

## **Nothing is ever over until the end: On religion, power and order**

*by John Milbank\**

### **I.**

Nothing is ever over. On my recent return from holiday in Ireland, I passed through Carrickfergus, a Protestant town in the majority-Protestant North. There, on the quayside, sure enough, in front of the imposingly intact Castle, was a statue to the Dutch Prince and eventual King of England, William of Orange, object of the fiercely anti-Papist cult of 'King Billy'. To my dismay, I saw that the date of the statue was 1990, already after the easing of the worst of the recent troubles.

The events it commemorates can seem to us, perhaps wrongly, as but the tail-end of the wars of religion in Europe at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> C. With an extended assumption of belatedness and anachronism, we tend to view modern Irish quarrels, which could be tragically reignited by the Brexit vote, as evidence of a backwardness at the far end of Europe. Yet were the recent conflicts of Catholic and Protestant in the north of that island merely a matter of lingering and throwback, or were they somehow a harbinger of a new global era in which the linking of religion with violence and terrorism has come to seem horribly normal rather than bizarrely aberrant?

After all, it is a simplification to imagine that the Irish tensions have been consistently present ever since the 17<sup>th</sup> C. The first militant Irish republicans in the early 19<sup>th</sup> C were Protestants, not Catholics. The first leaders of the campaign for home rule and the first revivers of Irish culture were often members of the more humane faction of the Protestant landowning ascendancy (such as the Gore-Booths of Lissadell House in County Sligo, as celebrated by the poet W.B Yeats) and a militant linking of Catholicism and Republicanism arose only from about the year 1900. And it would have remained a largely feared and scorned minority tendency within Ireland, were it not for the triple contingency of the First World War, British over-reaction to the Easter Rising and Ulster anger at perceived Republican treachery in contrast to the particularly terrible sacrifices of Northern Irish troops at the battle of the Somme. Thus were set in train patterns of politico-religious sectarianism, undergirded by dire myths of anger and resentment, that are specifically modern and even 20<sup>th</sup> C in character, and in no ways mere archaic survivals. What is more, the relative contemporary vigour of religion in Northern Ireland has its light as well as its dark side. It helps to shape strong family and community life, as evidenced by the consistently best educational results for the United Kingdom as a whole and perhaps within Ireland itself. Eire is indeed more subject to a secularisation that has ironically much more eroded in several places an authentic Irishness and has still more despoiled the Irish landscape with bungalows and quasi-American dream-homes.

A dreadful and still more ironic warning to the English lurks here: the very attempt to achieve cultural purity and self-control by national sovereignty may risk losing it through a denial of complex diversity and ineradicable connectedness. In the case of Southern Ireland, this has to do both with the Protestant and the Anglo-Irish legacy which are simplified and traduced by being filed under 'colonialism', just as the ancient link to the west of Scotland is suppressed by calling the ancient native language 'Irish' rather than 'Gaelic', in especial forgetfulness of the fact that the Gaelic spoken by the largely Catholic, and rarely Nationalist population of north Antrim in the north-eastern corner of Ireland ('The Glens of Antrim') was itself of a Scottish dialect variety. The problems of an absolutism about identity are vividly illustrated by the bizarre nature of the road border between northern and southern Ireland, which it is too risky to mark for ideological and security reasons, such that, as in a dream, one suddenly finds that one is driving kilometres not miles and that the road-

markings are entirely different. Thus a mythically absolute boundary cannot be inscribed even though its effects are all too real. (And incidentally the Southern Irish still think and talk in miles, just as they listen to the BBC, contribute money to the British Royal National Lifeboat Institute in boxes at the supermarket while lamenting their own lack of a National Health Service). The attempt at political corralling of a culture tends in Ireland, in stark contrast to say Wales which projects its identity more securely in linguistic and cultural terms, to backfire: thus one gets Americanisation built on an uncritical adulation of the USA, dream-homes, widespread governmental corruption, desecration of the coastline by cars on beaches, and the tax haven recently and rightly reprovved in the case of Apple by the EU, all of which was surely not what the Fenians fought for.

In the case of England, a quest for purity in relation to a still vaster mainland would make even less sense and would be likely to have even direr consequences, including a decadent decline into offshore tax-haven status. The English have never really existed in any such political, linguistic or literary purity besides their complex relations to their Celtic margins which exceed formal geographic borders, and their inevitable entanglements with close Continental neighbours – even if, from the Venerable Bede onwards, they have sometimes tried to claim so and sometimes (as with Bede) through a doublethink that turn by turn appropriates the Celtic or the Roman for a sheerly English identity.<sup>1</sup>

Today, in terms of its relation to the EU, the travails of England are starting to look not so unlike the travails of Ireland after all. Nothing is ever over, because the post-Romantic European settlement on the nation state is inherently insecure, since identities remain complex and contested. Are the Ukrainians Russians, are the Catalonians Spanish, the Bretons French? Is Italian unity inviolable? Should Belgium split? Should the Flemish remain always dispersed between three different countries? Should Scandinavia, like the British Isles be politically unified at some level? And so on. Moreover, this ethno-political uncertainty is never far removed from religious uncertainty, as we see in the case of Russia and Eastern Europe. If the post-Romantic settlement was less than permanent, then so, also, has proved the post-Westphalian one. *Cuius regio, eius religio* only works if political and confessional boundaries can be made roughly to map onto each other, or at least be co-ordinated. So long as they can be so, then religious conflict appears to be outdated. But in reality this effect might be more political than ideological, more to do with pragmatism than with the inevitable triumph of enlightenment. And if Ireland has been an exception to this, then so too is Britain, which may be nearly at the end of Europe, and yet has been central to the process of European modernisation, in the wake of the Dutch, and sometimes with their assistance and connivance.

What is more, the British *failure* to resolve the Reformation crisis and so, apparently to be fully modern (of which the Irish situation is only the extreme instance within the British-Irish archipelago) is arguably linked in a *positive* fashion to its ultra-modernisation. What is this failure? It is the acceptance after the so-called glorious revolution of 1689 (which can be more ingloriously read as the Dutch seizure of the Crown!) of a radical religious plurality between Anglicanism and religious dissent and of somewhat drastically different (and increasingly so) currents within Anglicanism itself, which look very odd to any other Protestant denomination. In effect, these divisions were a more muted echo of the grand conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism itself – as especially witnessed by the continued 18<sup>th</sup> C connections of High Church Anglican forces to Jacobite and so to Catholic or crypto-Catholic ones, especially powerful in the Gaelic margins.<sup>2</sup> As the historian Robert Tombs has argued, these divisions have given later left-right divisions in British politics more of a

<sup>1</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (London: Penguin, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> See Daniel Szechi, *The Jacobites: Britain and Europe, 1688-1788* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994); Paul Kléber Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People* (Cambridge, CUP, 1989).

quasi-religious sectarian, than an outright ideological character as on the Continent: ultimately the English, especially, remain Roundhead or Cavalier, dissenting whig or established-Church Tory, rather than liberal-socialist or reactionary.<sup>3</sup> (And one can read the Brexit vote as a populist Roundhead, still ‘anti-papist’ victory, as the psephological geography tends to bear out.) Appropriately then, a key site of recent Irish troubles, named Derry for Catholics or Londonderry for Protestants, is marked today by its indeed very ‘Londonish’ centre, within the 17<sup>th</sup> C walls. Irish sectarianism is but British sectarianism writ large.

But how is this lingering early modern feature dialectically connected to ultra-modernisation? By the way in which it encouraged the emergence of a neutral, non-religious speech appealing to reason and science as publicly normative standards – or rather by a mutation of the Roundhead become whig dissenting and low-Church trajectory in this more pragmatic direction.

And indeed one should think more here of the Enlightenment as the long Reformation that of reformation as proto-enlightenment. For enlightenment was marked by Unitarianism and Freemasonry, much more than by outright irreligion.<sup>4</sup> And from the same perspective, the apparent British-Irish exception at the edge of Europe starts to look much less so. For it is arguably not so much that the English, by virtue of entrenched pluralism and the role of a somewhat revolutionary Protestantism, escaped the need for secular revolution, as in France, as rather, as Edmund Burke and William Cobbett surmised, that the French revolution was also a late work of radical reformation – of ‘deistic’ freemasons, besides being the revenge of the Jansenists against the Jesuits and of the Huguenots against the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, as recent historians have stressed.<sup>5</sup> As with the English Reformation, its primary act was the seizure of the ecclesial patrimony, while the arguments over Church governance, as William Doyle suggests, were the *primary* instigators of the switch from constitutional reform to republican revolution.<sup>6</sup>

## II.

Religion alone delivers order as legitimation and ritually patterned control:<sup>7</sup> thus after the collapse of the unified European order which was Christendom, various contested simulacra of Christendom perforce had to succeed it, and these all remained for the most part religious, right up to the most recent times. In this sense, God has only now returned because he never went away, even if he has remained sometimes half-concealed behind pragmatic political arrangements not fully conceding their ultimately religious legitimation. However, the bloody ideological divisions that ensued upon the French Revolution led to an intensification of the earlier British attempt to mediate and override religious divisions in the name of Science and Reason. Now, with Auguste Comte (arguably the most important and influential thinker of modern times, though this is infrequently recognised), the quasi-religious and ‘negative’ abstract idealism of enlightenment, looking for ‘emancipation’ in the name of rights etc, is abandoned by many in the name of a purely ‘positive’ cult of what is factually apparent and pragmatically works. In an exacerbation of Hobbes to the point of abandonment of his liberal

<sup>3</sup> Robert Tombs, *The English and Their History* (London: Penguin, 2014), esp. 492-512.

<sup>4</sup> See Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (Lafayette, Louisiana: Cornerstone, 2006); S.J. Barnett, *The Enlightenment and Religion: The Myths of Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Stanford Cal: Stanford UP, 2001); William Cobbett, *A History of the Protestant Reformation in England and Ireland [1827]* (Charlotte NC: Tan Books, 2012); Barnett, *The Enlightenment and Religion*.

<sup>6</sup> William Doyle, *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> I have derived the science as power and religion as order contrast from Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Harvill Secker, 2016). But this essay is implicitly critical of some of his historiography and contentions.

solution, order is despaired of and so traditional religion refused. Instead, only power and the means of power remains (Nietzsche being but a variant of this). However, since order continues to be inescapably an exigency, a cult is to be made of power itself; the wielders of power are also to rule and to ensure integration around their expertise and their promotion of 'the human' as the possibility of this power over nature, within and yet beyond nature herself.<sup>8</sup>

Only with the invention of positivism, for political and ideological reasons, does any 'conflict' between science and religion historically begin, and it remains an entirely political conflict. And indeed it was not the only reaction to enlightenment: alongside positivism came also and in rivalry evangelical, pietist, Catholic and Orthodox revivals throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> C. There were also important hybrids: positivism itself was a curious inversion of the occasionalism, ontologism and voluntarism of post-revolution Catholic reaction and later, as with *Action Française*, this inversion was re-inverted: where power has once been sanctified, it can be rebaptised by a voluntarist and *intégriste* theology as after all religious order.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas, then, the 18<sup>th</sup> C was still arguably a period of the long Reformation, of religion turned rationalist but remaining religious, the 19<sup>th</sup> C was a more paradoxical period of the simultaneous revival of more authentic modes of Christianity, alongside a much more virulent and explicit atheism, linked for the first time also to an outright scientism. As Charles Taylor has argued, the wake of the Romantic reaction against Enlightenment brought a situation not of uncontested secularism, but rather of inherently contested and unresolved issues around belief and non-belief.<sup>10</sup>

What, then, of the 20<sup>th</sup> C and of the 21<sup>st</sup>? One can argue that one can divide this period into four different epochs. In the first, stretching from roughly 1900 to 1945, modes of atheistic positivism, focussed around naturalistic quasi-religions of race or class seized power, but were finally defeated, with a time-lag in the case of Communism lasting up till 1990. In the second, stretching from 1945 till 1990, a historic compromise was for a time arrived at between Christianity and a revived enlightenment around a humanism enshrined in notions of universal rights and human dignity.<sup>11</sup> For a very brief interval, from 1990 to 2001, it looked as if this compromise could universally triumph and bring about an Hegelian end of history. But from 2001 to the present, this compromise has variously collapsed; scientific and xenophobic, sometimes religious modes of positivism have returned, and a largely unprecedented factor, the challenge of Islam on the borders and within the West itself has emerged.

All this returns us, in a sense, to the 19<sup>th</sup> C situation. And to 19<sup>th</sup> C-type paradox. For today we seem to witness the simultaneous further decline of religion and yet also various strong revivals of religion, especially if we are speaking in global terms. If God has returned, then it is not mainly insofar as he is now believed in, as rather that he is once more much spoken of, albeit often in an ignorant and uninformed fashion. Above all, whereas in the second recent epoch from 1945 to 1990, religion appeared to be marginalised as uncontroversial and harmless, if often seen as sentimental and foolish, now religious belief and religious ethical practice is highly contested, as arguably never before.

Why should this be the case? There would seem to be several interlocking reasons. First, secular ideologies, or quasi-religions, like Marxism, Sociology and Freudianism, have drastically lost their credibility in a process that stretches back as far as the 1960's. A resulting void of postmodern relativism has been speedily filled by claims to erect ontologies solely on the basis of ascertainable

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<sup>8</sup> See Maurice Cowling, *Mill and Liberalism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1963).

<sup>9</sup> See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 51-74

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard Mass; Harvard UP, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia Penn: Pennsylvania UP, 2015).

natural science. Often linked to this is a new ideology of the secular as such, whose content is not so much the positive replacement of religion as negative hostility towards it, even if comically strenuous efforts are made to turn this negativity into an actionable content, as in the case of ‘humanistic funerals’ which, naturally, are both more and less funereal than the real thing. Nevertheless, one should not read ‘Dawkinsism’ as a substitute for lost ideological hope, so much as a new repriming of always central positivist content. For arguably the apparent positivity of the older ideologies always masked a secretly negative, anti-religious core, such that the destruction of the iconic, the symbolic and the meaningful to leave a residue of pure power alone and its cult, always lay at the heart of fascism, Nazism and communism. Dawkinsism is but a clearer embrace of scientism as always the heart of secularism, even if Dawkins himself, to his inconsistent credit, retains a sentimental humanistic overlay. While, indeed, the post 1960’s philosophy and history of science for a time relativised scientific claims, a militant scientism in Britain, at any rate, only lay dormant. From the time of Thomas Huxley onwards, proof of atheism was often the concealed purpose of British biology (in rather the same way that soft paganism and would-be cultured rationalism has often been the secret and obnoxious purpose of Oxbridge Classics) rather than being its regrettable implication, as the heterodox Cambridge biologist Rupert Sheldrake has argued.<sup>12</sup> In this way Dawkins is the rising to the surface of something hitherto concealed. And beyond Dawkins, a more militant neo-positivism is now proclaiming that only informational data is real, with human beings reduced to input-output loci and human freedom and uniquely creative and judgemental intelligence being denied.<sup>13</sup> In political terms, of course, this is a programme for a yet further increased rule by experts and the proletarianisation, pacification and perhaps partial extermination of the rest of the population.

In the second place, one could posit that the reason for this rising to the surface is not so much an outrage that religion still lingers, as a fear that it could return in the wake of the collapse of secular political and therapeutic hope. For all the continued popular erosion of religion, there are signs of European revival amongst more educated groups in an era where only sophisticated religion appears to offer strong overarching and hopeful worldviews. And so to some extent the hysteria of the new-atheism, arising already in the 1990’s, can be retrospectively regarded as a prophylactic protest against Christian intellectual recovery.

In the third place, the comfortably agnostic philosophy of the twentieth century, whether phenomenological or analytic, has succumbed to a metacritique of its critical stance.<sup>14</sup> Foundational boundaries projected against speculation have been deconstructed, and, in consequence, beyond a dogmatic scepticism whose dogmatism has in turn been questioned,<sup>15</sup> we see the return of a now admittedly speculative metaphysics, whether naturalistic or spiritualistic in form. The practical aspect of this abrupt transformation (which has left much of an older academic generation floundering) concerns the inadequacy of an ethical humanism based upon consensus as to the primacy of negative liberty and minimal contentment. For in a situation of increased cultural and ethnic plurality it quickly turns out that people’s notions of allowable freedom and of the content of contentment vary wildly, encouraging extremism if such notions are not tempered by educated reflection, as Quentin

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<sup>12</sup> Rupert Sheldrake, *The Science Delusion* (London: Coronet, 2013), 13-27, 291-317.

<sup>13</sup> See Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2016). But the pessimistic aspects of this book are more convincing than the optimistic. Data no more overflows the reach of Capitalism than production was once held to do – indeed both the datum and the product in their supposedly pure factual positivity are specifically capitalist products and capitalism controls (as with Google) most of all our apparent freedom in handling data.

<sup>14</sup> John Milbank, ‘Only Theology Saves Metaphysics: On the Modalities of Terror’ in *Belief and Metaphysics*, ed. P.M. Candler and C. Cunningham (London: SCM, 2007), 452-500 and ‘The Mystery of Reason’ in *The Grandeur of Reason: Religion, Tradition and Universalism* eds. P.M. Candler and C. Cunningham (London: SCM, 2010), 68-117.

<sup>15</sup> See Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 236-240.

Meillassoux has contended.<sup>16</sup> And equally, once humanism had finally slipped from its Christian moorings, it embarked upon a questioning of the sanctity of life both at birth and death, of the psychic besides corporeal significance of sex, and of the integrity of given biological identities, especially those of gender.

Inevitably this latter development has meant a practical and not just theoretical clash between thoroughly secularised people and those still adhering to Christian faith, for whom the secularists, in seeking to guard the human, had in fact abandoned it and started to license murder, as with much abortion, besides the appalling and uncontrollable license now given to euthanasia both in the Netherlands and in Belgium, and to license physical self-abuse, as with claimed medical alteration of gender and now even deliberate amputation of limbs. To say that all this is an abuse of medicine and a denial of the Hippocratic oath is putting it mildly.

But whatever one thinks about these issues, the main point here is that such disagreements render the whole notion of religious toleration inherently problematic. To what extent can individual religious people or religious bodies be granted exceptions with respect to new secular norms of birth, death, sexuality and gender, if thereby they are violating what are now perceived to be fundamental human rights? Above all, can religious bodies have any corporate legislative power to constrain the actions and beliefs of their members if these are regarded as primarily citizens, defined by an equal autonomy of action? In all honesty we do not any longer collectively agree about the value and range of religious tolerance. And this ancient night of irresolvable religious disagreement seems to have fallen suddenly upon our secular day. Once more, indeed, nothing seems to be really over after all.

And in the future these disagreements will only be exacerbated as the further release of power and possibility is construed as a fundamentally good thing, only to be controlled by the most powerful manipulators of such power in the interests of further freedom, which, for all the egalitarian rhetoric, can only mean the ever greater freedom of the most powerful. Read subversively, in the spirit of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, one could argue that this is not the triumph of science over superstition, but of a kind of black because indifferent magic of control (which often indeed manipulates physical forces and affinities whose nature it does not fully understand) over the white magic of art and liturgy which admits a certain magical kinship between soul and matter, and a certain theurgic ability of certain incantations to mediate the divine.<sup>17</sup> If the black magic of scientism denies this kinship, its necromancy lies precisely in the unadmitted psychic attraction of the very powerful to blind processes of force with which they seek to be as one, even to the extent of a contradictory denial of their own liberty which they nevertheless seek thereby to augment.

In the fourth place, one has the new irruption and incursion of a radicalised Islam to which, for example, an estimated 45% of British mosques can be held to belong (specifically to the Deobandi sect)<sup>18</sup> even though that in no way means that, for the overwhelming most part, they support acts of terrorism. This irruption has exacerbated the return of God in an extremely complex and frequently paradoxical way. Leftist forces, now often defined mainly by their secularism, may strategically ally with Islamists in perceived opposition to Western colonialism, the state of Israel and even, *sotto voce*, a supposed Jewish plutocracy. Meanwhile, the mainline churches too often decide simplistically to defend religious identity and liberty as such, without sufficiently considering that at least some of the humanist and secular legacy, as regards for example the equality of women, the freedom of religious attachment, and the non-sacrality of the politico-legal field is a post-Christian outcome. To be

<sup>16</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude: essai sur la nécessité de la contingence* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories' in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin, 1972), 11-70; C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (London: MacMillan, 1965).

<sup>18</sup> Melanie Philips, 'It's pure myth that Islam is a "religion of peace"' in *The Times*, Friday, August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

authentically Christian, the Churches need to place themselves somewhat in the middle as regards the quarrel between secularity and theocratic autonomy. It is correct, for example, to insist on the sheer absurdity of actually requiring women to be semi-naked on beaches, even though one should defend to the end their right to be so if they choose. But on the other hand, the churches should join those who protest against the Scottish police force decision to allow the Hijab as part of a police uniform. This is frightening, because no such conspicuous Christian, Jewish or Hindu symbol would be allowed, and rightly not. A policeperson should appear before you solely as a representative of secular law, and not as the direct representative of any faith whatsoever. So what we seem to have here is a worrying concession to radical Islamic pressure in (Hijabic...) disguise. Instead, a defence of the legitimate rights of Islamic religion in the West (including the exercise of Sharia law, so long as its principles do not contradict those of secular law) should be matched by a demand for reciprocity in Islamic lands, which is so far in the main very little forthcoming.

Yet currently, the more Christians concede against all the evidence that all and every religious 'fundamentalism' equally tends to violence (how many bombers are there really in the Bible belt?) then the more Christians themselves will be tarred with the brush of suspicion of religion as such, after every new Islamicist outrage. However admirable the advances anciently made in Arabic lands by Islam over a polytheistic past, and however far the Koranic legacy has often been brilliantly modified by Persian, Greek, Jewish, gnostic and Christian philosophical and mystical influences, it remains the case that Islam tries to reinstate the archaism of sacralised law and 'desert monotheism' as a new and somewhat perverse universal. This archaism follows almost inevitably from its unique claim to be a revelation beyond the Christian -- beyond, therefore, from a Christian point of view, the displacement of (according to St Paul) daemonically mediated human law and custom by the direct human presence of God himself in a non-repeatability that yet is now the paradoxical final example.

The tendency of the mainline of Sunni Islam and the *Kalam* orthodoxy to reduce order to power in a theocratic sense, or to one where the gaps in the divine command are supplied by the commands of human tyrants who can sometimes be oddly viewed as somewhat extrinsic to Islamic order (or even as belonging to a class themselves literally enslaved to ruling, as with the janissaries) involves indeed, as Emeritus Pope Benedict claimed at Regensburg, a certain difficulty with the mediation of the sacral by reason and the innate sacrality of reason itself.<sup>19</sup> This difficulty was observed from within Islam by the great historical theorist Ibn Khaldun, when he argued that a desert order undergoes a certain necessary decadence and decline when subject to sophisticated urban reflexivity.<sup>20</sup> Something similar was later noted for all human historical development by the Neapolitan Giambattista Vico in the 18<sup>th</sup> C, yet Vico also suggested a certain *acme* or point of balance achieved by Catholic Christianity with its unique integration of tradition, imagination and emotion with rational reflection, preventing any idolatry of *either* the image or the abstract notion.<sup>21</sup>

Reflecting on all this, one could suggest that the more the West suffers a radical Islamic incursion, alongside a tendency to the rise of irrational fundamentalisms inside Christianity, then the more it loses its *acme*, and the more it becomes subject to a Khaldunian oscillation, which is ultimately neo-pagan, for all that it is also Islamic. Thus today, as Christian universalism lapses, we see more and more an irresolvable tension between an abstract globalisation on the one hand, and atavistic localisms on the other, whether grounded in religious fundamentalism or in nationalism. Nothing is indeed ever over in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century where the counter-revolutionary spirit of Charles Maurras, so

<sup>19</sup> James V. Schaul, *The Regensburg Lecture* (South Bend Ind: St Augustine's Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. David Marsh (London: Penguin, 1999), §§ 1089-1092, pp 478-479.

recently assumed to be as dead as Charlemagne, albeit now oddly mutated to claim also the mantle of revolutionary secularism could plausibly seize power in France before very long.

### III.

All these four developments have, in fact, implications for the Churches and theology which so far they have scarcely faced up to. In cultural, besides philosophical terms, there now remains no shared neutral ground from which a liberal theology might begin, and that is why liberal theology is so manifestly exhausted. It may happen that Christians will agree with those of other faiths or with atheists on this or that, or even on much, but never on an exactly coinciding (albeit somewhat overlapping) basis, and never with any definite clarity as to the bounds of a shared human area and the reserved spaces of faith or lack of it. Nothing is after all over (apart from the liberal dogma that it is) and everything is once again in principle contestable. Thus Christians can only, once more, take their stand ultimately on Christian grounds.

This does not, however, mean that today, in inevitable rejection of theological liberalism, we should simply and uncritically espouse a received orthodoxy, whether Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican or Protestant. For to do so would be to fail to regard the advent of secularisation as a fundamental one for theology. Just why has it occurred? In part the answer may be far more contingent and banal than we suppose. For it can be a matter of observation today that the clergy and laity lack energy and often fail to do the obvious things, even though lost communities are crying out for fellowship, life, drama, celebration and meaning. Where these things are offered by Christians, a considerable measure of success usually ensues. Yet the fact that they are not sufficiently offered connects with the pervasiveness of half-belief and an embarrassed lack of enthusiasm. For this reason one is returned, in the end, to the basic issue of belief and its absence.

It is at this point that Christians have to ask themselves whether their orthodoxy and orthopraxis have after all been authentic enough. One can argue that very specific issues appear to view here. Charles Taylor argues that secularity ensued because of a rejection of the doctrines of hell and of an excessive ethical discipline or else, ironically, a secularisation of ethical discipline that freed itself from all religious festivity and celebration. There may be a sophisticated truth to the crude view that people have tended to reject Christianity because of repulsion at and refusal of the fear of eternal damnation, and dislike of clerical interference in their private and social joys.

In both instances, of hell and the displacement of festivity by discipline, one has to ask whether a nominal orthodoxy was fully true to its Biblical, liturgical and Patristic roots? It may well be that there is no doctrine of eternal punishment in the New Testament and that original creedal orthodoxy, as with Origen, Irenaeus and the Cappadocians was worked out according to a logic that not only did not include it, but specifically depended upon and pointed to the final eschatological reconciliation of all things.<sup>22</sup> Such a doctrine the most radically proclaims the omnipotence of God and yet construes this omnipotence as the omnipotence of love. Without *apocatastasis*, on the other hand, either God is construed as a tyrant, or his omnipotence is variously called into question. Although, indeed, Augustine and Aquinas were not guilty of the kind of deviation we find in late medieval thought and its tendency wrongly to play the created and the creative wills against each other, as though they lay on the same plane of reality, it may be that, in the long run, it is precisely the doctrine of eternal

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<sup>22</sup> See David Bentley Hart, 'God, Creation and Evil' in *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*, Vol 3, No 1 (Sept 2015), 1-17; Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Father John Whiteford's depressing and pathetic attempt to rebut Hart requires that he regard Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor and Isaac the Syrian, besides the supremely great Origen, as 'heretics'.



punishment that encourages this, along with somewhat resultant notions of the reserved absolute will of God as opposed to his ordained and creative will, and certainly resultant ideas of double predestination.<sup>23</sup> Above all, it may encourage a gradual loss of a sense of participation as fundamentally ensuing from the notion of creation by a God in whom we ‘live, move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28) without any reserve. For if for all eternity there remains a hell outside of God, and God in some sense wills or allows this, then we have idolatrously allowed there to exist an area of being ontologically independent of him. Accordingly, the dominance after Bonaventure and Scotus of a univocal ontology may also be somewhat to do with this.

The late medieval drift towards voluntarism, to a degree influenced by Islam, as Pope Emeritus Benedict rightly noted at Regensburg, was often espoused in the name of a stronger refusal of paganism and the pagan character of the neoplatonic legacy. Thus the inherent symbolisation and evocation of God in the created order was distrusted as overly necessitarian.<sup>24</sup> Yet this refusal had a highly ironic upshot, strongly connected to the ultimate influence of Avicenna, who blended an Aristotelian necessitarianism, and a kind of atomised Platonism of immutable univocal essences, with elements of Islamic divine election and prophetic inspiration.<sup>25</sup> In the hands of some of his Christian readers, this becomes more of an outright duality: thus in Henry of Ghent and still more in Duns Scotus for example, we see an absolute contrast of nature and will tending to determine all of their theology.<sup>26</sup> Just because freedom is seen as guaranteed only in absolute contrast to necessity, the same gesture which seeks to sustain the purity of will, paradoxically invokes as its shadow a realm of fixed natures, amongst which even God is forced to choose – a realm which ultimately in the west becomes that of disenchanting sheer subservience to the laws of non-contradiction, mathematics and inexorable physical mechanism.

Therefore, in seeking to eschew the paganism of symbol and affinity, these theologians instead raised the spectre of pure blind, pagan fatality. To revert to the *topos* of magic earlier invoked, in seeking to banish all ‘white magic’ as after all diabolical, they instead invoked a secret Faustian darkness of the pure control of meaningless forces of sheer power. Already then, within the sphere of order, which is that of religion, they had started to erect instead the idol of power and of a perverse power through order, thereby undoing the central Christian conception of divine government, which fuses the ‘political theology’ of the Bible, where God is cosmic governor, with the Greek reflection on Being as such and its basic divisions.<sup>27</sup>

This fusion, which is anticipated by the wisdom tradition of the Bible, finally tends to qualify one tendency in early Hebraic religion which tends to inherit the relative bleakness and fatalism of near-eastern polytheism, far from the groves of the Mediterranean, but to oppose to this not the capricious

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<sup>23</sup> This is to agree with David Bentley Hart that late Medieval deviations in the West are ultimately linked to some tendencies of the later Augustine, which can be read as being unconsciously at variance with the main liturgical and participatory thrust of his early and middle period writings.

<sup>24</sup> Ludger Honnefelder, *Johannes Duns Scotus* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> See John Milbank, ‘Trinitarian Metaphysics after Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas’ in *Tomismo Creativo: Letture Contemporanee del Doctor Communis* d. Marco Salvioli O.P. (Bologna: ESD, 2015), 41-117.

<sup>26</sup> See Etienne Gilson, *Introduction à ses positions fondamentales* (Paris: Vrin, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford Cal: Stanford UP, 2011), 1-16, 53-67; John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: the Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), ‘Preface; the Hidden Dimension of Humanity’, 1-18 and ‘*Oikonomia* leaves home: theology, politics and governance in the history of the west’, in *Telos*, forthcoming.

and bloodthirsty wills of several deities, but the absolute will of the God of Israel.<sup>28</sup> It is this ‘desert monotheism’ or ‘Magianism’ (as Oswald Spengler described it)<sup>29</sup> which the mainline of Sunni Islam in a sense curiously revives, and in such a manner that it can appear more as a ‘universal henotheism’ than a genuine monotheism which requires something like the neoplatonic thought of the One as ontological beyond the ontic, originally expressed as an excess of the ontological altogether. Obviously, some currents of Islam have absorbed just this qualifying sense of a true, absolute and transcendent unity, yet it is exactly these sorts of gains, with an accompanying allowance of a participatory and sacramental mediation of unity by saints and sacred sites which Wahabist, Salafist and kindred modern currents of Islam tend to deny. As with the history of some Calvinism, the spirit of iconoclasm and the spirit of anti-human violence do not then lie so far apart.<sup>30</sup>

Compared to the shift away from order, or from the ‘theopoliticoontology’ of divine government, the event of the Reformation is of small significance, as it but half -succeeded in rejecting it, and more often sustained and intensified it. Perhaps we can now see that currents of Renaissance Neoplatonism and Hermeticism, later sustained by many on both sides of the post-Reformation divide, need to be reappraised for their orthodoxy, as is already happening with younger theologians like Michael Martin in the USA and follows in part the example of Hans Urs von Balthasar in his recommendation of the Hermetic and sophiological reflections of Valentin Tomberg.<sup>31</sup> For in the face of the half voluntarist, half darkly-fatalistic theology of the Terminists in the later Middle Ages, resultant from their strict rationalism that tended to regard relentlessly rigorous application of the law of non-contradiction as the only philosophical touchstone, Renaissance thinkers from Cusa through Ficino to Robert Fludd and Thomas Vaughan in effect may have seen that one could only save the great orthodox tradition of symbolic realism and its authentic Hebrew-Greek hybrid, essential to genuine orthodoxy, if one *admitted* its more hyper-rational elements of irreducible contradiction and natural magical affinity and so forth. These elements were then increasingly seen within western culture, all the way to romanticism, as more accessible to emotion and imagination than to a reason debased as supposedly pure.

This ‘alternatively modern’ tradition, as we increasingly know, never went away, even during the Enlightenment, and is at least as responsible, from the 12C onwards, for the development of modern science and the possibility of human intervention in nature as is the nominalist, mechanical legacy. Indeed its subtlety seems more to anticipate the mysteries of modern physics, while sustaining, like quantum mechanics, the sense that the physical world may not be alien to subjectivity and so the operations of power to the preferential intimations of order.<sup>32</sup> As Henri de Lubac intimated, historically the Promethean may have arisen more with the pious mechanist than the admitted magus, even if one must definitely allow that symbolism can also walk on the dark and manipulative side.<sup>33</sup>

As to the second religious instigator of secularisation, the abandonment of festival for discipline, this is in many ways the practical equivalent of the same shift from genuine order, to order through power.

<sup>28</sup> Régis Debray, *God: An Itinerary*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (London: Verso, 2014), 16-105, 129-130.

<sup>29</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: An Abridged Edition*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (Oxford: OUP, 1991), 341.

<sup>30</sup> James Noyes, *The Politics of Iconoclasm: Religion, Violence and the Culture of Image-Breaking in Christianity and Islam* (London: IB Tauris, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Michael Martin, *The Submerged Reality: Sophiology and the Turn to a Poetic Metaphysics* (Kettering OH: Angelico, 2015), Hans Urs von Balthasar, ‘Afterword’ to Anonymous [Valentin Tomberg] *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, trans. Robert Powell (New York: Putnam, 2002), 659-665.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Hilary Gatti, *Giordano Bruno and Renaissance Science* (Ithaca NY State: Cornell UP, 1999); Ernst Benz, *The Theology of Electricity*, trans. Wolfgang Taraba (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> See John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Renewed Split in Modern Catholic Theology* (Grand Rapids Mich: Eerdmans, 2015), esp. 53-61.

Instead of the ritual re-enactment and attempt to call down an eternal order, which lay in continuity with folk ecstasy and celebration (as argued by Charles Taylor after Ivan Illich) western Christians during the course of the Middle ages increasingly stressed individual merit and behaviour, rendering even ritual in terms of a mechanical duty, in ways at which Protestants eventually and rightly protested. Yet most early modern Christians, whether Protestant or Catholic, sustained an excessive focus on individual morality whether as means to salvation or evidence of its presence, in a manner which tended to play down the problematic and often tragic continuity of what we can decide upon, with aspects of our natural and cultural situation and collective legacy upon which we cannot decide and can only be faced up to, and in certain more or less mysterious ways transformed, through religious devotion and liturgical performance.<sup>34</sup> The Christian East continued to understand this rather better, and in such a way that all ethical and medical practice was situated within this wider symbolic and ritual content, as the recent Russian novel *Laurus*, by Eugene Vodolazkin, set in the Russian Middle Ages, so vividly illustrates.<sup>35</sup> Much of the western historical subordination of the laity, contempt for folk-custom together with the more positive pagan survivals,<sup>36</sup> and unimaginative harshness towards sexual issues is connected with this (which is not in any way to say that the East was altogether free of such faults).

I would argue, therefore, that we need today a radicalised orthodoxy focused, as in the Christian origins, on *apocatastasis*, participation, immanent divine presence that is equally transcendence, symbolic realism, and the centrality of liturgy as theurgic re-enactment regarded as consummated in the Incarnation and Eucharist.

#### IV.

But what does this imply for the teaching of theology in the future? Here it can be contended that, ever since Schleiermacher, theology has been digging its own grave by over-professionalization and over-concession to secular norms. As in the case of orthodoxy as such, so in the case of theology, we should be asking what is the real character of Christian teaching, of *doctrina Christiana* as Augustine called it? Since the Baroque era and still more since that of modern university theology since the early 19<sup>th</sup> C, we have thought of theology as first of all distinct from philosophy, and secondly as distributed into various sub-disciplines.

To take the latter first: the result of distinguishing Biblical Studies and Church History from the rest of theology is often a curious kind of double-think. On the one hand, they are seen as fundamental for all of theology, given that Christianity is a historically revealed and developing religion. On the other hand, they are also seen as strictly critical disciplines, external to theology as such. The aim would appear to be to elicit secular and academic credibility by founding theology in something indubitably positive, which, like all positivity is both backed by power and delegated to trace the indubitable marks of power, otherwise known since early modernity as ‘facts’. Yet this, of course, is to misconstrue revelation, which is from the threefold divine fount of personality to and through human persons, already by way of their response, which is liturgical.

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<sup>34</sup> John Milbank, ‘On the Paraethical: Gillian Rose and Political Nihilism’ in *Telos*, Winter 2015, no. 173, 69-86.

<sup>35</sup> Eugene Vodolazkin, *Laurus*, trans. Laura C. Hayden (London: Oneworld, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> These were often better dealt with in Mediaeval Ireland, Wales and Iceland – as evidenced by such remarkable syncretic works of fiction as the Irish *Colloquy of the Ancients*, the Welsh *Mabinogion* and the Icelandic *Poetic Edda*. Something similar applies to Georgia in the East and its 12<sup>th</sup> C epic, *The Knight of the Panther Skin*. This Georgian and Armenian syncretism is reinvoked in the films of Sergei Paradjanov.

And the aim of currying favour is doomed to failure in the end, as we increasingly see today, for the secular academy will eventually find no reason why strictly objective studies cannot be alternately housed in ancient Near Eastern studies, classical and historical departments and so forth.

Instead of this approach, we need now to see that the apparently less defensible may be the more realistically so, because thereby theology can offer to the rest of the academy something that no one else can – namely a coherent claim to the mediation of the absolute by nature and history. Without the debatability of this claim, one could argue, the crucially constitutive university debate between the relative claims of power and order must necessarily lapse. Therefore, we need truly ‘theological theology’: departments where all those pursuing sub-disciplines remain nevertheless theologians, in the full systematic and philosophical sense, instead of appointing one or two people like that as a kind of indulgence and sop to the churches – who in any case, as they dangerously lapse into anti-intellectualism, seem to require and respect such figures less and less.

To revert now to the first point: the assumed separation of theology from philosophy. The upshot of this separation is that theologians, at least in their initial programme of study, tend to deal only with the philosophy of religion and not with philosophy as such, which is to say, with philosophy’s most ultimate scope, which is ontology. But this restriction inevitably dooms theology to cultural and academic marginality, for it means that it is assumed to have nothing fundamental to say about how things are or about what it means to be anything whatsoever. Instead, theology is seen as a regional discourse within the field of being, as both a set of debatable arguments as to the ultimate causes of finite being and a debatable claim to an event of revelation within the same field.

Yet to set things up in this way is to beg all the fundamental Christian questions and arguably to betray the real ancient Christian intellectual legacy. Most crucially, it is to repeat the late medieval undoing of divine government, and to split reality between a neo-pagan fated being on the one hand, and a deity fundamentally characterised by a will beyond natural constraint on the other. Thus, as Olivier Boulnois has now shown, the terms and disciplines of ‘ontology’ (a metaphysics that has finally abandoned the creative and aporetic Aristotelian hesitation between the primacy of God and the primacy of Being) and ‘natural theology’ (a rational enquiry about God merely regional to ontology) were of one single birth.<sup>37</sup> Previously, as with Thomas Aquinas, for example, metaphysics had first concerned being, but then reached its consummation beyond its own subject matter in concluding to a creative cause of shared being as such, ‘common being’, *ens commune*, and not simply being in its finite modes as it happens contingently to exist. In this way, for Aquinas, in contrast with Scotus, existence in its very beingness is not just fatedly ‘given’, but is marked at its centre and yet beyond itself by its character as *gift* and *sharing* in the divine nature which coincides with a pure ‘to be’ or *esse*. Since the theology proper to metaphysics is inseparable from the whole of metaphysics, the theologian, as Aquinas conceives him, studies first the entire ontological field of philosophy, though by concluding to an unknown cause properly disclosed only by revelation also opens up the way to reconceiving ontological distribution in terms of the disclosures of *esse* itself in a divine-human event.<sup>38</sup>

Earlier still and more radically, in the case of the Irish and Carolingian thinker John Scotus Eriugena’s astounding synthesis of the Patristic East and West, one sees a more drastic integration of the philosophical with the theological, to which Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa, in the face of Scotist and Terminist ruptures, will later revert. For here, as Jean Trouillard has argued, one finds also a further

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<sup>37</sup>Olivier Boulnois, *Métaphysiques rebelles: Genèse et structures d’une science au Moyen Âge* (Paris: PUF, 2013), 313-341.

<sup>38</sup>Boulnois, *Métaphysiques rebelles*, 189-311.

development of the neoplatonic tradition itself, and a resolution of some of its quandaries in specifically Christian terms.<sup>39</sup>

In the case of the theurgic neoplatonist Proclus, beyond the perspectives of the first neoplatonist Plotinus, matter at the bottom of the scale of being had been granted a certain uniquely pure and non-reflective (unlike intelligence) imaging of the transcendent One, enabling it to operate as a vehicle for the ritual and the sacramental. Such a development took further the neoplatonic refusal of the gnostic denigration of matter as error.<sup>40</sup> Yet Gnosticism possessed the advantage of accounting in dramatic terms for the contingency and henceforth fallen necessity of an ontological *lapsus*. Christianity, with Origen and Irenaeus, in effect transcended both Neoplatonism and Gnosticism by offering the idea of a drama of distortion which spoiled, for a while, both body and soul, yet then redeemed both such as to leave nothing behind.<sup>41</sup>

In the case of Eriugena this synthesis is brought to a head, such that the corporeal is seen as the appropriate vehicle of theophany and we are eventually raised, not simply above the body, but also *with* the body transfigured back into its true, created spiritual essence. Unlike with Aquinas later, resurrection is regarded both as a natural destiny of the metamorphosis of all life back into its source which is also its fulfilment, besides being simultaneously a work of free grace, since creation is all the way down a free gift, such that the supplementary is paradoxically fundamental.<sup>42</sup> By virtue of this more radically theophanic perspective, no road is left open in Eriugena, as it is marginally in Aquinas, towards a later and inauthentic duality of merely given nature as the realm of power and the gift of grace regarded too much as a work of capricious order.<sup>43</sup>

In this way, both the glory of the material mediator as created and echoing the One in its property as vehicle of shape and sign, and yet its lowly status (since it is now seen as contingently fallen), are accounted for, with the inherent nobility of the body as veil and yet disclosure of God being eschatologically restored. Beyond Neoplatonism hitherto, the other to the One is encompassed in terms of its eventual destiny as ‘created God’ to be reunited, though without total merger, with the ‘uncreated and uncreating’ original and abiding unity of everything.

Ontological reality is reconceived by Eriugena as a kind of eternal Trinitarian metahistory in which God the ultimate principle only exists insofar as he creates himself beyond his own as it were ‘initial’ uncircumscribable and so unknowable infinity (taken from Gregory of Nyssa) as knowing, and knows himself as creating, and thereby relationally and dynamically lives and ‘effectively’ moves in the Spirit.<sup>44</sup> Created reality is at once the realisation of this process and a distinct manifestatory participation in it, whereby each individual creature in different degrees simultaneously knows and creates itself (in terms of an outward ‘theurgic’ work of intellect informing body, not an internal ‘idealist’ work of mind projecting phenomena)<sup>45</sup> and creatures mutually both know and create each other (including humans and angels) in the various degrees of mystical *gnosis*, reason, imagination, common-sensing and corporeal interaction.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Jean Trouillard, *Jean Scot Erigène* (Paris: Hermann, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Trouillard, *Jean Scot Erigène*, 251-272.

<sup>41</sup> Catherine Pickstock, *Repetition and Identity* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 171-192.

<sup>42</sup> Trouillard, 99-131, 159-164, 251-272.

<sup>43</sup> See Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 85-93.

<sup>44</sup> Trouillard, 153-158.

<sup>45</sup> It is important in my view to avoid a post-Cartesian, Kantian and Hegelian anachronism at this point in reading Eriugena. For the contrast of the two different ‘makings’, or ‘constructions’, internal and external, see Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 208-211.

<sup>46</sup> Eriugena, *De Divisione Naturae*, IV, 780 a-c; Trouillard, 214-223.

The aporetic coincidence of constitution and manifestation of God is resolved by Eriugena in terms of eschatological arrival, when God is all in all – an achieved consummation that has always already been there at the core of the real. This is all in some ways proto-Hegelian, yet, unlike for Hegel, there is no moment of necessary alienation, nor determination of knowing by a negative logic as opposed to a positively willed and yet theophanic act of creation. The appearance of alienation, the loss of intuition and the coarsening occlusion of our original bodies are all the contingent upshot of our fallenness.

But redemption from this condition for Eriugena, much more emphatically than for Aquinas, never mind most later school theology, is simply the working and inevitable triumph of the original order of nature which nonetheless includes the order of grace. The eschaton is thereby as much ontological as it is metahistorical and by no means an arbitrary consummation, contingently willed by the deity.

In such an ancient Christian outlook, order and power, ontological setting and revealed event are inseparable as aspects of a wider theory of reality that is both ontological and historical, and construed in terms of both divine government and the divine drama of the rescue of the divine glory. And for this reason, the discourse of Eriugena, like that of Aquinas, though still more so, does not really have a disciplinary name for us today.

But I am convinced that theology should be once more doing something like this if it wishes to have any real contemporary impact in a situation where God has returned, but so far only to contestation. Nothing is ever over until the eschatological end of *apocatastasis*, and genuinely orthodox theology will not be over if it begins to re-anticipate it.

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