Getting Back to Idolatry Critique: Kingdom, Kin-dom, and the Triune Gift Economy

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Liberation theology has largely ceased to develop critiques of idolatry, especially in the United States. I will argue that the critique is still viable in Christian theology and promising for the future of liberation theology, by way of reformulating Ada María Isasi-Díaz’s framework of kin-dom within the triune economy. Ultimately this will mean reconsidering our understanding of and commitment to divinity and each other—in a word, faith.1

The idea to move liberation theology from theology to other disciplines drives discussion in liberation theology circles, especially in the US, as we talk about the future.2 Yet if we turn to, say, social and critical theory as primary lenses, can the future of liberation theology still allow for the charge of idolatry that it once maintained? To say yes to idolatry critique seems to require something that other disciplines cannot fully support or sometimes even consider: namely faith as humanity’s positive response to both transcendent and immanent divine work.3

1 I want to make a quick note about social location because liberation theology is inherently contextual. Describing my own social location means recognizing that I am not in the US minority in any sense of the term. Indeed, I am a white, heterosexual male and my birth in this country is without dispute. Also, I found myself with the ‘camp’ described by Christopher Ashley’s paper “Liberation and Postliberalism,” where previously I was not sure where I might ‘fit’ in relation to liberation theology. While my own location is important to acknowledge, it is not the social and theological location I mean for this article. Instead, I mean to establish the social location of the main argument: beside the obvious theological reasons noted in the text, I want to make explicit that this argument is made with attention to rising economic sovereignty, even though it has yet to (and may never fully) claim the modern nation-state’s monopoly on violence, and democratic governance presuming equal relations. Thus made subject to the market’s antibodies, resulting in the market commodifying ideology. The charge of idolatry, however, is rooted in transcendence (and immanence), which is at the very least a rival universality to global capitalism; the critique of idolatry assumes divine transcendence and that the incarnational, constructive project of divine salvation is the map for concrete, historical work, both constructive and critical. This is why, when ideology is the primary, hermeneutical category, I find it rather thin, unconvincing, and unable to go as far as theology.4 Also, although sociological work is necessary, I am not sure that it is primary for realizing divine work in history. Yet, theology’s constructive vision of “God of Life” is no longer sufficient for some.5 In contrast to others who go to sociology to recognize the theologians as Marxists. The distinction makes all the difference. The point is this: as soon as one uses the theological measuring stick, the entirety of the theological context is at play.6

This concern over immanence and transcendence influencing idolatry and ideology is informed by Charles Taylor’s work on “closed world structures” and “immanent frame.” Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), 551-592. The concern over distinction between ideology and faith is also informed by Gary Dorrian’s analysis of James Cone, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and Juan Segundo in Reconstructing the Common Good: Theology and the Social Order (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 115-124. It is important to note that Dorrian explicitly deals with Segundo’s work on the tension between ideology and idolatry. The concern over distinguishing between the two is not my own.

5 John Milbank, “The Politics of Time: Community, Gift and Liturgy,” Teos 113 (Fall 1998): 53. I use Milbank here knowing that there is disagreement between, say, Pettrella and Milbank over the larger issue of relating sociology and theology. I do not intend my use of Milbank to indicate that I ‘side’ with Milbank, but rather simply that I agree with some of his worries concerning the nature of capitalism and the necessity of thick transcendence along with immanence.


7 For instance, see Ivan Pettrella’s The Future of Liberation Theology (London, England: SCM, 2006) and Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic (London, England: SCM, 2008). Hereafter The Future of Liberation Theology will be cited as Future and Beyond Liberation Theology will be cited as Beyond. I agree with Pettrella that the disconnection between theological criticism and a concrete, constructive solution is problematic (Future, 39). Indeed, liberation theology today sounds more like critical theory than an endeavor to construct concrete projects, or as he calls them “historical projects.” Theology should certainly work with sociology, and indeed the historical project aspect is crucial, at least in part because divine work is active in human history. It is how theology relates to sociology and historical projects that is the issue here.

8 For example, see Lothar Ott’s criticism of Pettrella’s Beyond, 14. For more on Sung’s God of life, see Jung Mo Sung, “God of Life and the God of Life,” in God of Life, ed. Pablo Richard and trans. Barbara E. Campbell and Bonnie Shepard (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 191. However, I am not convinced that this is without its problems. On what theological basis does one measure fetish? Sociology, or perhaps better stated, critical theory, and liberation theology may say similar things as noted by Pettrella (Beyond, 5-16, 45); however, while liberation theologians have used Marx as a critical tool to counter capitalism, Marxists nevertheless would not

Critical theory’s concept of ideology is helpful, but when it flattens the idolatry critique by identifying idolatry as ideology, and thus making them synonymous, ideology ultimately replaces idolatry.7 I suspect that ideology here passes for differing positions within sheer immanence, and therefore unable to produce a “rival universality” to global capitalism.8 Therefore I worry that the political future will be a facade of sheer immanence dictating action read as competing ideologies—philosophical positions without roots—under the universal market.9 Ideology is thus made subject to the market’s antibodies, resulting in the market commodifying ideology. The charge of idolatry, however, is rooted in transcendence (and immanence), which is at the very least a rival universality to global capitalism; the critique of idolatry assumes divine transcendence and that the incarnational, constructive project of divine salvation is the map for concrete, historical work, both constructive and critical. This is why, when ideology is the primary, hermeneutical category, I find it rather thin, unconvincing, and unable to go as far as theology.10 Also, although sociological work is necessary, I am not sure that it is primary for realizing divine work in history. Yet, theology’s constructive vision of “God of Life” is no longer sufficient for some.11 In contrast to others who go to sociology to...
differentiate liberation theology’s God of life from the simulacra of the status quo, I turn first to theology. I find the triune economy thick and incarnational, and it thereby provides a specific map for the concrete, historical work for a facet of divine salvation called liberation. The triune economy attends to the concerns of liberation theology, if it is not actually the heart of liberation theology’s constructive vision (orthopraxy), and therefore grounds idolatry critique. However, establishing the vision and recovering the idolatry critique is not without its difficulties. The critique of idolatry—the rejection of the “worship of the false gods of the system of oppression”—has been one of the hallmarks of liberation theology. Indeed, the critique of placing a created thing in the position of divinity was crucial to early liberation theology. Yet, on the whole, the critique has seen little development in liberation theology for nearly three decades. This seems difficult to imagine, especially because the oppressive structures are still present and powerful as ever. It was liberation theology that changed; we now tend to call something evil or oppressive, but not an idol. Over the course of the 1980s and 90s, liberation theology’s development moved beyond the first wave and new voices began a transition to new, alternative frameworks that seemed to assume, but did not make use of or develop the idolatry critique.

One such framework was Ada María Isasi-Díaz’s “kin-dom.” She skillfully argued that the gracious, salvific work of God, through love of the neighbor, entails solidarity characterized by interconnectedness—namely commonality and mutuality. This establishes a true dialogical relationship between oppressor and oppressed, as opposed to charity which is “a one-sided giving, a donation, almost always, of what we have in abundance.” Yet, rather than describe solidarity as God’s “kingdom,” a term that Isasi-Díaz names as sexist and is in the contemporary context “hierarchical and elitist,” she instead uses the term “kin-dom” to emphasize that the eschatological community will be a family: “kin to each other.”

Find it interesting that even those who embrace a closed system, and themselves are atheists, nevertheless turn to religion—specifically the intersection of transcendence and immanence—to characterize or give as the preeminent example of transcendence within immanence (e.g. for Alain Badiou, Saint Paul on the road to Damascus and his work afterward is the in-breaking event of immanence represented as containing the possibility of the infinite. See St. Paul: The Foundations of Universalism, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003)).

This is what marks the major difference between Petrella’s work (Future, 10-11, 37) and my argument here. “The real question comes after the critique of idolatry: what do we do instead?” (Future, 11). My answer is in part this article. The idolatry critique is indeed negative, but it is based on something much deeper and specific than life—the triune life that redeems humanity through the divine economy. If concepts, like God of life, are too vague or distant from life, historical projects will not fix what appears to some to be sophisticated theological platitudes. (This is directly contrary to Petrella (Future, 38) insomuch as he seems to think enough theology has been done.) After all, “[f]aith in the resurrection of Jesus is an ‘epistemological revolution’—a revolution in the way of knowing—which allows us to discover the true image of God and the human being” (Sung, Desire, Market and Religion, 25). If we do more rigorous, theological reflection— that more strongly teases out the political implications in theology—then we can distinguish the necessary shape and more specific direction of the historical projects, rather than assert a morality via historical projects defined by sociology or critical theory. I believe here that I am following the basic notion of orthopraxy, rather than assuming history will define vague ideals. And so I am sympathetic to the form and content unity that Petrella seems to assume: “The construction of historical projects, therefore, is not merely the application of theological concepts to the social realm but part and parcel of the definition of the concepts themselves” (Future, 37 and addressed again on 39). Christianity says this about Jesus when it emphasizes the particularity of Jesus, never mind the fact that theology is inherently political when it affirms that the incarnation of the theology is part of its definition.

The constructive vision is salvation from social oppression into the beloved community by acting on bringing humanity into a life together (solidarity) through love and care defined by divinity (in the Christian case, Jesus). In other words, conditions of intelligibility and orthopraxy.

Today the kin-dom framework seems obvious, which is a testament to its influence. While we do need to challenge sexist language and social hierarchy that leads to oppression, today the framework is not without its problems. As a framework, it seems to have undercut the basis for idolatry critique for two reasons. First, because the charge of idolatry is predicated on kingdom theology, idolatry critique exited with the lack of focus on the kingdom of God that Isasi-Díaz critiqued.18 Second, I am not convinced that the rising generation has the same key assumptions as Isasi-Díaz, but we still employ her notion of solidarity as a framework, although only as social solidarity in immanence so that orthopraxy has become a moral praxis.19

In kin-dom, Isasi-Díaz rejected the modern sovereign as the image of God, and rightly so. The combination of problematic nominalist/voluntarist theology—the hidden, distant, and unintelligible God of sheer power (potentia absoluta rather than potentia ordinata)—and recovering patriarchal Roman law (patris potestas) during the late middle ages became the basic structure used by Hobbes to create absoluta, it seems to have undercut the basis for idolatry critique for two reasons. First, because the charge of idolatry is predicated on kingdom theology, idolatry critique exited with the lack of focus on the kingdom of God that Isasi-Díaz critiqued.18 Second, I am not convinced that the rising generation has the same key assumptions as Isasi-Díaz, but we still employ her notion of solidarity as a framework, although only as social solidarity in immanence so that orthopraxy has become a moral praxis.19

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overcome because they are ‘a slap in the face of God’s sovereignty.’ The alienation they cause is a denial of God.” 22 In sum, kin-dom is theologically based on the God who holds together and defines reality.

Therefore, while divine sovereignty is the basis for a theology of solidarity, it is also crucial for the critique of idolatry. 23 The ground for calling idolatrous the perversions in the human city was that God had a city imbued with divinity’s warm, grand affirmation of creation and sharp rejection of sin and death. 23 Indeed, without a divine kingdom for the human kingdom to presumptuously co-opt, there is nothing to be idolatrous about. Subsequently there is little theological ground to categorically question old fashioned imperialism, the new imperialism of bio-politics, or the sovereign market. Without measurement for idolatry, the ultimate outcome—that there is no idolatry—seems the most idolatrous position possible. This blindness is particularly disturbing for those of us made complicit in oppression just by simply living in the belly of the beast (the U.S.).

So divine sovereignty is crucial, but, and this is the root of the problem, Isasi-Díaz does not develop divine sovereignty in light of kin-dom. The concept as a framework for solidarity is incomplete. Rightly smashing sexist notions, but without establishing a thick notion of divine sovereignty within the kin-dom framework, leaves us inadvertently cut off from older notions of kingdom and reign that Isasi-Díaz might allow, like basileia, that maintains emphasis on transcendence necessary for the critique of idolatry. 24 The problem is not with the goal

21 Isasi-Díaz, 32-33. Interestingly, this paragraph on oppression rejecting divinity could very easily have used the word idolatry, but it does not. Instead it is construed as atheism.

22 Gutiérrez, God of Life, 48-64; Sung, Desire, Market and Religion, 27. Elizabeth Johnson notices this in Gordon Kaufman’s work (“God’s absoluteness, humaneness, and present presence and dimensions of the one living God, a concept which relativizes all idols and judges all human inhumaneness.”) and in liberation theology’s emphasis on the trinitic God and rejection of the nominalist God of sheer, arbitrary power (which characterized Hobbes’s sovereign): behind reformulating the “Trinity as a community of three distinct persons lies the common assumption of the political danger of nontrinitarian monotheism. One single God reigning in absolute power calls for one emperor or dictator similarly ruling. Imperial rule receives easy theological justification while human political dependency and attitudes of servitude are legitimated. In this context, the trinitarian doctrine takes a corrective and liberating role insofar as it replaces the concept of a divine monarch with the social character of the trinitic God.” She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2007), 208, 210.

23 For instance Petrella sees this when he follows Sung and Gutiérrez with the notion of “a unitary vision of history” (Beyond, 15).

24 Sung argues for transcendence, but as utopian vision—a teleological vision of sorts that he calls “utopian imagination” and “transcendental imagination” (Beyond the Spirit of Empire, 116, 127, 129, 133). It sounds rather Niebuhrian in some ways, but the emphasis on God’s kingdom would make the later Niebuhr, the Christian realist, nervous. What I am getting at here with the use of transcendence and incarnation I believe to be the same as the transcendence Sung describes. It is more than a vision, at least in part because it was also already inaugurated in Jesus. Too often I find that the eschatological vision, in its attempt to avoid naïveté, inadvertently lets us off the hook: ‘Those were nice things Jesus said, but he didn’t really mean them for today’ is the same logic that produces an untrue sympathy for liberation—‘Sure we should change things, but lets be pragmatic about this. What you suggest is too much of a category shift.’ This kind of sympathy, as it is only partial, does not go deep enough. When we do not go deep enough in our criticism and change, the theological life is co-opted. Despite our work and intentions, we become a simulacra. Vision, in combination with memory (Beyond the Spirit of Empire, 156-158, here Joerg Rieger is using Johannes Metz on anamnesis), then is only the beginning, not the framework. Grace—the material manifestation of divine gift—is incarnational, not just visionary.

25 Catherine Mowry LaCugna, God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1993). I also want to note that Miroslav Volf has rightly complicated the divinization of humanity through participating in the trinitarian relations (see After Our Own Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 191-220, and “The Trinity is Our Social Program: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement,” Modern Theology 14, no. 3. (July 1998): 403-423). However, Volf nevertheless still notes “that in an important sense the doctrine of the Trinity does entail a social program’ or, as [Volf] prefers to put it, that it ought to shape our ‘social vision’” (“The Trinity is Our Social Program,” 406).

26 I believe that liberation theology has been responding and continues to adapt to the rise of not simply global capitalism, but a sovereign, global capitalism. One could simply point to liberation theology’s project of state building to combat economic oppression (the state needs to be fixed because it is the mechanism of keeping life together just), but liberation theology’s positioning of itself goes deeper. As much as liberation theology is contextual, the development of the current milieu also seems to be undergoing a fusing of sorts (Feminists do economics, racial studies do gender, etc.). If James Cone is correct that liberation theologies built on the logic of earlier liberation theologies (as he noted in ST 103, Fall 2006 at Union), then what we have here is the possible synthesis of a massively multi-faceted theology that maintains the anawim at the heart of its theology. So as much as there is a contextual difference, there is at root a grand commonality as well. Also, if the move from political...
benth Johnson, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Leonardo Boff, Douglas Meeks, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Sarah Coakley, Louis-Marie Chauvet, Miroslav Volf, Pope Benedict XIV, and John Milbank to name a few.7 The trinitarian economy is a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in unity that affirms distinctiveness and equality, and expands universally in new, creative ways. It is therefore up to the task for supporting Isasi-Díaz’s notion of solidarity (as commonality and mutuality), friendship, and more.8 However, the history of humanity’s gift giving is fraught with
to economic sovereignty is indeed going on, it is distinctly possible that contextual difference will be variations on the theme of the haves and the have-nots under a sovereign global capitalism.

To be clear, I use the term trinitarian economy, and not social trinitarianism, for a specific reason: they are not same—those for and against in the social trinitarianism do not directly overlap between the two, particularly in terms of love and gift between the persons. It is this absolute love in gift, dynamically lived in the persons and resulting in healthy interpenetration (perichoresis), that I seek to push here. Gift giving is the life of the Trinity. Kathryn Tanner, Economy of Grace (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005). Johnson, She Who Is, Catherine Mowry LaCunga, God for Us, Leonardo Boff, Trinity and Society, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988).


It is important to highlight that in Agamben’s The Kingdom and the Glory, he ends at the trinitarian economy as the ground for equality, and therefore democracy, which at the very least
decision, and when gift talk is weak it enables oppression rather than confronts it, so I feel the need to detail some basic elements of the trinitarian economy.

First, the triune gift economy—as is the notion of divine sovereignty—is characterized by divine freedom.29 The implication then is that the God-who-gives does so in love, not obligation.30 Thus the character of the Trinitarian processio/circumincessio is sheer gift given in love.31

shows that what I am doing in this argument is not without (partial) allies. But the trinitarian focus goes further than simply the root. Reflecting on Agamben, J. Kameron Carter has noted that a warped trinitarian logic is pervasive, and so if we are to challenge anything, we need to confront the trinitarian idolatry in the market and political governance by setting straight what the trinitarian economy really is and demands: Agamben “connects the problem of governance and economy to its original and paradigmatic Cartesianism in Christian theology. The divine economy articulated in Trinitarian terms. His argument is going to give many theologians heartburn because if his problem of biopolitics represents an ongoing social display of a certain Trinitarian imagination that is as pervasive as to be now thorough, complete, and thus invisible to us.” With David Kline, “Race, Theology, and the Politics of Abjection: An Interview with J. Kameron Carter, Part I,” The Other Journal, accessed April 23, 2012, http://theotherjournal.com/2012/03/26/race-theology-and-the-politics-of-abjection-an-interview-with-j-kameron-carter-part-i/. Thus, getting the trinitarian economy right, not only important to theology, it is also important for those only concerned with sheer immanence.

29 Divine freedom being: God is not determined, but instead “free in his [sic] self-possession” (Balthasar, 256). Also see Meeks, 110.

30 Tanner establishes this (74) before she launches into noncompeting, mutuality, and the Trinity (75-85). I am following a similar pattern in my description here of the trinitarian economy.

31 I do not want to inadvertently re-see the sexism that feminism has worked so hard to exorcise (e.g. kingdom to kin-dom). However, I have yet to decide between processio or, for instance, Johnson’s work. Johnson notes in She Who Is that the processio is one-way, and therefore asymmetrical, because it lacks equality (161). In fact, for Johnson, processio implies “rank” because of generation (197). One of the reasons in my argument here for noting processio is because it does connect with missio since both are about giving/sending kenotically. While important, I do not have the space to work out the issue of generation subverting equality, other than the next three points. First, Tanner maintains the processio, but does not see hierarchy subverting equality in the economy, although this could be a miststep of course (74, 81). Second, I do not think I actually need to develop processio here because trinitarian generation is not the model of human participation: humanity cannot imitate triune generation in any sense. Human participation does have agency, but it is first dependent on divine work; we do not create ourselves or others. Humanity should realize the divine economy in fresh ways, but it is still a derivative realization—humans do not create in the divine way, and thus human hierarchy does not legitimately correspond to trinitarian generation. To make human hierarchy correspond to any notion of trinitarian hierarchy is a power move that has no revelatory (e.g. scriptural) support. One might call idolatrous such justification of a hierarchy because it attempts to elevate some finite beings to a transcendent position over and against other finite beings (Volf says just as much in “The Benedict XVI Caritas in Our Social Program,” 405). Also, such hierarchy violates the equality inherent to humanity as created in the image Dei. This ultimately means that if one maintains generation, there is the needed move to distinguish some divine action and human participation characterized as responsive to divinity that generates humanity and the equality within humanity. Identity and roles would not be precisely equal between divinity and humanity, but that is already established in the creator/created distinction. However, this does not undercar trinitarian work within the triune economy because human work is participatory, not generative. Third, if there is a hierarchy within the Trinity, and if it should correlate with human inter-relationality, it would roughly correspond with the one for whom God is partisan—the oppressed and their ‘friends’ as Isasi-Díaz calls them. They are the ones who would be subverting the system by living into the divine economy, and therefore forming the oppressed by rejection of oppression and invitation into the
Second, it affirms difference in unity by noting that there is a sense of what Rowan Williams calls “positive otherness.” The intra-trinitarian life is characterized by space and otherness so that all the persons are distinct. Thus the divine life does not overtake the existence of each person, break down distinction, or annex and silence the particular under the guise of gift. The reality is quite the contrary. It could not work without valuing and ensuring the space for otherness.

Third, perichoresis does expose one to another in a vulnerable way—it is after all kenotic—but perichoresis is based on mutual agency of equals in reciprocity, as opposed to简单的submission.

Perichoresis is through love and gift that which does not coerce and obliterate. Instead gift asks for the other to join in their own way. It affirms and calls; gift includes invitation. This establishes reciprocity, not market exchange.

Grace is indeed pure gift, but it also seeks to call out grace in others.

Fourth, the trinitarian economy is coherent, cohesive, and expansive. Because the Trinity and its gift economy affirms and maintains distinction between the persons, it does not become unhinged and spin unbalanced. Because the divine economy. Nevertheless, I am reticent to argue for point three because humans are at best softly determinative insofar as they carry on God’s project, and humans are certainly not generative. In the end, I agree with the second point, and one can see this in the well traveled question: can humanity determinative insofar as they carry on God’s project, and humans are certainly not generative. In the divine economy. Nevertheless, I am reticent to argue for point three because humans are at best softly determinative insofar as they carry on God’s project, and humans are certainly not generative.

This notion of gift that I advocate is suspicious of a “restricted economy,” I am not sure that the tradition is as distinct from her own work as she argues it is.

Williams calls “positive otherness.” Thus the divine representative or tool on earth (e.g. the medieval monarch as a kind of regent)? As an Anabaptist, I say no.

32 Positive otherness is part of Williams’s summary of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s work.


33 Balthasar, 257. Poetically he asserts: “there must be areas of infinite freedom that are already there and do not allow everything to be compressed into an airless unity and identity. The Father’s act of surrender calls for its own area of freedom; the Son’s act, whereby he receives himself from and acknowledges his indebtedness to the Father, requires its own area; and the act where by the Spirit proceeds, illuminating the most intimate love of Father and Son, testifying to it and fanning it into flame, demands its area of freedom.”

34 I say this specifically with legitimate feminist fears in mind: that theology has been and is used to make women vulnerable, and ultimately subservient, because patriarchal power denies women basic human agency. I do not believe that the trinitarian economy, although it may have a sense of zero, takes from people their agency. Instead, it calls people into active participation, which presumes, affirms, and calls people to exercise agency (although not agency defined by self-generation). Johnson notes this on 196 and 220-222 of She Who Is. However, on Johnson’s point about perichoresis, I am not sure that the tradition is as distinct from her own work as she argues it is.

35 Tanner, 62. This notion of gift that I advocate is suspicious of a “restricted economy” that may eventually collapse grace into an economy of bargain by emphasizing the completion of an analysis, anamnesis, grace, and “return gift” as ethics around the Escharist (208-280) that draw from Johannes Metz’s work, which is similar to Hauerwas’s on this point (memory and narrative operating as formation).

36 Isasi-Díaz would agree considering she wrote and quoted Gutiérrez: “But though the kingdom is a gift of God, it also ‘requires certain behaviors from those who receive it’” (Mujerista, 117).

37 This point is crucial. John Milbank names this vital character as plenitude, while Louis-Marie Chauvet puts it another way: “grace is essentially that which cannot be calculated and cannot be sold” (Milbank, “Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysics,” and Being Reconciled, 138-161; Chauvet, 108.) Caritas in veritate also attests to this character of grace: “Gift by its nature goes beyond merit, its rule is that of superabundance” (34). I also want to note here that we must be faithful to Milbank and Chauvet without simply repeating a footnote above, that they seem at odds. Chauvet, a Hiedeggarian, is highly suspicious of metaphysics while Milbank embraces metaphysics and Thomas. However, I believe that they may not be so far apart and in my mind I use D. Stephen Long’s Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), to bridge the two. I am not the first to see Chauvet as possibly amenable to a good metaphysics. For a perspective from an heir of Bernard Lonergan, see Joseph C. Mudl, “From De-o ntology to a Metaphysics of Meaning: Louis-Marie Chauvet and Bernard Lonergan on Foundations in Sacramental Theology,” Proceedings of the North American Academy of Liturgy (2008).


39 I do want to continue acknowledging where there might be problems for some. To say that God is missionary can only be said from certain faiths—ones with certain notions of revelation, gift-giving, love defined in a certain way, and more. One may be able to fudge the Trinity for another faith if there is an understanding of faith as response to God’s gift that maintains a kind of relational equality between humanity under God. I will admit that this is not first a pluralist theology. Trinity resists translation into a pluralist framework because its basis is so very, if not uniquely Christian, which is also the root for disagreement with critical theory above. The Christian identity does not mean, however, that it is antithetical to interfaith dialogue. Quite the opposite, actually, but I do not have room here other than to point to projects like scriptural reasoning projects for interfaith dialogue that can be understood as sharing each others’ tradition through gift giving.


41 For example, Jesus of Nazareth, a different kind of messiah than expected, was the incarnate, divine based seeking reconciliation through reciprocation. He is the Hebrew concept of the creator’s persistent loving kindness towards Israel. Also, this sentence parallels Caritas in veritate.
divine gift brings humanity into the triune life, and thus the qualities of divine relationality begin to constitute human relationality. The death of the divine giver is not the end of true gift; rather, it is the first gift that continues in plenitude and enables us to (re)give. Therefore the specific or particular instance of divine gift is meant to move beyond those who first receive, and expand into an alternative economy that is rooted in loving gift, positive otherness, openness, invitation, stability, and abundance. Indeed, the triune economy—through missio—redeems human relations, and in such a way that is focused on the common good.

Of course one might object that divine plenitude is not an economic source for the poor, so gift is still asymmetrical, if not paternalistic, because the poor cannot give gifts while the rich can. However, the triune economy is not a rich man’s game, or perhaps Jesus would have been a rich, Roman emperor. The oppressed still have agency, although oppression attempts to deny this. For example, there is prophecy, and that is a gift at the very least because it is revelatory. The call to redemption is a gift, so the voices of the oppressed are very important and should be received as gift.

Redemption, through an economy of gift giving, affirms and deepens Isasi-Díaz’s concern for commonality and mutuality, her technical understanding of friendship, and her refusal of one-sided charity. This economy also provides

44 Richard Bauckham, The Future of Love, 352. Here is where gift shows the problem with commonality as the basis. For the oppressors to become friends of the oppressed, they need a moral call and must give up their commonality of self-interest with the oppressors. Yet on what basis? To truly give up idols, and their strong temptations, requires something more than a strong moral constitution. It requires something that overcomes the idolatrous creation and maintenance of social divisions. As invitation ultimately derived from divine vision, gift works directly to overcome the social divisions of culture. Tanner notes: “As a gift giver you identify yourself very closely with all those you would not naturally resonate with or feel sympathy for because of their cultural and social differences from you” (80). Thus gift both begins the process of solidarity and is the realization of solidarity in a specific, concrete way.

48 This parallels the dialogic relationship that Isasi-Díaz envisioned. Walter Rauschenbusch notes this, and even uses the logic of gift to do so (A Theology for the Social Gospel (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 141).

49 Tanner, 89-142. Meeks attempts to revise conceptions of numerous topics in Reconstructing the Common Good to over and over.

45 Milbank, Being Reconciled.

46 This parallels Isasi-Díaz’s “word uttered by the poor” that makes friends out of the oppressor (Lift Every Voice, 36). This is the idiomatic meaning of “friendship” in the kin-dom framework that are predicated on only social reality. On one hand this is necessary because Isasi-Díaz is trying to get the oppressed to unify by virtue of them being in similar circumstances. On the other hand, this is a commonality and mutuality that does not distinguish between commonality of circumstances and commonality of self-interest, and it makes little mention of commonality of the body of Christ (although I do think Isasi-Díaz has this operating). Of course self-interest is not inherently bad, but it is the basis of our capitalist economy, so we need to make sure that kin-dom inherently opposes capitalism’s logic of self-interest. Gift giving does so more sharply than what mutuality does in kin-kind (Tanner, 75-85, and also 92-95, 101-142). Also, gift giving is that which can transcend where there is not already commonality or mutuality—it is how one makes friends.

49 Tanner, 89-142. Meeks attempts to revise conceptions of numerous topics in Reconstructing the Common Good.
in light of the truth that Christianity proclaims (transcendence and immanence together in the Incarnation) for grounding the idolatry critique; we need to deepen the theological ground and make more explicit the political implications of the prevailing theological frameworks for informing, if not guiding or even generating, historical projects. I have endeavored to quickly show that the trinitarian economy does just that, and is especially applicable because it is immediately interactive with the social aspect of sin that generates structural evil, maintains continuity with liberation theology’s second wave, and will be more relevant in the future as global capitalism continues to extend its sovereignty.

that is or could be a very positive side effect. Mutuality as an element of solidarity must push the oppressed and their ‘friends’ to revolutionary politics” (Lift Every Voice, 37). As much as this might be limiting the purchase of historical violence from the past, it is also calling the rich to participate in the gift giving already being done by the oppressed. I do want to note here that reciprocity as I have used it throughout the argument is not exactly the same as John Rawls’s notion that Isasi-Díaz uses at times (specifically Mujerista, 122) because it is bound up in Rawls’s overall project, which I find unconvincing.