

Making Religious Practices Intelligible: A Prophetic Pragmatic Interpretation of Radical Orthodoxy

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Prophetic pragmatism and radical orthodoxy seek to overcome the limitations of traditional philosophy by means of religious practices. This essay compares and contrasts the two positions by discussing the importance of religious practices in "making sense" of the world and the lives of those who perform such practices. By taking advantage of and overcoming the postmodern age, both traditions free religion from the auspices of philosophy. However, certain theological limitations make radical orthodoxy more difficult to implement than prophetic pragmatism, which is not only free of such limitations, but can also account for the radical orthodox position.

Pragmatism, John Dewey tells us, is not about making intelligence practical; rather, it is about making practice intelligible. Instead of grounding what we do upon what we know, the pragmatist grounds what we know upon what we do. In this way, pragmatism serves as a criticism of philosophy as it is traditionally conceived. For the pragmatist, action itself is epistemological; that is, knowledge is founded on practices. There is no mind- or language-independent knowledge "out there" in a "world without us."

What do we mean by the term "intelligible?" For the pragmatist, something is intelligible when it "makes sense." The expression "X makes sense" traditionally means that one has something like a clear and distinct idea of X and that X follows from other beliefs that one holds. The pragmatist reverses the tradition; the expression "X makes sense" means nothing more than "sense is made by X." "Makes" is the dominant word here.

There are a variety of practices that make the world intelligible: scientific practices, economic practices, political practices, societal practices, and — given the venue of this essay — perhaps even philosophical practices. Excluded from this list is the type of practices that I will discuss in this essay — religious practices. Surely religious practices must be equally intelligible;

that is, some truths we hold are grounded on certain religious practices that we perform. To fail to include religious practices, when present and relevant, would make a pragmatic account quite incomplete because we would be sieving practices, excluding perhaps the very practices that are the most intelligible for ordinary people. As a liberal ironist pragmatist, I will not assume that everyone must ground their truths in religious practices; but for those who are religious, such practices must be incorporated.

Prophetic pragmatism, Cornel West's religious variety of pragmatism, opens a possibility for African-Americans to "make sense" of their lives. Since Black America is for the most part formed, grounded, and perpetuated by "Church folks," it is important to incorporate the elements of the Black church into the set of practices that makes African-American life "make sense." The truths of African-Americans, at least on the collective level, are grounded in religious practices. Pragmatism, with its emphasis on practices, serves as the theoretical backdrop for West's version of African-American philosophy.

Radical orthodoxy, the theological brainchild of John Milbank, also seeks to ground truths in religious practices. Instead of allowing philosophy to define and therefore delimit religious practices, the radical orthodox theologian uses religious practices to define and delimit philosophical concepts. This move reverses the age-old distinction between "first" and "second" theology, which established philosophy as trump over theology. Instead of looking to philosophy to make theology "make sense" (as one finds in scholasticism forward), radical orthodoxy grounds the enterprise of "making sense" in theology itself.

There are several similarities between prophetic pragmatism and radical orthodoxy. First, both traditions offer a critique of traditional philosophy. Second, both traditions ground truths in religious practices, allowing religious practices to participate in knowledge in a way that has been denied religion for a long time. Finally, both traditions align themselves with the spirit of postmodernism, only in the end to both criticize and attempt to overcome it.

There are also some very important differences between prophetic pragmatism and radical orthodoxy. Earlier, I mentioned that as a liberal ironist pragmatist I do not assume that everyone must ground the truth on religious practices. Radical orthodoxy, however, is not an ironist position. Radical orthodoxy holds that the "Truth" is grounded in *one* way, a Christian way — a Eucharistic way. This makes radical orthodoxy incompatible with any variety of pragmatism, even its closest ally, prophetic pragmatism. Also, another important, perhaps personal, difference is that prophetic pragmatism is based on the religious practices of the so-called "Low Church tradition," whereas radical orthodoxy is based on the High Liturgical traditions. That difference shuts out the exact features of the Black church experience that prophetic

pragmatism draws upon, and, I believe, radical orthodoxy is unable to account for.

I will first summarize West's prophetic pragmatism as a critique of philosophy grounded upon Black Christian practices. Section two is devoted to radical orthodoxy's use of sacramental ecclesiology as a critique of the primacy of philosophy. I then discuss how both radical orthodoxy and prophetic pragmatism share in a postmodern opportunity, yet reject the label of "postmodern" to describe their respective project. In the final section, I offer two criticisms of radical orthodoxy from a prophetic pragmatic perspective: (1) radical orthodoxy's ignorance of, and sometimes disdain for, the Low Church tradition; and (2) radical orthodoxy's insistence on "Truth," a notion challenged by pragmatism and, *a fortiori*, prophetic pragmatism.

1. Prophetic Pragmatism

Prophetic pragmatism is Cornel West's unique fusion of pragmatism and Black Christian practices. In one sense, prophetic pragmatism is a critique of traditional pragmatism and some forms of neopragmatism; in another sense, it is "pragmatism at its best."¹ This section explores West's renovation of pragmatism so that it can account for the religious practices that make the Black experience intelligible. This involves two things: (1) pragmatism's critique of traditional philosophy, and (2) the incorporation of Black prophetic practices into the pragmatist model.

The Critique of Philosophy. Pragmatism is a critique of philosophy as it is traditionally conceived. West writes in the introduction to *The American Evasion of Philosophy* that

the evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy — from Emerson to Rorty — results in a conception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism in which the meaning of America is put forward by intellectuals in response to distinct social and cultural crises. In this sense, American pragmatism is less a philosophical tradition putting forward solutions to perennial problems in the Western philosophical conversation initiated by Plato and more a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment.²

Pragmatism rejects the Old World way of doing philosophy. It is indeed an "evasion" of this method of intellectual life. Instead of understanding philosophy as solving theoretical puzzles, the pragmatist seeks ways of thinking about practical issues that face a community in a given place and

time. If the term “philosophy” has any significance for the pragmatist, it has to be a kind of self-reflective criticism. West writes that philosophy is

the interpretation of a people’s past for the purpose of solving specific problems presently confronting the cultural way of life from which the people come ... philosophy is critical in that it constantly questions the tacit assumptions of earlier interpretations of the past. It scrutinizes the norms these interpretations endorse, the solutions they offer, and the self-images they foster.³

In short, pragmatism seeks to understand the things that we do, not the things that we know.

The critique of the philosophical obsession with knowledge is central to pragmatism. As stated above, pragmatism is an evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy. West traces this back to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who asserted “the primacy of power-laden people’s opinion (*doxa*) over value-free philosophers’ knowledge (*episteme*) ... a democratic leveling of the subordination of common sense to Reason.”⁴ Pragmatism is the critique of not only philosophy as an enterprise, but its power and priority. The pragmatist favors *praxis*, which is grounded in practices and opinions, over *theoria*, which is disinterested, detached, and, therefore, aloof to social issues. Since knowledge is not given a special position above opinion, knowledge becomes a public process. Knowledge becomes the instrument of *hoi polloi*. This is the nightmare of Plato’s Socrates, who was not in favor of democracy; traditional philosophy is not democratic. Therefore, American philosophy, grounded in democracy as a way of life, goes directly against the anti-democratic origins of philosophy. Perhaps, to use a Deleuzean term out of context, American philosophy is the “overturning of Platonism,” the philosophical victory of the *hoi polloi*.

Knowledge is not about certainty or “Truth.” For the pragmatist, “the validation of knowledge claims rests on practical judgments constituted by, and constructed in, dynamic social practices.”⁵ West, in the spirit of Richard Rorty (who is closer to prophetic pragmatism than he is aware)⁶, writes, “All pragmatists are epistemic antifoundationalists ... all interpretation is value laden ... there are no unmediated facts ... there is no such thing as a neutral observation language ... one gives up the notion that epistemic justification terminates in something other than practice.”⁷ In other words, the concept of knowledge must be reconceived to accommodate the pragmatists’ antifoundationalism:

Knowledge should not be a rummaging for foundations but a matter of public testing and open evaluation of consequences. Knowledge claims

are secured by the social practices of a community of inquirers, rather than the purely mental activity of an individual subject. The community understands inquiry as a set of social practices.... The social or communal is thus the central philosophical category of this pragmatist conception of knowledge.⁸

Religious Practices and Intelligibility. Prophetic pragmatism, given its neopragmatic spin, criticizes “the blindness and silences of old pragmatism.”⁹ Put bluntly in the opening pages of *Prophesy Deliverance!*, “American philosophy has never taken the Afro-American experience seriously.”¹⁰ From the pragmatist perspective, this is a very important criticism. Given that pragmatism grounds everything in practices, experiences, and the lives of ordinary people, to exclude a significant set of practices, experiences, and lives puts a large hole in what has “made sense” over the years. Prophetic pragmatism seeks to remedy that vacancy by analyzing Black practices. For West, the major difference between Black practices and those done by non-Blacks is the prophetic, religious dimension of the Black experience. Hence the name “prophetic pragmatism;” the practices that will “make sense” of the world will be those of African-Americans, whose practices have been ignored by history. Although pragmatism had not previously explored Black practices, there is nothing about pragmatism *per se* that prohibits such a thing from happening. West writes that “pragmatism provides an American context for Afro-American thought, a context that imparts to it both a shape and a heritage of philosophical legitimacy.... [Prophetic pragmatism is] an Afro-American philosophy that is essentially a specific expression of contemporary American philosophy which takes seriously the Afro-American experience.”¹¹

West describes prophetic Black Christian practices in detail in *Prophetic Fragments*. The Black experience is a religious one insofar as Christianity helped slaves “make sense” of their lives:

The institutional roots of the prophetic tradition in Afro-America lie in black churches.... These institutions were the unique products of a courageous and creative people who struggled under excruciating conditions of economic exploitation, political oppression, and cultural degradation.... The African appropriation of Euro-American Christianity was ... the result of the black encounter with the absurd; that is, an attempt to make sense out of a meaningless and senseless predicament.... Protestant Christianity provided many black slaves with a sense of somebodiness, a personal and egalitarian God who gave them an identity and dignity not found in American society.¹²

The emphasis here is placed on the “making sense” of Black Christianity. Through participation in the Kingdom of God, Black people were somebody in a society that told them that they were no one. However, being a child of God, and performing religious actions, proved White people wrong.

Black Christian practices reflect the struggle of African-Americans, and grounds the truth that oppression is wrong, and that such oppression can and will be overcome. Church is the place of joy and hope in the midst of pain and suffering. The appropriation of the Old Testament prophesy, the Gospel and Passion of Jesus, and the anticipation of the Apocalyptic settling of the score from Revelations strengthened Black people, made them free in a slave society, gave them the hope to seek political reform and social mobility. This is what West calls in *Prophetic Fragments* “subversive joy” and “revolutionary patience.” It is Black prophetic religious practices that make the Black experience make sense.

2. Radical Orthodoxy

Radical orthodoxy is the theological response to the so-called “philosophical theology” movement in twentieth century continental philosophy. If philosophers can make a “religious” turn and usurp religion from the theologians, surely theologians can make a “philosophical” turn and usurp truth, beauty, virtue, space, and time from the philosophers. In response to “philosophical theology,” the radical orthodox theologian presents a “theological philosophy.” In this section, I will present what I take to be the basic position of radical orthodoxy, focusing on the following two themes: (1) radical orthodoxy’s critique of the primacy of philosophy over theology, and (2) the importance of church practices in understanding truths (ecclesiology). I will confess up front that I am not a theologian, so I am not going to try to connect radical orthodoxy to its theological predecessors. Instead, I will focus on the interaction between philosophy and theology, and how radical orthodoxy contributes to the question of what philosophy is and what its limits are.

The Critique of Philosophy. D. Stephen Long gives the best description of radical orthodoxy when he describes radical orthodoxy as having

emerged out of John Milbank’s dissatisfaction with modern theology’s acceptance of its fate (implicit or explicit) as innocuous and irrelevant because it allowed theology to be positioned by philosophical transcendentalism.... After abandoning theology’s position of humility before modern transcendentalism, radical orthodoxy remembers the Christological filling of space and time such that metaphysics can be truly overcome....¹³

In the history of Western civilization, the overshadowing of theology by philosophy has always been an issue. Assumedly, once upon a time in a land far, far away, when Christianity was the only religion in the West that mattered, philosophy and theology were coextensive. As Milbank writes, it was assumed that “faith and reason [were] not essentially distinct, since both [were] but differing degrees of participation in the mind of God.”¹⁴ However, at the beginning of the Middle Ages, as Aristotle’s influence began to exert itself on Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, it became necessary for the Abrahamic (or is “Aristotelian” a better adjective?) religions to agree on Aristotle’s scientific truths while still disagreeing on religious truths. This caused philosophy and theology to part ways. Philosophy became known as “first theology.” Each religion then continued with its own respective theologies, called “second theology.” It was acknowledged that Aristotle was right, and religious accounts were allegories.¹⁵

From that moment on in intellectual history, philosophy trumped theology. The truth of any theological statement was expressible in philosophical terms. Milbank’s objection to traditional theology is that theology *accepted* this secondary position. As centuries passed, and modernism was born, theology found itself having to submit itself to tighter philosophical standards. As Long writes, “[o]nce [modern] transcendentalism becomes the basis for ontology, ethics, and aesthetics, ‘God’ becomes irrelevant for the practical matters of everyday existence. ‘God’ provides little beyond safeguarding an already secure presence ... ‘ontotheology’.”¹⁶

John Milbank seeks to change that. In the introduction to the radical orthodoxy “manifesto,” *Radical Orthodoxy*, Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock lay out their thesis: “For several centuries now, secularism has been defining and constructing the world. It is a world in which the theological is either discredited or turned into a harmless leisure-time activity of private commitment.... [Radical orthodoxy] attempts to reclaim the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological framework.”¹⁷ In other words, theology is intelligible in certain ways that the secular — the philosophical — is not. Milbank writes that “Radical Orthodoxy ... allows for no entirely autonomous realm of secular discourse ... [radical orthodoxy] does not limit theology to a pure exegetical exposition of the word of God.”¹⁸ Secular discourse is unable to completely “make sense” in the world; therefore, secular discourse cannot remain autonomous. There is room for theology to “make sense” of things that philosophy is unable to make sense of, such as forgiveness (Derrida’s big puzzle), grace, and, perhaps, “Truth.” This, Milbank hopes, gives theology something more to do than simply help people understand what the scriptures say; theology is restored to its coextensive power.

It would be too quick to simply show that radical orthodoxy is merely an attempt to return theology to its previous state of glory. Milbank believes that theology can serve as a critique of philosophy, especially philosophy's sense of autonomy and legitimacy:

Modern theology on the whole accepts that philosophy has its own legitimacy, its own autonomy, apart from faith ... [in] neo-orthodoxy, an attempt is made to articulate this knowledge [the knowledge of God] in terms of categories proper to theology itself ... yet what often remains unclear here is the degree to which these theological categories are permitted to disturb a philosophical account of what it is to be, to know and to act, without reference to God.¹⁹

Radical orthodoxy builds upon neo-orthodoxy insofar as it seeks to reclaim the power of theological concepts and categories. However, it goes beyond neo-orthodoxy by challenging philosophical concepts from the theological standpoint. Milbank's point is that philosophy does not necessarily get the last word. Theology invades the philosophical, showing that theology might be more intelligible than philosophy. According to Long, radical orthodoxy is the putting into question of the whole enterprise of philosophy's attempt to shut theology out; it "begins by questioning the dualism between reason and revelation, faith and nature. It does not seek some privileged space for theology separate from reason and philosophy ... [radical orthodoxy] undoes any secure division between faith and reason, theology and philosophy."²⁰ In the end, the hope of radical orthodoxy is to restore theology to its intelligible position.

Religious Practices and Intelligibility. For Milbank, the most important aspect of radical orthodoxy is its acknowledgment that "the sacral interpenetrates everywhere."²¹ The sacred, the realm of theology, is everywhere. The sacred world is captured in the sacraments, the practices that serve as outward signs of inward faith and grace. Long describes it this way: "participation in the church makes possible a theological knowledge that must then mediate all other forms of knowledge."²² Church practices establish a kind of knowledge that "makes sense" to and for those who participate in them.

The relationship between theology and ecclesiology should seem so obvious that one ought not say anything about it. However, Milbank correctly points out that theology has become an academic enterprise, and in doing so, has ignored church life. To correct this, Milbank seeks to formulate a radically orthodox ecclesiology in *Being Reconciled*. The principle that should govern theology's work is this: "Theology presupposes and reflects upon the practices of the Church, and therefore ... is a secondary aspect of the Church's life."²³ Theology is not primarily an academic division of a university or divinity

school. Rather, it is the way that religious practices “make sense.” Milbank’s radical orthodoxy suggests that theology be found “in the body of the faithful,” not in the halls of academe.²⁴ Theology must change its allegiance:

Should theology owe its prime allegiance to academic standards or to the Church community? Should it be (the ‘aristocratic’ view) primarily a ‘public discourse’ answerable to the critical norms and liberal values of free society in the West, or should it be the faith of the Church seeking understanding according to a logic indissociable from this faith (the ‘democratic’ view)?²⁵

Just as prophetic pragmatism is a democratic way of doing philosophy, radical orthodoxy is a democratic way of doing theology, grounding theological truths in the religious practices of church people. This return to the practices of the Christian people is what is so “radical” about radical orthodoxy: “[Radical orthodoxy] is radical in that it is also capable of calling the church itself back to its roots at the same time that it seeks to bear witness to those roots to all of humanity.... Ontology, ethics, aesthetics, politics, [and] economics gain their real intelligibility when understood in terms of this radical gift.”²⁶ Radical orthodoxy attempts to make religious practices intelligible, so that one can better understand ontology, ethics, knowledge, etc. Philosophy needs religious practices in order that religion can “make sense” of what philosophy is all about.

3. Postmodernism

One important similarity between prophetic pragmatism and radical orthodoxy is that both traditions align themselves with the spirit of postmodernism, only in the end to both criticize and attempt to overcome it. This is because the postmodern age upsets the prevalent philosophical landscape. However, postmodernism’s solutions are either still tied to modernism in a certain way or irrelevant to our particular needs. For radical orthodoxy, postmodernism offers a new opportunity for establishing truths, yet still prioritizes philosophy over theology. For prophetic pragmatism, (“continental”) postmodernism puts into question the philosophy of old, but fails to account for the American postmodernity that sets the stage for prophetic pragmatism.

West, like most neopragmatists, adopts historicism as part of his prophetic pragmatic project. Historicism, he writes, is “indispensable for contemporary religious thought ... the acceptance of historicism ... entails a rejection of old-style metaphysics.”²⁷ For West, historicism is the postmodern element of prophetic pragmatism. It is important because pragmatism is based on practices, and practices do not appear out of nowhere. Instead, there are

“background prejudices, presuppositions, and prejudgments”²⁸ that inform those practices. One must use history as a tool of self-assessment: those practices that lead to harmful states of affairs are to be corrected, and those practices that improve life should be reaffirmed. West is clear that historicism does not automatically imply anti-realist and relativist positions.²⁹ Rather, historicism is a wonderful tool to figure out reality and knowledge, given that knowledge is grounded in practices, and practices have their respective histories.

If historicism is all that is required for postmodernism, then prophetic pragmatism is a postmodern pragmatism. However, West worries that “postmodernism” as a movement in academic disciplines misses the mark. For West, America is in an age that is correctly titled “postmodern.” American postmodernity is highlighted by three events: the end of the Age of Europe, the emergence of America as a world power, and the decolonization of foreign countries.³⁰ Given the end of the Age of Europe, why should Americans turn to French and German thinkers, the alleged “postmodernists?” Although their works are of use to American philosophers, the European postmodernists “remain narrowly focused on the European and Euro-American predicament,”³¹ causing the African-American experience to remain ignored. In order to correctly appropriate postmodernism, Americans must develop their own works in light of the *American* postmodern age. West writes that

French poststructuralist discourses indeed lead to these [historicist] conclusions, but only “we Americans” can make them historically specific, socially pertinent, and politically relevant to “us”.... To take seriously “Afro-America” as a political reality in process and a rhetorical figure in textual motion does not mean that we shun European critical discourses, especially those of the Frankfurters (Adorno, Marcuse) and French fries (Derrida, Foucault). Rather, it requires that we delve more deeply into them with a sense of our own historical past and political present.³²

We see, therefore, that prophetic pragmatism accepts postmodernity’s emphasis on historicism, but rejects the Eurocentricity of academic postmodernism. If prophetic pragmatism’s goal is to have African-American practices taken seriously, it must appropriate the postmodern innovation and remold it to its American context. European theory cannot and will never “make sense” of (African-)American practices.

Radical orthodoxy similarly takes up and responds to postmodernism. According to Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock, radical orthodoxy “regards the nihilistic drift of postmodernism (which nonetheless has roots in the outset of modernity) as a supreme opportunity ... in the face of the secular demise of

truth, [radical orthodoxy] seeks to reconfigure theological truth.”³³ Like prophetic pragmatism, radical orthodoxy allies itself with postmodernism insofar as it opens an opportunity for it to break free from philosophy’s modern stranglehold. Milbank sees his work as corresponding to other theological appropriations of postmodernity such as the work by Jean-Luc Marion,³⁴ especially given that Marion seeks a “God without Being” that would be quite appealing to a radical orthodox theologian. However, radical orthodoxy goes beyond theological phenomenology, appropriating “analytic” philosophical issues as well as phenomenological ones. Also, Milbank is not as worried about God with or without Being but rather its converse, Being with or without God.

However, as Long puts it, “the alliance between postmodernity and radical orthodoxy can be at most momentary, for, like modern philosophers, most postmodern thinkers cannot find their way back to the roots to remember them.”³⁵ Postmodernism does not go back to the coextension of theology and philosophy, and, as a result, is just as bad for theology as modernism was. In fact, postmodernity throws the theological baby out with the ontotheological bathwater. Postmodernity is anti-Christian because it is anti-metaphysical. However, this presupposes that religion is dependent on metaphysics; therefore, postmodernists are just as guilty as modernists of placing theology under the auspices of philosophy. As Long notes, “the postmodern critique of Christianity wrongly assumes [that theology] depends on [the] metaphysics of presence.”³⁶ Postmodernism overshoots — it destroys modernity but fails to notice that theology is a hostage to modernist philosophy. Radical orthodoxy corrects this, using the postmodern critique of modernity to free theology from the shackles of philosophical intelligibility. Radical orthodoxy then overcomes postmodernism’s insistence on violence,³⁷ replacing ontological violence with Christological peace. By doing this, one returns to a kind of “premodernity” that postmodernity must fail to restore in its destruction of modern transcendentalism.

Postmodernism is unable to truly account for the religious practices performed by religious people. However, for both prophetic pragmatism and radical orthodoxy, the postmodern moment serves as the opportunity for reopening the question of what philosophy is and breaking philosophy’s monopoly on intelligibility. The end of modernity means that intelligibility is up for grabs, and this time, religion will not be a passive observer.

4. Democracy and Truth

There are two objections to radical orthodoxy that prophetic pragmatism can give. Both objections center on what I have loosely been calling “democracy.” In the first section of this paper, I described pragmatism as an inversion of

Platonism, the overthrowing of the Philosopher-King by the *hoi polloi*, the grounding of intelligibility in what we do instead of what we know. American philosophy is democratic, and as such, must refuse the age-old monarchal (and aristocratic) understandings of the philosophical enterprise.

Milbank describes radical orthodoxy as a democratic way of doing theology, as discussed in the second section; however, the sense of “democracy” used there does not suggest anything like a pragmatic inversion of Platonism. I do not know if radical orthodoxy is truly democratic, especially since it wants to have the “Truth,” which is exactly where, pragmatists argue, philosophy goes wrong in the first place. Second, radical orthodoxy vindicates the High Liturgical tradition of church life at the expense of the more democratic (and American, particularly African-American) Low Church tradition. In this section, I will discuss Low Church tradition first, and then conclude the paper with some comments on “Truth” and truths.

African-American religious tradition is very different from other Black religious traditions in the world, primarily because of the way that American Low Church Evangelical Protestantism works. Slaves in the United States were submitted to Low Church Christianity. The main advantage of this fact is that blacks were able to control their own churches. Unable to go to church with Whites, Blacks in the American South, mostly Baptists and Methodists, formed their own churches. Without a hierarchy of positions (no pope, archbishop, bishop, etc.), each congregation was free. It is this freedom, ecclesiastical freedom, that would serve as the model of freedom for Blacks in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — not some theoretical notion of what Hegel called “abstract right,” nor documents like the Declaration of Independence — the model was church life. West writes that the Low Church tradition “provided a precious historical possession not found among other groups of oppressed black people in the New World: control over their own ecclesiastical institutions.”³⁸ In the rest of the Diaspora, people of African descent were submitted to Catholicism and Anglicanism, which too easily operated simultaneously with racism and colonialism. The oppression of Blacks abroad was strengthened by the lack of ecclesiastical control that African-Americans enjoyed. Black churches served as the sites of freedom, places where Blacks could be black and, through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, overcome slavery, even if that freedom was merely spiritual. Church was the celebration of heritage, and, as West writes, that understanding of church still continues in Black America. He writes that Black churches are not places to do theology, rather “to share and expand together the rich heritage they have inherited.”³⁹ It is through Black Christian practices — singing devotional hymns and spirituals, powerful praying, shouting, dancing, etc. — that Blacks found intelligibility in a world that made no sense at all. Black Americans are the first pragmatists, for they only had practices to “make sense” of the world — theory was denied

them. Blacks were led to the truth about God, not from a theological or philosophical point of view, but from a pragmatic one. As West writes, “[t]he common black argument for belief in God is not that it is logical or reasonable to do so, but rather that such belief is requisite for one’s sanity and for entrée to the most uplifting sociality available in the black community.”⁴⁰

One does not have to be in the Low Church tradition to be a prophetic pragmatist, even though the first ones were. Prophetic pragmatism is able to accommodate upwards so as to include High Liturgical traditions (such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, “Black” Catholicism, etc.). In short, the religious life of the oppressed makes sense of their lives and their world. Prophetic pragmatism is even able to serve as a starting-point for the liberation theology movements within Latin-American Catholicism, movements that start with practices and end with theory.

Radical orthodoxy is unable to accommodate downward to the Low Church understanding of ecclesiology and sacraments, leaving it unable to incorporate the African-American experience. Many Low Church notions are dismissed. For example, Milbank writes that theology “is answerable to the Bishop as the occupant of the *cathedra* and as President at the Eucharist” and “to the Church [the Catholic and Apostolic Church].”⁴¹ Clearly Low Church theologians cannot be answerable to these people and institutions. A more democratic solution would be that theologians are answerable to the congregation who employs church activities pragmatically. Milbank also rejects “all Protestant accounts of grace as mere imputation (although there are many Protestant accounts not of this kind).”⁴² Of course, the Protestant accounts that are “not of this kind” are higher up on the liturgical scale. The notion of grace that Milbank is rejecting, although he does not come forth and say it, is Low Church grace, the “resolution of debts” as a gift of Christ’s atonement. Milbank disagrees with the old Low Church hymn “The Old Account Was Settled Long Ago.” As a result, African-American faith is diminished. After all, what does grace mean to a slave other than this: “If I deserve to be a slave because I am a sinner, then through Christ’s redemption long ago on Calvary’s tree has already made me free from it.” This perspective is ignored by Milbank’s theology.

Also, many traditions of religious reform are criticized, although they have merit in the eyes of the prophetic pragmatist. For example, Long criticizes the liberation theologies of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino, as well as the Black theology of James Cone, which have been trying to force theology to acknowledge the African-American perspective for years, because they rely on perspectives and concepts that are “outside of” ecclesiology, e.g., “justice” or “political freedom.”⁴³ This accusation is true if and only if ecclesiology is defined by the High Liturgical tradition; but what happens when “church life” becomes ecclesiology, as it is in the case of the prophetic

pragmatists? Then these traditions are not outside of ecclesiology at all. In short, prophetic pragmatism challenges radical orthodoxy's fixed and limited views of ecclesiology.

Finally, I have reservations about the motives of radical orthodoxy in terms of truth. It seems that radical orthodoxy is interested in more than just making religious practices intelligible; rather, it seeks to turn theological truths into "Truths." As a pragmatist, I find this disconcerting. I am willing to grant the importance of theological truths because there are practices, religious practices, that "make sense" of the world. However, there is a great difference between truths of that sort and "Truths." Radical orthodoxy sees post-modernism as an opportunity because postmodernism brings about the end to philosophical "Truth." However, I do not think that this automatically opens the door to a new reign of "Truth," this time theological. To do so would be to overthrow the Philosopher-King only to replace it with the Theologian-King, which amounts to the same problem that pragmatism has had with philosophy. The overcoming of Platonism by pragmatism overthrows all ultimate authorities, be them philosophical, scientific, or religious.

I agree with Milbank that theological truths do not have to cower before philosophical truths, scientific truths, or any other kind of truths; nor do they have to stay in their own designated "place." It is pragmatically acceptable for truths of one sort to meddle in and challenge other kinds of truth. Therefore, under a pragmatist rubric, Milbank can offer a critique of philosophy on theological grounds if and only if Milbank acknowledges that theology is one language game — one way of intelligibility — among many others. The result of such an acknowledgment would be that philosophy itself would have to be revealed as another language game (among others). This would make Milbank's project radically different from neo-orthodoxy insofar as theological truths could put pressure on other (secular) kinds of truth, but also save theology from making the philosophical mistake of assuming that theology has a power to tap into the "Truth" of a world "out there" (or, given that they are promoting a Christian Platonic metaphysics, "up there").

Imagine what would happen if radical orthodoxy's goals were to come to fruition. Philosophy would still be around, but this time serving as the subordinate one to theology. We would perhaps have something like "first" and "second" philosophy, in inversion of the medieval distinction between first and second "theology": theology (Christian theology) would be the Truth of the matter, and philosophy (in all of its varieties) would be nothing more than various academic expressions of that one True theology. This is simply a reversal of the power structure, and, as Foucault teaches us, nothing new ever comes from the reversal of power positions.

Prophetic pragmatism allows for theological truths. By "theological truths" I mean that there are ways of "making sense" that are grounded on

religious (and solely religious) practices. “Philosophical truths,” a phrase that sounds redundant because philosophy has lead us to believe that it alone can have truths, means that there are ways of “making sense” that are grounded on philosophical practices. Philosophy is one set of practices among many, and if that is what radical orthodoxy is demonstrating, then the pragmatist welcomes it with open arms. If not, the pragmatist has no choice but to reject radical orthodoxy’s agenda.

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This essay is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Ruth E. Stone (1914–2004).

NOTES

1. West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 139. See also West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 7: “prophetic pragmatism ... serves as the culmination of the American pragmatist tradition.”

2. West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 5.

3. West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), p. 20.

4. West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 212.

5. West, *Keeping Faith*, 135–136.

6. I explore Rorty’s prophetic pragmatism in a forthcoming essay “Can There Be Hope Without Prophecy?” I argue that Rorty’s desire to have a notion of hope that is completely divorced from prophetic notions is impossible. Given that Rorty would never jettison hope as an important pragmatist concept, I hold that even Rorty has to acknowledge the prophetic dimension of his pragmatism.

7. West, *Keeping Faith*, p. 90. See also Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), pp. xxv, 33, 36–37; Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972–1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 162–166; Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 4–7; and Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), chaps. 3, 6, and 8.

8. West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, p. 21.

9. West, *Keeping Faith*, p. 135.

10. West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, p. 11.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

12. West, *Prophetic Fragments* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 42–43.

13. Long, “Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 130–131.

14. Milbank, "The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy," in *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry*, ed. Laurence Hemming (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000), p. 35.

15. I propose that the split between philosophy and theology occurred prior to Duns Scotus and Francisco Suárez; see Milbank, "Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Harmann and Jacobi," in *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry*, ed. Laurence Hemming (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000), p. 23; and also Long, "Radical Orthodoxy," p. 138. The split happened in 10th century Arabia and Spain, with the "double truth" theories held by thinkers like Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroës. I will be discussing the "double truth" theory as part of the history of Spanish philosophy in my forthcoming book *The Problem of God in Spanish Philosophy*.

16. Long, "Radical Orthodoxy," pp. 127–128. "Ontotheology" is Martin Heidegger's term for the philo-sophical use of God and theology. See Heidegger, "The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics," in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969), pp. 42–76; also see Stone, "Returning to the Desert," in *Essays zu Jacques Derrida und Gianni Vattimo, Religion*, ed. Ludwig Nagl (Vienna: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 131–143.

17. John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, "Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Philosophy*, ed. Laurence Hemming (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 1–2.

18. Milbank, "The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy," p. 34.

19. Milbank, "Knowledge," p. 21.

20. Long, "Radical Orthodoxy," p. 134; see also p. 131; Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 120, 122.

21. Milbank, "The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy," p. 37.

22. Long, "Radical Orthodoxy," p. 144.

23. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, p. 109.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

26. Long, "Radical Orthodoxy," pp. 144–145.

27. West, *Prophetic Fragments*, p. 267.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 267.

29. See West, *Prophetic Fragments*, p. 269. Rorty makes the same argument about pragmatism in the introduction of *Philosophy and Social Hope*. To be historicist (or an ironist, to use Rorty's term) does not automatically imply anti-realism and relativism, two labels that are often (incorrectly) placed on neopragmatists. Rorty is correct when he says that such labels really do not apply to neopragmatists because neopragmatism does not play the traditional game of metaphysics and epistemology (Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. xix).

30. West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, pp. 235–236.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

32. West, *Prophetic Fragments*, p. 170.

33. Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock, "Suspending the Material," p. 1.

34. Milbank, "The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy," p. 43.

35. Long, "Radical Orthodoxy," p. 129.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

37. Milbank, "The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy," p. 42; see also Long, "Radical Orthodoxy," p. 130.

38. West, *Prophetic Fragments*, p. 43.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, pp. 126, 133.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

43. See D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), chaps. 8 and 9, for his criticisms against liberation and Black theology.

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