

# **WESLEYAN THEOLOGY IN A POSTMODERN ERA: THE SPIRIT OF LIFE IN AN AGE OF THE NIHIL**

by

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It would not do for Wesleyan theologians to ignore the liberative philosophical thinking of postmodernity. Its passionate, unrelenting pursuit of the moral and its search for a kind of “holy living” is likely to attract Wesleyans as much as its stoic humanism, clothed in obscure new scholastic language, will tend to repel. Furthermore, Wesleyan theologians should not refuse to come to grips with postmodernity if for no other reason than that our children speak its language and many “seekers” in our churches and schools find its grammar and imagination fascinating. And, finally, if we are indeed in a postmodern world, must we not be *in* it even if we are not *of* it? But what is postmodernity?

Everybody talks about “postmodernity,” but not many mean the same thing by it. Do we mean by postmodernity a new historical epoch? Or is postmodernity simply a hyper-extension of modernity? Would we say that everything in the Wesleyan theological project depends on our negotiating postmodern thinking and values? Or would accepting postmodernist perspectives make Wesleyan theology impossible? Must we accept the radical critiques of knowledge, power, and truth which postmodern philosophers lodge against modernity so that the new postmodern philosophy would actually determine the parameters of theology in yet a new way? Can there be, after all, a postmodern Wesleyan theology?

Modernity set limits to Christian theology, especially epistemological limits. Many think postmodern philosophies free theology from the limits determined by liberal philosophies. Some evangelical and postliberal theologians increasingly appreciate postmodern philosophy for this reason.<sup>1</sup> And so do liberation and feminist, process and pragmatist theologians. The attraction of postmodern philosophies is that they seem to fund the struggle for freedom against all forms of domination concocted by modernity and thus gain a hearing from those who have suffered from modernity.

But postmodern philosophies also set their own limits on Christian theology. The "Radical Orthodoxy" school, led by thinkers like John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, use postmodern philosophy, especially that of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, to engage in a radical criticism of modernity and of liberal theology in order to free theology from modern secular reason.<sup>2</sup> But they find in postmodern philosophy a profound nihilism that must be exposed, subsumed, and transcended by returning to the premodern Christian tradition, especially the Augustinian and other Platonic strands of the tradition. Agreeing with some aspects of this project, I will argue (1) that modernity in many of its misery-causing as well as liberative aspects is not over, (2) that postmodern thinkers have on their own terms failed in their attempt to address many misery-causing aspects of modernity, and (3) that there may be little

<sup>1</sup>See Henry H. Knight III, *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997); Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998); David S. Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997); J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); idem., *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Graham Ward, ed., *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); idem., *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds. *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1999). For misgivings about this project see David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

in postmodern philosophy that can help us with the constructive task of Wesleyan theology. And yet I think (4) that some postmodern philosophers are describing the human plight in our time, often in exquisitely perceptive ways. In this sense, postmodern philosophy is a crucial partner in elaborating the points in postmodern life where Wesleyans must work theologically.

### **Postmodern Conditions of Life**

If we speak of “postmodernity” as a new period in history, two terms epitomize its conditions: *cyberspace* and the *global market*. Graham Ward describes the postmodern experience in the cyberspatial modes with which nearly anyone who would read this essay would be intimately familiar:

Surfing the net is the ultimate postmodern experience. Facing your SGVA screen-low radiation/anti-static-poised over the multimedia controls, you launch into new forms of spatiality created by the flows of electronic information. In Disneyland colours you download texts, pictures, video chips, voices from anywhere in the world, regardless of time zones. Electronic libraries in São Paulo, chat-lines in Florida, info sites in Sydney, data banks in Vancouver, on-line shopping in Paris, audio-visual tours with 3-D graphics of the Vatican, the White House, the Kremlin, the Taj-Mahal—are all available at your fingertips, twenty-four hours a day. Time and space as conceived by empiricists collapse in omnipresence and multilocality. And the ride is continuous, for the electronic tide maintains you on the crest of impending satisfaction, far above any ocean floor, fast forwarding toward endless pleasures yet to be located and bookmarked. Time disappears, boredom is deflated. The drug of the ever new, instant access to a vast sea of endless desire which circulates globally; browsing through hours without commitment on any theme imaginable; dwelling voyeuristically in one location until the pull of other possibilities reasserts the essentially nomadic lifestyle of the net-surfer: these are the characteristic experiences of living in cyberspace. Cyberspace is an unidentified spatiality, like the contours of a perfume, and you are an adventurer, a navigator in uncharted waters, discovering the hero inside yourself. You act anonymously, simply as the unnamed, unidentifiable view-

point of so many interactive network games, and where an identity is needed, you can construct one. Reality is soft, malleable, permeable, and available only through the constant discharge of electronic energy signaling across the cosmos. Discourse is energized, sexualized. It issues from nowhere and sheers off toward a thousand synthetic horizons, all presented like so many Hollywood sunsets and sunrises. In this land of fantasy and ceaseless journeying, this experience of tasting, sampling, and passing on, truth, knowledge, and facts are all only dots of light on a screen, evanescent, consumable. This is the ultimate in the secularization of the divine, for here is a God who sees and knows all things, existing in pure activity and realized presence, in perpetuity. Divinization as the dissolution of subjectivity within the immanent, amniotic satisfaction, is the final goal and object of postmodernity. Cyberspace is the realization of a metaphor used repeatedly by Derrida, Irigaray, and Kristeva—the Khora, the plentitudinous womb, dark, motile, and unformed, from which all things issue.<sup>3</sup>

Two facts about life in cyberspace, however, lead us immediately to the reality of the global market. First, this “god” occupying cyberspace can only be accessed by those with sufficient means of exchange to purchase its techné and media. Second, hardly any page on the “net” exists without the representation of a commodity to be bought and sold. That is to say, the postmodern condition is indissolubly connected with the new realities of the global market.<sup>4</sup> There is already as much scholarly ink spilled over the question of the periodization of the postmodern as there was over dating modernity.<sup>5</sup> The best answer, it seems to me, is that postmodernism began with the end of the Second World War when we witnessed not only the human power to destroy the earth but also the world

<sup>3</sup>Graham Ward, “Introduction,” in *The Postmodern God*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>4</sup>David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernism: An Essay into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 112 and passim. See also Nicholas Boyle, *Who Are We Now?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1998) and Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>5</sup>See Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (New York: Verso, 1998).

conditions for the spread of the market over the globe.<sup>6</sup> Thus the most convincing analysis of the historical conditions of postmodernism is, to my mind, Frederic Jameson's depiction of the effect of the global market on our culture.<sup>7</sup>

At the dawn of the twenty-first century the trend throughout the world is that we have everywhere not only a market economy, but also what Karl Polanyi calls a *market society*.<sup>8</sup> In a market society all social goods that must be distributed for life are reduced to commodities: food, housing, learning, healing, even the delivery of justice and the generation of the generations. Everything is a commodity. Information, signs, and images themselves become commodities. Transactions in signs are particularly prized for their profitability because they easily traverse spatial barriers in cyberspace. This makes disposability of communal relationships even more severe. Everything is for sale. There are no commons. It is no longer possible to conceive *oikoumene* separate from *oikonomia* or the church in abstraction from either. The new *catholica* called globalization spawns fragmentation, dividing peoples and communities through increasing income gaps and dissolving subjects so that they can no longer imagine a genuine catholic narrative that includes all people in a household of peace for survival of the day.

To be genuinely *in* the postmodern world, then, Wesleyan theology should address itself to the question of power within these current conditions.

### The Postmodern Project and Wesleyan Holy Living

The postmodern philosophical project seeks to deconstruct the dominative power that lurks everywhere in modernity by attending closely to everyday practices. It takes up Nietzsche's claim that behind all appearances is the Will to Power. If you peel off the layers of any phenomenon or

<sup>6</sup>Other dates that are crucial in postmodernism are 1968 (the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the Paris student revolt, the Czech invasion, the riots at the Democratic National Convention), 1973 (the OPEC crisis), and 1989 (the year the "seventy-five years war" [1914-1989] ended).

<sup>7</sup>Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup>M. Douglas Meeks, "God's *oikonomia* and the New World Economy," in *Christian Social Ethics in a Global Era*, edited by Max L. Stackhouse, Peter L. Berger, Dennis P. McCann, and M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 111-126.

entity, you will find desire expressed in power, usually leading to violence against human beings and nature. The familiar litany of giving a moral account of power itself could be heard in every institution over the past three decades, including seminary and college faculties and the church, as we attempt to become conscious of our social location in terms of race, gender, class, nation, religion, and species. We ask repeatedly how power is manifesting itself among us? How do we feel it, embody it, institutionalize it, recognize it, claim it, deny it, repress or suppress it, resist, release, or recycle it?<sup>9</sup> Postmodern thinking leads to a new self-consciousness of power relations, for a social location is nothing but a venue of powers and counter-powers in constant interaction and mutual resistance.

According to Michel Foucault, power is the “subtle, all-pervading force of social control.” It is not something easily located hierarchically at the apex. Power “is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or a piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through net-like organization.”<sup>10</sup> Power is a function of relations and only exists in action. Foucault’s work has given rise to a generation of intellectuals who no longer dream of large power structures that can realize justice or, for that matter, any macro alternatives to massive human misery caused by global systems.

In order to analyze power in modern culture, the Foucauldian strategy is to look at everyday practices such as those in prison systems and sexual relationships. It is not enough to criticize whites, males, Republicans, capitalists, etc. If you want to get at power, say the postmoderns, you’ve got to attack its source. Power is lodged in the human subject itself, in subjectivity. Both the bourgeois establishments and revolutionary movements of the last two centuries find their power base in the way the modern self joins knowledge and power. Epistemology is the problem. Or, in the thought of Jacques Derrida, language itself (especially writing) is the problem. Subjectivity reveals an “epistemic imperialism” of the dominant subject over the other.<sup>11</sup> The prescription therefore is to undermine

<sup>9</sup>Catherine Keller, “Power Lines,” in *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. Cynthia L. Rigby (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), p. 67.

<sup>10</sup>Michel Foucault. *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 98, 89.

<sup>11</sup>“Where there is power, there is also a resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” *Ibid.*, p. 99.

every logocentrism holding together the modern self. Everything that bears traces of homogeneity in civil, legal, and pedagogical institutions must be expelled. Any kind of totality and closure which would distort the full expression of the particular and concrete has to be subverted and left behind as modern detritus.

Knowledge is power, and since the human subject is reason, the modern self has to be deconstructed. Postmodern deconstruction of the self breaks down the liberal theological alliance between God and the self, but at the same time destroys all metaphysics of presence and identity. There is no way in which God can be experienced in the present. Deconstruction also extends to the traditions and metanarratives on which the modern self has grounded itself.<sup>12</sup> Whatever modernity has prized in its traditions is submitted to parody and irony. Thus, human beings are expected to live without foundations in a postmetaphysical world. This gives rise to the ethical problems of relativism and pluralism.

We are inexorably led to the question of whether there can be any human community or any non-parodied morality. How do a nonfoundational culture and a decentered self deal with the sociopolitical implications of confronting the other? When we decenter the subject (especially as the male and European), how can we move beyond power relations to envisage another way for communities to be formed and be present to each other? Can there be any moral community in postmodernity? If there can be no moral community, does this not undermine the possibilities of altering this endlessly ramified monolith of power? Does the radical postmodern undermining of the dominative power lodged in the modern self lead to the negation of any power that can resist or transform destructive power now expressed with global scope through media, technology, and market?

Wesleyan theology in a postmodern age cannot escape these questions of power and in particular whether there can be a community that can act morally in relation to creation-destroying power. In fact, something like this question is precisely what John Wesley has bequeathed us. From first to last, chronologically and thematically, Wesley was concerned with holy living. He was driven, one might say, by the question, What makes holiness possible? How can we serve the righteousness of

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<sup>12</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

God in the world?<sup>13</sup> How does God make it possible to serve the conditions of life against death? In a *formally* similar way, postmodern philosophers are also haunted by the question of whether human beings can live in a way which will survive the threat of death in the powers and principalities.

Wesley's morphology of God's prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace exists for the sake of the practices of discipleship which, in turn, are devoted to God's renovation of the world. God restores to us the image of God, so that, living in the Triune God in history, we may love through grace, even in the face of death-serving powers. This means that a critical Wesleyan spirituality should make sense in the context of the experience of postmodern power. Do the Wesleyan practices of spirituality do more than simply allay the sense of suffering or offer an antidote to powerlessness? How does the work of the Holy Spirit in our practices of discipleship actually change causes of suffering? What difference does life *coram Deo* make for justice and peace in a postmodern world?

I believe that there is a stunning parallel between Wesley and postmodern thought in that Wesley's theology was also addressed to those who were paralyzed by the politics of power. The message he offered was that power was already in their midst and accessible to their reception. By concentrating on the work of the Holy Spirit instead of a metaphysics of presence, Wesley looked for the new humanity in Christ, created by the gift of Jesus Christ and embodied in the mutuality of the sanctified gift-giving community. Wesley was every bit as realistic as the postmodern philosophers about the possibility of moral life: We are commanded by God to love. But we cannot love on our own; only the grace of God makes it possible for us to love God and each other. God's economy is constituted by the constantly announced and relearned generosity of God, by gifts that give in being given and create dignity in being received. Unless we mean by the church's identity and mission only what the market intends, then the mystery by which we participate in the divine community of gifting and understand ourselves and our community as gifts to be gifted must open up time and space for actual gifting. How else will God redeem the world except through God's grace, God's love freely given for God's justice in the world?

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<sup>13</sup>For a fresh treatment of this question, see Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).



But it is the reality of this grace/gift and love that postmodern thinkers most call into question. In confrontation with postmodern thought at these points, Wesleyan theology can be helped to regain its identity for these times. God's grace, as uncovered in the gift of Jesus Christ and the power of love—which is the cross of the resurrected one, come to the fore as the realities that separate the church from the postmodern perspective; they are also the realities to which the church is commanded to witness in the postmodern world.

### **The Postmodern Gift**

Is gifting possible in the postmodern conditions of the global market society? Can a gift be given? Has our culture become so saturated by commodity exchange that there can be no such thing as a gift anymore? In the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu the traditional suspicion about gift as a means of domination turns into full-blown modern and postmodern cynicism about gift.<sup>14</sup> For Bourdieu gift economies are inherently deceptive and must therefore be disenchanting. He accepts the anthropological definition that religion is “commerce between the gods and human beings” and revives Plato's critique of the theater as the means of concealing through portrayal the reality submerged beneath the ritual. Religion's work of reproducing established relationships while concealing the relationships of the material economy is labor intensive and expensive in time and money. While the ritualized gift in feasts, ceremonies, and courtesies squanders wealth and wastes time, what seems most useless turns out to be most profitable. “Wastage of money, energy, time, and ingenuity is the very essence of the social alchemy through which an interested relationship is turned into a disinterested, gratuitous relationship, overt domination into misrecognized, ‘socially recognized’ domination, in other words, *legitimate authority*.”<sup>15</sup> Gift economies, according to Bourdieu, are thus soft forms of exploitation because, absent political bonding systems, they can inculcate obligation without force. Ritualized social relationships merely mask the stubborn fact of scarcity. But, after all, the original eighteenth-century theorists of the modern market celebrated the fact that the authority (and ceremonies) of the church, as well as the coercion of the state,

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<sup>14</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 192.

could be eliminated because, in these latter days, it is now possible to organize mass human behavior by the mechanism of commodity exchange.

Within this new and measurable grid, everything that appears to be a gift is merely a contract, merely a disguised exchange of commodities.<sup>16</sup> The pretense of gift conceals coercion at work and reconciles all to such coercion. Gifting at bottom hides contractual exchange and usurious reality. In this mentality gift becomes synonymous with blunder, foolish candor, and private sensibility. Everyone is suspicious of gifts, for they make one "much obliged." Gifts destroy freedom, the freedom to follow one's whim. Gifts are for private, sentimental occasions. This is why public policies assume that all solutions to all social problems should be market and contractual solutions. This also is why the stewardship of the church is usually governed by Andrew Carnegie's rules of philanthropy.

Nietzsche's framing of giving as a linguistic and moral problem forms the backdrop for the amazing philosophical concentration on gift by Jacques Derrida.<sup>17</sup> In his profoundly unreadable book, *Given Time*, Derrida argues that, if giving constitutes a circle of reciprocity, it is hardly giving at all.<sup>18</sup> Only if there would be an effraction of the economic circle, an act of grace, a nonidentical repetition, could we speak of a gift. The gift in order to be gift must not be returned.<sup>19</sup> The gift is ruined if it is consumed by exchange. And yet, by obligating a return gift, the gift always becomes a form of exchange. The very fact that we can think about what is given is a way of receiving and returning the gift and thus makes it an aspect of exchange. "It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible. Not impossible but *the* impossible."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup>"If gifts are only given in order to render indebted, to ensure continued exact compliance with what has been laid down, marked by the powerful, both dead and living, then there can be, we must judge, no real gift." John Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic," in *Rethinking Metaphysics*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 119-161, 129.

<sup>17</sup>I follow here the resourceful study of gifting by Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>19</sup>"If the other gives me back or owes me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift, whether this restitution is immediate or whether it is programmed by a complex circulation of a long-term deferral or difference." Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

Here I think we should stand with Wesley. If there is no such thing as a gift, if a gift cannot be given, then there is no content to Christian faith and no possibility of the church of Jesus Christ. Our faith, our hope, and our love depend utterly on the gift (*charis*) God has given and on the gifting God enables us to do. If there is no real space and time for gifting, what chance is there for human life? The crisis of the churches in the Wesleyan and Methodist traditions may be that we have forgotten how to conceive grace, for its reality of gifting has become arcane and perplexing to us. We have forgotten how to be gifted and to gift. So accustomed to the logic of exchange are we that the logic of grace seems foreign. Are we trying to be Christians without the actual practice of grace/gifting?

### Death as the Ethical Horizon

For Derrida, the return of the gift ruins the gift quality of a gift, and yet a gift always demands a return. John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock (proponents of the "Radical Orthodoxy" school of theology) connect the inability to return the gift with the "nihilistic consummation of philosophy" in the trend from Nietzsche through Heidegger to Derrida (and in part Levinas) to see *death* as the horizon or ground of possibility for ethical action. The nihilist reconstitution of subjectivity as the moral self depends on the notion of pure and unrewarded self-sacrifice in the face of the finality of death.<sup>21</sup> Observes Pickstock:

It would seem that Derrida shares these morbid ethics of his predecessors: death alone guarantees our singularity, and as death is uniquely our own, it is the only thing we can offer. Indeed, for Derrida, death is the only example of the pure gift, for it is supremely unreturnable, supremely silent, and therefore the optimum moment of disappropriation. Thus the offering of our death for the other is seen as the ultimate ethical good, alone guaranteeing our responsibility for the other, although it is not clear that, for Derrida and Levinas, this ethic can be put into practice.<sup>22</sup>

The free, one-way gift supposedly defines the good in postmodern ethical thought, for only the readiness to die precludes the will to power.

<sup>21</sup>John Milbank, "The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice," *First Things* (March 1999), p. 34.

<sup>22</sup>Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing*, p. 111.

What makes us aware of the self in the first place is the double intrusion of death: (1) the cry of the vulnerable other, which elicits (2) our preparedness to negate our own life. "The notion that a sacrificial offering without hope of return is the only true gift suggests that to be ethical is to be prepared to lose oneself for the other."<sup>23</sup> The vulnerability of the other places an ethical demand on me, and thus God becomes a shadow of the "other" transformed into the "Other," rather than the source of life against death.

In opposition to this ethics based on death, the church must seek an ethical life based on the resurrection of the crucified one. In this perspective self-sacrifice is not the paradigmatic good. The good toward which we are aimed both eschatologically and pneumatologically is rather the mutual giving of the community made possible through the grace of God's love. The resurrection and crucifixion of Jesus make gifting possible and point to the trinitarian community of gifting as the source of gift. The life of Jesus in the horizon of God's promises to Israel gives the shape of the gifting community.

### **The Trinity and the Return of the Gift**

I refer again to my claim that if a gift cannot be given there is no content to Christian faith and no possibility of the church of Jesus Christ. I now argue that an important function of trinitarian doctrine is to help us again to distinguish between commodity exchange and gift giving, without denying the crucial point that gifts must be returned.<sup>24</sup> The Trinity as a hermeneutic of God's gracious giving and the theory of the practice of gifting through the grace of God opens up the possibility of thinking, not only of God's being through the hyperbolic logic of giving, but also the return of God's gift. The Trinity is the community of extravagant, overflowing, and self-diffusive goodness. The gratuity of God's giving is the

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<sup>23</sup>According to Derrida and Levinas, we acknowledge the other person only after we have sensed a "trace" of his or her pain and responded sacrificially to that pain and thus after we are no longer in communication with the other. But Milbank responds that this other is a "totalized other, an other reduced to ourselves, since we can only imagine it by projecting our own subjectivity on it. One would not die then for a specific diversity and concrete difference—but just any old invisible other." Milbank, "The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice," p. 34.

<sup>24</sup>For the following cf. M. Douglas Meeks, "Trinity, Community and Power," in *Trinity, Community and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Abingdon/Kingswood), forthcoming.

mystery of God's being.<sup>25</sup> This fecundity is at once God's withdrawal to give space to God's creatures and God's indwelling in God's creation. The gift is nothing other than Godself. God's being as love is essentially other related, ecstatic, and passionate. God's being as love seeks affiliation, a society of persons who are both free and connected through acts of excessive and mutual giving. God aims at a community that responds to giving with further giving, creating relationships of obligation and responsibility. God's excess creates space and time for human reciprocity.

The gift always precedes the act of passing it along. God's hyperbolic giving initiates all our giving and thus points to a certain surplus of unilateral giving over reciprocity. God always gives without the guarantee of return. But God's love should not be depicted as so transcendent and idealized that God's gratuity excludes human giving in return. Response to God's giving should not be the logic of exchange, but God's giving does create more than gratitude (that is, gratitude narrowly construed as less than a real return of the gift). God's grace creates human mutuality and further giving. The perfect sacrifice of our worship, our gratitude to God, opens up the possibility of our giving "like" God's giving, though the gift God gives us is a "crucified" gift that qualifies all the possibilities of our giving under the conditions of suffering, deceit, and violence in history. But even under these conditions giving is the way in which God is received.

The Father's gift is infinitely great, so great that we are in infinite debt. We must speak the Trinity in order to speak the narrative of the cross. In giving the Son, God gives God's own life. In order to save us from slavery, God becomes a slave (Phil. 2:4-12). If one gives so much that a similar gift cannot be returned, then the receiver thereby becomes enslaved. This violates the duty to receive, namely the duty to give in such a fashion that one expects to receive in turn. God would then look like the "strong man" of archaic and modern economies who gives in order to subjugate the receiver. Why is not this the case with the Triune community? The answer of Paul and Luther is the mystery of freedom in justifying grace. The Father is not the "strong man," for in giving the Son, the passionate love of God seeks out what God has created and this in great vulnerability to the subjection to death to which we have fallen.

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<sup>25</sup>Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) has taken this direction in a very creative but in the end too extreme way.

The reason that the immensity of this gift does not destroy us is that in giving the Son, God for-gives us our debt (Rom. 7:6, 8, 12). The gift of the crucified, risen Son is appropriate; it may not be what we desire but it is the one thing needful for life. The power of God's love freely given us is the only power that is stronger than death, evil, and sin. All other powers eventually destroy themselves. This, then, is the freedom in obedience which we know in justifying grace.

But if we do not go beyond justifying grace, we are not yet living in the fullness of the Trinity, for we have not yet returned the gift. Holiness means the practice of love in justice as the return of the gift of God's love. We have been forgiven our debt, and yet in the life of grace we receive a new command: "Owe no one anything except to love one another" (Rom. 13:8). Love is not the fruit of our will and yet, for all that, it is the subject of a strange command: "love one another even as I have loved you" (John 13:34). Sanctification is our return of God's gift. God the Holy Spirit gives us the power to return the gift of God. God the Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to serve the life-giving grace of God in the world. The work of the Holy Spirit, both in the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, is the return of the gift of God.

The gift is inseparable from the return; giving from giving back.<sup>26</sup> How then is giving different from exchange? When we give a gift, what we receive in return is asymmetrical; it often surprises us precisely because it is different from what we gave. Second, a return gift may be for a long time delayed; the giver may require no exact guarantee of when it is to be returned. Third, even if it seems to repeat the initial gift, the return gift will repeat non-identically. Thus it is not primarily the circumstances (i.e., how free, how unconstrained it is, with what expectations it is given), but rather the content of a gift that indicates "giftness."

Moreover, it is the character of a gift not to be coerced. The one who receives the gift is free to determine when and what to return. But the failure to return a gift is met by the giver and the community with a certain sense of wounded or incomplete justice. The one who does not return gifts is "punished" by more gifts, more grace. But, in the end, the failure to return, the hoarding of gifts, and possessive individualism lead (as is the case of Isaiah's landowner who buys the property of all his neighbors) to the hell of isolation.

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<sup>26</sup>For the following cf. Milbank, p. 122.

Modern theology, on the whole, has not helped in the contrast between gift and exchange, but in many ways has only exacerbated the problem. In response to the sharp distinction between free gift and contract, modern theology has developed a notion of gift as "pure gift" that is defined in opposition to commodity exchange but has no power to offer an alternative to commodity exchange. This can be seen in Nygren's definition of *agape* as pure giving as opposed to the *eros* of desiring.<sup>27</sup> It can also be seen in the Social Gospel understanding of love that was accepted uncritically by two generations of ethicists, but then was confined to the private realm. This is especially true of Reinhold Niebuhr's ethics.<sup>28</sup> The result is an approach to love and gifting that precludes a doctrine of sanctification that would seek to find correspondences between trinitarian love and giving in the congregation and public spheres.

This theological understanding of pure gift that is limited to justifying grace is very similar to the modern character of gift. The character of the modern gift, defined as it is over against commodity exchange, is that it does not expect a return gift. It is unaffected in its gift character by the gratitude or lack of it on the part of the recipient. It is given as a whim. The content of the gift does not matter. A gift can be anything. What matters is correct intention and lack of constraint in the circumstances surrounding the act. This is a formalistic and unilateral definition of gift. There is nothing duty-bound about the gift. As in a commodity exchange, there may be sentiment but not emotion. This cleavage between gift and commodity exchange reflects the modern distinction between the private and public spheres of life.

Gifts literally cease to be gifts if they are not used and if they are not given further.<sup>29</sup> When gifts are sold or traded, they change their nature. That something will come back to the giver is not the condition of the gift, though the character of gifting is that something does come back. Market exchange, on the other hand, aims at an equilibrium. You pay in order to balance the scales. In gift-giving, however, an imbalance is created that causes momentum and creates new relationships. In commodity exchange there is neither motion nor emotion; the whole point is to keep

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<sup>27</sup>Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. by Philip S. Watson (London: SPCK, 1982).

<sup>28</sup>Cf. John Milbank, "The Poverty of Niebuhrianism," in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 233-254.

<sup>29</sup>For the following, Meeks, *God the Economist*, p. 118ff., 179f.

the balance, to make sure that the exchange doesn't consume anything or involve one person with another. The point is that consumer goods are to be consumed by their owners, not by the relationship or transaction. When a thing is bought or sold, it goes out of circulation and ceases to be a gift. As is demonstrated in countless fairy tales, our choice is to keep the gift moving or be eaten by it! Our property can devour us if we hoard it. God the gift-giver seeks to keep the gift in motion by catching up all things necessary for life into the dance of life.

A commodity is truly consumed when it is sold because nothing about the exchange assures its return. The peculiar reality of gifting, however, is that, when the gift is used, it is not used up. The gift that is passed along remains abundant. Gifts that remain gifts can support an affluence of satisfaction, even without numerical abundance. Gifting replaces the bloated satiety that results from narcissistic consumption and competition for scarce goods with the liberating fulfillment that stems from sharing. Thus a theological alternative to the "nihilistic gesture," making death the sole horizon of the ethical, would be:

. . . to assume that *nothing* is one's own, but rather that everything, life and death alike, arrive not as possession but as gifts. Thus they cannot be owned without ceasing to be themselves, and so we can only receive such gifts in the very act of passing them on. The two movements of receiving and passing on are mutually constitutive and perhaps one could add that the act of receiving is indistinguishable from, or is itself, a counter-gift of return. Such circulation of gift is only possible in a theological order genuinely spoken in the middle voice, an wholly other mode which authentically outwits the shuttling between the action and passion of the secular order. For, according to a theological reading of the gift, to give is already to receive the return which is the gift *to be able* to give. The "giving up" of the gift occurs in trust of a "return" with difference, but this return is not something we can earn, nor is it over against the moment of giving up. It is neither subject to any calculation, nor is it a giving-away in order for others to be grateful for the price one has paid. In contrast to Derrida, one can speak of a return indissociable from the act of giving, simultaneous with it, a condition of its possibility, and yet *not* reducible to an economic market exchange—not reducible because the return



is not simply something one is hoping to receive later, but is something one is already receiving in giving.<sup>30</sup>

The ethical, then, is constituted by sharing rather than one-way giving and the horizon of the ethical is the ultimate community of the resurrection feast. Sharing with another, convivial enjoyment of another is, therefore, the telos of God's justifying and sanctifying grace rather than suffering on the other's behalf. Attention to the other (the sense of the ethical) is not grounded in death but in God's power for life which creates the communion in which the self must be fully present in communion rather than sacrificed.

The biblical history of "God and bread" shows that bread is the symbol for all those things human beings need for life and life abundant. Giving food to those who lack what is necessary for life "can occur as a one-way gift from those who have to those who have not, or it can occur in a feast, where all eat together. In the feast, egotism is mitigated, since here one eats only if one eats along with others; and yet at the same time one does eat, and so selfhood is not eradicated. This image of the feast suggests . . . that what is supremely good is the ecstatic—not in the sense of departing from life, but in the sense of departing from oneself while in this very departing receiving oneself back again."<sup>31</sup> Modern philanthropic and bureaucratic forms of "giving" miss the sense in which sacrificial gifts come from communion and create communion. In isolating gifting from communion they produce either giving as self-gratification or welfare giving that results in making neighbors strangers.<sup>32</sup>

God expects a return to God's gift. What is our appropriate gift to God? We owe only what God gives us to give further: our lives.<sup>33</sup> The

<sup>30</sup>Pickstock, *After Writing*, p. 111-112.

<sup>31</sup>Milbank, "The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice," p. 35.

<sup>32</sup>Teresa Odendahl, *Charity Begins at Home: Generosity and Self-Interest Among the Philanthropic Elite* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers: An Essay on Privacy, Solidarity and the Politics of Being Human* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985); Susan A. Ostrander and Paul G. Schervish, "Giving and Getting: Philanthropy as a Social Relation," in *Critical Issues in Philanthropy: Strengthening Theory and Practice*, ed. Jon Van Til (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).

<sup>33</sup>This is true for the sacrifice of Jesus: "Jesus' sacrifice accomplishes our reconciliation only when we are actually brought together with him and his Father in one community; that is, in that their communal Spirit becomes that of a community in and by which we live." Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1: *The Triune God* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 192.

sacrificial giving of Jesus in the cross enables our self-giving, but it ends sacrifice as our way of assuring salvation. Sacrifice is not in itself the good, but rather what sustains the way to communion in the face of everything that negates communion. Giving up oneself in love is not an end in itself, even though it will be frequently required as we journey on the way with Jesus. This is true because we are never in the company of Jesus without the company of those in whom Jesus makes himself present: those who are sick and dying, those who fail, those who are made commodities in the global market, and those who lose their identity in cyberspace. To preserve the feast, to keep alive a community of generosity, one may very often have to act in one-sided ways, without apparent return. Indeed, in "a corrupt, fallen world, the only way to the recovery of mutual interaction will pass through sacrifice unto death."<sup>34</sup> But the gift of surplus unilateral giving in such "sacrifice" is God's gift of the cross, the gift of suffering love, which is grounded in and aimed at, not death, but the life of resurrection. The hope for a reciprocal gift, if it does not occur in today's communion, has its sustenance in the promised resurrection banquet.

The sacrificial gift of ourselves will not come back in the same form. And therein is the surprise and joy of the sanctifying gospel. In order to retain the character of gift, gifts are transformed in their circulation. They are changed by the character of the one who receives or the community that receives. The joy of the gift, if it succeeds in establishing an understanding too deep for words, is the mutuality of peace. When we receive a reciprocal gift (even if it is only gratitude) we receive the same gift of mutuality that we had first offered. But now gifter, giftee, and the gift are all transformed into the mutuality of the new creation. Participating in the eternal movement of divine love "would therefore be a form of exchange of gifts in which the other does not emerge as a debtor, because she has already given by having joyfully received and because even before the gift has reached her she was already engaged in a movement of advance reciprocation."<sup>35</sup> It is this character of perfect donation in the trinitarian love of God out of which our life in community arises, even if under the conditions of sin our self-giving is often one-sided and asymmetrical. In any

<sup>34</sup>Milbank, "The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice," p. 35.

<sup>35</sup>Miroslav Volf, "'The Trinity is Our Social Program': The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14 (1998), 403-423, 412-413.

case, no one more than John Wesley held out for sanctified giving in love already here and now.

I have tried to show that the dialogue with postmodern thought is urgent precisely because it presses Wesleyan theology to say why and how grace in the face of death can lead to life. Wesleyan theology of grace in a postmodern age will be a theology of life against death. That postmodern philosophers raise so stringently the problem of gift and claim that the single horizon in which gift is possible is death compels Wesleyan theology to the ground of grace in the self-giving, life-creating love of God. Holiness has its one and only habitat in this community of love. I do not see how we can perform Wesleyan theology in the postmodern world except by practicing gifting and the life born of the resurrection in full view of the cyberspatial urge to commodification.