

SOCIOLOGY, THEOLOGY, AND THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL READERS

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## *Introduction*

Biblical, particularly priestly and cultic, studies have received renewed vitality with the integration of modern *social theory* for methods of interpretation.<sup>1</sup> This has come largely via anthropology. Equally, theology has witnessed invigorated expressions through a recent movement *challenging* the assumptions of social theory. This movement offers, in turn, an explicitly *theological* method of interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Two key figures active in these expressions are anthropologist Mary Douglas and theologian John Milbank. This essay will examine the work of both authors as it appears in the sociological reading of the Bible (Douglas) and the critique of such readings (Milbank). My intention, however, is not confined to issues of correct interpretative method. Rather, I am using this framework to explore the broader issue of the relationship between religion and society. For both Milbank and Douglas this relationship functions significantly in their work.<sup>3</sup>

One significant avenue for understanding Douglas and Milbank is addressing the role of transcendence in their work. For Milbank transcendence plays a key role the articulation of his ontology and epistemology. For Douglas this appears in her emphasis on ritual (most often religious ritual which addresses the sublime in some manner) as key to understanding society. I do not find either author to have adequately attended to the role of transcendence in the application of their work. In response I will develop a key image that emerges in both their contributions. This shared image is the figure of the ‘priest’ who navigates issues of

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Balentine, *The Torah’s Vision of Worship* (OBT; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1999); Frank H. Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology* (JSOTSup 91; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990); Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> I am referring to the movement referred to as Radical Orthodoxy which revolves around the writings of John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock. See John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds. *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> John Milbank, “The End of Dialogue,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (ed. Gavin D’Costa; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 174-91; Mary Douglas, “The Effects of Modernization on Religious Change,” *Daedalus* 117 (1988): 457-84.

transcendence in both Milbank's critique of social theory as well as Douglas' reading of the Torah.

To establish suitable parameters I will confine myself primarily to John Milbank's chapter "Policing the Sublime: A Critique of the Sociology of Religion" in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*.<sup>4</sup> This critique will be applied to Mary Douglas' *Leviticus as Literature*.<sup>5</sup> I will offer a concise account of both contributions after which I will demonstrate that Milbank's critique does indeed hold against Douglas' reading. The result, however, is not the overturning of an inadequate reading but rather the uncovering of the possible incommensurability of Douglas and Milbank's theoretical models. A significant dissimilarity between the two models lies in the relationship between society and religion. More precisely, the issue is whether one discourse can more appropriately 'read' the other. To address this relationship I will return to the shared image of 'priest' and offer a reading of Torah in which transcendence figures prominently in the ability to interpret and address reality.<sup>6</sup> This image will emphasize the interplay of boundary and presence (the breach of boundaries) within a context acknowledging transcendence. The validity of this reading as a potential hermeneutic resource will be supported by examples from various sources. These sources include the book of Isaiah, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, as well as significant expressions of recent theological aesthetics. In conclusion I will offer an image of the interpreter of both text and society as someone who attends to the breaches of boundary in the world. This interpreter is a historically conditioned subject whose readings are inherently qualitative and bound by his or her *relationship* to object being interpreted.

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<sup>4</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> In my reading of priest I am concerned primarily with the calling of Israel to steward the holy presence of Yahweh as outlined in the Pentateuch.

## ***Mary Douglas and the Ritual World of the Bible***

In lamenting the modern reader's inability to understand the foreign world of the Torah, Gordon Wenham identifies the impasse in the unintelligibility of their *rituals*.<sup>7</sup> This is confirmed, he argues, by the work of anthropologists who claim that it is ritual systems which reveal the values of society. Wenham adopts anthropologist Monica Wilson's programmatic statement regarding the role of ritual.

Rituals reveal values at their deepest levels . . . men [sic] express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of the expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed. I see in the study of rituals the key understanding the constitution of human societies.<sup>8</sup>

The thinking follows that if ritual is the key to understanding the Torah and anthropologists are those who specialize in interpreting rituals then anthropologists may offer the tools essential for understanding the Torah. Mary Douglas figures prominently as an early influential figure in the sociological interpretation of ritual elements in the Torah.<sup>9</sup> A significant and mature expression of this work is her monograph *Leviticus as Literature*.

In her preface Douglas reflects on the fact that in the twentieth century her discipline was in much the same state as that of Pentateuchal studies. The then current concept of reason eschewed 'primitive' forms of ritual which were considered to be magical or superstitious.<sup>10</sup> With the advent of structuralist approaches to anthropology ritual systems were reconsidered and found to have an internal integrity which, given its cultural context, made as much or as little

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<sup>7</sup> Gordon Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC 4; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1981), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. The passage being referred to is taken from Monica Wilson, "Nyakusy Ritual and Symbolism," *American Anthropologist* 56 (1954): 228-41.

<sup>9</sup> For a thorough engagement with Douglas' contribution see John Sawyer, ed., *Reading Leviticus: A Conversation with Mary Douglas* (JSOTSup 227; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., v. For the state of biblical studies in this regard see Wenham, *Numbers*, 26-28.

sense as modern western culture. This came from the emerging belief that basic worldviews were not founded on universally accepted premises. Given particular worldviews, atheism can have the same consistency and integrity as tribal magic. This moved anthropology away from a prescriptive comparison of social expressions, with a single intellectual ideal, to describing alternative worldviews as equally valid.

Douglas establishes her methodology by stating that the primary anthropological need is to “locate the religion in some community of worshippers in some known time and space.”<sup>11</sup> Aware of the textual and scholarly ambiguity regarding the dating of Pentateuchal sources, Douglas remains tentative affirming only that there was a prior ‘original form’ of Israelite religion that underwent a ‘new synthesis’ at the hands of the priestly scribes.<sup>12</sup> She does not assume a late dating for Leviticus preferring the relative dating of being prior to Deuteronomy.<sup>13</sup> Accepting that Leviticus is a synthetic aggregate, Douglas attempts to discover “where seams have been stitched over and the gaps [in knowledge] closed.”<sup>14</sup> This means uncovering the prior social conditions which gave rise to these ritual expressions.

In chapters 2 and 3 Douglas outlines her basic distinction between ‘presentational/analogical’ and ‘discursive/rational-instrumental’ modes of thought and discourse. Douglas characterizes discursive thought as the primary mode of discourse in the western world. Discursive thinking submits to accepted parameters of logical non-contradictory development. In her field this mode assumed a superior position and perceived analogical forms of discourse to be ‘primitive’ and inferior. This type of thinking is clearly evident in earlier modern attempts to understand books

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<sup>11</sup> Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

like Leviticus.<sup>15</sup> Douglas characterizes analogical discourse as referring to the relationship between objects on an initially blank ‘virtual space’. Each social expression represents an initially blank canvas upon which rituals fill out the forms and colours.<sup>16</sup> Analogical discourse is not understood by linear developmental thought but by understanding the place which objects occupy in relation to each other. Douglas argues that Leviticus (as opposed to Deuteronomy) represents analogical discourse.

To appropriately interpret analogical thought Douglas introduces the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In this model rituals were not to be understood as simply representing something. In this model rituals could be isolated assuming they expressed an independent significance. Similar to Saussure’s approach to words, in structural anthropology rituals are understood as functioning in relation to the whole ritual system. Lévi-Strauss uses the example of the distribution of a killed animal among the people of a South African tribe. Instead of asking what does eating a particular part of the body *represent*, the question rather is how a particular part of the body *relates* to the whole. Interpreted this way Douglas makes the important programmatic statement that “the carcass of the animal is a virtual space on which social distinctions are projected.”<sup>17</sup> Two elements are important here. First, this allows Douglas to argue that the text of Leviticus *itself* is perceived spatially and more specifically, architecturally. The text of Leviticus actually guides the reader through the various areas of the Tabernacle.<sup>18</sup> Douglas substantiates this move by noting that Mt. Sinai is a ‘type’ of vertical Tabernacle witnessing to the three movements towards the Holy of Holies.<sup>19</sup> From here Douglas

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<sup>15</sup> This approach assumes that rituals represent *logical* independent thoughts (i.e. Israelites were forbidden to eat pork because of health concerns). For examples of this in Leviticus see Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979), 166-70.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 218-40.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 59ff.

adds the 'space' of *body*. In the same way that ritual concepts can be projected on either the Tabernacle or Mt. Sinai they can also be projected onto the body of a sacrificial animal. This facilitates Douglas' ingenious reading of the prohibition to eat a particular type of fat located in the sacrificial animal (Lev 3:15). The opaqueness of the fat represents incense as well as a cover over the most central (sacred) place of the body/sanctuary.<sup>20</sup> The basic paradigm of Mountain/Tabernacle/Body weaves through her entire work. The second element of significance, and crucial for this paper, is that Douglas affirms a basic anthropological view which, to be addressed below, Milbank directly opposes. This view is the assumption that there exists such prior neutral 'virtual spaces' of social relations upon which the particulars of ritual (i.e. religion) organize themselves. Ritual and therefore religion, becomes a *part* of society. Notwithstanding Douglas' great contribution to the invigoration of priestly studies I will limit the remainder of my interaction to those interpretations that most exhibit her anthropological methodology.

Douglas' anthropological sensibilities emerge in her reading of the editor of Leviticus purging any notion of a 'cult of the dead'.<sup>21</sup> She establishes the context as the Second Temple period in which family rivalries and theological unease form the backdrop for the post-exilic community. Abolishing the cults of the dead would have served the political goal of centralizing administration. Here the people would no longer attend to the dead who were given power to influence the vision of the establishing authority. Thus rituals address a prior social conflict. In this way Douglas employs the basic anthropological category of how cults of the dead function in society and applies it to what social information can be gathered around the text.

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<sup>20</sup> Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 247.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-108.



Dealing with the role of oracles, Douglas states that an oracle's efficacy draws "upon local theories of causation to do the double work of finding truth and promoting peace."<sup>22</sup> Here, Douglas parts drastically with the influential work of Jacob Milgrom, who argues that the guilt of sin in Leviticus 6 is based on internal conviction; "when one has thus sinned, and *feeling* guilt . . ."<sup>23</sup> Internal conviction proves unsatisfactory for Douglas who requires that social stability comes from clear univocal adjudication. This is satisfied with from some form of divination; "when you have discovered (by divination), what you did wrong . . ."<sup>24</sup> Here, oracles are understood as a functional necessity for this type of social system.

Douglas concludes her section on oracles with an attempt to account for the differences between Leviticus and Deuteronomy.<sup>25</sup> She begins by asserting that all conflicts of principle stem from personal and institutional conflicts. She adds that ritualized religion exists only on the basis of its followers. Therefore, religious forms are the direct projection of the will of its adherents. "If they allow it to be said that God does not really mind about a particular misdeed, it is because they have particular interest in dissuading other people, kin or neighbours, from doing it."<sup>26</sup> In this way, God becomes the tool of religious will. In Leviticus, the statement that the land will 'vomit you up' for disobedience (Lev 18:28) provides a powerful form of social control beyond the limitations of human enforcement.

The most pervasive and clearest expression of Douglas' anthropological sensibilities comes in her spatialization of the Tabernacle. Addressing the practical difficulty of centralized slaughter in Israel, as demanded in Leviticus, Douglas cites the relationship between the zones of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>23</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Rituals and Ethics* (CC; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2004), 58-60.

<sup>24</sup> Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 127.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 130-33.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 130.

the Tabernacle and the zones of an animal body and concludes that “there is no reason why the virtual space should not be reproduced as many times as needed. . . . In this sense, the tabernacle is spiritualized.”<sup>27</sup> Worshippers can sacrifice wherever they want so long as they understand the presence of the Tabernacle in the body of the animal. This approach culminates in her grand presentation of the text itself offering passage through the Tabernacle.<sup>28</sup> Keeping in mind that the audience was exilic and post-exilic with no physical Tabernacle she suggests that reading the book allowed its audience to internalize the Tabernacle. It constitutes a “projectible universe constantly reconstituting itself in objects and places. . . . The multiplication of tabernacles is implicit in the idea of replicable holy space.” This leads to the final conclusion that “correctly mapped on to space, their temple once consecrated will be as the original tabernacle, and they can build as many as they want.”<sup>29</sup> Returning to her initial image of ‘virtual space’ or blank canvas, Douglas offers the Tabernacle as a conceptual organization upon a social plane.

Douglas bases her reading of Leviticus on anthropological principles. These principles include the basic structural relationships of rituals as well as a prior social space upon which conflicts produce ritual action. I will now turn to Milbank’s critique of social theory.

### ***John Milbank and the Sacramental World***

John Milbank released *Theology and Social Theory* in 1990 and it became, in many ways, programmatic for the theological movement which came to be referred as Radical Orthodoxy.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 218-40.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>30</sup> For an excellent introduction to the literature and ideas of the movement see James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004).

In his introduction Milbank addresses his work to both social theorists and theologians.<sup>31</sup> He challenges social theorists by claiming that their discourse is founded upon the modification or rejection of Christian claims. In this way social theorists offer no substantial authority for their position but are subsumed within the Christian story (or *mythos* as Milbank calls it). He demonstrates this position through an ‘archaeology’ of intellectual history in search of the genesis of social theory. He claims that this procedure exposes the arbitrary moves made in the construction of secularism. In this analysis social theorists can claim nothing *prior* to a Christian world-view and become no more justifiable than Christian discourse. This makes the entire notion of the secular problematic. Milbank is quick to point out that many social theorists working in a post-Nietzschean stream also find the secular problematic.<sup>32</sup> Thus the refrain of Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy becomes, “Once there was no secular. . .”<sup>33</sup>

To the theologian, Milbank levels the accusation of false humility, as theology yields its voice to the dominant modes of secular discourse. If theology no longer occupies a position from which to ‘read’ its contemporaries it will in turn be positioned by them. If positioned, theology becomes either an idolatrous mouthpiece for secularism or silenced and complicit with notions of the secular. Milbank views current theological reliance on social theory as stemming from the postmodern understanding of the absolute historical contingency of knowledge. We influence, and are influenced by, the dynamics of historical movement. There is no external reference that can be accessed as mutually accepted authority. From this post-foundationalist understanding Milbank asserts that “my entire case is constructed from a complete *concession* as

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<sup>31</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1-6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 432; Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 87; Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), xiv.

to this state of affairs.”<sup>34</sup> Theology was right to accept its historical conditioning but wrong to seek the social sciences for authority. In so doing theology is severed from dealing with the implications of transcendence and the revelation of God.<sup>35</sup>

In “Policing the Sublime,” Milbank challenges western society of its basic assumption that society simply *is* while religions constitute a problematic category which it must appropriately steward. Milbank identifies this situation as political with the emergence of the state as distinct from the church. This historical development included the need to place religion under the “superior glance of a critical discourse.”<sup>36</sup> For the welfare of the state, religion needed to be kept in its appropriate place. The state accomplished this with its own religious position of what it believed was necessary for stable perpetuation. This privileging of secular space views religions as offering murky depictions of the clear, prior categories of society which is based on instrumental reason and economic relationship. This position devalues the particulars of religion and imposes upon them a grid of ‘pure’ social concepts which always interpret the individual in relation to society. Any religious claim to transcendence becomes grounded on the plane of immanent relationships.

It should be emphasized that for Milbank, social theory’s tendency to ‘deal’ with religion does not necessarily mean that it expresses contempt for religion as such.<sup>37</sup> Rather, for social theory religious ritual maintains a notion of the ‘real’ essence of religion which ascribes value to social action and power. In many respects religion then becomes *the language of value* for society. In addition, many social theorists recognize the unempirical aspect of religion and notions of the sublime in general. Though social theory accepts the role of the sublime as

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<sup>34</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 148.

<sup>36</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 102.

<sup>37</sup> Graham Ward, *True Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 158n.20.

necessary, it renders it functionally inaccessible to religion (which Milbank interprets as essentially Kantian). Here social theory attempts to maintain (police) notions of transcendence relegating it to private preference. Milbank suggests that for the sociologist, “the sublime is to be protected and treasured, although it causes no positively definable effects with the objective factual world – in so far as this *appears* to be the case (as religions so often believe) then it can be shown by sociology that the conditions for the representation of the sublime are in fact *entirely given by the social*.”<sup>38</sup> The ‘idea’ of the sublime is accepted but legitimate articulation and integration of it is foreclosed in favour of socially determined categories.

Milbank argues that such a foreclosure is based on an untenable position. For social theory to deny transcendence as participating in knowledge and life requires a perspective which straddles both the finite and the infinite. Social theory implicitly claims then, to have seen the boundaries from a ‘God-like’ perspective and understands its limitations.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, Milbank views social theory as patrolling the boundaries of the sublime in support of secular society which attempts to bracket religion from any real influence in matters of politics (though it may be called upon for token expressions of ‘purpose’). Religion is packaged and offered to the *individual’s* sense of value. Given Douglas’ work in the field of priestly law it is ironic that Milbank positions the sociologist as a type of anti-priest guarding the entrance to the Holy of Holies. In place of the ‘neutral’ and ‘secular’ Milbank advances the argument that the Christian story offers a sacramental understanding of reality as *created* and in *participation* with the Creator. This will be further addressed in the following interaction.

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<sup>38</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 104. [final italics mine]

<sup>39</sup> See also David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), 13.

## *The Possibility of Critique*

Given the tone of Milbank's work and other early articles such as "The End of Dialogue"<sup>40</sup> it could be asked whether there is any point in engaging these two figures. Milbank views social theory as a type of Christian heresy. And, as will be demonstrated, Douglas indeed affirms many of the positions which Milbank renounces. Neither assume to share a common intellectual foundation. The following comments help to validate the following interaction. First, as was already mentioned, Milbank does not reject all observations made by sociologists. In many ways he is in firm agreement with the sociological recognition of the 'situatedness' of human knowledge and practice. We are historically and relationally conditioned. In relation to Douglas in particular, Milbank seems to offer a conditional nod of respect.<sup>41</sup> Also, in reading the biblical text, Milbank affirms that sociological concerns have helped commentators avoid abstractions and also tend to lead readers toward the final literary form of the text.<sup>42</sup> However, despite some admirable qualities Milbank maintains that "they tend to mislead, precisely at the point where they are most 'sociological'."<sup>43</sup> For this reason Milbank's claims must be examined as biblical scholarship appears to have only *increased* its reliance on social theory. In addition, Milbank does not necessarily reject a *sociologist's* reading but will challenge a *sociological* reading based on his above arguments.<sup>44</sup> In Milbank's project 'sociology' makes its return as a more fully

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<sup>40</sup> John Milbank, "The End of Dialogue," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (ed. Gavin D'Costa; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 174-91. In this article Milbank sees liberalism as offering the imperial notion of 'dialogue', which assumes to position the dialogue partner within liberalism's agenda. Milbank replaces this with 'mutual suspicion' which must precede any process of conversion.

<sup>41</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 101, 112.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>44</sup> This can be seen in the preface to Milbank's recent work *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (New York: Routledge, 2003) in which he states that he is "concerned to learn from social theory in its more historical, ethnographic and less ideological aspects." (xi)

understood theology, albeit in a speculative not scientific discourse.<sup>45</sup> These qualifications open a potentially fruitful exchange between Douglas and Milbank on this matter.

It must be stated at the outset that in addition to Milbank's generally complementary view of Douglas he may even applaud many of her literary sensibilities in approaching the text of Leviticus. The type of analogical imagination which allows humanity to be re-encharmed with the material forms around us is keeping in part with the aesthetic sensibilities of Radical Orthodoxy.<sup>46</sup> Many of her readings appear faithful to the liturgical character of Leviticus. For Douglas, the text of Leviticus itself enables its community to faithfully engage in worship. This, however, need not be claimed as *sociological* reading *per se*. Douglas herself corroborates her reading with patristic, medieval, and modern commentators.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, Douglas, in understanding Leviticus, and Milbank, in understanding transcendence, both hold a high view of analogical or aesthetic thinking. The difference is that Douglas characterizes this as *one* cultural form of thought to which social theory may apply its conceptual framework. Milbank appears much more earnest in relating the aesthetic to matters of ontology and ethics.<sup>48</sup> For Milbank the world is *created* and *all* participate in God's sustaining presence. This allows material forms to attain a level of integrity offering themselves as accessible, analogical, testimony to transcendence. In so far as Douglas agrees that analogy tends to contrast western rationalism she does so with the assumption that both may be read from a third, critical vantage point.

Douglas bases her work on the application of sociological method, in addition to historical research, for the purpose of yielding insight into the 'seams' of the Levitical synthesis.<sup>49</sup> As

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<sup>45</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 388.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 223-29

<sup>47</sup> Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 61-64.

<sup>48</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 431; Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 185-229; Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 11.

<sup>49</sup> Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 5.

noted above, her insights into the cult of the dead, oracles, and religious form all assume a prior ‘pure’ (to use Milbank’s term) social interaction which were later expressed in ritual form. This is Douglas at her ‘most sociological’. The social condition exists, the ritual follows. Douglas appears to be making the exact move that Milbank levels against social theory. Douglas implicitly holds that there are prior social relations which get addressed with varying levels of success by religious rituals in their ‘will to power’.<sup>50</sup>

Milbank’s critique also addresses Douglas’ vision of the ‘spiritual Jerusalem’ as that ideal religious understanding which offers itself to particular and primary social situations. Douglas’ language bears close affinity to Milbank’s account of the sublime. Douglas elevates the God of Israel and the rituals that surround this God. However, this relationship between ritual and transcendence is never presented beyond the control and maintenance of the priest. In this way the sublime *is* managed so as to control what, if any, actual impact it creates.<sup>51</sup> The Tabernacle remains an abstract notion that can be implemented as the particular social dynamics require it. The rituals themselves do not engage with a reality beyond their social purpose. If this reading of Douglas is correct it would appear to come into conflict with her primary contention that Leviticus testifies to a community breaking decisively with its neighbours, establishing the primacy of *God’s justice* over the unstable conflicts of the gods and ancestors.<sup>52</sup> Douglas seems to be saying that these rituals *do* indeed impact the community. However, this still falls under Milbank’s critique. Douglas assumes that the move toward stabilizing ritual comes out of an already existing conflict. In her account the priestly vision attempted to constrain the chaotic nature of its context. This places conflict (violence) as the first order of the social. Douglas offers nothing prior. Ritual emerges after conflict. This is an issue which Milbank has taken

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 130-31; Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 106.

<sup>51</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 104.

<sup>52</sup> Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 5, 131-33.



great pains to address.<sup>53</sup> Milbank asserts that if a foundation of reason cannot be established and accepted to adjudicate thought and action, as postmodern social theory suggests, then what remains is autonomy and difference with the attendant and infinite expressions of ‘will to power’ which try to constrain the violence.<sup>54</sup> In this reading, Douglas still places individual social conflict as the prior context for religious ritual. This stands in contrast to Milbank’s claim of the primal ordering of peace and difference offered in the Christian *mythos*.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, Douglas not only places the role of the priest as constraining primal conflict in the past, she also offers little hope that this textual contribution can significantly effect the present.

Approaching doxology Douglas ends her work thus,

Leviticus’ general reflection on God’s justice reaches forward to the Book of Job. God’s choice is unconstrained. His election is never deserved. The converse is also true: demerit does not explain misfortune; disease or barrenness is not the fault of the victim. . . . The fate of the two goats was settled by lot. There is no way that a person could merit being chosen by God. He chose Israel freely, and his prophecies and promises became Israel’s destiny.<sup>56</sup>

Douglas exhibits undeniably great respect for the text and tradition of the Torah. However, accepting Milbank’s critique for the moment, one cannot help to sense that she has sealed off the dynamic presence of Israel’s God. The choice is made, human response and participation is virtually irrelevant, and all that remains is the social function of religion to continually maintain the borders of peace.

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<sup>53</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 278-325; Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 71, 195; This also the major critique in David Hart’s *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 35-125.

<sup>54</sup> I grant that Douglas was certainly not concerned with addressing Milbank’s concerns as she situated Leviticus. However, the tension remains in her recent work in the Torah in which she views priests as attempting to restore “the original message of forgiveness and rebirth” in a violent and chaotic context. This is believed to be attained by the ingenuity of the priests applying appropriate ritual strategies. Mary Douglas, *Jacob’s Tears: The Priestly Work of Reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 195. In reading Douglas one gets the reminder of specialists who ‘looked down the well’ at Jesus and found that he turned out to be *best* at whatever they do.

<sup>55</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 422-32.

<sup>56</sup> Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 251.

In response to this critique Douglas may justifiably ask why Milbank's project is not simply another even more subtle will to power. Milbank also attempts to organize the social order to address the existing environment of conflict. Even if his critique is accepted, can Milbank legitimately position social theory? It may be that Christianity poses the greatest threat, masquerading its violent tendencies with a vision of primal peace.<sup>57</sup> Milbank offers no common ground for response. They may talk about the matter but there is no mutually agreed rationale to adjudicate. Milbank does not assume a theoretical universal truth he offers only that there may be an 'attractiveness' to the Christian picture of God.<sup>58</sup> For Milbank, and Radical Orthodoxy, truth becomes, in a very serious (and aesthetic) sense, a matter of taste. Knowledge was born in the apple and not in the abstract.

At this point my reading of Douglas and Milbank appears to stall at the increasingly problematic, and perhaps more true reality, of the incommensurability of founding world-views. The priority of religious and social knowledge stand at odds. Douglas and Milbank simply do not agree. Foundation becomes a matter of belief and not proof. Both sides attempt to interpret the world from these beliefs. However, as my introduction indicated, the interest of these two writers reflects the broader relationship between religion and society. Both writers offer astute and critical readings of text and society. In the final section I offer no attempt at synthesis or resolution. However, given the common concern for understanding the boundaries and role of religion I consider it appropriate to offer a contribution through a reflection on the role of 'priest'.

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<sup>57</sup> Hart acknowledges this critique in addressing Nietzsche's claims against Christianity, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 102.

<sup>58</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 384.

## *Transcendence, Priesthood, and Reading the Wor(l)d*

The role of prophet as poet and social critic has enjoyed great prestige in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>59</sup> However, alongside this image there may now be space to again recognize the role of the priest.<sup>60</sup> Milbank emphasizes transcendence as a crucial aspect of interpreting reality. Douglas pays careful attention to the ritual aspect of transcendence but privileges knowledge based on social determination. Here religious and social knowledge are shown to be odds in the belief that their discourse more accurately positions or ‘reads’ the other. In this way I want to introduce priesthood hermeneutically. The current condition of hermeneutics is such that we still negotiate between the almost entirely debunked modern project of ideal historical reconstruction on the one hand,<sup>61</sup> and the extreme claims of the *absence* of any determinate content in reading on the other.<sup>62</sup> In navigating this tension some propose the basic idea that we must *relate* in order to understand.<sup>63</sup> There is *something* to attend to but that something, though impacting and substantive, will remain distinctly *other*. There remains neither mastery nor despair of meaning but the work of sustained engagement. This approach takes seriously a deeply *aesthetic* view of knowledge. Aesthetics understands objects as having

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<sup>59</sup> John Barton, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 13.

<sup>60</sup> An appropriate recovery of ‘priest’ is significant because until recently any significant concept of ‘priest’ in Protestantism was largely crushed by the influence of nineteenth century Old Testament scholarship which regarded it as inferior or too ‘Jewish’. See Balentine, *The Torah’s Vision of Worship*, 15-16.

<sup>61</sup> Seen clearly in J. P. Gabler’s inaugural lecture of 1787 in which he lays out the ideals and goals of historical reconstruction for the purpose of articulating stable models of truth. For text and commentary see John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, “J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality,” *SJT* 33 (1980): 133-58.

<sup>62</sup> For the absence of a readable ‘presence’ see Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (trans. by Alan Bass; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 26; Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 3.

<sup>63</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 155; Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 401-67; Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 8-28; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 271.

the potential to offer their presence gratuitously.<sup>64</sup> Here the subject may experience the substantive presence of meaning and not its infinite deferral. Emphasizing the movement and presence between subject and object the image of priest becomes significant addressing reading as the appropriate understanding of boundaries and access. Boundaries emphasize that form is important, as it marks the reality and difference of the object, but as with aesthetics and the priestly tradition of Torah boundaries allow the possibility of being ‘breached’ allowing for the reception of presence.

For priests boundaries were ultimately a matter of life and death. The boundaries range from those set by God in creation (Gen 1); those given for the land of Israel (Num 34); those given for the arrangement of the camp (Num 2); those given among the Levites (Num 3); those given to the dimensions and internal boundaries of the Tabernacle (Ex 25-27). These boundaries are *not* to isolate but precisely the opposite. These boundaries are given to *facilitate* the relationship between God and humanity and between humans. For this reason priests addressed a dizzying array of ‘breaches,’ the crossing of boundaries. These breaches included the ethical, between the human and human. The ethical nature of the Torah’s laws are commonly acknowledged. How does one deal with a neighbour who has inappropriately breached (trespassed) community boundaries? The priests were also keenly concerned with physiological breaches. The loss of certain fluids related directly with someone’s status in relation to God.<sup>65</sup> The breaches of the skin (blood, semen, infection) were significant and needed to be accounted for. There were also sacrificial breaches in which an animal’s boundary, its skin, was breached and turned into smoke (Lev 1:6-10). Ultimately the greatest care was taken in crossing the boundaries of the Tabernacle and later of the Temple. The result of entering this space could range from being

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<sup>64</sup> My use of aesthetics is developed more fully below.

<sup>65</sup> Douglas becomes extremely significant for understanding this component of priestly thought; Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 176-94.

consumed by fire (Lev 10:2) to being cleansed by it (Isa 6:7). Beyond the Torah the role of boundaries extends to the maintenance of Jerusalem's walls and gates (Jer 17:19-27; Neh 2-6), the tearing of the curtain in the New Testament (Matt 27:51), and ultimately into Christian reflection on the incarnation. In all of these accounts the crossing of boundaries is not inherently bad, in fact boundaries are necessary and called for. However, in crossing boundaries *something happened* and it was to this reality that priests were called to be responsible.<sup>66</sup>

For the priests not every breach was the same. Leviticus offers a complex account of the various consequences and solutions to breached boundaries. Some breaches simply required the person to stay outside camp until evening (Lev 15:6) while others carried the possibility of death (Lev 20:9). These distinctions were based upon the calling of Levites to “distinguish between the holy and the common, between the clean and the clean, and [to] teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses” (Lev 10:10-11). Priests were called to interpret their context given its ontological reality, namely the presence of a holy God. The priest does not contradict but complements the prophet who, like Isaiah with his Sabbath corrective (Isa 58), demonstrates that appropriate boundaries find their *telos* in right relationships not vice versa. Indeed, the prophet gains his or her significance in understanding appropriate and inappropriate boundaries. According to the text, the Torah repels notions of static and hierarchical application. As priests, standing ‘in the breach’ was no position of power but of necessary respect for boundaries and the reality of transcendence (Lev 16:2). This does not mean the absence of strict application. The priesthood was part of the detailed and constructive work of community life. However, handling the law did not put one above the law (Lev 10; Deut 34:4) nor did it disallow circumstantial appeals (Num 27:5-11).

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<sup>66</sup> Balentine does an excellent job of addressing this theme throughout his work but see specifically *The Torah's Vision for Worship*, 240-54.

This image of priest as interpreter also demands that any remaining notions of ‘neutral description’ be put to rest. The interpreter is set within the relationships of their context. Interpretation is qualitative, it serves to support or undermine given assumptions regarding life or truth. Though no consensus on hermeneutic method exists the image of priesthood demands a category of humility and courage towards the beautiful and terrifying breaches in our world. Both scripture and literature offer further images of what I propose to be the priesthood of interpretation.

In Isaiah 6 the prophet becomes priest of the sublime postured in the Temple.<sup>67</sup> Isaiah receives insight into his circumstance. The boundary of political reality and monotheistic sovereignty merge. *In the year the king died . . . I saw [the king] seated on the throne.* Isaiah is not lifted to abstract ecstasy, but the opposite. His senses become saturated.

*His robe **filled** the Temple . . .  
and all around were six-winged **blazing** angels  
covering their faces and **crying out** to each other  
HOLY, HOLY, HOLY is the LORD, the earth is **filled** his glory.  
Their voices **shook** the foundations and all was **filled** with smoke.*

Sensual boundaries are breached and the fullness of experience impoverishes his ability to respond. Isaiah’s only response is an inability to respond.

*Woe to me, I am undone!*

Isaiah, however, is not left without a message, without content, of the sublime but it comes thus,

*Hear! But do not hear.  
See! But do not see.*

*Make their obedience be disobedience, lest they repent.*

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<sup>67</sup> For influences of this reading see David Driedger, *Read Carefully but do not Understand: Isaiah 6:9-10 and the Ethics of Reading* (MDiv thesis; Providence Theological Seminary, 2004), 101-14.

Is this a riddle, a command, or a judgment? To obey is to disobey? Despairing, the prophet cries, *How long?* At this cry the fullness of his senses are drained before the reality of God's judgment. *Until the cities lie ruined and emptied.* Isaiah receives determinate, full and moving knowledge. Isaiah carries this knowledge of God but the only expression of language afforded to him of this holiness is a seed, and less than a seed. Isaiah brings Israel a stump. There is no passive, controlled manipulation of the text, there is the only the opportunity to recognize possible expressions which emerge from the encounter.

In Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* the seaman Marlow travels deep into the Congo at the turn of the twentieth century as Europeans expanded the ivory trade. Marlow commands a small steamer which moves from the stir and patterns of Western civilization into the unknown, mysterious heart of Africa. During the trip Marlow becomes aware of a man named Kurtz who resides at the destination of his journey. Kurtz has entrenched himself deep in the jungle and his eccentricity and success as an ivory trader has generated many speculations. As the story continues the reader experiences an increased intensity of both the foreignness of Marlow's surroundings as well as the presence of this man named Kurtz. In many ways Kurtz is not so much someone to meet as something to experience. His personality, his persuasion, his influence stretched far and reached deep. However, this presence is never fully divorced from the physical reality of the body. Kurtz is human, but not just. As Marlow proceeds further down the river he encounters brutal human atrocities with Africans treated as animals. The white traders are consumed with greed, many of them vengefully jealous of how Kurtz has been successful in expanding his presence deeper into Africa.

The book culminates as Marlow and his crew pass through an attack by the native people who, we are told, wish to protect Kurtz for the gift he is to them. Marlow witnesses cruel death

and bizarre actions. The accounts of Kurtz escalate, is he madman or genius? His senses are filled by the overwhelming *presence* of a world not unreal, but perhaps too real. A world unconstrained, without boundaries. A world open to the force of will. Marlow finally encounters Kurtz who is by then a shell of a man and near death. But despite his fragile frame there remains a voice that nearly levels Marlow's consciousness as he realizes his exposure to the raw materials of humanity in their most pure form. At Kurtz's last breathe Marlow hears him utter an isolated pronouncement, his judgment, "The horror! The horror!" At this Kurtz is left and dies. Marlow reflects on experiencing the presence of an unbridled expression of human nature. While Marlow claims to understand because he too has "peeped over the edge" he affirms that Kurtz has communicated something different as he has stepped "over the edge of the invisible." He was overcome with involuntary respect for Kurtz. In his attempt to recount these events Marlow compares it to Kurtz's, "Better his cry – much better."<sup>68</sup>

Marlow returns to Europe with contempt for all the triviality that he sees. Their daily routines insulating them from significance. He does not offer commentary on their lives, nor does he desire to. In the final pages Marlow is invited to Kurtz's widow who wishes to articulate her love for Kurtz with someone else who knew and loved him. This meeting closes in her desire to hear Kurtz's final words.

"Repeat them," she murmured in a heart-broken tone. 'I want – I want – something – something – to – live with.'

"I was on the point of crying at her, 'Don't you understand?' The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of the rising wind.

'The horror! The horror!'

"His last word – to live with,' she insisted. 'Don't you understand I loved him – I loved him – I loved him!'

"I pulled myself together and spoke slowly.

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<sup>68</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and The End of the Tether* (New York: Airmont Publishing Company, 1966), 90.



“‘The last word he pronounced was – your name.’

“I heard a light sigh and the my heart stood still, stopped dead short by an exulting and terrible cry, by the cry of an inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain. ‘I knew it – I was sure!’ . . . She knew. She was sure. I heard weeping; she had hidden her face in her hands. It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle. Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice that was his due? Hadn’t he said he wanted only justice? But I couldn’t. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark – too dark altogether. . . .”<sup>69</sup>

Marlow received the significance of his experience. However, as with Isaiah, he strains under the demands and implications of communicating that encounter.

This hermeneutic framing should not be mistaken as an escape into the ambiguity of metaphor. What I offer in these images assumes that we do acquire real knowledge from the world around us. However, this knowledge is not determined by interpreting static objects with a fixed method. Rather, our engagement with reality expresses a generative and gratuitous relationship in which an appropriate response cannot be predetermined, fixed, or controlled. The presence of the object impacts our ability to respond. Recent expressions of theological aesthetics vigorously address this aspect of knowledge. The role of an aesthetic based knowledge resonates with the agenda in Rowan Williams’ recent book which revolves around the aesthetics of Jacques Maritain.<sup>70</sup> Here the artistic process is viewed as a reflection on our ability to perceive, not fixed foundations, but rhythms by which we may address the reality and potentiality of the world. In this way, the artistic process stands in defiance to the type of instrumental precision which seeks to make things ‘fit’.<sup>71</sup> The result of the artistic is a reading which might offer the type of imagery or metaphor which both clarifies and alludes. Williams, as a theologian, does not hesitate in relating this process to engaging with notions of the sacred,

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>70</sup> Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Morehouse, 2005).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 141.

returning us to the notion of priest.<sup>72</sup> David Hart also addresses the role of metaphor in his theological aesthetics. In attempting to speak of God metaphor exhibits “a fertile and evocative mingling of ambiguity and clarity.”<sup>73</sup> In support he quotes Paul Ricoeur’s notion of ‘root metaphors’ which

on the one hand, have the power to bring together the partial metaphors borrowed from diverse fields of our experience and thereby to assure them a kind of equilibrium. On the other hand, they have the ability to engender a conceptual diversity, I mean, an unlimited number of potential interpretations at a conceptual level. Root metaphors assemble and scatter. They assemble subordinate images together, and they scatter concepts at a higher level.<sup>74</sup>

Adopting this view fits well into the guiding insight of theological aesthetics which is the gratuity of form, offering itself beyond limited perspectives. Hart extends Ricoeur’s contribution stating that such a metaphor (here dealing with ‘Christ is the Temple’) “reveals its meaning by way of its inexhaustibly fecund resistance to final analysis, by which it continues to generate newer and more elaborate metaphorical and hermeneutical locutions.”<sup>75</sup>

These accounts of knowledge and understanding which take aesthetics seriously draw us back into the priestly world. The scene at Mt. Sinai (Ex 19) in which God calls the people to be a ‘kingdom of priests’ is set not immediately in the precision of levitical law but shrouded in the dense cloud (Ex 19:9) of God’s presence. This is a sensual, aesthetic, account. The trumpet sounds and grows in intensity. The mountain is covered with smoke as the LORD descends in fire. This scene is central to the priestly task of establishing boundaries. These images stand at the key points of God’s revelation to humanity. Boundaries are there because transcendence and presence are part of the ontological assumptions of Torah. God’s revelation attempts to help

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>73</sup> Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 303.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 304. See also Jan Mukařovský, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*. (trans. Mark E. Suino; Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University of Michigan, 1970), 89-94

steward the implications of breeched boundaries. “‘Put *limits* around the mountain and set it apart as holy.’ The LORD replied, ‘Go down and bring Aaron with you. But the priests and the people must not *force their way through* to come up to the LORD, or I will *break out* against them’” (Ex 19:23b-24). The correct understanding of boundary is necessary because movement and presence will always occur in a qualitative manner.<sup>76</sup> In addition, the context for correctly establishing boundaries can never be justifiably excised from the dense cloud of God’s presence.<sup>77</sup> This position’s the interpreter and qualifies the possible type of response. Isaiah is left no recourse but through paradox and image and Marlow judges that Kurtz has indeed understood and pronounced correctly. These examples assume and demand that the breach of boundary and the reception of presence is part of reality. However, they also demand that this encounter may not yield to abstract examination but may, at times, only be accessed by dense aesthetic forms of communication.

## ***Conclusion***

This essay examined the work of Mary Douglas and John Milbank within the context of biblical interpretation. This context allowed the further exploration of Douglas and Milbank’s approach to the relationship between religion and society. I interpreted the two authors through the guiding theme of transcendence, as it functioned significantly in both their work. Milbank’s critique of sociological readings of the Bible was found applicable to several aspects of Douglas’ account. Examining both writers I encountered the apparent incommensurability of the two

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<sup>76</sup> I am thinking here of modern law and its attempt to discern appropriate social and physical boundaries in terms of sexuality. There is no longer any notion of neutral “touch”. To touch is cross a boundary.

<sup>77</sup> For other reflections on the aesthetic nature of God’s presence in Torah see Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); Rowans Williams, “Between the Cherubim: the Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne,” in *On Christian Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), 183-96.

approaches. Accepting a post-foundational position, I did not attempt a synthesis. In place, I discerned significant hermeneutic commonalities. Given the shared vocabulary and interests I considered it appropriate to reflect on this situation within the image of ‘priest’. This image resonates deeply with various expressions of theological aesthetics. This approach offers no *methodology* in the way Gadamer critiques the term.<sup>78</sup> The image, rather, testifies to the reality of boundaries and the need distinguish and steward the points of access. The priest is bound by the holy presence of God. This image illustrates that reading and relaying are two different tasks. Both Isaiah and Marlow were offered transcendent presence. The accounts are fully sensual and not detached. However, this reception offers Isaiah no equal representation for the thick presence of its meaning. For Marlow, he has rightly understood something of the boundaries which were crossed but he strains and labours and finally withdraws from the dreadful weight of his truth. Cast in light of the priest, the social or theological reader remains responsible to stand at the site of this encounter. The image assumes no common intellectual foundation but demands respect for common relationships. In this account Douglas and Milbank cannot quickly discount the other, though they may part drastically in their tasks.<sup>79</sup> Milbank is right to look down at the floor and see the lines which are drawn ask why he is standing where he is. However, in doing so has he pushed others to the corners, or outside the room altogether, foreclosing the type of transcendence he seeks to champion?

It would be imprudent to deny the reality of various and devastating breaches witnessed in racial, economic, political, and sexual relationships. The understanding and response to these

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<sup>78</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 268-278.

<sup>79</sup> After completing this paper it was encouraging to find a recent article by Milbank in which he addresses postmodernism as the “obliteration of boundaries” and that Christianity can learn from the Jewish tradition of limits. This article offered a much more irenic position without denying his conviction of difference. John Milbank, “The Gospel Affinity,” in *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition Amid Modernity and Postmodernity* (ed. Miroslav Volf and William Katerberg; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 149-69.

realities remains always ongoing. The priesthood of interpretation recognizes neither neutrality nor manipulation in this context. The reader is firmly invested in their context and his or her readings will always in some way be prescriptive, or at least qualitative. If interpretation accepts its task as invested and qualitative it may continue to be spurred towards substantive readings of the breaches witnessed in our world. The Torah testifies to a complex and nuanced reading of the world. In turn our context requires positive and robust readings of society. However, these readings, as with the priestly tradition, must remain nestled within various generative images such as, the cloud of presence, the empty mercy seat, and the prophetic critique. The image of priest presented here reminds us that task of reading the wor(l)d must remain situated within the poetic refrains of Marlow's 'horror' and Isaiah's 'holy'.

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