Lord, and will be best placed to recognize the good and evil which occurs both within and beyond its

42. J. W. Skillen, "Acting Politically in Biblical Obedience?" in *A Royal Priesthood?* ed. C. Bartholomew *et al.* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), 398.

43. Milbank, "The Gift of Ruling," 217.

44. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 211–12; M. Daniel Carroll, "The Power of the Future in the Present: Eschatology and Ethics in O'Donovan and Beyond," in *A Royal Priesthood?*, ed. Bartholomew *et al.*, 124.

45. Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 11, 24, 26, 46.

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boundaries. In this way, the *hubris* of Christendom can be avoided and the limits of the secular *polis* acknowledged.

Re-envisioning Political Liberalism as Political Limitism

Although it has been argued above that political authority is subject to ontological constraints and that it can be used by God to provide a time, a *saeculum*, in which people can choose the supreme good, not all political authorities are equally good. Closed liberalism as an approach to political authority suffers particular consequences as a result of the idolatry into which it has fallen. This third section of the article seeks to explore the problems besetting closed liberalism, before turning to the visions of political limitism offered by O'Donovan and Milbank. Criticism of their accounts is reserved for the final section of this article.

The Impact of the Loss of Eternity on Politics

As a liberal understanding of politics, closed liberalism holds to the idea that political power should be limited. However, the effectiveness of this idea is profoundly undercut by the fact that closed liberalism has forgotten that there is a limit on the *polis*. O'Donovan argues that a society which has lost sight of eternity will inevitably overload the present age with meaning and significance, and so will cease to be saecular.[46]

One of the profound insights of Augustine's *City of God*, retrieved in their own ways by Milbank and O'Donovan, is that the church and not the political entity is the most important society. When the idea of eternity is lost to a society, then the Church ceases to be the most important society, or even an equal interlocutor of government, and is reduced to a voluntary association of individuals who choose organized religion as a recreational activity.

Another consequence of the loss of eternity is that government has to provide the answer to all problems. The corollary of Marx's accusation that the Church did nothing more than promise people recompense in the life to come whilst doing nothing to alleviate conditions on earth has proved to be the tyranny of regimes attempting to establish heaven on earth. Radical orthodoxy argues that the secular state is a parody of the Church or of the New Jerusalem.[47] For closed liberalism, this tendency manifests itself in the absolutization of individual human rights.[48] For

46. O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love*, 42, 69; *The Ways of Judgment*, 76–7.

47. William T. Cavanaugh, "The City: Beyond Secular Parodies," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, 182–8.

48. In "The Gift of Ruling," 235, Milbank argues that these rights "only exist when the State proclaims them, yet the State alone cannot legitimate them, else they cease to be natural and so general and objective."

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the enforcement of such rights the state is appealed to as the guardian of the individual to the detriment of all intermediate communities and groupings.[49]

A third way in which closed liberalism is affected by the loss of eternity is through the simple equation of the nation-state with the perfect society. Thus, argues Insole, the American conception of political order manages to combine a dangerous form of political liberalism with a belief in eternity because of its self-understanding as the chosen nation.[50]

The first and third errors are mirror images of one another. Whereas the first rejects any eschatology, the third is guilty of over-realized eschatology, the claim that the fullness of the kingdom of heaven is or can be found or founded on earth, embodied in a particular nation or *polis*. The second error indicates the convertibility of the other two. Human rights are absolutized because the present life is the only time available for self-realization and the sate is therefore appealed to as the guardian and all-powerful provider of the resources for self-realization.

Legislative diarrhoea is a disease of closed liberalism. Without the horizon of eternity, governments are seen as all-powerful and therefore capable of solving every evil under the sun. Because earthly goods are the only goods they are all-important. The response to every new tragedy is a new law.

O'Donovan's Account of Early Modern Liberalism

In *The Desire of the Nations*, O'Donovan regards the apogee of Christian political thought as what he calls "early modern liberalism" which under the impact of the gospel arrived at the principles of freedom, mercy in judgment, natural right and openness to speech.[51] These principles, which O'Donovan might be persuaded to call political virtues, give rise to certain features of a liberal political order which O'Donovan discusses in chapter 10 of *The Ways of Judgment*. Without ascribing ultimate value to these principles, O'Donovan wishes to preserve them whilst unmasking the

49. William T. Cavanaugh, "Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State is not the Keeper of the Common Good," in *In Search of the Common Good*, ed. P. D. Miller and D. P. McCann (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 301–32 (312, 314, 317–9, 325, 329–30); Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 100.

50. Insole attributes this to the effect of the Calvinist doctrine of election: see ch. 3 of *The Politics of Human Frailty*; though it seems to me that it is likely to have more to do with the Wesleyan doctrine of perfection.

51. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 250–71; C. Bartholomew, "Introduction," in *A Royal Priesthood?*, ed. Bartholomew *et al.*, 34; J. Chaplin, "Political Eschatology and Responsible Government," in the same volume, 272.

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dangerous claims to religious neutrality and the exaltation of individual wills present in late-modern liberalism.[52]

In O'Donovan's account of freedom, it is not a matter of individualism as a *credo*, but rather a recognition that while "[t]here can be no separation of law and morality; …there can be, and is, …a sphere of individual responsibility before God in which the public good is not immediately at stake."[53] "Mercy in judgment" is the practice of human judgment as tempered and informed by the recognition that all human judgments are "under the judgment which God made on the cross, a judgment that was at the same time a redemption."[54] "Natural right" is, for O'Donovan, the affirmation that because of the work of Christ certain things now follow: a natural equality between human beings; the affirmation of the affinities of family, locality, language, tradition, culture and law; the international community as a law-governed forum; and "the creaturely cohabitation of human and non-human species in a common world."[55] Finally, "openness to speech" is a matter of "access to public deliberations."[56]

For O'Donovan, Christian thought leads to a law-governed society, which is sustained and informed by "the missionary presence of the church within its midst" and "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus."[57] The sympathetic ruler does not aim to implement the Kingdom of God by force or to make their whole populace good Christians, but instead to maintain a relatively peaceful and just social space within which the Church's mission can flourish. Such a ruler acknowledges that their rule is subject to the rule of law, which it is their responsibility to promote and uphold.[58]

For O'Donovan, because of its acknowledgment of the Church and of the four principles set out above, it is a Christian government which is most cognizant of the limits on its jurisdiction.

> [t]he most truly Christian state understands itself most thoroughly as "secular." It makes the confession of Christ's victory and accepts the relegation of its own authority… Like [John] the Baptist, it has a place on the threshold of the Kingdom, not within it. The only corresponding service that the church can render to this authority of the passing world is to help it make that act of self-denying recognition.[59]

52. O. O'Donovan, *Peace and Certainty: A Theological Essay on Deterrence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 94; Lockwood O'Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 139–41.
53. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 255.
54. Ibid., 256.
55. Ibid., 262.
56. Ibid., 270.
57. Ibid., 249.
58. O'Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection*, 217.
59. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 219, 243.

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Chaplin calls O'Donovan's position one of "Christian liberalism," or better, "Christian constitutionalism."[60] Rowland describes O'Donovan's work as "in many ways an apology for a consciously theological, though much chastened, liberal polity."[61]

Milbank and "the Gift of Ruling"

Goudzwaard's *Idols of our Time* calls the Church to subject contemporary ideologies to the criteria of "Christ's commands to walk in his truth, to do justice, and to love our neighbours as ourselves"[62] and so to expose their nature. Milbank's article "The Gift of Ruling" can be read as an outline of a social vision which sketches how political authority would be understood differently if its practices were subjected to, in particular, the Christian understandings of charity, truth and justice.

In "The Gift of Ruling," published after Insole's attack on the illiberal tendencies of radical orthodoxy in *The Politics of Human Frailty*, Milbank offers an account of what he sees as the important features of mediaeval Christendom which have been lost by closed liberalism. Milbank commends the Church's desire "to infuse secular practices of warfare, punishment, trade and feudal tenure with the exercise of mercy and forbearance" and its understanding that "redemptive charity…was a state pertaining between people, not simply a virtue exercised by an individual."[63] He therefore contends for an understanding of rule in which it is not a question of power asserted but rather of rule shared.[64]

For Milbank, the Christian understanding of truth is that "truth requires free consent else it is not understood."[65] This is a religious conception of truth "fully at home only, one could argue, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam." Democracy must be circumscribed by a recognition of the historical "transmission of the gift of truth across time" and saved from demagoguery by "the reservation of a non-democrative educative sphere concerned with finding the truth, not ascertaining majority opinion."[66]

Finally, Milbank contends that "What really guarantees human dignity and freedom…is something like the idea that the individual is in the image of God."[67] This alone grounds adequately an understanding of what is due to people and how they should be treated.

60. Chaplin, "Political Eschatology and Responsible Government," 269, 283 n. 74.
61. C. Rowland, "Response to *The Desire of the Nations*," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 11 (1998): 77–85 (77).
62. Goudzwaard, *Idols of our Time*, 24.
63. Milbank, "The Gift of Ruling," 216.
64. Ibid., 224–5.
65. Ibid., 236.
66. Ibid., 231.
67. Milbank, "The Gift of Ruling," 237.

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O'Donovan's and Milbank's Ideas Compared

It is possible to distinguish between Milbank's and O'Donovan's accounts. Milbank's more Catholic vision is more corporatist, O'Donovan's more Protestant rendering has greater space for the individual's direct accountability to God on certain matters. Both argue, however, for a Christian critique of secular political authority and identify limits to that authority. For O'Donovan, the central limit on political authority is that, in the light of the resurrection, its jurisdiction is restricted to the necessary task of doing judgment.[68] In Milbank's thought, the limit comes through a conception of ruling as sharing and gift in opposition to the idea of absolute sovereignty.[69] Thus both identify a positive, but limited, role, which governmental authorities are called to play.

In their different ways, O'Donovan and Milbank offer versions of what might be described as political limitism. Political limitism insists that there are limits on political authority. These limits are twofold. First, there is a limit on political power. No one within the *polis* is given absolute power. Second, there is a limit on the *polis*. The *polis* is not understood to be the only society, the all-sufficient society or the most important society. Instead, the Church stands over against the *polis* as an independent institution affirming that citizenship of heaven is ultimately more important than citizenship of the United Kingdom or the United States. It is because of the two limits, the limits on political power and the limits on the *polis*, that political limitism insists that government is not called upon to resolve religious questions by force or to repress dissent.

Whereas closed liberalism issues a torrent of legislation, as the response to every high-profile incident of evil is "something must be done," political limitism would start from a presumption against government intervention, with the burden of proof being on government to show why and how governmental action would make things better.

Evaluating Political Limitism

In this essay it has been argued that the Augustinian vision of O'Donovan and Milbank collides with the self-understanding of closed liberalism. Nonetheless, it has been seen that O'Donovan is able to defend a vision of political order which has many features which could be regarded as characteristically "liberal." Similarly, Milbank's vision for the polity set out in "The Gift of Ruling" turns out to be more "liberal" in tone than Insole might have feared. This essay has deliberately considered them at

68. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 147–8; *The Ways of Judgment*, 5.
69. Milbank, "The Gift of Ruling," 224–5.

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their most winsome, for their arguments deserve to be evaluated at their highest before moving straight to a hermeneutic of suspicion.

The dangers which critics identify in Milbank's and O'Donovan's visions are those of coercion and *hubris*. With regard to the first criticism, Gorringe appeals to hundreds of years of the violent history of Christendom in mediaeval Europe and Latin America as evidence that Christendom was not a dream worth chasing.[70] With regard to the second criticism, Insole points to contemporary American politics and what he sees as its theological antecedents as evidence of the dangers of a *polis* which believes that it has discovered the truth, and therefore has God on its side.

The concerns about coercion and *hubris* would be justified if it can be shown that Milbank and O'Donovan are, after all, Idealists. The charge of Idealism can be made against Milbank and O'Donovan in one of two ways. It can be contended that their political theologies should be read as proposing an Idealist view of the possibilities for political authority. Alternatively, it could be argued that the overall direction of their theologies is such that, whether consciously or not, an Idealist politics is the result.

Express Idealism in the Theology of Milbank and O'Donovan

On the accounts offered by Milbank and O'Donovan, even if a *polis* adopts an understanding of the nature of temporal, finite, goods which is informed by the Church, it remains idolatrous insofar as it pursues those goods without reference to the eternal, infinite, good, without reference to God. Even an attenuated political liberalism remains, in Milbank's view, idolatrous unless it becomes confessionally monotheistic[71] or, as O'Donovan appears to argue, confessionally Christian.[72] O'Donovan insists that he is only in favour of "the theological *possibility* of the Christian state, but not its *necessity*."[73] The difficulty is that the logic of his argument seems to lead to the theological *impossibility* of the legitimate non-confessional State. Hauerwas and Fodor argue that, on O'Donovan's account, "The judgments required for legitimacy, that is, the kind of rule Paul justified in Romans 13, [are] morally impossible for societies that do not acknowledge God."[74] The discussion set out above indicates how

70. Gorringe, "Authority, Plebs and Patricians," 24–9.

71. Milbank in "The Gift of Ruling," 231 and 236 seeks to argue that the Abrahamic religions can, on the basis of their Platonic-Aristotelian and mystical versions, find sufficient common ground to forge a religiously informed social democracy.

72. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 195.

73. O'Donovan, 'Response to Gerrit de Kruijf', in *A Royal Priesthood?*, ed. Bartholomew *et al.*, 239; original emphasis.

74. S. Hauerwas and J. Fodor, "Remaining in Babylon: Oliver O'Donovan's Defense of Christendom," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 11 (1998): 30–55 (51 n. 12).

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O'Donovan seeks to escape from this *impasse*. The question is whether O'Donovan can insist on the legitimacy of the representative choice for God[75] without also insisting on its necessity.

Implicit Idealism in the Theology of Milbank and O'Donovan

Even if the charge of express idealism could be deflected, and Milbank and O'Donovan were to establish that their political theologies were intended to give rise to a polity which recognized the limits of politics and was recognizably liberal, there is still the question of whether the overall direction of their thought fatally undermines this intention. Such a question is too big to be definitively answered at the end of a short article, but it must be seriously posed.

With regard to Milbank, the concerns relate to the emphasis he places on education and to his approach to truth. In relation to education, because Milbank succumbs to postmodern word inflation, his endorsements of the use of "coercion" for educative purposes leave one wondering where he would draw the line.[76] Notwithstanding Milbank's stress on free consent to truth, in *Theology and Social Theory* he was prepared to endorse Augustine's admission of "the necessity for the Church as well as the *imperium* to use coercive methods" on the basis that such coercive action can "still be 'redeemed' by retrospective acceptance, and so contribute to the final goal of peace."[77]

In relation to truth, there is a concern that Milbank's appeal to narrative cloaks assertive truth-claims, claims which Gunton points out "run the risk of calling attention not to the Lord and his Christ but to the rightness of the believer or the group."[78] Gardner finds that there is something alarming about radical orthodoxy's "apparent obliviousness to the power and the violence—to the politics—which it inveighs."[79] Hanvey suggests that it is worth asking whether the implicit hermeneutics of radical orthodoxy may not actually be the will to power. On this account, "'God' is constantly converted into an object and claimed as a convenient site or space from which to construct radical orthodoxy's edifice, "a consummable fiction."[80] Laurence Hemming warns of the danger of radical orthodoxy

75. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 222, 249.

76. J. Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 37–8, 113, 184.

77. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 418.

78. C. E. Gunton, "Editorial," *The International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1.2 (1999): 117.

79. Lucy Gardner, "Listening at the Threshold," in *Radical Orthodoxy?—A Catholic Enquiry*, ed. L. P. Hemming (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 137.

80. James Hanvey, "Conclusion: Continuing the Conversation," in *Radical Orthodoxy?—A Catholic Enquiry*, ed. Hemming, 167.

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asserting the idea of God, who would therefore be a human fabrication,[81] and that the very name of the movement itself, by the appropriation of "radical" and "orthodox," makes implicit claims to truth and authority which are simultaneously exposed as claims to power.[82] Most critically of all, Insole says that radical orthodoxy's "thorough-going constructivism about truth…allows theology to create worldviews in the interests of political agendas."[83]

With regard to O'Donovan, concern centres around O'Donovan's appropriation of Christendom. Gorringe fears that O'Donovan's *apologia* for Christendom fails to recognize that "the whole enterprise was…a misunderstanding of mission, a mis-construal of what power and authority really look like in the light of Jesus of Nazareth."[84] Even if that misunderstanding was not total, the fear is that a constitutionally entrenched church would succumb once again to the temptations of worldly power and wealth.[85]

The criticisms of Milbank and O'Donovan merit further investigation. The present article has sought to show, however, that Milbank and O'Donovan offer a nuanced critique of political liberalism, which criticizes its current self-understanding as idolatrous, and argues for a recovery or transformation of its nature as a political doctrine regarding the limited nature of government, and that this critique provides a viable way of understanding political authority as a potentially idolatrous yet nonetheless en-graced reality. Read at their best, they offer a theological justification of a form of political liberalism which "rob[s] it of its pretensions towards absolute power and significance."[86] If there are significant, perhaps even fatal, problems with their accounts, it is for others to show that they can do better.

Conclusions

On the Augustinian account offered by Milbank and O'Donovan, all societies which are not governed in accordance with a monotheistic or

81. L. P. Hemming, "Quod Impossibile Est! Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy," in *Radical Orthodoxy?—A Catholic Enquiry*, 92; see also G. Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), 83.

82. L. P. Hemming, "Conclusion: Continuing the Conversation," in *Radical Orthodoxy?—A Catholic Enquiry*, 167.

83. Insole, *The Politics of Human Frailty*, 135–6.

84. Gorringe, "Authority, Plebs and Patricians," 27.

85. C. J. D. Greene, "Revisiting Christendom," in *A Royal Priesthood?*, ed. Bartholomew *et al.*, 332–3.

86. Greene, "Revisiting Christendom," 337.

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Christian confession are idolatrous and, as Augustine pointed out with regard to the Christianized Roman Empire, even those which claim to be Christian may still be enslaved to the worship of another idolatry. Closed liberalism, by denying that God is the supreme good, falls into the idolatrous pursuit of lesser goods. How then can Christians account for and respond to the pseudo-peace of the idolatrous *polis*?

As has been seen, the answer is both ontological and providential. The goods which a society pursues are, for the most part, genuine goods. They are good in themselves; it is the disordered pursuit of them which is an evil. Even troublesome motivations like ambition, power and fame can be understood as a disordered search for the significance which can only truly be found in reference to God.[87] The relative goodness of the goods pursued by human beings is grounded in God alone, who is the source of all goodness. Thus politics, like marriage, work, play, friendship, food and drink, shelter and security, falls into that broad category of things which are still en-graced despite their fallenness and their misapprehension by human beings.

There is a providential constraining of human evil. Political authority is *a* part, though not necessarily the most important part, of the means by which the chaos wrought by the disordered and inordinate pursuit of temporal goods by human beings is restrained. This provides a space and time in which people can discover the right ordering of their earthly loves through subordination to the supreme good of knowing and loving God.

The Church, by its very nature, calls governments to understand the limits of their task. It affirms the role of political authorities but insists that political entities are not the ultimate society. The Church has a message about the true nature of the ends which governments may pursue, but it is also bound to witness to its Lord and Saviour, who sustains human governments for a time through the work of the Spirit even as they rule over idolatrous societies.

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87. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (London: HarperCollins, 2002 [Geoffrey Bles, 1946]), ix.

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