

RADICAL ORTHODOXY, SAINT AUGUSTINE, AND THE CHALLENGE OF NIHILISM  
A CASE STUDY IN DOING THEOLOGY UNDER ADVERSE CONDITIONS

BY  
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PROF. ROBERT WENDLAND, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

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## ABSTRACT

Radical Orthodoxy is a movement in contemporary theology which attempts to answer the challenges that nihilism and modernism pose to the theological endeavor. In doing so it makes extensive use of pre-modern sources, particularly Augustine, to propose an alternative metanarrative. This paper will examine the way in which Radical Orthodoxy uses Augustine, particularly his concept of the “two cities,” to determine whether it is faithfully reflecting Augustine’s thoughts, or simply using his terminology for its own purpose. This paper will seek to accomplish this goal by giving a brief overview of nihilism and Radical Orthodoxy, by examining Augustine’s writings, particularly the *City of God*, and by evaluating the degree to which Radical Orthodoxy’s conclusions match Augustine’s. This paper will show that Radical Orthodoxy does not faithfully reflect Augustine’s thoughts, and that this leads to a failure to profitably answer nihilism.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Table of Contents .....	iii
Introduction.....	1
The Challenge of Nihilism.....	3
Radical Orthodoxy .....	7
Radical Orthodoxy against Modernity.....	9
Radical Orthodoxy against Postmodernism.....	11
Radical Orthodoxy with Augustine .....	13
Augustine in Radical Orthodoxy .....	15
Key Writings of Augustine .....	21
City of God .....	21
Confessions.....	27
Critique of Radical Orthodoxy.....	32
Does RO represent Augustine fairly? .....	33
Does RO Answer Nihilism?.....	37
Conclusion .....	39
Bibliography .....	43

## INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to do theology?

A confessional Lutheran answer will need to cover several facets in order to give a complete answer to this question. First and foremost, we preach Christ crucified, that God has revealed himself through his Son dying on a cross; theology is Christocentric. We limit ourselves to *Deus revelatus*, a God who has spoken through human authors and human words in a book called the Bible. We seek to be clear and concise in our communication, so that we can teach and evangelize to others in a way that is winsome and understandable yet conveys the truths of God. These are just a few of the criteria a confessional Lutheran would use to identify theology.

This paper is going to ignore most of that. This is not out of a desire to flaunt confessional Lutheranism but rather out of necessity. This paper will be looking at two very different theological perspectives: on the one hand, the post-secular thought of Radical Orthodoxy (RO), and on the other hand, the pre-modern works of St. Augustine of Hippo. Both of these have very different ideas of what it means to do theology. Both of these see massive problems in the world around them and believe that theology is the solution. Both of these are convinced that the way in which they are doing theology is not only valid but right.

This paper is a case study in doing theology under adverse conditions. There are a lot of areas to disagree with these theologians, both RO and St. Augustine – their viewpoint on who God is, on what Scripture is, on what it means to be a Christian. It would be easy to make a list of what a confessional Lutheran would judge as its heresies and write them off. That is not what this paper will do. Instead, this paper will seek to give an accurate, concise explanation of what

these theologians are saying. It will allow both Radical Orthodoxy and Augustine to speak for themselves, to say their piece. The question will not be one of “how can a confessional Lutheran prove either RO or Augustine wrong,” but rather “what questions are they trying to answer” and “what are they seeing about God that I may be missing?”

In order to do this, the paper will take an in-depth look at Radical Orthodoxy and the nihilism that it is reacting to, then it will describe the ways in which RO makes use of Augustine. After summarizing RO, it will turn to Augustine himself, looking at some key sources to understand his theology of the two cities. Finally, it will offer a critique of RO both on the basis of Augustine and on the basis of nihilism. This will demonstrate that, though Radical Orthodoxy attempts to use Augustine’s theology to escape from nihilism, its use of Augustine is partial at best and, therefore, ultimately falls short of answering nihilism.

## THE CHALLENGE OF NIHILISM

Understanding Radical Orthodoxy (RO) starts by understanding what it is reacting to: nihilism. A basic understanding of nihilism can give us the framework and the terminology to understand RO. Since it was popularized by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, nihilism has been a much-abused term. Many have equated nihilism with a kind of philosophical sociopath. This caricature of the nihilist is a brute of a man, so absolutely certain that the world is meaningless that he does not think twice about benefitting at the expense of others and delighting at watching the world burn. Many conclude that if nihilism were allowed to reign, there would be nothing but brutal anarchy, as everyone seeks to carve out their own spheres of influence and dominance over others.

But this is a caricature, a misunderstanding of nihilism's purpose and results. Nihilism is both a philosophy and a pervading social perspective.<sup>1</sup> It is also a reaction, a rejection of many of the foundational ideas of Enlightenment modernism. These ideas ultimately find their origin in Descartes. Many are familiar with Descartes' famous maxim, "*cogito ergo sum*," "I think, therefore I am." But fewer recognize what exactly this means for epistemology, the philosophical discipline concerned with the nature of knowledge and the manner in which it is obtained. Before Descartes, it could be said in the West that the ultimate source of truth was God; all things were true only if God said they were true. But Descartes with his method of systematic skepticism cast

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1. The following description of nihilism is based primarily on the account given by James C. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997). Although Edwards is not a proponent of Radical Orthodoxy (his perspective is that of an atheist philosopher) his introduction to nihilism is one of the best and most intelligible explanations for a broad audience. His conceptual framework will give the tools needed to understand Radical Orthodoxy as a whole.

doubt even on the existence of God. When he came to the end of his skeptical thinking, there was only one thing he could not doubt: himself, as a thinking being. Though Descartes was a Christian, his theory made reality subjective rather than objective. After Descartes, it was no longer God who arbitrated truth but rather the subjective self, the “ego-subject.”<sup>2</sup> What followed was the rational Enlightenment and modern secularism, where the task of discovering and articulating truth falls to the thinking self.

However, this Cartesian philosophy makes a key assumption which leaves it prey to nihilism. Descartes and those who follow in his footsteps assume that truth is “nothing but an accurate representation”<sup>3</sup> of reality as it truly is. In other words, though our thinking may be distorted or inaccurate at times, it is still fundamentally a reflection of a world or a truth which really does exist, a “*Ding an Sich*,” as Kant refers to it.

Nietzsche targets this assumption in his critique of the Cartesian ego-subject. There is no way for us to verify that our representation of the world, our thoughts, actually reflects some objective reality. In fact, Cartesian skepticism has made that impossible. Instead of being passive receivers of knowledge, individuals engage in the task of “*interpretation*, the willful imposition of structure and meaning on something – a text, a set of events, a sequence of sense-experiences – that demands it.”<sup>4</sup> People are not impersonal observers, but beings who must impose some sort of order and meaning on our sense-experiences in order to survive. This casts doubt on all forms of knowledge, since they were formed not as the result of an objective search for truth but within

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2. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things*. 28-29

3. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things*. 31

4. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things*. 34

the context of an individual's need; as Nietzsche put it: "In the formulation of reason, logic, the categories, it was *need* that was authoritative: the need, not to 'know,' but to subsume, to schematize, for the purpose of intelligibility and calculation."<sup>5</sup>

But this critique is inevitably accompanied by another realization, that belief in any transcendent value is impossible to rationally justify. The result is Nietzsche's definition of nihilism: "That the highest values devalue themselves."<sup>6</sup> To rephrase, any sort of value that could be held as higher than another, such as the search for truth or love for God, is reduced by the realization that it is nothing more than the tool people have crafted to order and understand the world they find themselves in. Nothing is transcendent. Nothing is objective. Everything that people think and believe is contingent, it does not stand on its own but is reliant on the simple fact that people want to believe it because they need it. Joel Okamoto, reflecting on the change that nihilism has brought, writes,

At one time throughout the West, 'God,' 'Christ,' and 'the Church' had unquestioned authoritative status. . . . it was enough to answer 'Why' with 'It is the Word of God' or 'the command of Christ' or 'the will of the Church.' But Nietzsche concluded that now they had authority only because people gave it to them, because *they valued them*. They were *highest* values, to be sure, but since they were just values, they could not have the status that they once enjoyed. The values devaluated themselves.<sup>7</sup>

If this is the case, the name that these values have is not that important – God can just as easily be replaced by sex, money, or lifestyle, without any difference. Thus religion becomes nothing more than a contender in the marketplace of values.

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5. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things*. 34 (Quoting Nietzsche)

6. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things*. 41

7. Joel P Okamoto, "Evangelism in 'an Age of Normal Nihilism,'" *Missio Apostol.* 22.1 (2014): 33–43.



This nihilism is nothing like the unfeeling brute it is often made out to be. In fact, instead of being an abnormal state of affairs, embraced by only a few, nihilism has worked its way into our whole Western society until you have what James Edwards calls “Normal Nihilism.”

Nihilism is now the way the world comes to us, the way it sounds itself out to us; it is the way we comport ourselves to what we are given. We are all now nihilists. ... as normal nihilists we are aware of both the existence of radically alternative structures of interpretation and the fact that we ourselves lack any knockdown, noncircular way to demonstrate the self-sufficiency, solidity, or originality of our own.<sup>8</sup>

Nowhere is this more obvious than the ways Christians must defend their faith today – no longer is Christianity seen as a source of transcendental truth, but rather as a way for individuals to handle the difficulties of life. Faith has become a commodity people must be sold on, a self-help program, and if it does not fit, it can easily be tossed aside or replaced.

Nietzsche concludes that nihilism ultimately leads to a state of warfare, where each person strives to enforce their own interpretive framework on others. Truth is reduced to a weapon, a means by which one interpretive community claims precedent over another. The search for meaning is no longer motivated by a desire for understanding, but a will to power. Here is where Nietzsche’s *übermensch* emerges, an individual who refuses to bow to the will or interpretation of anyone else but acts in line with his own interpretation, without regret or fear. He is “a joyful nihilist, not a despairing one; his is a nihilism of strength, not of weakness. He sees quite clearly the hole left by the flight of the gods ... he will fill the abyss with his own will to power.”<sup>9</sup> The best one can hope for is not to escape the violence but to dominate it. But not everybody is satisfied with this modern assessment of religious affairs.

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8. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things*. 46

9. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things*. 44

## RADICAL ORTHODOXY

Radical Orthodoxy is a reaction to this kind of Nietzschean nihilism in two forms, two dominant philosophical perspectives: modern secularism and postmodern deconstruction. The former, it rejects entirely; the latter, it dialogues with heavily. The conception of theology which emerges is only loosely defined, full of emphases without axiomatic dogma. It is not so much a doctrine as a school, a group of scholars with similar concerns and methods.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the description which follows is a loose overview drawn from the foundational documents of the movement, rather than an attempt to explain every nuance of the group as a whole.

To start, Radical Orthodoxy has its own account of nihilism, similar in many respects to Edwards, but with a few key differences. Its primary concern is with ontology: what is the nature of existence, of being? They trace nihilism back to a misunderstanding of ontology – in fact, a simple RO definition of nihilism is, “Nihilism is a consequence of the ontological flattening of the cosmos by univocity.”<sup>11</sup> What does this mean? Before answering this question, one must understand the Platonic concept of participation, which influenced Christianity through Augustine.

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10. Who are these scholars? The three theologians considered “leaders” of the movement are Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock, and John Milbank. All three are British scholars with a connection to Cambridge, and Radical Orthodoxy has been referred to as a “Cambridge Movement.” Of the three, John Milbank can be considered the “father” of Radical Orthodoxy, voicing many of its key tenets and concerns in his book *Theology and Social Theory* (first published in 1991). He followed that with “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” the catalyst for the movement. This paper will focus primarily on the work of Milbank, although others’ voices will not be ignored. For more information on the history of the movement, see Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 31ff.

11. James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2004). 102

In Platonic thought, all being was an extension of the divine; reality only exists in so far as it is connected to, or participate in, God. Charles Allen, in writing about RO, explains Platonism as the idea that “God and the world are much more intimately bound up with each other than our forebears ever realized, but that’s just what lets God be God and the world be the world. And it lets us be ourselves without being by ourselves.”<sup>12</sup> Milbank repeats this sentiment: “for nihilism the void is not, and therefore time is not either ... for theology, eternity is, and therefore time and body also are.”<sup>13</sup> In this framework, known as participation theology, there is no division between secular and sacred; everything is ultimately theological. This concept of participation theology will be fundamental to many of the arguments RO will make.

But then there was a shift, a shift that RO traces farther back than Descartes to Duns Scotus. They argue that Scotus was the original source of the problem because of his theory of “univocity of being,” namely, that “both the Creator and the creature exist in the same way or in the same sense. Being, now, becomes a category that is unhooked from participation in God and is a more neutral or abstract qualifier that is applied to God and creatures in the same way. ... The result is that the vertical suspension of creation from the Creator is unhooked, and because being is ‘flattened,’ the world is freed to be an autonomous realm.”<sup>14</sup> The result is that “Scotus signals a paradigm shift in ontology that eventually issues in both what we call modernity as well as (ultimately) nihilism – an ontological framework that denies the transcendent and thus leaves

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12. Charles W. Allen, “Radical Orthodoxy in the Parish: Or, Postmodern Critical Augustinianism for Dummies,” *Encounter* 64.3 (2003): 219–29. 227

13. Laurence Paul Hemming, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy?: A Catholic Enquiry* (Heythrop College (University of London), 2000). 42

14. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*. 97

the realm of immanence to its own resources.”<sup>15</sup> Duns Scotus prepared the way for Descartes by imagining a world where God was simply another being, thus giving us an opportunity to imagine a world where God was not. This “has negative implications for the upholding of a Christian vision and for the synthesis of theology and philosophy.”<sup>16</sup> Nihilism in RO could be summarized as a denial of the transcendent in a way that leads to the loss of meaning. The ultimate values devalue themselves as they are shown to have no ontological claim to transcendent reality.

With RO’s understanding of nihilism in mind, this paper will focus on three of the most distinctive features of RO, direct results of the philosophies to which RO is reacting: a rejection of the modern distinction between sacred and secular, a rejection of the nihilistic argument for absolute meaninglessness, and a turn back to pre-modern sources, particularly Augustine.

### **Radical Orthodoxy against Modernity**

The first of these distinctives, a rejection of the distinction between sacred and secular, is a direct result of RO’s reaction to modern secularism. John Milbank, one of RO’s leading theologians, characterizes the modern epistemology as a “single system of truth based on universal reason, which tells us what reality is like.”<sup>17</sup> Modern secularism advocates a single, objective truth or way of knowing reality. It bases this universal reason on a close examination of the individual

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15. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*. 93

16. Catherine Pickstock, “Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance,” *Mod. Theol.* 21.4 (2005): 543–74. 544

17. John Milbank, “‘Postmodern Critical Augustinianism’: A Short Summa in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions,” *Mod. Theol.* 7.3 (1991): 225–37. 225

and their ability to know truth, the Cartesian ego-subject discussed earlier. This kind of modern thinking is probably most familiar in science, where only truth which can pass the scientific method is accepted as real.

While this may continue to be the dominant narrative in Western discourse, Milbank sees this as a bankrupt system, already vanquished by postmodern thought. In his estimation, as well as the estimation of his colleagues Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock, “today the logic of secularism is imploding.”<sup>18</sup> It has already been vanquished by postmodernism, where “there are infinitely many possible versions of truth, inseparable from particular narratives.”<sup>19</sup> Instead of looking inward as modernity does, at the individual and the process of knowing, postmodernity turns outwards and organizes the information it finds via narratives. It contends that one cannot find truth simply by looking at the individual’s search for truth because every individual is always situated in a time and a place, a “plot, which has its own unique, unfounded reasons.”<sup>20</sup>

Leaning on this understanding of what truth is, John Milbank can say of his own theology, “this speculation is utterly unfounded, is inseparable from a narrative practice of remembering, and yet, in postmodern terms, it is just as valid or invalid as claims about supposedly universal human needs, desires, or modes of interaction.”<sup>21</sup> Because every form of truth is formulated within its own story, the criteria for determining truth cannot be forced on

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18. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999). 1

19. Milbank, ““Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.”” 225

20. Milbank, ““Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.”” 225

21. Milbank, ““Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.”” 226

other frameworks. Theology no longer needs to measure up to modernity's standards of epistemology – it only needs to have its own story to account for what it is saying.

But RO goes further than this. Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock describe their vision in this way: “And just how is it *radical*? Radical, first of all, in the sense of a return to patristic and medieval roots, and especially to the Augustinian vision of all knowledge as divine illumination – a notion which transcends the modern bastard dualism of faith and reason, grace and nature.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, RO argues that the distinction between secular and sacred knowledge is absurd, nonsensical, when seen from the perspective of participation theology. Participation theology takes all of reality as derivative of the ultimate, eternal, and infinite. All things are dependent on God to give them causality and meaning. “This is to say that all there is *only* is because it is more than it is.”<sup>23</sup> Thus the secular distinction is not only nonsensical, it is actively harmful to humanity. No human can seek knowledge separate from seeking God. Therefore, the RO project is one of restoring theology to its status as “queen of the sciences,” to reformulate and ground all other discourse in terms of theological discourse.

### **Radical Orthodoxy against Postmodernism**

Yet for all it owes to postmodern thought, RO has its own disagreements with postmodernism and the nihilism it ultimately leads to. John Milbank states the problem with postmodernism: “If Christianity is just one of many possible perspectives, then why believe any of them? Is not each perspective a strategy of power, every discourse but the means to assert that discourse?”

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22. Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*. 2

23. Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*. 4

Postmodernism seems to imply nihilism.”<sup>24</sup> RO desperately desires to find a world with meaning, even in the midst of a denial of absolute truth. In this pursuit, postmodernism is problematic: since it denies any possibility of a universal, objective truth, it also denies any possibility of an eternal meaning.

RO’s approach to this problem is not at all straightforward. Because they are indebted to the tools of postmodernity, they cannot simply divorce themselves from it. They must find an answer within the system itself. Tom Jacobs helps to clarify this dilemma and RO’s solution:

We are aware that we can no longer found our stories upon reason itself; but this does not prevent us from having faith in it, and this is now on the basis of the inherent attractivity of the story. Applied to the Christian narrative: this narrative, like all others, is essentially a fiction. This is for Milbank the harsh reality which a post-Nietzschean theology should confront: Christianity is metaphysically no more founded than other narratives. However, this does not mean that the situation for theology becomes hopeless. It is theology’s assignment now to convince us that the Christian story (as a story) is a better one than all the other stories; moreover that it is the best one.<sup>25</sup>

Because of postmodernity, there is no ability to claim that one narrative is more truthful than another, no ability to evaluate a story from the outside. The best anyone can hope for is meaning within a story, nothing more.

Yet RO proposes a hopeful outlook: “what finally distances it from nihilism is its proposal of the rational possibility, and the faithfully perceived actuality, of an indeterminacy that is not impersonal chaos but infinite interpersonal harmonious order.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, RO does not deny the “fluctuating” nature of truth and reality espoused by postmodernism; instead, it

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24. Milbank, ““Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.”” 226

25. Tom Jacobs, “Flirting with Premodernity: John Milbank and the Return of the (Christian) Master-Narrative,” *ARC* 34 (2006): 131–58. 134

26. Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*. 1-2

argues that this can and should be the Christian perspective. But unlike nihilism, RO proclaims an ultimate reality, God, in which all reality participates. Again, it turns to participation theology to explain its position. If the world is “a reality suspended between nothing and infinity,”<sup>27</sup> then human beings must rely on an infinite God to find meaning, something postmodern nihilism refuses.

### **Radical Orthodoxy with Augustine**

In both the rejection of modern secularism and postmodern nihilism, participation theology plays a key role in defining the central structure of RO. This reliance on participation explains RO’s return to pre-modern sources: in the work of writers like Augustine, the ideas of participation are clearly present. “The central theological framework of radical orthodoxy is ‘participation’ as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity because any alternative configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God. The latter can lead only to nihilism (though in different guises).”<sup>28</sup> Participation saves the world from “the void,” from a static, meaningless reality composed only of relationships without any substance. It does so by placing everything in a relationship to God once more, a framework common among the pre-modern Christian writers.

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27. Milbank, ““Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.”” 227

28. Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*. 3



RO utilizes many of the conceptual frameworks of pre-modern Christianity, without subscribing to the underlying metaphysics. This is in line with its commitment to postmodern methodology:

This externality is no longer, as for pre-modernity, an organized spatial realm of substances, genera and species, but rather a world of temporary relational networks ... Once the epistemological approach from the subject is shown to be as foundationalist as pre-modern metaphysics, the latter makes a strange kind of return: but as a necessary 'fiction' concerning the unseen relation of time to eternity, not as a record of 'observation' of this relationship.<sup>29</sup>

Pre-modernity and post-modernity are allied, in that both look outward, at the world around them to determine what is true and what has meaning, as opposed to modernity which looked at the individual and attempted to use that knowledge to delineate a universal and objective truth. But the alliance could be said to only go as far as terms – the pre-modern story is necessary precisely because it is a story, not because it is an “observation” of reality as it is.

In both their reaction to modernism and postmodernism, the theologians of Radical Orthodoxy are concerned with the specter of nihilism. Passionately searching for a world with meaning, they believe that Christianity can do post-modernism better than post-modernism can. As Milbank puts it, “If nihilism cannot ‘position’ Christianity in its genealogy, in a way that amounts to more than interpretation, then it emphatically cannot – as we already suspected – justify historically its reading of every event as an event of warfare.”<sup>30</sup> They find reason to hope for this in the Platonic thoughts of Augustine.

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29. Milbank, ““Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.”” 226

30. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Repr., Signposts in Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). 294

## AUGUSTINE IN RADICAL ORTHODOXY

Radical Orthodoxy has a lot to say about Augustine. It was noted above the key role that participation theology plays in the theology of RO, and the way in which they attribute this to Augustine. However, participation, as both a theological and philosophical concept, is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, this paper will focus on three concepts which Radical Orthodoxy draws on Augustine for, specifically in its attempt to answer Nietzschean nihilism, all of which assume a participatory metaphysic. These are the Christian metanarrative, “musical” ontology, and the nature of the church as a community of God. This paper will examine the RO perspective on each of these topics, and then below will look more closely at what Augustine writes on each of these ideas. The analysis of RO will then operate on two axes: first, how faithfully is it in its use of Augustine, and second whether or not it is able to answer nihilism.

These three features are not traditionally associated with Augustinian thought, but one must keep the *telos* of RO in mind: these theologians are responding to nihilism within modernity and postmodernity. This priority shapes the way they draw on Augustine, what they consider to be useful. So, for example, the Christian metanarrative. When RO uses postmodern deconstruction ideas to unseat the dominant modern philosophy, it must put all stories, all metanarratives, on the same level. But then, if it wants to compete with nihilism, it must be able to put forward its own account, its own metanarrative. Furthermore, that metanarrative needs to be internally consistent.

Augustine supplies just such a metanarrative, a story of where humanity came from and where it is trying to go, that is entirely Christian. As Hollerich describes it, “In Milbank’s view,

Augustine provides the most successful Christian example of a ‘metanarrative realism’ which can criticize both secular society and the church itself on the basis of resources provided entirely from within the Christian tradition.”<sup>31</sup> Augustine gives these theologians the metanarrative language they need in order to do their theology. This metanarrative can compete with nihilism for two reasons: first, it can agree with nihilism on the shifting nature of reality by invoking a musical ontology and second, it can disagree with nihilism by putting forward the church as a place of peaceful community.

What is a “musical ontology?” Catherine Pickstock delves into this topic at great length. She writes, “For Augustine the entire cosmos itself is not a total ‘thing’ to which one could accord a size, even a maximum size. On the contrary, it is rather an assemblage of all the relations that it encompasses.”<sup>32</sup> What does this mean? Pickstock is pushing back against a metaphysical view of reality that would see it as essentially a static object, something that can be picked up and examined. If this were the case, reality would be like a single note, continually sounding the same. Instead, reality is better defined like music, as a series of differences which flow one after another and relate to one another.

Hankey gives an explanation of why a “musical” ontology is necessary to a Christian metanarrative when he writes, “Getting beyond neopagan nihilist postmodernity to a postmodern Christianity, not afraid to embrace difference and to create itself and reality in the flux of an endless semiotic *poesis*, requires first of all a mythology, the opposite of the ones assumed by the

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31. Michael J Hollerich, “John Milbank, Augustine, and the ‘Secular,’” *Hist. Apocal. Secul. Imagin. New Essays Augustines City God* (1999): 311–26. 316

32. Catherine Pickstock, “Music: Soul, City and Cosmos after Augustine,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999), 243–77. 247

old and new paganism.”<sup>33</sup> This idea is most clearly stated in Milbank’s “*Summa*.” “First, it may be argued that Christianity can become ‘internally’ postmodern in a way that may not be possible for every religion or ideology. ... A reality suspended between nothing and infinity is a reality of flux, a reality without substance, composed only of relational differences and ceaseless alterations. [*sic*] (Augustine, *De Musica*) Like nihilism, Christianity can, should, embrace the differential flux.”<sup>34</sup>

Why is this so important? Because this musical ontology acknowledges what postmodern nihilism takes as self-evident: the world is constantly in flux, constantly changing as new perspectives emerge to interpret reality anew. But at the same time, this kind of musical ontology does not mean violent conflict between competing interpretations, as Nietzsche would argue for. Instead, “In this music the endings and displacements do not imply a necessary violence (as they do for neopagan postmodernity).”<sup>35</sup> Milbank says the same: “In music there must be continuous endings and displacements, yet this is no necessary violence ... Christianity ... can, I want to claim, think difference, yet it perhaps uniquely tries to deny that this necessity entails conflict.”<sup>36</sup> Christianity can acknowledge the fluctuating nature of reality, without descending to the level of constant warfare which nihilism entails. “Thus [Augustine] evacuates reality in a way that seems to include a nihilistic moment, only to affirm all the more an absolutely infinite order which,

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33. Wayne J. Hankey, “Re-Christianizing Augustine Postmodern Style: Readings by Jacques Derrida, Robert Dodaro, Jean-Luc Marion, Rowan Williams, Lewis Ayres and John Milbank,” *Animus* 2 (1997): 3–34. 27

34. Milbank, ““Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.”” 227

35. Hankey, “Re-Christianizing Augustine Postmodern Style.” 27

36. Milbank, ““Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.”” 228

nonetheless, finitude can never fully grasp.”<sup>37</sup> Different interpretations of reality, constantly changing, do not necessarily mean violent conflict and the rise of the *übermensch*.

How is Augustinian Christianity uniquely suited to bringing this peace? The answer is found in Augustine’s conception of the two cities. RO theologians argue that they are following Augustine when they interpret the story of creation, fall, and redemption as a story about unity. Cavanaugh writes, “Cain’s fratricide, the wickedness of Noah’s generation, and the scattering of Babel can be understood only against the backdrop of the natural unity of the human race in the creation story of Genesis 1.”<sup>38</sup> In the beginning, the human race was united, for all participated in the image of God. After the fall, this unity is broken; the entire course of history after the Fall is one of fracturing. It is only in Christ that humanity is restored to unity through participation in God.

Augustine puts a point on this interpretation when he writes on the two cities, imagining, on the one hand, the secular city, where peace is obtained by dominion, and on the other the City of God, where peace is achieved through true unity. Again, Cavanaugh writes, “In Augustine’s vision of the two cities, the reunification of the human race depends on Christians locating true citizenship beyond the confines of the earthly empire. We journey through the *civitas terrae* always aware that our true home is in heaven.”<sup>39</sup> Peace is possible only through a radical alternative to the nihilistic violence of the City of Man.

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37. Pickstock, “Music.” 248

38. William Cavanaugh, “The City: Beyond Secular Parodies,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999), 182–200. 183

39. Cavanaugh, “The City.” 185

But what is the nature of the City of God? RO argues that it is a community of peace, rather than a place of conflict, and thus a real alternative to nihilistic antagonism. Milbank states in his “Summa” that “Augustine already put the idea of the peaceful community at the centre of his theology.”<sup>40</sup> He expands upon this idea in *Theology and Social Theory*:

The non-antagonistic, peaceful mode of life of the City of God is grounded in a particular, historical and ‘mythical’ narrative, and in an ontology which explicates the beliefs implicit in this narrative. It is in fact the ontological priority of peace over conflict (which is arguably the key theme of his entire thought) that is the principle undergirding Augustine’s critique. However, this principle is firmly anchored in a narrative, a practice, and a dogmatic faith, not in universal reason.<sup>41</sup>

Here the themes of the last several paragraphs come together. The City of God is above all about peace, not conflict, which unites humanity once more and at the same time invalidates the antagonism of nihilism. It does so through an ontology which allows for peace, the musical ontology explained by Pickstock, which sees change and variety not as conflict but as a part of a greater whole. And Augustine’s idea of the City of God accomplishes all this while remaining grounded in its own narrative, giving it the metanarrative realism it needs to compete with nihilism. No wonder that the theologians of RO are so excited about Augustine!

One more interesting coda to this discussion is the place that theology proper and Christology hold in all of this. In a way, RO sees these two aspects of theology as secondary to, and supportive of, the idea of church as peaceful community. The Trinity, therefore, is invoked to show that community is intrinsic to God himself: “God as Trinity is therefore himself community, and even a ‘community in process.’”<sup>42</sup> Likewise, the doctrine of the incarnation is

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40. Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.” 229

41. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*. 390

42. Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.” 234

seen as a vindication of the church, the act of God which makes a community of peace possible. Milbank writes, “The ‘incarnation’ has no meaning, therefore, except as ‘the beginning,’ the foundation of the church, a new sort of community of charity and forgiveness, as a space for the possibility of this offering. For Augustine, it is the church that is the adequate sacrifice to God; in other words the realization of the perfect community.”<sup>43</sup> The incarnation is central to Christianity, but it “in no way contradicts the truth that the central aspect of salvation is the creation of perfect community.”<sup>44</sup>

This quote only reinforces a key theme of RO: they are concerned not so much with the history as with the story, a story that can hold up to nihilism. The narrative is enough. So Milbank says, “Resurrection is no proof of divinity, nor a kind of vindication of Jesus’ mission. ... What we have is the memory of community, of ‘ordinary’ conversation, of eating and drinking, continuing beyond death. Without this element, there could not really be a memory of a moment of ‘perfect’ community, for this is normally inhibited by the forces of nature as we know them, and by death, especially.”<sup>45</sup> Here it is very clear: the theologians of RO are not concerned with the history as much as the interpretation thereof. Next this paper will turn to Augustine to see how this emphasis measures up against his own words.

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43. Milbank, ““Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.”” 232

44. Milbank, ““Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.”” 232

45. Milbank, ““Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.”” 232

## KEY WRITINGS OF AUGUSTINE

Augustine was both a prolific and a profound author. Trying to summarize his theological view on any given point is challenging, at the least. Because of the constraints of this paper, the focus will be on the writings that Radical Orthodox theologians, and John Milbank in particular, use in their writings. The most prominent Augustinian writing in RO is *City of God*, followed by the *Confessions*.

### **City of God**

The first, and primary, source to be dealt with is Augustine's *magnum opus*, the *City of God*. Written over a period of 16 years, the *City of God* was begun as a response to those who claimed that Rome had been sacked because the people had abandoned the ancient gods of Rome for Christianity. Therefore the first ten books consist of an attack on pagan religion, showing that pagan worship is beneficial neither for this life nor for the life to come.<sup>46</sup> While these books are an important part of the work, they will not receive much attention; instead, the focus will be on the second half of the work, where Augustine explains the two "cities," the City of Man and the City of God, and their respective places in history. This is Augustine's vision of the Christian community, which interests RO greatly. Augustine unfolds his idea by describing how the cities began, what their goals are on earth, and what their final fate shall be.

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46. Matthew Levering, *The Theology of Augustine: An Introductory Guide to His Most Important Works* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2013). 113



Augustine's description of the two cities is both historical and theological: on the one hand, it is rooted in the chronological account of how humanity came to be here and an assessment of the Roman state as a particular instance of the City of Man; on the other hand, this whole history is read from a perspective with a strong sense of how God has worked through history. Therefore, it should be no surprise that Augustine begins with an account of creation and paradise, and looks for the origin of the two cities in the beginning of all things. In the beginning, there was only one city, God's city. But this did not last.

The separation began, not with man, but with the angels. The angels were created holy, but then some of the angels followed Satan in rebellion. This caused the first division, between light and darkness. Augustine's description of the two groups of angels then is a kind of foreshadowing of the differences between the City of Man and of God: "two societies of angels – the one enjoying God, the other swelling with pride;... the one blazing with the holy love of God, the other reeking with the unclean lust of self-advancement."<sup>47</sup> Augustine argues that both groups are possessed of a great love (or lust), but the distinction lies in where that love is directed.

Likewise, the two cities originate in love. Augustine summarizes the genesis of the two cities: "two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self."<sup>48</sup> The City of Man loves mankind and all his temporal affairs, while the City of God has love which is directed correctly towards God and eternal life.

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47. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009). 339-40

48. Augustine, *City of God*. 430

That this is the key difference is clear from the genesis of the City of Man, the account of the Fall. Augustine writes that the first sin happened first of all because “the first evil will, which preceded all man’s evil acts, was rather a kind of falling away from the work of God to its own works ... and therefore the acts resulting were evil, not having God, but the will itself for the end.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, the desires that Adam and Eve had to sin were not evil because of what they wanted to do, but rather because they had turned away from God. God is the source of all that is good, and so to desire or will for anything besides God is, by definition, to desire what is evil. Later, Augustine writes

Our first parents fell into open disobedience because already they were secretly corrupted; for the evil act had never been done had not an evil will preceded it. And what is the origin of our evil will but pride?... And this is undue exaltation, when the soul abandons Him to whom it ought to cleave as its end, and becomes a kind of end to itself.... And it does so when it falls away from that unchangeable good which ought to satisfy it more than itself.<sup>50</sup>

What determines good and evil is not the action itself but the alignment of that action towards or away from God. This was the cause of Adam and Eve’s sin, and this kind of misguided love is the foundation for the entire City of Man.

From the Fall, Augustine traces the history of the City of Man and the City of God through the course of biblical history, from Cain and Abel to Christ. He does this in order to show the difference between the two cities’ goals while they are here on Earth. “There are no more than two kinds of human society, which we may justly call two cities, according to the language of our Scriptures. The one consists of those who wish to live after the flesh, the other of

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49. Augustine, *City of God*. 413

50. Augustine, *City of God*. 415

those who wish to live after the spirit.”<sup>51</sup> What does Augustine mean when he says one lives after the flesh and the other after the spirit? Later he explains: “the end of our good is that for the sake of which other things are to be desired, while it is to be desired for its own sake.... By the end of good, we at present mean, not that by which good is destroyed, so that it no longer exists, but that by which it is finished, so that it becomes complete.”<sup>52</sup> Again, the difference between the two cities is in what they love and why they love it. Both are seeking after life and peace, which Augustine identifies as the supreme good, and both are attempting to avoid death, the supreme evil.<sup>53</sup> But the two cities seek these things in different places.

The City of Man, the quintessential example of which is Rome, “seeks an earthly peace, and the end it proposes, in the well-ordered concord of civic obedience and rule, is the combination of men’s wills to attain the things which are helpful to this life.”<sup>54</sup> The City of Man wants peace on this earth in the form of a well-ordered state. The end goal of temporal peace is admirable, but it can only be attained through violence. “But the imperial city has endeavored to impose on subject nations not only her yoke, but her language, as a bond of peace ... but how many great wars, how much slaughter and bloodshed, have provided this unity!”<sup>55</sup> While the City of Man desires peace, it can find no other way to attain this peace than through violence, making war to preserve peace. They do so because they’ve made a fundamental error: they believe that peace and ultimately goodness can be found on earth. “These have, with a marvelous

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51. Augustine, *City of God*. 397

52. Augustine, *City of God*. 604

53. Augustine, *City of God*. 611,620

54. Augustine, *City of God*. 628

55. Augustine, *City of God*. 617

shallowness, sought to find their blessedness in this life and in themselves.”<sup>56</sup> Like its progenitor, Satan, the City of Man seeks to find ultimate goodness in something other than God, and so they will inevitably fall short.

The City of God, on the other hand, has a different goal: it too seeks peace, but “the peace of the celestial city is the perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God, and of one another in God.”<sup>57</sup> Recognizing that all the good things of this world are temporary, the citizen of the City of God turns from earthly peace and towards God, the source of all that is good. “This alone can be truly called and esteemed the peace of the reasonable creatures, consisting as it does in the perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God and of one another in God.”<sup>58</sup> This returns mankind to its correct orientation towards God, no longer seeking good from some other source but finding all good in God alone.

This peace is not complete now. Augustine writes, “But the peace which is peculiar to ourselves we enjoy now with God by faith, and shall hereafter enjoy eternally with Him by sight.... Our very righteousness, too, though true insofar as it has respect to the true good, is yet in this life of such a kind that it consists rather in the remission of sins than in the perfecting of virtues.”<sup>59</sup> The peace of the City of God cannot be realized fully here; it is a real peace, but only by faith. The City of God is a pilgrim city, because it is still traveling to its final destination.

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56. Augustine, *City of God*. 611

57. Augustine, *City of God*. 623

58. Augustine, *City of God*. 629

59. Augustine, *City of God*. 639

Because it is not complete, the peace of the City of God does not invalidate the peace of the City of Man. Augustine explains,

The heavenly city, or rather the part of it which sojourns on earth and lives by faith, makes use of this [earthly] peace only because it must.... So long as it lives like a captive and a stranger in the earthly city, though it has already received the promise of redemption ... it makes no scruple to obey the laws of the earthly city, whereby the things necessary for the maintenance of this mortal life are administered; and thus, as this life is common to both cities, so there is a harmony between them in regard to what belongs to it.<sup>60</sup>

The believers here on earth who make up the City of God do not scorn their citizenship in the City of Man, and make every effort to keep good law and order. But they recognize that they have a still higher calling.

Thus the City of God encompasses a great diversity of peoples and states, as its members practice the command to evangelize. Augustine writes,

This heavenly city, then, while it sojourns on earth, calls citizens out of all nations, and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages, not scrupling about diversities in the manners, laws, and institutions ... It therefore is so far from rescinding and abolishing these diversities, that it even preserves and adopts them, so long only as no hindrance to the worship of the one supreme and true God is thus introduced.<sup>61</sup>

Citizenship in the City of God does not invalidate citizenship in the City of Man, but rather supersedes it, so that it is given correct priority: earthly peace is only a means to the ultimate peace of God, and so Christians can accommodate differences in language or law in order to give others a place in that peace.

That peace is important because the fates of these two cities is radically different. Those who considered the City of Man to be the ultimate and final goal, who sought their own glory,

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60. Augustine, *City of God*. 628

61. Augustine, *City of God*. 629

will find the same fate as Satan: “they who do not belong to this City of God shall inherit eternal misery, which is also called the second death because the soul shall then be separated from God its life.”<sup>62</sup> On the last day, however, the City of God shall be glorified and rejoice in the presence of God for all eternity. “How great shall be that felicity, which shall be tainted with no evil, which shall lack no good, and which shall afford leisure for the praises of God, who shall be all in all!... Certainly that city shall have no greater joy than the celebration of the grace of Christ, who redeemed us by His blood.”<sup>63</sup> Then there shall be true peace, which will last for all eternity.

Two cities, with two different loves, reach two different ends. The City of Man loves earthly peace, and while it maintains that peace for a time, ultimately it will crumble and be condemned. The City of God loves eternal peace, and while it journeys here below, it keeps its eyes firmly fixed on heaven above. This narrative of the two cities is a key part in considering the claims of Radical Orthodoxy, but there is one more source to cover for a full analysis.

### **Confessions**

What Augustine speaks of abstractly in the *City of God*, he makes concrete in the twelve books of his *Confessions*. Considered to be the first autobiography, the *Confessions* are much more complex than an autobiography – it is also a theological treatise and a prayer all wrapped up in one. And yet, the same worldview underlies both books: rightly ordered love leads to peace. The difference is one of scope. What Augustine demonstrated on the stage of history throughout the

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62. Augustine, *City of God*. 640

63. Augustine, *City of God*. 778,780

*City of God*, he confesses to be true in his own life. He makes the theology of the two cities concrete.

This emphasis is obvious from the first paragraphs. “Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.”<sup>64</sup> The entire book is full of sections like these, breaking up the narrative with heartfelt prayers. These prayers reveal that Augustine knows what it means to have a restless heart, but he also knows what it means to be at peace. He is painfully aware of the ways in which a misguided love can lead the soul astray, and he rejoices that his heart has been oriented towards God once more. He can speak of the two cities because he has lived in both of them. The *Confessions* follow that journey, through the City of Man and into the City of God.

Augustine begins with his life in the City of Man, beset by sin and deceived by the philosophies of the world. On the one hand, he spends a large portion of book 2 describing his sin of stealing pears, which concludes with the famous line: “I went away from Thee, my God; in my youth, I strayed too far from Thy sustaining power, and I became to myself a barren land.”<sup>65</sup> He describes his time in Carthage as “a cauldron of illicit loves,”<sup>66</sup> where he developed a lust not only for sexual pleasure but also for literature and oratory. On the other hand, it was around this time that he fell into the snares of the Manichaeans, whom he describes as “a sect of men talking high-sounding nonsense, carnal and wordy men.”<sup>67</sup> Although he will eventually distance himself

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64. Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Michael P. Foley, trans. F. J. Sheed, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2006). 3

65. Augustine, *Confessions*. 34

66. Augustine, *Confessions*. 37

67. Augustine, *Confessions*. 42

from the sect, he spends almost 9 years with the Manichaeans. After he separated himself from them, he was still eager for the things of the world, so that he says of himself: “I was all hot for honours, money, marriage: and You made mock of my hotness. In my pursuit of these, I suffered most bitter disappointments, but in this you were good to me since I was thus prevented from taking delight in anything not Yourself.”<sup>68</sup> As Augustine looks back on these times, he recognizes just how far these things had led him from a love of the true God.

There were several factors which led to his conversion, his entry into the City of God. He credits God with using not only his dissatisfaction with earthly things to lead him back but also the death of a close friend<sup>69</sup> and the preaching of St. Ambrose.<sup>70</sup> He even credits the Platonists with helping him to leave the City of Man, though they are like a hill, far off, from which one can only distantly see the truth: “It is one thing to see this land of peace from a wooded mountaintop ... and quite another to hold to the way that leads there.”<sup>71</sup> Yet ultimately, it is only Christ, revealed through the Word of God, which can deliver one from the City of Man and bring them to the City of God. “So now I seized greedily upon the adorable writing of your Spirit ... I found that whatever truth I had read in the Platonists was said here with praise of Your grace.”<sup>72</sup> “The writings of the Platonists contain nothing of all this. Their pages show nothing of the face of that love, the tears of confession, Your sacrifice, an afflicted spirit, a contrite and humbled

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68. Augustine, *Confessions*. 101

69. Augustine, *Confessions*. 58ff.

70. Augustine, *Confessions*. 90ff.

71. Augustine, *Confessions*. 137

72. Augustine, *Confessions*. 136



heart, the salvation of Your people, the espoused city.”<sup>73</sup> The Platonists indeed had great wisdom, could point to God as the supreme good which must be loved above all else, but they could not show Augustine how to love him, because they did not have Christ. Augustine writes, “I set about finding a way to gain the strength that was necessary for enjoying You. And I could not find it until I embraced the Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.”<sup>74</sup>

Even after his conversion, the *Confessions* revolve around this theme. The last three books are an allegorical interpretation of Genesis, in which Augustine meditates on the nature of time, history, and the church. Although these chapters may seem disconnected to a modern reader, they make sense when seen as Augustine’s efforts to show his readers how he fits into the church now that he has been converted. Peter Brown explains this idea in his introduction to the *Confessions*: “It was, after all, important to know what Augustine, the former Manichee and star rhetor, was like, not that he had become, for good or ill, Catholic bishop of Hippo.... In the ensuing books, Augustine let his friends see him doing what he had once seen Ambrose do in Milan. It was what he, now, did as a Catholic bishop.”<sup>75</sup> By writing on the church, Augustine showed his readers where he fit in the church, the City of God. Thus, his writings on Genesis in the *Confessions* form a bridge to his section on Genesis in *City of God*.

These last three books also present us with an account of Augustine’s understanding of ‘musical ontology’ as he struggles to understand what time is and what it means that God created everything *ex nihilo*. This begins with a realization about God’s Word: creation was made

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73. Augustine, *Confessions*. 137

74. Augustine, *Confessions*. 133

75. Augustine, *Confessions*. xxvii-iii

through God's eternal Word, and yet that Word was outside of time, and therefore eternal. It could not be like our words, which are distinguishable because they have a beginning and an end point; no, rather, "it is by a Word co-eternal with Yourself that in one eternal act You say all that You say, and all things are made that You say are to be made."<sup>76</sup> Levering explains it well: "Without changing, the eternal God can create changing, temporal realities."<sup>77</sup> Thus creation is not a violent act, as if God had to bulldoze over nothing to create something, but rather one unified whole, created and sustained by the single, eternal Word of God. Here Augustine shows how his musical ontology is a result of his participatory theology: there can be change and the progress of time in reality only because it is all dependent on the unchanging, eternal God.

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76. Augustine, *Confessions*. 238

77. Levering, *The Theology of Augustine*. 106

## CRITIQUE OF RADICAL ORTHODOXY

Having surveyed some of the most important works of Augustine, this final section of the paper will offer a critique of Radical Orthodoxy's use of Augustine. The goal of this section is to analyze the ideas of RO in a fair light with two goals in mind: first, does its interpretation of Augustine match what Augustine wrote, or is it using selections from his work to advance its own goals? And second, does its theology actually reach the goal of answering nihilism?

In this area, it is important to start with a caveat: the largest difference between RO and Augustine (as well as a confessional Lutheran stance) is the question of the metaphysical existence of God. Augustine would affirm that God truly does exist; RO argues that such a question of metaphysics is unnecessary, indeed, impossible. As was previously observed, "This is for Milbank the harsh reality which a post-Nietzschean theology should confront: Christianity is metaphysically no more founded than other narratives."<sup>78</sup> This is, admittedly, a massive difference between the two, but for the purpose of this paper, however, this question will be bracketed so that RO can be dealt with on its own terms. Certainly, when all is said and done, Augustine would be unable to agree with RO for this very important reason, and this key difference leads to a number of fundamental differences between RO and Augustine. But in the following analysis, the focus will not be on the metaphysical question but rather on the RO interpretation of Augustine and its attempt to use him to answer nihilism.

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78. Jacobs, "Flirting with Premodernity." 134

### Does Radical Orthodoxy represent Augustine fairly?

The differences between RO and Augustine hinge on their varying interpretations of the City of God. RO, and Milbank in particular, envisage the City of God as a perfect community here on earth. This is seen both in terms of what they are and how they reach their goals. Milbank's focus is on the peace that is found in the City of God, as opposed to the City of Man where peace is enforced by violence. He characterizes the City of God as "non-antagonistic"<sup>79</sup> and argues that "Augustine's contrast between ontological antagonism and ontological peace is grounded in the contrasting historical narratives of the two cities." From this viewpoint, the entire narrative of the City of God becomes a communal one: "Augustine already put the idea of the peaceful community at the centre of his theology."<sup>80</sup> Even Christ is swept up into this viewpoint, becoming nothing more than the model and originator of perfect Christian community.<sup>81</sup> In Augustine's theology, however, this would make the City of God into nothing more than another version of the City of Man: Milbank has substituted temporal goals and loves for eternal ones. "But the actual possession of the happiness of this life, without the hope of what is beyond, is but a false happiness and profound misery."<sup>82</sup> Augustine sees the City of God as a community in progress – it does not have perfect peace in this life but only in eternity, in the presence of God. "But the peace which is peculiar to ourselves we enjoy now with God by faith, and shall hereafter enjoy eternally with Him by sight."<sup>83</sup>

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79. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*. 390

80. Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism." 229

81. Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism." 231-33

82. Augustine, *City of God*. 631

83. Augustine, *City of God*. 639

This hints at another key difference between the two: eschatology. The Last Days play a minimal part in RO's account of the City of God. Again, the focus is on the changes that a community of peace affects here on earth. This is very different than Augustine's account of the two cities, which has a large eschatological emphasis. Throughout his account of the two cities, his focus is on their goal, their *telos*.<sup>84</sup> The problem with the City of Man is not necessarily the nature of its goal, i.e., the creation and preservation of peace on earth, but that they prioritize this goal over God. They make the lesser good a higher goal than the greater good. The final result of this misguided love will be condemnation. But the City of God is a pilgrim city – it travels through this world with its eyes constantly trained heavenward, awaiting the Second Coming. Indeed, when Augustine speaks of the ultimate good, he begins not with peace, but eternal life: “life eternal is the supreme good, death eternal the supreme evil.”<sup>85</sup> The church is a community-in-expectation of the eternal life which is to come. This “now and not yet” mentality is missing from Milbank and his fellow theologians.

On another note, Millbank's conception of the City of God relies on it being a city in opposition and completely antagonistic to the City of Man. The City of Man, which represents the nihilist, atheistic philosophy RO detests, is essentially one of hopeless despair because it espouses “the regulation of power by power.”<sup>86</sup> The City of God represents an alternative way of life, an altogether different approach to the fundamentals of life which is supposed to replace or supplant the City of Man. But this does not match Augustine, who sees the two overlapping rather than competing. Indeed, the City of God lives within the City of Man, at least for now, and

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84. Augustine, *City of God*. 639-40

85. Augustine, *City of God*. 611

86. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*. 390

enjoys the benefits of the peace which they provide.<sup>87</sup> Mattes echoes this critique: “Milbank seems too quick to deny God’s work at all in the ‘City of Man,’ despite the fact that people can be vehicles of God’s creative and healing work whether they have allegiance to God or not.”<sup>88</sup> The City of Man is not unnecessary but temporary. Without a strong eschatology, RO is free to ignore this distinction. In doing so, it makes a caricature of Augustine’s two cities.

Furthermore, is the Christian community truly the place of peace that RO makes it out to be? Because of its musical ontology, it claims that Christianity is always inclusive – in fact, to exclude anyone from the City of God is antithetical to the peace that it espouses. Milbank writes, “One way to try to secure peace is to draw boundaries around ‘the same’ and exclude ‘the other’ ... But the Church has misunderstood itself when it does likewise. For the point of the suppression of the law is that nothing really positive is excluded – no difference, whatsoever – but only the negative, that which denies and takes away from Being: in other words, the violent.”<sup>89</sup> Yet this is not at all an Augustinian thought. One only needs to look as far as his extensive writings against Manichaeans, Donatists, and Pelagians to see that Augustine does not see the City of God as a fully inclusive community. Hankey points this out: “The disturbing trouble is, of course, that Augustine is the Hammer of Heretics, who not only drew boundaries between orthodox Christianity and heresy, but even used Imperial coercion against Donatists and Pelagians.”<sup>90</sup> This disconnect between the Augustinian ecclesiology and the RO conception of

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87. Augustine, *City of God*. 629

88. Mark C Mattes, “A Lutheran Assessment of ‘Radical Orthodoxy,’” *Lutheran Q.* 15.3 (2001): 354–67.  
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89. Milbank, “‘Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.’” 229

90. Hankey, “Re-Christianizing Augustine Postmodern Style.” 29

the City of God calls into question its definition of the City of Man as well. The nihilism they oppose seems to have only a superficial resemblance to the City of Man that Augustine writes of.

Taking this thought one step further: how does Augustine define the City of God, the church? It is a community characterized by their correct love of God, who has redeemed believers through the blood of Christ and revealed himself through Scripture. Knowledge of Christ's death and resurrection is a prerequisite to loving God rightly. As he writes in the *Confessions*, "I set about finding a way to gain the strength that was necessary for enjoying You. And I could not find it until I embraced the Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus."<sup>91</sup> The church is the Christ-community, not just any community. When this strong definition of church is compared to RO, questions naturally arise: to what extent is RO even Christian, that is, Christocentric? Could it just as easily be any religion, so long as that religion can create a community of peace?<sup>92</sup>

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91. Augustine, *Confessions*. 133

92. One final point, which is only tangentially related to the focus of this paper, though it is of special interest to a confessional Lutheran reader: Overall, Milbank's conception of the City of God focuses on community aspects to the exclusion of personal, subjective needs. Nowhere is this seen more powerfully than in his minimal reference to justification or atonement. He gives a nod to Augustine's conception of sin, defining it as "the denial of God and others in favour of self-love and self-assertion." (*Theology and Social Theory*, 390) But when it comes to salvation, it is expressed as the creation of community, not the sacrifice necessary to make such a community possible: "This salvation takes the form of a different inauguration of a different kind of community.... Instead of a peace 'achieved' through the abandonment of the losers, the subordination of potential rivals and resistance to enemies, the church provides a genuine peace by its memory of all the victims, its equal concern for all its citizens and its self-exposed offering of reconciliation to enemies." (*Theology and Social Theory*, 392) Later, he writes, "After Jesus's death our redemption becomes possible ... by the horrifying and sublime compulsion of Jesus's death, whose concrete circumstance makes us feel that here we really 'see' sin, and at the same time the essence of human goodness. Knowing the shape of sin and the shape of its refusal, we can at last be radically changed." (*Theology and Social Theory*, 397) Again, here is the Christian message of sin and salvation, but changed to fit the idea of a new community here on earth. Sin and salvation, rather than concepts that describe mankind's relationship with God, become concepts of interpersonal relationships.

These concepts, integral to the Scriptural message, are reflected time and again in Augustine. Indeed, through the *Confessions* he shows that the two cities are not only a communal concept, but are key for understanding one's own journey through life. In the *City of God* he confesses: "our very righteousness ... is yet in this life of such a kind that it consists rather in the remission of sins than in the perfecting of virtues. Witness the prayer of the whole City of God in its pilgrim state, for it cries to God by the mouth of all its members, 'Forgive us our debts as we

In light of this, it is clear that Radical Orthodoxy is not so much Augustinian as Augustine-inspired. Although they use some of the same vocabulary and ideas as Augustine, they are working in a different setting, facing a different task than, and operating under different presuppositions than Augustine. As a result, RO's interpretation does not have the same theological emphases that Augustine exhibits, particularly the Christological and eschatological focus, and instead sounds more like philosophy in theological garb. Nor is it likely that this conclusion would bother them. The postmodern, deconstructionist mindset would probably see little problem with taking a text and using it to say what they want to say. After all, they have an important goal to pursue: the defeat of nihilism.

### **Does Radical Orthodoxy Answer Nihilism?**

So, does RO succeed in this goal? Here it is good to give RO credit. They are not afraid to face the reality of the Western civilization many Christians find themselves in today. Nihilism is everywhere – it has become one of the default lenses through which Western civilization views the world.

Radical Orthodoxy fights back against this in several ways. Particularly helpful is its argument against modern standards of knowledge. If the modern standard of knowledge becomes the absolute standard, then religious truth gets pushed to the side. The scientific method is used to discredit the truth of the Bible, in a way altogether inappropriate to each sphere of knowledge. RO's work to restore theology to a place of prominence, the "queen of the sciences," is one that

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forgive our debtors.'" (*City of God*, 639) Augustine does not minimize forensic justification, while still confessing the centrality of the church. This is an area where RO falls short.



other Christians can appreciate. Though theology does not rule over the other sciences, it gives people the framework they need to understand all other knowledge in a Christian light.

Unfortunately, RO falls short when it comes to defining an alternative to nihilism, precisely because they refuse to leave the playing field nihilism has defined. Milbank writes: “Hence Radical Orthodoxy, although it opposes the modern, also seeks to save it. It espouses, not the pre-modern, but an alternative version of modernity.”<sup>93</sup> Although they use the Christian story, they refuse to subscribe to the Christian metaphysic, the reality of a God who lived and died to save us. They are tied to the tools of Derrida that they used to take apart modernism, and those tools can be turned on them just as easily. They are really advocating another form of nihilism, a reaction to the atheistic, Nietzschean nihilism that says everything is violence. It is a kinder, gentler nihilism, but still nihilism.

Ultimately, if they were willing to be fully Augustinian, they could escape nihilism. Augustine confesses a real God, who really does imbue all life with meaning, and will make that meaning complete in eternity. Augustine has moved beyond nihilism by confessing something outside of himself. RO is unable to make that move.

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93. Hemming, *Radical Orthodoxy?* 45

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let us return to the questions this paper has sought to answer. Radical Orthodoxy is a school of post-liberal theology which seeks to answer the challenge of nihilism by utilizing pre-modern sources, particularly Augustine. Its goal in doing so is to show that Christianity offers a viable alternative to the nihilism found in both modernity and postmodernity. They focus on the communal nature of Christianity, as found in Augustine's concept of the City of God, and hold it forth as the peaceful alternative to nihilism's violence.

However, in doing so, RO is representing Augustine in a one-sided manner. It ignores his emphasis on eschatology and salvation, and in doing so, it makes the City of God into something Augustine would call another City of Man. The love in its "Christian community" is no longer centered in God but is concerned only with man. However, that it would make this kind of one-sided interpretation is not surprising, considering RO's use of deconstructionism. If confronted with allegations of "misusing Augustine," it is doubtful that any RO theologian would see their viewpoint as inconsistent or intellectually dishonest. But what it leaves out of Augustine only highlights the key difference between Augustine and RO, and between a confessional Lutheran viewpoint and RO for that matter: RO lacks a commitment to the metaphysical and historical reality of a God who died for us.

What, then, can a Christian learn from this paper? First of all, there is the question of nihilism. Instead of being the philosophical boogeyman that lurks in the dark, espoused by few though feared by many, Radical Orthodoxy correctly identifies nihilism as the pervading mindset of our times. Nihilism poses a challenging question: why do you believe what you believe? Do

you believe in Christianity because you really do believe there is a God who will hold you accountable for your sin and has given his Son as Savior? Or do you believe in Christianity because that is how you can get through life? If there is no underlying metaphysical truth, then really, there is no truth at all, only interpretation.

What can we learn from RO's approach to nihilism? On the one hand we can learn positively from its approach: they face the challenge head on, acknowledge nihilism, and propose a nuanced, intelligent solution to the problem. We can also appreciate some of the conclusions they draw from Augustine: we remember that we are in the world, not of the world; that the church of God is a pilgrim city. But, we can also learn negatively: in the end, if we refuse to make a metaphysical confession, as RO refuses to do, we find that despite our arguments, we have never left the sphere of nihilism. RO theologians are still using Christianity as a convenient crutch to hide from nihilism, the very thing Nietzsche despised because he perceived it as blind hypocrisy, a masquerade to conceal a different form of the very same nihilism.

What then can we learn from Augustine? Augustine's writings, and especially the *City of God* can be corrective for the ahistorical and individualized Christianity of America. Whereas religion in America tends to focus on personal experience and subjective salvation, Augustine presents a picture of the church as a whole, sharing in a common goal, a common life, and a common heritage. Furthermore, he bases this in the history of the Christian congregation, drawing on the biblical text to show how God's people have lived as a community through every era. These themes are uncommon in American Christianity, and if we neglect them, we neglect also a great deal of the comfort of the gospel, which brings us into communities as the body of Christ. This historical confession also becomes a metaphysical confession: Augustine shows that

God is real, in fact, God acts in human history, and nowhere more clearly than in the Incarnation. We could do worse than to follow Augustine's lead in emphasizing a God who entered history as an antidote to nihilistic, subjective tendencies today.

What, then, can we learn about reading other theological viewpoints? First of all, patience. Beyond the simple fact that neither RO nor Augustine is using the vocabulary we use in ways that we are familiar with, any theologian must confront the challenge of historical "situatedness" when reading other perspectives. RO is speaking from a certain time and place, seeking to address a certain problem, and this is reflected in the language and ideas they make use of. The same is true for Augustine, though the position is radically different. It is important to listen to both in their context, understand their goals, and respond to their concerns. But this must be balanced with the challenging task of holding their words up to the standard of Scripture – another "situated" document but one that proclaims universal truth because it is the voice of God himself. Ultimately, we want to avoid what RO does: picking and choosing the ideas and terms you like, so that you can craft your own story (either positive or negative) out of quotes from someone else. Allow Augustine to stay in his historical context – the sack of Rome, the fall of an empire, the hope of Christianity – and to speak to us from that context, one Christian pilgrim to another.

Finally, what other questions could be explored in this area? Both halves of this thesis deserve more study. On the one hand, the work of Graham Ward could be delved into in greater depth – his book, *True Religion*<sup>94</sup>, interacts more with the Augustinian concept of the individual than the "two cities" as well as deconstructionist philosophy; his "flavor" of RO may be

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94. Graham Ward, *True Religion*, Blackwell Manifestos (Oxford, UK ; Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003).

considerably different from the ideas of John Milbank, focused on in this paper. On the other hand, there is much greater depth to Augustine's *City of God* than this paper was able to describe. A thesis could very easily be written on Augustine's use of history in the *City of God*, as well as any number of other topics. Ultimately, the field of Augustinian studies as a whole is one in which the Lutheran church would benefit from taking a more active interest. Though it may involve doing theology under adverse conditions, the results would be well worth the effort.

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