

Costly Giving: On Jean-Luc Marion's Theology of the Gift

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"(A)ll that a man...discourseth in his spirit is nothing but merchandise"

John Wheeler, *A Treatise of Commerce* [1601]

In a recent review of Jean-Luc Marion's *God Without Being: Hors-Texte* (Chicago, 1991), Graham Ward comments: 'It is possibly presumptuous at this point to say whether Marion's *theological argument* for a God without Being succeeds. This book will need considerably more digesting by theologians before a judgment can be made about its success.'¹ It is a point well made, and the argument I will make in this article is intended only as a further contribution to the appropriation of Marion's work in a theological climate that remains famously resistant to the roots of his work. That this is an important, indeed even seminal book for Theology should, it seems to me, be granted. And even if it is to be branded 'postmodern'—which is itself very debatable judgement—it most certainly does not exhibit any of 'the enthusiastic naivete' that has marked so much of this expanding genre. Rigorous, even orthodox it may be, but still new.

Ward depicts Marion's 'odyssey' as a 'relentless foray into sophisticated, abstract thinking', which is true enough. But this should not allow us to dismiss it to the rarefied stratosphere inhabited by Parisian intellectuals. As I read it, its concerns are real and immediate, and by way of illustration of this fact I will begin with a brief anecdote.

In the clergy vestry at the Church where I am currently serving my title, there are two large safes. The first is opened by a key and contains 'the silver' as they say: that is the vessels for the celebration of the Eucharist. The other, secured by a combination lock, contains the money: the notes, the coins and the cheques, although, interestingly enough, not the 'silver'. The clergy and Church Wardens all possess keys to the vessel safe, however only the Church Wardens possess the combination to the money safe. After one occasion on which I had presided at a celebration of the Eucharist, and during which there had been a money collection, I put the money into the vessel safe—for 'safe keeping'—as I could not gain access to the money safe. A day later, I was in the vestry when my then Rector opened the vessel safe in preparation for a Eucharist. Here he

discovered the money from the day before in a collection plate perched on the top of the vessels. His response was immediate and unexpectedly fierce: money should not be left in proximity to the Holy Vessels he proclaimed; it was wrong, indeed it was almost as though some sort of awful alchemical contagion was being threatened. And this, of course, is the point of my anecdote, and the issue I want to take up in the rest of this paper: in short, orders of exchange that begin to slip from their proper place, their proper economy. Economy that is: root *Nomos*, Law, and all that this entails. For what it appeared to entail for my Rector was the breaking of a very important Law, perhaps even the Law of Laws we could say: the law of a divine commerce.

Now perhaps things have always been thus. Certainly Georg Simmel comments in his immense *The Philosophy of Money*:

The frequent animosity of the religious and clerical mentality towards money matters may perhaps be traced to its instinct for the similarity in psychological form between the highest economic and highest cosmic unity and to the awareness of the danger of competition between monetary and religious interest.²

Indeed, but what is certainly the case is the centrality of orders of exchange for Marion in *God Without Being*. This is his reflection on the destiny of being or *ousia* following his exegesis of the Lukan parable of the Prodigal Son. It is an exegesis much concerned with orders of exchange and stands at the crux of a sophisticated argument as he seeks to establish a passage from Heidegger to the Eucharist, or, as he calls it: 'The Crossing of Being'. Marion writes:

Thus, *ousia* is inscribed in the play of donation, abandon, and pardon that make of it the currency of an entirely other exchange than of beings.³

I will return to this exegesis, but what is at stake for Marion here—and perhaps also for us postmoderns?—is the very possibility of our being delivered from the economic exchange of debt and account into 'an entirely other exchange', characterised by 'the play of donation, abandon and pardon'.

In what follows, my intention, in brief, is this. First, to offer a reading of what Marion is up to in *God Without Being*; second, to open this up to the problematic of Money by way of a glance in the direction of Simmel and Derrida; and finally, to redirect this back towards the dialectic between God's love and justice, a dialectic that at every turn threatened to overwhelm Luther to name but one.

Marion describes his endeavour in *God Without Being* as releasing

theology from 'the second idolatry'—that is the idolatry of inscribing 'God according to Being'. But how is this 'revolution'—a word with which we must always take great care—to be achieved? How is this thinking of a God without Being to proceed? Only, Marion demands, by abandoning the vanity of revolution in the first place; which is to say, the idolatry of the revolving or dazzling return to the Self. Thinking always remains idolatrous so long as it moves within an odyssean economy of appropriation; that is a homecoming to Self of the thought that has defused the otherness of the world, and, in the last instance, the otherness of God. And ontology, whose secret and great power has now finally been unmasked by Heidegger as the ontological difference, is, we could say, the idolatrous discourse par excellence; for the symbol it deploys for our understanding of understanding itself, 'the symbol of the symbolic' as it were, is the Circle. 'The figure of the circle is obviously at the centre', comments Derrida ⁴, and delivering it from this place of preeminence is what is involved in any effort to think a God without Being. Or so it would seem. Certainly this is the impression gained from the first part of the book in which Marion presents his brilliantly conceived phenomenology of the Idol and the Icon; the latter being the figure that 'inverts, with a confounding phenomenological precision, the essential moments of the idol.' [p 21] Marion writes in conclusion this first section:

The idol always moves . . . towards its twilight, since already in its dawn the idol gathers only a foreign brilliance. The icon, which unbalances human sight in order to engulf it in infinite depth, marks such an advance of God that even in the times of the worst distress indifference cannot ruin it.⁵

Heady stuff indeed, but this much is clear: the idol revolves from dawn to dusk and back again we may assume—a pagan sun in the human firmament; the icon however, marks the advance of God: in short, the creedal affirmation of a Kingdom without end. And note that little word again with all its 'supplementary' significance: 'without'.

Thus, for Marion, to think God without Being is to think the Cross displacing the circle; and God appears in the text under erasure. It is only the Cross that can signify pure Gift whose name is Love. For only Love gives without any expectation of any return: 'Love loves without condition, simply because it loves' [p 47] writes Marion, and in this, Love will love beyond the infernal circle of exchange, the economy of debt and account. And so our task, a task Marion describes as 'immense and, in a sense, still untouched', is this: to work 'love conceptually (and hence, in return, working the concept through love), to the point where its full speculative power can be deployed.'⁶ *God Without Being*, we could

say, proclaims a mighty revolt against the Law of economy, and all in the name of the Gift that is Love.

But here we must pause for breath, a pause intended to invoke the stakes or perhaps count the cost of Marion's 'shoot[ing] for God according to his most theological name—charity.' That this is an unhappy task, even an infidelity, should be clear enough; for how can we cost love, or rather a discourse on love, other than penitentially? And indeed Marion writes in the introduction to *God without Being* 'One must obtain forgiveness for every essay in theology.', but still we are lead to enquire, in what way, or against what measure is this to be secured? To quote Derrida, in a comment that will have to stand alone for a moment: 'can or ought (a gift) secure itself against counterfeit money?' which, as I hope to show, is to say only, and in another way: can or ought Theology secure itself against the devices and deceits of ontology?

Now in order to better understand the burden of this questioning I shall return to *God Without Being* at a point where, as I have already indicated, we can discover a critical point of passage in Marion's argument: his exegesis of the parable of the prodigal Son. This exegesis, which is intended to show how '*The gift delivers Being/being.*' is given such prominence because it is the only place in the entire New Testament where 'the philosophical term par excellence, *ousia*' makes its appearance. Now, Marion readily admits that we are not to burden this fleeting appearance with the full freight of its royal philosophical ancestry; nevertheless, we are to discover here a similitude between pre-philosophical and philosophical meaning in the common root of disposability: that is the disposability of goods. It is this that provides Marion with his key, for the parable concerns possession and possession alone. In brief then, and according to Marion, the parable tells of the annulment of the Gift—the gift of 'place, meaning and legitimacy' once shared by Father and Sons alike—into a mode of dissipation lubricated by the younger son's desire. And the moral of the story is this. The parable, which speaks of the ways of the Father, displays the destiny of being when evicted from the play of donation, abandon and pardon; but it also, and through the forgiveness of the Father, promises a restored currency of 'an entirely other exchange' to that of the economy of idolatry. In short, this Lukan parable displays the way of a God without Being. However, in the midst of this brilliant commentary we should note the brief and fleeting appearance of another term: money. For, according to Marion, when being is delivered from the play of infinity, the gift falls, or rather drains into liquid money (p. 98). And the being which was once inscribed in the fecundity of the land—which of course gives season on season—now dissipates into a lubricated debauchery. The whisper of love stutters

into the chatter of ontology we could say. And so it comes to this: it is money that both facilitates the exchanges of the idolatrous economy, and indeed becomes the idol par excellence, for money marks the Gift with a price, an exchange-value, which terminates utterly the infinite depth of giving. Money and the discourse of ontology amount to the same thing, an equating of that which remains other to us, and thus the rendering of an account of that which has become ours, our own possession.

That this insight is not the sole property or concern of Theology is clear enough in Simmel's work on money. Indeed, a comment from his *Philosophy of Money* will bring greater clarity to our thinking here. He writes:

Money is similar to the forms of logic, which lend themselves equally to any particular content, regardless of that content's development or combination.⁸

Therefore, we may suggest, money is a system of tropic production and exchange much like language, which involves not only a particularly powerful thematic for thought, or for that matter group of 'root metaphors', but also actively participates in all exchange, that is all thinking. And this is to say, that we may or may not have thoughts about money at this or that moment, but our thinking—by way of accounting, adequation, and indeed even dialectic,—will always participate in the language of wares; it will of necessity be a monetary discourse: economic, under the Law (*nomos*), and always in search of a home (*oikos*).

It is at this point that Derrida's reflections on the Gift become so pertinent, and why he suggests, that in speaking of the Gift, 'We can no longer avoid the question of what money is.' [p 59] And this of course means we are back into ontology all over again. Can one speak of both gift and exchange in the same breath without speaking of two different things? And if one affirms this, which Marion wants to by speaking of 'an entirely *other* exchange', can one avoid speaking of money and moreover counterfeit money. Thus, reading both Marion and Derrida on the Gift would be a very valuable exercise. But I do not wish to conclude with this, rather I want to question, from a Christological viewpoint, what is involved in Marion's promise of this 'entirely *other* exchange' that can secure itself against the possibility of equivalence and dissipation?

So far I have attempted to suggest that rendering an account of love is a costly business, and that Derrida, amongst others, may remind us of something like this by pointing to those places where Marion endeavours to subdue the economics of thinking by way of banishing money from the discourse of faith. But if Derrida has reminded us of this, it suggests only a more properly Christological thinking of the ineffable exteriority of

God's love which has become for-us in Christ. Which is to say, learning the dauntingly difficult discipline of rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's, and doing it all in the one language, one life. [Mk 12:17]

Perhaps I can put my concern in this way. Marion speaks of 'the *agape* properly revealed in and as the Christ', but despite this, his Christology never really gets off the ground. Indeed, his renewed theology seems to take its entire inspiration from the most theological name for God, which is love. [1 Jn 4:8] But if this is so, then its not at all surprising that when God is finally liberated from Being by way of some inspired, although perhaps contrived, Pauline exegesis, it all comes to conclusion in the *parable* of the Prodigal Son. That is to say, it is precisely as parable that we are to learn of the ways of God—of a God without Being. But Love as parable—which is to say, God is like . . . - always relieves us of Christ as paradox, Christ as God and man. And it is this surely that accounts for the persistence of ontological discourse in Theology's domain, and moreover, the possibility of counterfeit. That it is the case that we have no concrete language for the unity of God but the austere narrative of Christ's life, seems perplexingly absent from Marion's endeavour; but more than this, it is precisely this 'control', I would suggest, that could begin to provide Marion with the currency by which to cost the exchanges of love. Although, of course, whether this God would still remain a God without Being would have to be seen.

Now in the midst of this sophistication, and *God Without Being* is an extremely sophisticated book, there is, I believe, a temptation to miss what is really at stake. And this I suggest brings us back in a way to the anecdote with which I began this paper; or at least to a measure of the ferocity or righteous indignation that I recounted there. For it was just that: *righteous* indignation. And if I may be allowed to propel the burden of my argument forward on this admittedly flimsy note, what I want to suggest is that delivering our discourse on God from Being, by way of the originary Gift, may dangerously unbalance the dogmatic endeavour to speak always and at the same time of a God of Love and Righteousness, of a God of Mercy and Justice. Now sure enough this is a task in which 'we must never forget that there exists "another" in God only in so far as it is one and the same thing.' But the point of this dialectic, if dialectic we can call it, is that the justice that becomes love, or love that becomes justice becomes so in the person of the Crucified One. To elaborate, Barth writes in *Church Dogmatics* II/I 'The Doctrine of God':

(Christ) is not only the measure but also the Subject. That is, He is not only the just norm according to which punishment takes place, but also the judge who judges and punishes in righteousness.⁹

Thinking Christ's gift, given once and for all in the Cross (and in what other way are we to think of God?), demands not the purity of a preontological discourse—which in effect petitions a return to the gold standard—but rather a costing that reveals the utter poverty of the riches we believe we *possess*. In a modern Anglican Eucharistic liturgy (Alternative Service Book) there is perhaps no better illustration of this than in the scorching irony that attaches to the saying of David's prayer of dedication and thanksgiving from I Chronicles 29 over the Offertory or Collection as it is received by the priest. David's prayer, repeated by the priest, reads:

Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power,
the glory, the splendour, and the majesty;
For everything in heaven and on earth is yours.
All things come from you,
And of your own do we give you.

But what in fact we see is a plate half-filled with coppers, pound coins and the occasional paper note. The ambiguities here are manifold.¹⁰ In the liturgy, the Offertory marks a passage from the Ministry of Word to that of Sacrament and all that this entails; and the presence of money, in this symbolically charged transition, threatens the eucharistic exchange by way of being *another place* in this world where sign and referent coincide other than that is than in the Word which is God. Thus perhaps we can better perceive the ire of my Rector, but also his foolishness. For, that this collection marks another exchange from the one in which the bread and wine will become the body and blood of Christ for-us is no doubt the case, but that this *remains* the case involves not so much the utter profanity of our worldly exchanges, but rather our deafness to the promptings of the Spirit, the Spirit of Justice and of Peace. The Spirit, to which Aquinas gave the proper name, 'Gift'.

'To give pure giving to be thought—that in retrospect it seems to me is what is at stake in *God Without Being*'. This is how Marion concluded his preface to the 1991 English Edition of the book. It is this, I would suggest, that marks both its promise and its folly when, on this side of the parousia, we are still counting the cost.

1 *New Blackfriars* (Vol 74, No.867), p.56.

2 *The Philosophy of Money* tr. T. Bottomore & D. Frisby (London, 1978) p.237.

3 *God Without Being* p.100.

4 *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* tr P.Kamuf (Chicago, 1992) p. 6.

5 *God Without Being* p.24.

6 *Ibid.* p.47.

7 *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* p.59.

8 *The Philosophy of Money* p 441.

9 *Church Dogmatics* II/1 (Edinburgh 1957) p.401.

10 For a brief history of the Offertory see *The End of the Offertory—An Anglican Study* Colin Buchanan (Grove Liturgical Study No.14.)