

“Beyond Secular Liberalism, Theological Traditionalism, and Incomplete Pragmatism: A  
Milbankian Engagement with Jeffrey Stout’s *Democracy and Tradition*”

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## Introduction

My paper is entitled, “Beyond Secular Liberalism, Theological Traditionalism, and Incomplete Pragmatism.” This is a borrowing and modification of the name of a segment in the final chapter of Jeffrey Stout’s book, *Democracy and Tradition*, entitled “Beyond Secular Liberalism and Theological Traditionalism.”<sup>1</sup> This portion of his text summarizes his book’s argument. His concern is for democracy, and he fears it is in trouble if religious claims are excluded from democratic conversation. To address this trouble, Stout engages in “immanent criticism” of “secular liberals” and “new traditionalists,” the former group including John Rawls and Richard Rorty, and of the latter including Stanley Hauerwas, Alasdair MacIntyre, and John Milbank. By immanent criticism he means meeting someone on their own ground, arguing from *their* “idiosyncratic premises,” giving them reasons why they should accept *your* conclusions (DT, 72). Stout argues against the liberals that their exclusion of religious claims from political decision-making will have disastrous consequences for political unity, and it violates the freedoms of speech and religious expression (DT, 63-91). He argues against the traditionalists that they have wrongly taken the terms of constitutional democracy from the liberals at face value, rather than looking at actual democratic political culture (DT, 103). Because the liberal descriptive account is apparently false, Stout thinks the traditionalist rejection of liberal democracy is unjustified. This is a central premise of

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 294-300. All citations will appear in the text as DT, accompanied by the page number.

Stout's book, which has the overall project of arguing that democracy is a tradition, over against claims such as those of MacIntyre, that modern politics is "civil war carried on by other means."<sup>2</sup>

Because no significant work has been done to assess Stout's take on Milbank, the "Beyond Incomplete Pragmatism" of my title represents what I intend to add to the conversation, by assessing the criticisms Stout levels against Milbank's project of "refusing the secular" (DT, 103) as well as Stout's own account of secularization.<sup>3</sup> I will argue that in their dispute over secularization Milbank offers a more convincing story than Stout does, as well as a more complete pragmatism as a politics to employ in a "secularized" society. I offer this as immanent criticism of Stout's book, to convince him that he needs a more robust, *theological*, version of pragmatism to make the politics he desires intelligible. To put my thesis in a sentence, it is this: Jeffrey Stout offers the defense of pragmatic democracy as a desirable tradition of human politics to participate in, without properly acknowledging its intellectual source; he should, on the basis of his own commitments, recognize a better political source in Christian theology.

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<sup>2</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 263. Stout cites this quote in DT, 118.

<sup>3</sup> Much has been written in response to Stout's engagements with MacIntyre and Hauerwas, but no significant work has been done to assess Stout's take on Milbank. Articles that engage the New traditionalists in general without focusing on Milbank include: Philip Gordon Ziegler, "Christian Theology and Democratic Politics in Conversation with Jeffrey Stout," *Theology Today* 63/2 (July 2006): 227-234; Linell E. Cady, "Secularism, secularizing, and secularization: reflections on Stout's Democracy and tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73/3 (Spring 2005): 871-885. Those dealing with Stout and MacIntyre include: Ted A. Smith, "Eschatological Memories of Actually Existing Democracy," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27/1 (Spring-Summer 2007): 137-156; M. Cathleen Kaveny, "Between Example and Doctrine: Common Law and Morality," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33/4 (December 2005): 669-695; Pavel Hejzlar, "Beyond foundationalism and relativism in social theory: MacIntyre, Stout and Walzer," *Communio Viatorum* 47/3 (2005): 296-324; G. Scott Davis, "The Pragmatic Turn in the Study of Religion," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33/4 (December 2005): 659-668. A fascinating book that deals with Stout and the New Traditionalists: Craig Hovey, *Speak Thus: Christian Language in Church and World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008). Stanley Hauerwas responded to Stout in "Postscript: Reply to Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*," in *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, Brazos, 2004).

This paper is divided into two asymmetrical parts. In “Beyond Secular Liberalism and Theological Traditionalism,” I will first give a summary of Stout’s project; second, his account of secularization; and third, his criticisms of Milbank. In “Beyond Incomplete Pragmatism,” I pose questions to Stout’s project: about his story of secularization, the role of the nation-state, and his justification of democracy and pragmatism, respectively. My essay then culminates by arguing that Milbank offers a more complete (and therefore more desirable) pragmatism.

## I. BEYOND SECULAR LIBERALISM AND THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONALISM

### **I.1: The Mission of *Democracy and Tradition***

The project Stout embarks on is the construction of “an alternative public philosophy,” as an “acceptable path” between secular liberalism and new traditionalism (DT, 296). His *orientation* is pragmatic in nature, and this is consistently evident in his critiques of liberals and traditionalists, as well as in his delineation of what his alternative philosophy should accomplish. Stout also develops a pragmatic *philosophy*, which takes the best insights of the liberals and traditionalists, and “splits the difference” in Hegelian fashion, to develop a “Hegelian pragmatist” philosophy (138). Pragmatism can mean many things, but he has in mind a practical philosophy: “pragmatism is the philosophical space in which democratic rebellion against hierarchy combines with traditionalist love of virtue to form a new intellectual tradition that is indebted to both” (DT, 13).

But the *Hegelian* element in his philosophy is not incidental; he thinks indebtedness to Hegel is what the traditionalists and the liberals have in common. It is also from Hegel that Stout gets his concern for a community of virtue (DT, 194), the inspiration to refuse

a Kantian universal morality and rationality (DT, 77-82), and the method of pushing the conversation forward through dialectical reasoning (DT, 13). Hegel is where everything converges, though this is Hegel stripped of metaphysics (DT, 246-269). Stout offers all of this as one self-consciously standing in a democratic *tradition*, which includes Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Dewey, Walt Whitman, and Henry David Thoreau (DT, 19-41).

A central argument in his book is that democracy is a tradition, rather than an atomizing impulse that destroys community. The key way in which Stout goes about establishing this claim is through negating others' arguments. Arguing that both the traditionalists and the liberals wrongly describe democratic culture, he offers a redescription of his own. He rejects claims that theological reasons should be excluded from making and defending political decisions (DT, 63), and he refuses any Kantian-like common rationality as legitimate for democracy (whereby the only valid political decisions are ones "no reasonable person would reject") (DT, 66). Because the liberal articulation is neither accurate of actual democratic culture, nor is the idea of a common rationality philosophically defensible, Stout thinks the traditionalists are not justified in their rejection of democratic culture (DT, 77). On the positive side of his argument *tradition* Stout claims continuity with a tradition including figures such as the American transcendentalists and various others, though it seems that he simply wants to embrace modern thought, while denying that modern thought is a "total break with the past" (DT, 202). "The democratic practice of giving and asking for ethical reasons," Stout argues, "is where the life of democracy principally resides," and he points to the abolition of slavery as evidence of democratic success (DT, 6, 123).

Two more philosophical issues that are central to Stout's book should be mentioned. The first is "the problem of the point of view" (DT, 120). This is the issue of what gives one a perspective to critique something, or construct a philosophical position. For example, Stout thinks that modernity-bashers, whether traditionalist (DT, 160) or postmodern (DT, 287), have a serious issue, because if things are really as bad as they describe them to be, then such intelligible criticisms should not be possible on our age!<sup>4</sup> The liberal who claims that democracy is a complete break with the past (DT, 203), and the Kantian liberal also have the same problem (DT, 287), though for different reasons.<sup>5</sup>

Stout's solution to the "point of view" issue is pragmatic, by looking for the practical import of what given thinker has to say about modern democratic culture. Because Stout doubts the possibility of discerning a single "essence" to modernity, he offers a more limited approach: "When a writer says that some X is essential to our understanding of modernity, it is wise to ask: relative to what ends?" So he asks, "What concerns make sense of this writer's descriptions and evaluations, and what reason might we have for sharing those concerns or rejecting them?" (DT, 289). Stout asserts that democracy is not the essence of modernity, but modernity is complex. An appropriate attitude toward modernity is one of ambivalence. Again he directs us to the practical concern: "The question is not whether ours is an age we would prefer, all things considered, into which to be born... So our question had better be how to live here and now, under the circumstances in which we finally find ourselves" (DT, 290).

The second philosophical issue on Stout's radar is the distinction between truth and justification. He develops a "contextualist account of justification with a nonrelativist

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<sup>4</sup> I believe this is called the problem of *self-referential incoherence*.

<sup>5</sup> This is (mostly) because they deny their intellectual lineage.

account of moral truth” (DT, 240). This means that one might be justified in believing something, even if it is not true, because one’s context has limited their epistemic privileges. For Stout’s pragmatism, the default position is that people are justified in their beliefs unless they are given sufficient reason to change them (DT, 281). Stout is concerned that truth not be collapsed into justification. This is pragmatic humility, which always leaves room for improvement by recognizing that we may be wrong about things (DT, 245).

## **I.2: Stout’s Account of the Secularization of Political Discourse**

Stout makes a crucial distinction between secularized and secularism. Consequently, he really gives no account of “the secular,” but only of the secularization of political discourse. “Secularized,” on the one hand, represents “a sense in which the ethical discourse of most modern democracies... is not ‘framed by a theological perspective’ taken for granted by all those who participate in it” (DT, 93). The “framed in a theological perspective” in the middle of Stout’s sentence is quoted from *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, a frame which Radical Orthodoxy figures such as John Milbank seek to reestablish around politics, in response to the loss of this frame at the end of Christendom.<sup>6</sup> Stout thinks Milbank and friends are simply resenting the “fact” of pluralism and correlative preclusion of a theological framing of political discourse—hence the title of his chapter on this: “Secularization and Resentment” (DT, 99). But this fact of pluralism and necessary secularization is not *secularism*, Stout asserts, because “[i]t entails neither the denial of theological assumptions nor the expulsion of theological

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<sup>6</sup> John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 3. All citations hereafter will appear in the text as RONT, accompanied by the page number.

expression from the public sphere” (Ibid). By theological assumptions, he means “assumptions about the nature and existence of God” (DT, 99). “Secularism,” on the other hand, is the “ideology” of justifying secularized democracies (DT, 100). It becomes apparent, however, that the problem with secularism is not that it justifies democracy – for Stout does this much – but that those who justify it in theory tend to banish theological reasoning from political discourse. Therefore Stout has distinguished secularism from secularization, and tries to show that Milbank is wrong to resent this latter, seemingly obvious fact of pluralism.

To show that secularization is “benign” (DT, 298), Stout gives a story of secularization and pits it over against the Radical Orthodoxy story of secularization. His account claims to prioritize concrete shifts in historical practice, rather than in ideas. It can be summarized fairly easily: In the early-modern period people ceased to appeal to the Bible when engaging in public disputes, due to conflict over who has the correct interpretation of scripture. Therefore people had to appeal to other sources of authority, such as reason, and therefore “their ethical discourse was secularized” (DT, 94).

Stout gives a case study of seventeenth-century England to show how the Bible had been “dethroned” by the 1650’s from its previous status of authority in public discourse, such as in parliament (DT, 94). This is because people failed to have *consensus* on what the Bible says about political and economic matters less than *whether* the Bible has authority. Due to the obvious corruption of the church, they could no longer appeal to tradition as the authoritative interpreter of scripture. Political speech had become secularized, though the individuals in the political community did not abandon their faith (DT, 97). Stout claims that the advantage of his account of secularization over

secularism's account is that his does not depict a disenchanting world, nor does Stout have to subscribe to any theories about the inevitability of the loss of faith (DT, 98).<sup>7</sup>

Not only did this happen in Christian settings, but technological advances in travel and communication also increased the reality of pluralism, and therefore the need for secularized discourse. Stout's account of secularization is simply his account of "what can be taken for granted when exchanging reasons in public settings" (DT, 97). This means "participants in a given discursive practice are not in a position to take for granted that their interlocutors are making the same religious assumptions they are." This requires no commitment to ideologies of secularism, nor the "Secular state," nor "Secular reason" (Ibid.). People are "free to frame their contributions to it in whatever vocabulary they please," though he attenuates this claim by declaring that it is "imprudent, rhetorically speaking, to introduce explicitly theological premises into an argument intended to persuade a religiously-diverse public audience" (DT, 99). Wishing away pluralism does no good; our discourse will be secularized until our society changes.

Stout poses the following question to the traditionalists: why does anyone resent this sense of secularized discourse? He asserts that "[r]esentment of this fact is indistinguishable from resentment of religious diversity" (DT, 99). Theologians critique the incoherence of public discourse for lacking a philosophical or theological ground, but how is coherence to be gained? Whose theological assumptions should we adopt? How should we secure the agreement without using coercion? It is morally harmful if pursued by way of coercion, but Stout concludes that proposals that do not resort to coercion have

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<sup>7</sup> Implicit in this account of secularization is the admission that it occurred among Christians, specifically among Protestants. This completely side-steps the question of the church. There is a whole history of the decline of ecclesial authority and the rise of state-authority (which I do not have room to rehearse here) that is required for this story to be complete, which also begs the question of the state.

no realistic way of securing the type of agreement that anti-secularists desire (DT, 100). It is with questions like these in mind that Stout recapitulates Radical Orthodoxy's refusal of the secular, to which I will now turn.

### **I.3: Radical Orthodoxy's Refusal of the Secular**

Stout argues that contemporary theologians are resenting secularism, denouncing it in vehement terms, and William T. Cavanaugh and John Milbank are taken to task for the Radical Orthodoxy version of resentment. Stout says they reject accounts of liberalism given by Rawls and Rorty as secularist (DT, 103).<sup>8</sup> Because Stout thinks these descriptions are not accurate, rejection of democratic "political culture" is not warranted by Milbank (DT, 75-77, 84). It is important to notice here that Stout is making a crucial distinction between liberal *theory* and democratic *culture*. This is a distinction Stout accuses Milbank of not recognizing; apparently Milbank thinks our religiously diverse culture is the product of "secularist ideology" (DT, 102).

The importance of the distinction between theory and culture play into the most general critique Stout offers of Radical Orthodoxy – that it is a form of "intellectualism" (DT, 101). Stout accuses Milbank of this in two ways: (1) in his account of the rise of secularism, and (2) in his proposed response to secularism. He also indicts Milbank for giving a dichotomous account of church and world. I will deal with each of these in turn.

Radical Orthodoxy focuses on secularization as "the social and discursive consequences of intellectual error" (DT, 101). Cavanaugh claims that this error includes (1) stripping the sacred from a profane remainder, and (2) the replacement of the Christian mythos of salvation for another mythos in which the nation-state is the savior

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<sup>8</sup> To my knowledge Milbank does not in fact address either Rawls's or Rorty's accounts of liberalism, and Stout gives no citation of this supposed rejection of them.

from religious violence (DT, 101). Yet the State has failed to save us, and necessarily so, because the ground on which it is built – the idea of social contract – is implicitly violent. Stout points out, however, “that most liberal theorists have taken pains to deny that the state is appropriately seen as a vehicle of salvation” (Ibid.).

Radical Orthodoxy’s fatal flaw is tracing secularity as an idea, brought about by faulty theology, and to be corrected theologically. Stout finds the “intellectualism in this account of secularization extremely implausible” (Ibid.). He thinks Radical Orthodoxy has taken over the secularist story of secularization, a narrative that now lies in shambles because it falsely predicted the end of religion. Stout proffers a more “down-to-earth” story (DT, 102), in which pluralism drove the secularization of political discourse. This then produced a “desacralization” of the political sphere alone (not culture); where theory came in was in trying to justify what already existed. Theory is present, but does not exhibit the causality that Radical Orthodoxy ascribes to it. History rarely works in a theory driven way, and secularists have never been great enough in numbers to produce secular culture (Ibid.).

Stout thinks the question for political theology is this: “Where, if at all, does God’s authority over all of creation figure into this picture?” He says Radical Orthodoxy answers it “by taking secularism’s account of modern democracy at face value and then refusing the secular as antitheological” (Ibid). They think God’s authority over a political order needs to be explicit, but Stout says this should not be the case if secularization occurred in a community in which all citizens agree that God has ultimate authority:<sup>9</sup> “Every Christian is free to affirm God’s ultimate authority over every political community, including his or her own, whether or not others agree” (Ibid). But he thinks

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<sup>9</sup> We ought to remember his example of England.

Milbank condemns communities outside the church by suppressing three questions:

1. Is it not possible to discern the workings of the Holy Spirit in modern democratic aspirations?
2. Is there nothing in the political life of modern democracies, or in the lives of those who are struggling for just and decent arrangements within them, that a loving God would bless?
3. If the plenitude of God's triune inner life shines forth in all of creation, cannot theology discern some such light in democratic political community? (DT, 104, paraphrased in my own words)

Stout asserts that Milbank answers these questions only indirectly, and too abstractly.

Stout wants to descend from the methodological level. Milbank supports "genuine Christian socialism," but fails to flesh this out, and he condemns the political theology of Karl Rahner for complicity with secular discourse (DT, 104). Stout wants a concrete response to the question, "what is political theology to say about the non-Christians in the coalition?" (DT, 105). "If Milbank is prepared to declare them unwitting collaborators in God's gracious rulership of the world," Stout muses, "while granting them the freedom to interpret the shared socialist project in their own terms, then one wonders why the resulting political theology should advertise itself as a 'refusal of the secular' " (Ibid). This is where the rubber meets the road. If Milbank will allow Christians, for their own theological reasons, to join non-Christians, then, Stout concludes, "he is implicitly granting the legitimacy of what I am calling a secularized political sphere" (Ibid). If not, Stout thinks he offers little more than "nostalgia, utopian fantasy, and withdrawal" into an enclave (Ibid).

Stout also thinks Milbank has a "point of view problem," which casts doubt on his criticism of modern social theory. While Milbank endorses thinkers like John Ruskin as "a relatively isolated prophet" (TST, 200), he has had to ignore the scads of thinkers that inhabit the same "major tradition of social criticism" who influenced Ruskin (DT, 106). The same applies to the appropriation of Samuel Coleridge. How can Milbank pre-define them as not belonging to their setting? Moreover, Milbank does not fill in the details of

Ruskin and Coleridge's less than desirable features, such as such as sexism and endorsement of hierarchy (DT, 107). For these reasons, Stout concludes, "If one tugs a little on Milbank's references to Ruskin and Coleridge, the whole tale begins to unravel. The democratic vitality of the modern period has been eclipsed by 'the secular' writ large" (DT, 107). Is Stout's critique of Milbank accurate? I will answer this in the negative, and give a Milbankian critique of Stout in the second half of this paper.

## **II. BEYOND INCOMPLETE PRAGMATISM**

### **II.1: A Theological, Pragmatic Response to Stout**

I propose some questions for Stout, in the Socratic manner he identifies with (DT, 72). I agree with him that a version of pragmatism can help solve the standoff between secularism and traditionalism, though I think his version proves to be inadequate. To show this, I pose some questions about his rebellion against hierarchy and the love of virtue, which are particular sites of the point of view problem. I will begin with his point of view.

#### ***Stout's Point of View***

If anyone in this conversation has a "point of view problem," then it certainly includes Stout. His critiques of Milbank, as well as his own positive defense of democracy, beg all sorts of questions that he does not address. It seems to me that Stout does not recognize how inseparably tied secularization is to the Christian West. I mean this in a twofold manner: 1) by conflating "secularized political discourse" with the "fact of pluralism," he ignores the "fact" that pluralism has always existed, and that secularization occurred first in *Christian modernity*; 2) in arguing for pragmatic philosophy and democracy he ignores their Christian roots. No where in his whole book

does Stout give a sufficient answer to the simple questions: “Why *pragmatism*? Why *democracy*?” There are good reasons to say that the egalitarian impulse of democracy is rooted in Christianity, as Stout hints at.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding secularization, Stout too literally interprets Milbank’s refusal of secularism as condemning of the whole space and time we call “modernity.” If perverse forms of Christian theology and practice gave rise to secularization, as Milbank argues, then it is clearer to see that Milbank is trying to move *beyond secular reason* because it has Christian theological roots. Milbank does not resent the fact of pluralism.<sup>11</sup> Rather, he resents the fact that heretical theology and the revival of pagan virtue combined to form secular reason (TST, 25). To move beyond this, he thinks, will require the exposure and critique of its intellectual sources. If Stout is concerned with down to earth history and pragmatic political action, and Milbank is concerned with disentangling intellectual errors, then there may be a sense in which they talk past each other. However, as I will show, Milbank refuses to separate thought and action.

### ***The Nation-State and Rebellion Against Hierarchy***

If Stout’s pragmatism contains a “democratic rebellion against hierarchy,” then he must deal with an unacknowledged “elephant in the room”: the role of the nation-state.

**[speak of self-canceling hierarchy in Milbank]** Stout frequently talks of the need for people to care for their fellow citizens, those in the same “civic nation” (e.g., DT, 5, 48),

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<sup>10</sup> DT, 204-5: “Eventually, however, church councils began to strike many Catholics as a model for more collegial, less hierarchical, exercise of authority within the church. And in certain places, including England, the demand of Protestant radicals for egalitarian social and political relationships made significant headway.”

<sup>11</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990, 2006). All citations hereafter will appear in the text as TST, accompanied by the page number.

which he distinguishes from the “nation-state” (DT, 297). He encourages democratic culture at the local, state and national levels (DT, 303), and he even gives an extended example of his own neighborhood, which has come together democratically to prevent the replacement of area housing with bureaucratic offices (DT, 300-302). But the overall frame of his discourse is, from page one, the topic of national unity (DT, 1). The reason he feels free to give reasons to and ask reasons from folks like Cavanaugh and Milbank, I give to you in his own words:

A constitutional democracy is in place. We consent to being governed by it insofar as we refrain as a people from pressing for alternatives... For us, its strictly political referent is a form of government in which the adult members of society being governed all have some share in electing rulers and are free to speak their minds in a wide-ranging discussion that rulers are bound to take seriously. (DT, 3-4)

Stout fails to distance democratic culture from the nation-state, as can be seen in his emphasis on electing rulers and appealing to rulers. His very definition of public speech is what happens when “citizens address one another qua citizens” (DT, 97). If Stout were merely asking Christians to talk to their neighbors without reference or recourse to the state, then Cavanaugh and Milbank would presumably have no problem with Stout’s proposal. But a thorough reading of *Democracy and Tradition* does not warrant the conclusion that Stout is being so modest.

### ***The Love of Virtue***

Another element of Stout’s point of view problem is the argument for the democratic virtues of piety, hope, and love (DT, 9-12, 19-41). Why are these virtues needed? Why are they justified? Stout may have taken into account what Milbank calls the “MacIntyrean voice” of *Theology and Social Theory*, which argues for “opposing modern management of power in the name of ancient virtue,” but Stout fails to heed the “nihilistic voice” of the book, the voice of “historicizing critique,” which includes a

critique of virtue (TST, 5). Friedrich Nietzsche, a figure whom Stout mostly ignores, represents this nihilistic voice, and is a figure that I think has to be dealt with if one is going to argue for morality or ethics today. Nietzsche destroys the absolute justification or moral discourse by showing that they are cultural constructions (TST, 281-3, 336), and he asserts that there is no reason that the aesthetically strong should not rule the aesthetically weak.<sup>12</sup> From whence does Stout get his egalitarian impulse? If Stout thinks the need for egalitarian politics and democratic virtue is self-evident, then it can only be the residue of Christian morality, lingering in the post-Christian West that he is observing. Even the postmodern, death-of-God atheists recognize this source of virtue, while they praise Christianity in the same breath as the agent of secularization.<sup>13</sup> Stout may have argued successfully that there is virtue in democratic tradition, but he has not acknowledged its source nor given justification for its continuing existence.

## II.2: A More Complete Pragmatism

Though *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* does in its introduction claim to “refuse the secular,” Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory* does not merely “refuse” the secular, but refuses one particular configuration of it. Milbank begins with the insight that the secular, or *saeculum*, “was [for most of Christian history] not a space, a domain, but a time – the interval between fall and eschaton” (TST, 9). As a “domain,” the secular “had to be instituted or *imagined*, both in theory and practice” (Ibid). This was imagined in a Christian culture: “It belongs to the received wisdom of sociology to interpret

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<sup>12</sup> For a clearer explication of this aesthetic notion of dominance, see the wonderful book by Murray Jardine, *The Making and Unmaking of Technological Society: How Christianity Can Save Modernity From Itself* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 218-222.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), especially chapter for (130-185) which is entitled “Religious Secularity”; See also Gianni Vattimo, “Toward a Nonreligious Christianity,” in *After the Death of God* (ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins; New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 31-37.

Christianity as itself an agent of secularization” (Ibid). But Milbank says sociology usually limits this insight to the negative aspect of secularization, the “desacralizing” aspect. He wants to draw attention to the positive side of secularization, “at the inception of modernity, [which] had to invent ‘the political’ and ‘the State’, just as much as it had to invent ‘private religion’ ” (TST, 10). Contra Stout’s critique that Milbank one-sidedly points to intellectual error alone as the villain of his story, Milbank asserts that social theory “was only possible because the new science of politics both assumed and constructed for itself a new autonomous object – defined as a field of pure power” (Ibid). To modern political thinkers this object of “the political” was first of all seen as all natural, due to their cultural inheritance of natural law, but it was also “artificial,” in the sense that they realized human creative capacity. Once this invented object was given a natural foundation, knowledge of it was a “retracing of the paths of human construction, an analysis of *factum* (the made)” (TST, 11). This *factum* could be known with such certainty, Milbank argues, that thinkers “declared legal knowledge to be more certain than medical knowledge because it lay more within the command and insight of the human will. Later, for Hobbes, Wilkins and Locke, ethical understanding is more susceptible to geometrization or probabilization [*sic*] than physics because here alone technical control can be coextensive with the object of understanding” (Ibid). It is this account of the *factum* as the secular that Milbank calls into question. Milbank offers as a counter-example “the new ‘conceptist’ notion of the Idea in mannerist art-theory and Baroque rhetoric. Here, precisely the same new recognition of the humanly artificial arises,” which allows human making its own integrity, yet preserves the fact that this is made possible by a divine source (TST, 12). He continues: “Behind this ‘pragmatist’

reconception of the idea one can trace, not a secularizing impulse, but rather influences of Trinitarian theology” (Ibid). Rather than “staking out an area of secular autonomy,” the *factum* can be seen “as a gateway to transcendence,” a view that remains “both humanist and metaphysical” (Ibid). I will argue below that Stout conceives the humanist element of the *factum*, but wrongly lops off transcendence.

### ***A More Complete Account of the State***

In a section of his book entitled “The Theological Construction of Secular Politics,” Milbank traces the way in which the *factum* came to be identified with the secular. I do not have the space here to recapitulate all of it, but I want to mention that Milbank says this was accomplished through a redefinition of the human person. Ownership is collapsed into personhood, so that “self-identity” is “self-possession: ‘Every man has a property in his own person [*sic*],’ as Locke will later say” (TST, 14). The modern state is modeled after this anthropology, as is seen clearly in Hobbes’ “Artificial Man (Leviathan) whose identity and reality are secured by an unrestricted right to preserve and control his own artificial body” (Ibid). Milbank’s verdict on this situation is stunning: “Hobbes was simply more clear-sighted than later more apparently ‘liberal’ thinkers like Locke in realizing that a liberal peace requires a single undisputed power, but not necessarily a continued majority consensus, which may not be forthcoming” (TST, 14).

I want to suggest that the reason for the ambiguity in Stout’s account (or non-account!) of the state is because he either, like Locke, is not clear-sighted enough to realize that “a liberal peace requires a single undisputed power,” or he assumes that unresolved conflict is to be handed to the authority of the nation-state, an object grounded

in a theology he wants to bypass to focus on more down-to-earth concerns. The refusal of the modern state is one of the most important moves of Radical Orthodoxy. This is not due to the resentment of religious pluralism, but a resentment of the *invention* of the modern state as a sovereign entity that requires that religion to be a primarily individual phenomenon (TST, 10). Cavanaugh cogently argues that the state has no legitimacy (RONT 182-200), and Stout has given no arguments for the legitimacy of the state. From Radical Orthodoxy's perspective there is no reason why a Christian should address anyone else *qua citizen* of the United States, because if there is a disagreement the Christian is not going to defer authority to the state. Stout wants to keep things on the ground level, and avoid metaphysics (DT, 246-269), yet he totally takes for granted the state, an institution that was founded on metaphysical theories about human nature and divine sovereignty in the writings of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau (RONT, 182-200). Radical Orthodoxy does not present a dichotomous account of God's grace, to the exclusion of everything outside the church; it merely argues that the modern state is to be rejected because it is a "simulacrum, a false, copy, of the Body of Christ" (RONT 182). If Cavanaugh, for example, appears to be complicit with constitutional democracy, it is because he is more committed to nonviolence than to violently imposing Christian socialism.<sup>14</sup>

***A More Complete Account of Virtue (by Grounding it in Transcendence)***

I also want to suggest that Stout should be more open to the *ontological* and *metaphysical* elements of pragmatism. Before explaining myself, I need to define these terms, since they can be so slippery. All I mean by ontology is claims about "the way

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<sup>14</sup> See William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), vii.

things are.” What I mean by metaphysical is that which exceeds strictly human or natural reality. I suggest Stout conceives the humanist element of the *factum*, but wrongly lops of the metaphysical aspect. He wants to claim the pragmatist tradition of Dewey and its insistence on the need for virtue, but he eschews Dewey’s “naturalist metaphysics” (DT, 34). I cite this not to defend Dewey’s *naturalistic* metaphysics, but to point out that Dewey had a reason to assert the desirability of virtue because he grounded it in a claim about the way things are (an ontological claim). If Stout thinks that the appeal of virtue is self-evident, without needing metaphysical grounding, then this can only be the vision of Christian residue in his culture.

Are Stout’s appeals to virtue arbitrary? I actually think not. He consistently avoids giving his pragmatic truth any metaphysical status, because he thinks that metaphysical versions of truth such as correspondence theories add “no explanatory value” to the idea of truth (DT, 248). He thinks that *adding* metaphysics does nothing to explain how truth works, or how truth is not purely relative. Truthful sentences “work” because they exhibit “accuracy” (DT, 249). When he argues this way, he has separated the true from the good and the beautiful, and has a purely instrumental view of truth. Yet he refuses to define truth, because he wants truth to be able to push our practices to improve. For example, in his discussion of excellence (doing something well), he gives an answer to the following question: how does excellence not collapse “into *what human beings love and admire?*” (DT, 262). By keeping it open-ended: “there might well be some forms of excellence that cannot be reduced to a disposition to elicit approval from human beings ... [T]here could, it seems to me, be a form of excellence that transcended even an idealized human capacity to recognize it” (DT, 263). Similarly, he says things like “If the God of the

philosophers is dead, not everything is permitted” (DT, 268). But this is precisely what he fails to make intelligible. Stout concludes the chapter where this discussion is placed, with the following conclusion:

“Where do we find ourselves?” writes Emerson. “In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none, we wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight.” The stair I am on is higher than the one below me. It affords me a better view. This view excels the other. I declare it excellent – but not perfect, for I can imagine a better one. Does this judgment depend, for its objectivity, on whether the uppermost actual stair affords a perfect view? If I cannot yet see the top, don’t I still know what I’m talking *about* when I assert the excellence of the view I now enjoy? (DT, 269)<sup>15</sup>

This ends a chapter entitled “Ethics Without Metaphysics.” It appears to me that the reason Stout espouses pragmatism and democracy is because he senses something more than human in human making. He makes a step of faith when he utters the following line: “My democratic wager is that the grounds for this-worldly hope and the evils we need to resist are both to be found among the people” (DT, 58). The very idea that history is going somewhere, *progressing* toward a telos, is a Hebrew and Christian idea.<sup>16</sup> I invite him to view the *factum* “as a gateway to transcendence,” a view that remains “both humanist and metaphysical.” From his own perspective, he has really given no reason why he should not admit the metaphysical sign in human making, other than trying to keep the focus on practical matters. If Stout is into giving and asking for reasons, he

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<sup>15</sup> Randy L. Friedman argues that Stout offers an attenuated version of Emersonian thought. Stout’s “secular, sceptical, relativist, anti-realist, and anti-metaphysical” appropriation of Emerson deviates from true Emersonian thought: “In fact, on my reading of the strand of pragmatism running from Emerson through James to Dewey, the pluralism of the Emersonian democrat *depends* on certain metaphysical commitments. The traditional reading of Emerson as anti-religion, and by extension, anti-religious, impedes a better understanding of self-reliance and obfuscates some of the Emersonian inheritances in James and Dewey.” See “Traditions of Pragmatism and the Myth of the Emersonian Democrat,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 43.1 (2007) 154-184. I am quoting from 154.

<sup>16</sup> For a theological and political perspective on this, see Murray Jardine, *The Making and Unmaking of Technological Society*, 13-25. For a sociological perspective, see Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005), xiii, 6-15.

needs to give reasons for people to participate in democracy, and to recognize the authority of the state. If he does not, his position is as arbitrary as any.

But because Milbank and Cavanaugh offer an account of the rise of the state, they are more justified in rejecting it than Stout is in recommending it. Stout can be dissatisfied with their “withdrawal” from the state, but they have argued that they are rejecting a “disciplined imagination of space and time,” which they have deconstructed and found wanting. If Stout wants to distance himself from the state, then why should he be concerned anyway? But I have suggested that his project is not so distinct from that of the state, and therefore I think he needs to heed Radical Orthodoxy’s critique of the state.<sup>17</sup>

Though I do not have enough space to give a full account of Milbank’s version of pragmatism, I will outline some of its most important features. As Stout recognizes, when it comes to doctrines of nature and grace Milbank prefers the tradition represented by Maurice Blondel to that of Karl Rahner and liberation theology (DT, 104). Stout accuses Milbank of holding a dichotomous view of the church and world, in which the former alone is graced. Nothing could be further from the truth. According to Milbank, both schools see all of creation as graced, but Rahner tends to conflate nature into grace, or, he “naturalizes the supernatural” (TST, 207). This is seen in the emphasis and the direction of his account of graced-nature. For Rahner there is a sense in which nature is grace-imbued in an obvious manner, such that theological and secular disciplines have the same perspective, effectively carving out an autonomous sphere for secularity (TST, 208).

Blondel, on the other hand, tends to “supernaturalize the natural,” such that nature is a

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<sup>17</sup> Additionally, as far as the accusation that they withdraw from the discursive practice of democratic conversation, Milbank and Cavanaugh are anything but sectarian, as they engage theorists from every perspective in their work. One would only need to examine the indexes of their books to see this.

gateway to transcendence. He offers a “supernatural pragmatism,” in which “thought and action are inseparably fused,” because he sees action, rather than contemplation, as the “mode of ingress for the concrete, supernatural life” (TST, 209, 207).

This “supernatural pragmatism” is not an epistemology that prescribes where to start thinking; from this perspective thought is *always already happening* in every action. There is a sense in which the true is the made, and as humans we wonder at our creativity and fabricating capabilities. What I take from Milbank and Blondel is that only when we see human making as a gateway to transcendence do we find out the reason why what we make is in any sense true.<sup>18</sup> But not all action is good – surely Stout admits this – which leads to the question of why certain actions are to be preferred over others.

Action can only be desired because it is part of a narrative. If Stout thinks Cavanaugh and Milbank are intellectualists, it is because he has not comprehended why they refuse to separate thought from action, or from language. They are narrating an interpretation of the world that shapes the world we act within. Milbank says people can only be “out-narrated,” not refuted: “if we can persuade people – for reasons of literary taste – that Christianity offers a much better story,” then they will see Christian virtue as desirable (TST, 331). For him, this means the Christian story that claims that peace and goodness are at the heart of the world – an ontology of peace. He claims that even Plato realized that democracy was a “‘secular’ peace of temporarily suspended violence, or regulated competition” (TST, 336). If social order is linguistically constructed, placing

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<sup>18</sup> “Blondel’s action is focused in emanative *poesis*, and the key to his ‘postmodernism’ lies in his finding in what is made, the *factum*, the opening to transcendence, rather than the keeper of human autonomy. For Blondel our thought depends entirely upon contingent, theoretically unjustifiable assumptions, and on equally unjustifiable additions to the received tradition, and yet it is precisely this historicist confinement of our thought which renders it *irreducible* to any immanent process, and always dependent upon its participation in a transcendent plenitude of realized action, of thought as word and deed” (TST, 219).

humans in either harmony or in competition, then it is understandable that Milbank utters phrases such as “ethics is only a sub-sphere of aesthetics, governed by criteria of good taste” (TST, 360). This is an important element to show which *factum* is desirable.

Milbank says there is a sense in which “everything works,” and we are left without a criterion of judgment with *mere* pragmatism (TST, 344). Mere pragmatism leaves all of the different systems that work in raw competition. What is needed is an ontology that allows for difference in a peaceable manner, which for Milbank means an ontology grounded in the harmony of the Trinity, where three persons are yet one (TST, 381).

### **Conclusion: The Living Faith of the Dead**

I want to conclude by claiming that Milbank and Cavanaugh narrate a more desirable “tradition” than Stout’s democracy. I have summarized Stout’s project and his critique of Milbank, and have argued that Milbank (along with Cavanaugh) has a more complete and convincing account of secularization, as well as a more intelligible pragmatic politics than Stout does, because he offers a criterion of judgment for what this pragmatics should look like. If for some reason I were to convince Stout that this is a better pragmatism, he might still be disappointed that my immanent critique has not included a plan for a theologically framed democratic state. Aside from the fact that I don’t think we absolutely need nation-states (in the modern sense); my essay has been limited to adding to his conversation with John Milbank on secularization. I certainly want to move beyond secular liberalism. I also want to move beyond theological traditionalism, but not beyond theological tradition, and I trust that Milbank would say the same. As Jaroslav Pelikan put it, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead;

traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”<sup>19</sup> From this vantage point I say that Milbank and Cavanaugh are not traditionalists, but inheritors of a living faith. Christian tradition did not reveal the possibility of human making and then die with God when the masters of suspicion appeared on the scene. The tradition is still with us, pointing us upward to the God in whom we participate when our action is situated in the theological frame of “a highly complex, learned practice, which Jesus spells out in fully exemplary fashion” (TST, 240). The Christian ethic is the non-identical repetition, the re-performance of Christ in a new setting, which can take on manifold forms of action.

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<sup>19</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Volume 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1971), 9.