

THE POETIC ONTOLOGY OF JOHN MILBANK:  
DIVINE NOVELTY AND THE RE-ENCHANTMENT OF HUMAN *POESIS*

**Abstract**

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This dissertation argues that a speculative proposal as to the participatory quality of human “*poesis*” or “making” represents an often-unrecognized principle of unity in the thought of English Anglican theologian, John Milbank (1952-). With the further purpose of clarifying Milbank’s ontological commitments to a Catholic academic audience, this project notes both the ubiquity of this theme across Milbank’s diverse body of works and its qualitative claim regarding the world’s “poetic” participation in God. Included within this effort is also the question of the efficacy of Milbank’s proposed “alternative modernity” and how Milbank envisions a poetic ontology mitigating the anti-sacral effects of modern secularism. Highlighted by this investigation is the prominence given by Milbank to the thought Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) and Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), who are respectively said to support the ideas of God’s “*theurgic*” descent into the order of nature’s artificiality and “*factum*” being a transcendental property convertible with *verum* and *bonum*. By drawing attention to the import of these ideas on Milbank’s interpretation of the doctrines of creation *ex nihilo* and the Trinity, this dissertation raises critical concerns as to the commensurability between Milbank’s poetic ontology and the broader theological tradition.

Chapter One directs attention to the prominence of “*poesis*” in Milbank’s early thought, demonstrating by way of Milbank’s prior doctoral work on Vico how ontological conclusions regarding the participatory character of human making support his anti-modern critique first raised in *Theology and Social Theory*. Chapter Two traces the same poetic theme across the middle period of Milbank’s career, arguing that Milbank’s appropriation of the Henri de Lubac and Thomas Aquinas serve to support a “poetic” model of transcendental truth. Chapter Three highlights the ongoing prevalence of a poetic ontology in Milbank’s recent works while underscoring how this theory informs Milbank’s’ conception of the common good. Chapter Four expands on concerns raised earlier with a critical assessment of Milbank’s interpretation of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and its distortion by early Enlightenment thinkers. Chapter Five concludes by highlighting similar concerns with respect to Milbank’s trinitarian theology, demonstrating how an assumption as to the necessary opposition between nature and art informs his portrayal of inner-trinitarian relations.