

My Beloved is Mine and I am His: non-commensurable-giving as a metaphor for the divine-human relationship.¹

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Introduction.

At the heart of Christian *belief* is a gift: the 'free gift of God. . . in Jesus Christ our Lord'.² The language of gift is peppered through the New Testament and constitutes one of its most distinctive features. It portrays an abundant and generous God who acts out of love, without expecting return, and whose generosity in no wise depends on our activity. Traditionally, this utter gratuitousness of God's gifts has been cited and defended in connection with the doctrine of divine sovereignty: God's gifts must be offered without expectation of any return, because to claim otherwise would be to imply that God desires something, and so lacks it in the first place.

However, this affirmation is in some tension with another: that at the heart of Christian *life* is a response, in the worship and works of God's people. While the image of a needy God is alien to Christian understanding, it is equally alien to the Christian understanding to postulate a God who does not want or intend a responsive movement from God's people. Herein lies a dilemma for Christian theology: how to hold together such an exalted view of the necessary freedom and unconditionality of God's gift with the maintenance of human responsibility and so capacity to respond?

So Christians must at one and the same time preach that God gives freely; and that to love God is *necessarily* to serve God. This tension is a familiar and perennial one, beginning with the faith-versus-works controversy of the New Testament itself, and re-emerging regularly throughout Christian history. The issue of the relation of gift and response arises predictably and urgently whenever the very bases of belief and practice are under scrutiny: for example, between Augustinians and Pelagians; Calvinists and Catholics; Quietists and activists. The stubbornness with which the problem resists any permanent resolution gives us a clue to the profundity of the difficulty: it is not the fault of poor theology, but a tension within the Christian *kerygma* at its source. It can be understood as related to a tension in the logic of gifts and gift-giving in general, whether Christian or not. Stephen Webb³ presents the difficulty as

follows: if a gift is truly free, it must be offered without thought of any desired consequence, and in particular without reference to any desired response from the recipient. It thus appears to represent an irresponsible and solipsistic *squandering*. On the other hand, if a gift is offered in order to procure a certain outcome or response from the recipient, it is not a gift at all but a form of *exchange*. So Derrida, for example, concludes that a gift is impossible: the gift cannot be given.⁴

This tension in the Christian understanding of God's gift is a practical issue as well as a speculative one, because it maps the parameters of our understanding of the divine-human relationship. In order to be redemptive, God's gift must *involve* us. It cannot simply be God's self-squandering without reference to the recipient(s), because although this protects God's sovereignty it strips God's grace-ful action of any end in a renewed relationship between God and humanity. On the other hand, if God's gift is understood to demand or entail a response from us, it becomes a move in an exchange: a calculated trade that loses all sense of gratuitousness.

In general, the resources we bring to our understanding of the divine-human relationship are drawn analogically from our experience of being human, and as a result are necessarily historically- and culturally-conditioned. This is particularly true in the area of our understanding of God's gift and our response: human societies and human identity are constituted in the very process of gift and exchange,⁵ and the available models of gift-giving vary according to the economic, social and discursive structure within which giving and responding takes place.⁶ Consequently, the particular experience we bring of living in our own society both funds and delimits what we can understand about God's gift, and varies with both time and place.

This shifting framework means that the theological account of God's gift must be worked and reworked as the social, cultural and economic circumstances change. It must be reworked for personal, ecclesial and missiological reasons. At the personal level, our growth to maturity as Christians requires of us a mature understanding of God's gift, in which we are neither reduced by it to the status of passive recipients, nor placed in a position of equality with (and so rivalry with) God. Ecclesially, the Church has managed to find contingent ways to maintain the tension between squandering and exchange in its account of the divine-human relationship, without lurching permanently into either antinomianism or a crude economy of exchange. Its identity as Church requires that it continue to do so. Missiologically, a society that cannot understand 'gift' both needs the gospel desperately and is likely to be deaf to it. The Church's mission requires that it find persuasive syntheses of the two themes of squandering and exchange, in terms that its context(s) can understand.

Therefore, as society changes, new accounts of the nature of God's gift must be found if the Gospel is to be preached, heard and responded to. This amounts to a good argument that the way we think about giving and exchange deserves to come under scrutiny at present. Few can doubt that the economic basis of life in the West has undergone profound economic changes over the last century, and this has affected the ways we understand the divine-human relationship. In addition, there is widespread agreement that the concept of Gift has undergone an impoverishment in contemporary western society.⁷ The time is ripe for renewed scrutiny, and for a search for resources that can enrich our society's understanding of 'gift' in general.

Responses

There have been two significant recent attempts to find richer theological resources from outside the constraints of contemporary culture. Stephen Webb (to whom I owe most of the analysis of the problem) looks to the resources of the Christian doctrine of God itself as the basis for a renewed understanding that transcends cultural and historical boundaries. He argues that "The truth of theology is to show that the gifts of God — primarily creation and salvation — are simultaneously free and undeserved, yet binding and obliging."⁸ This simultaneity is rendered possible by the insight that "divine excess begets reciprocity", because the Trinitarian God is at one moment Giver, Given and (act of) Giving.⁹ The Trinitarian elision of the distinction between the three modalities of the gift-event means that, as the Christian is drawn up into the life and reign of God, the very separation of excess and exchange becomes meaningless: "In the Trinitarian pattern of giving, the excessive gift endows a mutual exchange, simultaneously making the excessive productive and the reciprocal unpredictable".¹⁰ In the final analysis, all true gifts are part of the inner life of the Gifting God.

The difficulties that surround this account are to do with the fact that God becomes the *sole* term in the construction of the gift-relationship. In the first place, there is a circularity in the argument: the Trinity is constructed by analogy with a model of gift-giving, and the model is then in turn interpreted by extrapolation from the account of the Trinity. As Kilby has pointed out,¹¹ this is a common fallacy when attempting to argue between the Trinity and the conditions of human sociality, and as a result our own social prejudices are projected onto the Trinity and re-claimed as divine attributes: "what is projected onto God is immediately reflected back into the world, and this reverse projection is said to be what is *important* about the doctrine."¹² It therefore fails to bring anything new to the consideration of the problem. Secondly, although Webb presents giving as multiplicative, generating further giving to third parties and so building

community, the end-point is an eschatological one in which all gifts, givers and giving are caught up into the inner life of the Trinity. In other words, although gifts appear to be multiple, diverse and boundless, in the end they are all part of the One Giver, Gift and Giving.¹³ What is lost is the specificity of *this* gift, at *this* moment, between *these* persons. Otherness and uniqueness have been elided from our account of the gift.

The second of my interlocutors for these purposes is John Milbank, who in recent years has turned his attention to the theology of gift twice, in distinct ways. The first of these, in 1995, took as its point of departure the work of Bourdieu, Malinowski and Mauss, and so comes at the issue from the standpoint of social anthropology.¹⁴ This is closest to my own approach — appealing to the resources of other cultures in order to enrich our concept of gift —, and I will move on to it later. His later (and to my mind much more difficult) work¹⁵ represents an approach through mediaeval metaphysics, to a theology of God's giving. Unlike Webb's attempt, it seems to provide new resources with which to work, and so an enriched theology of Gift.

In this work, Milbank begins with a critique of modernity for having abandoned the concept of the soul in favour of the Cartesian reflecting subject. He argues that, as a result, modernity can no longer understand reciprocity except as an empty commercial transaction, in which nothing of true value is handed over, since nothing of the giver is implicated in the gift. What is needed is a return to the mediaeval scholastic understanding, exemplified in Thomas Aquinas, of a self constituted ontologically rather than epistemologically, and so able to 'give itself away' in the act of giving.¹⁶ In this way, he recovers a notion of the necessary freedom of the gift.

In the second part,¹⁷ Milbank applies this renewed understanding of giving to the divine-human relationship, a relationship that is reciprocal, but not static. There is "an asymmetrical reciprocity, which implies not a fixed circle, but an unending spiral, in which each response only completes the circle by breaking out of it to re-establish it —like a ring on a finger where the ends bind by overlapping, but do not actually meet.",¹⁸ Neither is the relationship conditioned by a Hegelian teleology: the spiralling is not from lower to higher, but iteratively between the visible and invisible, human and divine.¹⁹ The soul, then, is the place where gifts are given and received, "constituted as the site of the finite manifestation of the spiralling interplay between the finite surface and transcendent depth which alone sustains things in being. The soul is the soul of reciprocity."²⁰

Milbank has come up with an account that affirms the character of gift as exchange, but overcomes the stasis and self-cancelling character of exchange by placing it within an endless, spiralling movement that is the

essential character of true reciprocity. It is a considerable advance on Webb's position and a significant contribution to the debate. But again there are two areas of concern, that relate to the question of how giving constructs relationships with particular others as well as with 'transcendent Otherness'. Firstly, it may be argued that what Milbank describes is not true mutuality, but a modified solipsism. From solitude, the soul is drawn into an exclusive relationship with the divine Other. There is an assumption that the soul may transact analogous relationships with other others, but these do not follow from the model he provides. Is there, therefore, no overlap between the divine-human relationship and human-human relationships? Secondly, and by extension, this eternally-spiralling relationship does not help us to understand the role of particular gift-events. On the contrary, it tends to elide the status of particular events and merge them all into a general 'giving-ness', an ontological condition beyond time.

This generality may be seen as an artefact of Milbank's methodology. Simply by addressing the question at the level of ontology, he is necessarily concerned with generalities rather than particulars. Whatever the suitability of this approach for his own purposes, it is clearly limited for ours: how, instead, may *particular acts*, between particular persons, be made space for within the understanding of gift? Here his earlier work, based as it is on reports from historical human societies, seems a much more promising source.

In this earlier paper, 'Can a Gift be Given?' (1995), Milbank develops his thesis in conversation with the work of social theorists and social anthropologists (particularly Bourdieu, Mauss and Malinowski), exploring the tension between squandering and exchange. An important insight here is that a gift always requires return, but the return may be delayed, and it may be the return of a *different sort of* gift. There is fertile ground here. If we allow that gifts may be of different sorts, and therefore not self-evidently comparable, we can affirm each particular instance of gift-giving as an unique event rather than (or as well as) a move in a series of reciprocal acts. But Milbank does not explore very far down this road, concentrating instead on the significance of delay in returning gifts. As a result, he continues to treat all gifts exchanged between two parties, different or not, as part of a single exchange-relationship. He therefore does not find an alternative to the tension between squandering and exchange, but only a point within it that he is prepared to defend: a definition of Christian *agape* as a unique understanding of gift, a form of *purified gift-exchange* characterised by ". . . a requisite *attention* to the other, her character, situation and mood, such that we know how to surprise and not to annoy."²¹

Positively, by admitting the possibility of different sorts of gift Milbank has loosened the contractual nature of exchange underlying his account: by returning a gift that is *different*, the recipient-donor reverses the direction of the relationship.²² Nevertheless, the essential features of an exchange-based model are unmitigated: a gift is always given in the expectation of return, and the relationship remains asymmetrical and unstable until restitution has been made. Although Milbank makes a virtue out of this predicament by upholding an account of Christian *agape* in which what is exchanged involves the very being of the giver in both directions, his account still seems to share the paradox and impoverishment of the views he rejects. Although our agapeic gift to God is different from God's gift to us, it still in some sense represents a restitution or repayment to God. Similarly, the form of 'purified gift-exchange' he advocates cannot form the basis for an agapeic Christian community: gifts are debts to be discharged, not invitations to deeper communion.

Reconstruction

This discussion has exposed some of the cultural assumptions that we bring to a theological understanding of gift. As befits our status as members of an essentially mercantile western culture, we share the assumption that reciprocity is always repayment, and therefore cancellation of the debt incurred by the recipient at the hands of the donor. Gifts are to be returned: the *telos* is always the ending of debt and so the restoration of in-dependence in both parties. The desired state to return to, the baseline for human flourishing, is one in which nobody has claims over me, and in turn nobody owes anything to me. However, the regulating assumption that the desired state is one of solitude is questionable as soon as it is expressed. In some other societies, interdependence is more explicitly sought and therefore it is *not* necessarily desirable to reduce indebtedness. Instead, gifts and the resulting indebtedness are seen as the substrate of all social interaction. It follows that increasing the general level of indebtedness adds to the common good.

This is where we need to pick up two themes that Milbank notes but does not adequately develop. The first is the recognition that gifts (and donors and gift-events) may *differ*, with the consequence that in returning a (non-commensurable) gift the giver may not be cancelling a debt but adding to it in the opposite direction. Instead of one debt, we have two: not cancelling each other out but drawing both participants in the relationship more closely and indissolubly together. The second is that a form of indebtedness may in some societies be not alienating, but community-building: "In rendering the other indebted through your excessive gift you do not, as in a modern market relationship, ensure the alienation from

yourself of your debtor, who does his best to avoid you, but rather his continuing bondage of devotion and respect towards you.”²³

In order to resource this idea, we need to look beyond western culture. I want to bring in a construction of gift-giving given to me by the Siane people of Papua New Guinea. This is not the place for an ethnographic exercise: empirical ethnography has fearsome methodological issues of its own that can’t be tackled here. I therefore do not intend to propose this account as an objective description of Siane society, but advance it only as a suggestive story that may stand or fall on its capacity to shed light on the question at hand.²⁴

Among the Siane (the story goes), complex tangles of indebtedness to many others form the matrix on which the community is constructed. To be in relation is to be simultaneously a debtor and a creditor: only outsiders have neither claims nor obligations. Consequently, it was viewed as rude and antisocial to return a gift, or to refuse to give one. If somebody lent K10, the worst possible response was to *return* K10 at a later date. This was tantamount to declaring that you were terminating any relationship that was developing with the lender, and wanted nothing more to do with them.²⁵ Better was to remain indebted, or to return a larger sum, thus maintaining the debt but reversing its direction. But better still (and this is something neither Mauss nor Milbank follow up in detail) is to return a *different sort of gift*, such as some food, or a dance, praise, or some technical information. Then the original debt remains: it is not replicated but *complicated*, tangled in a wider and deeper way. It and the social relationship it inaugurated is enriched and deepened by another structure of indebtedness pointing in the opposite direction. The debt is not cancelled but redoubled, yet the balance of power has been ameliorated.

This gives us a new approach to the theology of gift and, particularly, the way giving and returning gifts fund our conception of the divine-human relationship. Our relationship with God, say, is one in which God offers us creation, salvation, sanctification. We offer God worship, service and ministry to others. Must our response be treated as having no interest for God on the one hand, or somehow diminishing or negating God’s generosity on the other? As long as we are clear that we are talking of different orders of gift (which is beyond challenge) there is no need to adopt either of these positions.

Instead, we can argue somewhat like this:

- Since divine and human gifts are incommensurable, human gifts do not need to be treated as worthless and trivial in order to protect God’s majesty and freedom. On the contrary, human gifts can be seen as unique: for example, my worship is uniquely the worship of *this* person, in *this* place and time.

- As such, human gifts supply something that God does not already possess, and could not have without our agency. There is a sense in which God ‘owes’ us —we have offered to God something that cannot be replaced, and cannot be returned.
- The objection must immediately be considered that God is necessarily absolute and so immutable — to which the most straightforward answer would be something like Gilkey’s distinction between God’s absoluteness in the order of being, and God’s involvement with creation in the order of knowing.²⁶ The full discussion of the difficulty lies outside the scope of the present paper, but its force must be noted.
- Similarly (and in response to both Webb and Milbank) God’s giving need not imply an expectation of return now, or an unmet obligation for the future, or the opening of a reciprocal relationship that is resolved eschatologically. Rather, the image is of a God who permits Godself to become entangled in human affairs for their own sake, limitlessly giving and being so placed as to receive gifts, eternally complicated in the human world without ceasing to be God.

These considerations focus on the divine-human relationship, conceived in individual terms. However, we may also talk about a necessarily social and ecclesiological dimension, because part of our gift to God is service and mission among others. It follows that:

- There is a double complication of the gift arising from God’s involvement with us. As well as God becoming entangled with each of us in burgeoning, incommensurable gift-events, God becomes entangled in our entanglement with each other.
- Thus, in entering into relationship with any one person, God enters into relationship with all those who are in turn related to that one. For God’s entanglement with an individual necessarily entails entanglement with the whole of creation. We may perceive here echoes of atonement theology with its assertion that in Jesus Christ the whole world is redeemed,²⁷ but it is outside the scope of the present essay. At least we can say that God is entangled in a complicated relationship with the whole church.

A suggestive illustration of this process at work may be found in the story of Jesus’ meeting with Zacchaeus.²⁸ Jesus’ gift of dignity and human companionship with the outcast elicits a response from Zacchaeus: not a return of honour to Jesus, but the offer to remit the debts of the people. The effect is, clearly, to strengthen by ‘complication’ his relationship with Jesus; but also to involve others in it. Consequently, all the debtors can be understood to have received a gift from Jesus, and this in turn may generate further gift-giving.

Implications

In this paper I have suggested that, in the face of an impoverishment of the concept of Gift in contemporary western society, further suggestive resources can be located in the concept as employed in other cultural systems. The model I have adopted entails some theses about the character of the divine-human and human-human relationships that await further development. However, these theses also have further consequences at theological and practical levels that can be briefly recounted here.

Theologically, this model presents God's mode of engagement as one who chooses to need us, and so lacks what we choose not to provide. Acknowledgement of our need is not an expression of our inferiority to God (which in any case may be incoherent as a statement, since God and humanity are different sorts of thing) but of our similarity to God: we desire, as God does, to enter into relationship with the Other. This eases the polarisation of heteronomy and autonomy, since God and humanity have claims over each other that together amount to liberation; it also indicates a way we can understand God's openness towards our gifts as expressing, rather than compromising, God's power and freedom. The way forward may be through a reinterpretation of theological concepts of lack and desire, replacing the the absoluteness of kenotic theory (with its image of the squandering of God's divinity regardless of human response) with the mutuality of an image of divine-human friendship.

Soteriologically, this model contributes to moves for a more humane and human-scale understanding of God's grace as an invitation from the God who graciously offers to be indebted to us, as we are indebted to God. It gives us a way of understanding redemption as necessarily transcending the personal and local. This entanglement of God and creation is open-ended, drawing as it does all human (and perhaps non-human) relationships into its realm. This is the Kingdom of God: that over which God reigns, but equally that with which God has assented to become entangled in relationships of mutual obligation and risk.

On a more practical level, there are ecclesiological and missiological implications. If mutual indebtedness through the complication of the gift thus operates as a way of contracting relationships without reducing otherness, there is a pattern for constructing Christian communities ecumenically, and for inter-faith dialogue. Regarding the former, the *telos* for church life is not organisational unity but mutual indebtedness, in which each offers to the other(s). regarding the latter, it becomes important (for example) for the Church to be 'in the presence of' Islam without adopting Muslim perspectives.

Conclusions

In this paper I have argued, first, that there are resources from outside contemporary western culture that may be used to enrich the theological concept of gift. By introducing the concept of incommensurability into gift-exchange, it is possible to reject the logical dilemma between squandering and exchange in favour of a complexity of gifts, accompanied by a complication of relationships.

Secondly, the model of gift-giving thus generated can be used analogically to understand divine grace and human response, and so to adjust our understanding of the divine-human relationship. This allows a more nuanced interpretation of the relationship between divine autonomy and human action, and between God's gift to humanity and human beings' gifts to each other.

Finally, I have argued that thus reconceiving the divine-human exchange has implications across a range of concerns in Christian theology, in particular in the areas of soteriology, eschatology, ecumenism and mission. A more detailed treatment of these themes will, however, have to require further work.

- 1 A version of this paper was first read at the Annual Conference of the Society for the Study of Theology, 11 April 2002
- 2 Rom 6²³ (NRSV).
- 3 Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God. a Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (Oxford: University Press 1996). I am indebted to Webb's work for the basic approach to the question adopted here.
- 4 See e.g. *Given Time 1: Counterfeit Money* trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University Press 1992)
- 5 See Richard Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship* (London: George Allen and Unwin 1970), 73 : "The social relations set up by gift-exchange are among the most powerful forces which bind a social group together" (quoted in Webb, 42)
- 6 See especially Webb, *The Gifting God*, 1-3.
- 7 Webb, 4-6
- 8 Webb, 84
- 9 Ibid 90
- 10 Ibid 11
- 11 K. Kilby, 'Perichoresis and projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity', *New Blackfriars* Vol 81, no. 956 (2000) 432-445.
- 12 Ibid, 442
- 13 "Christianity affirms both excess and mutuality by taking them to the extreme point —located through hope on an eschatological horizon — where they meet, one leading to the other" (SHW 9)
- 14 John Milbank, 'Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic' *Modern Theology* 11.1 (1995) 119-61
- 15 'Soul of Reciprocity, Part 1: Reciprocity refused' *Modern Theology* 17 (2001) 3:335-391 and Part 2, 'Reciprocity granted' *Modern Theology* 17(2001) 485-509
- 16 This is the substance of Part 1: 'Reciprocity Refused'.
- 17 In Part 2: 'Reciprocity Granted'

- 18 Ibid, 486
- 19 "Within such knowledge [i.e. by faith], we will then affirm a virtuous and not futile reciprocal spiralling between the visible and the invisible: a benign circulation for which, instead of mutual cancellation, the finite visible is known as upheld in its finitude only by the infinite invisible, and inversely, the infinite invisible is known as intrinsically the giver of the shapes of the finite" Ibid, 489.
- 20 Ibid, 490. This then leads to his conclusion that, in giving, "The reciprocating circles of twin souls must not be superseded by one impersonal circle, but must be themselves given, in their twin, never-interlocking circularity, by an elevated otherness. If, all the same, the gift they are offered is not merely an empty gift of one-way circularity, but rather, the gift of reciprocity, then what is disclosed is transcendent Otherness that is itself personal exchange: eternal spiralling, not an eternal and impersonal unity." Ibid, 505.
- 21 Milbank, 'Can a Gift be Given?' 132
- 22 125-7
- 23 127
- 24 The work of Dr. Ennio Mantovani S.V.D in the *Point* series (Goroka: Melanesian Institute. P.O. Box 576, Goroka, PNG) has parallels from the closely-related Chimbu people.
- 25 Marcel Mauss reports a similar status for gift-giving as the basis for social interaction, as described by Radcliffe-Brown in *The Andaman Islanders*. However, neither he nor Radcliffe-Brown bring out the importance of the gifts' *incommensurability*, and instead minimise it by reducing gifts to items of comparable value. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enquire as to whether or not their analysis adequately represents the substance of what they observed. It is however tempting to view their interpretation as the mapping of western values on a different sort of economy. See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* trans Ian Cunnison [1954] (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1969) 17f.
- 26 See Langdon Gilkey, 'Creation, Being and Nonbeing' in David B Burrell and Bernard McGinn (Eds) *God and Creation. an Ecumenical Symposium* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 1990) 226-241
- 27 Also the Johannine 'whoever knows me knows the Father'
- 28 Lk 19¹⁻¹⁰ I am indebted to a participant in the aforementioned SST Conference (whose name I failed to remember) for this insight.

Correction

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Paragraph 2 Page 522 should read:

James Alison expresses this providential element very clearly as he asserts that in the death of Jesus we see 'a loving God who was planning a way to get us out of our violent and sinful life. Not a human sacrifice to God, but God's sacrifice to humans.'¹⁵ Given what I have written about the whole trajectory of Christ's life, death and resurrection in the previous section, I would rather say, more comprehensively, that in Jesus Christ it was both God's and Jesus the man's sacrifice to humans and to God.¹⁶ Another author, Sebastian Moore, while ruling out the concepts of sacrifice that are nonapplicable to Christ, also has the audacity to call the passion a sacrifice: 'the death of Jesus on a cross is a sacrifice only in its full expression as a feast of love.'¹⁷ For Moore, the risen Christ who invites his disciples to share in the eucharist turns his passion into a feast of love'.