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# The gift in theology

## *Unilateralism and reciprocity in Kathryn Tanner's and John Milbank's theology of gift*

Filip Rasmussen 

In recent years, many theologians, philosophers, and anthropologists have turned to the simultaneously intriguing and problematic question of the possibility of “the gift”. This article compares the way the latter figures and is developed for constructive purposes in the theology of Kathryn Tanner and John Milbank. After having explained the background of the current resurgence of gift-language in the work of Marcel Mauss and Jacques Derrida, the article examines how Tanner and Milbank answer the concerns of the latter and highlight their very different emphases on unilateralism and reciprocity, respectively. As an answer to a question posed by Sarah Coakley, I argue that the differences between Milbank and Tanner, between “purified” gift exchange on the one hand and “unilateral” gift on the other, are more rhetorical than substantial. Nevertheless, I also argue that there is a tension between unilateralism and reciprocity in Tanner’s theology which comes down to a problem of relationality. I argue that Milbank solves this problem in a better way, and that Tanner’s account might be adjusted by bringing themes of reciprocity, although implicitly present, more clearly to the surface, and by nuancing her notions of “pure” and “completely unilateral” gifts.

Looking at human relations, nothing seems as basic as giving and receiving. These actions and their essential part, the gift itself, have in recent years been given much attention in fields such as anthropology, philosophy, and theology. In Christian theology, salvation is often thought to be achieved through some kind of relationship with God and this relationship is said to come about by God’s unconditional and pure gift. But what does an unconditional and pure gift entail? Thinking about this makes gift language in theology seem both enticing and problematic, especially when one considers that grace is thought of as a gift in the Christian tradition. A core issue is whether or not a completely unilateral gift is at all possible, considering that anthropological and philosophical studies have rendered this doubtful. Does it not

seem that the gift is always deeply engaged in an ongoing exchange – *do ut des*? The answer to this question affects both how we understand God's relation to the world and how we understand our life in community with one another.

In this article, I compare two theologians who have made gift-language central to their theological undertaking: Kathryn Tanner and John Milbank. Tanner organizes all the main topics of Christian theology, such as the Trinity, creation, covenant, Christology, and eschatology, around the idea of God as gift-giver,<sup>1</sup> and Milbank sees "gift" as a kind of transcendental category in relation to all the *topoi* of theology.<sup>2</sup> These two theologians are especially interesting to compare because of their very different emphases on unilateralism and reciprocity, respectively. The guiding question of my comparison will be one posed by Sarah Coakley: "Are the rhetorical differences between Milbank and Tanner (between 'purified' gift exchange on the one hand and 'unilateral' gift on the other) in some respects more apparent than real?"<sup>3</sup> By examining this question, I want to identify some core issues that go into thinking about "gift" in relation to theology.

In the following, I begin by briefly examining the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss' study of the gift and afterwards comment on Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the same phenomenon. I do this in order to clarify the anthropological and philosophical underpinnings of Tanner's and Milbank's work. In the main part of this article, I present Tanner's and Milbank's theology of "gift". This will include both how they answer Mauss and Derrida and how they develop gift themes in their own theological work. Finally, I compare Milbank and Tanner with a special emphasis on the question posed by Coakley above.

### *Tracing the gift – social deceit and the impossible*

Mauss' study of gift-giving in so-called archaic types of societies, *Essai sur le don*, is generally regarded to have started the current discussion about the phenomenon of the gift.<sup>4</sup> The interest of this study is mainly archaeological, economic, and political. The theological aspect is not at the centre of attention; it is rather seen as only one part of the larger social nexus of gift-giving. Mauss insists that economic markets existed even before our modern conception of contract, sale, and money.<sup>5</sup> Before money, there was no simple barter, but instead a gift economy that involved every part of society. By giving to another, one establishes oneself in a reciprocal relation to the receiver – one enters a social nexus of gifts and counter-gifts where social status is established

and maintained. This happens not only at the level of individuals, but also between larger social groups – families, clans, tribes. Gift-giving appears free and disinterested, but in reality, it is constrained and self-interested. Mauss writes of the gift as “the present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, and when really there is obligation and economic self-interest”.<sup>6</sup> Every gift is part of a reciprocal relation between giver and receiver, deeply affected by unspoken rules, expectations, and interests. Thus, it seems that there are no “free” gifts.

In 1991, Jacques Derrida wrote a book on Mauss’ theory of gift-giving which has been given much attention by both philosophers and theologians. In short, Derrida points out that although Mauss claims to be talking about gift-giving, he actually seems to be talking about something else entirely, considering our common-sense notion of a gift. Thus, Derrida argues that Mauss’ work “deals with economy, exchange, contract (*do ut des*), it speaks of raising the stakes, sacrifice, gift and counter-gift – in short, everything that in the thing itself impels the gift and the annulment of the gift”.<sup>7</sup> It therefore “speaks of everything but the gift”.<sup>8</sup> So what is Mauss really describing? This becomes an important question for Derrida; the gift functions for him as an exercise in deconstruction and stands at the centre of Derrida’s “religion without religion”.<sup>9</sup> Derrida’s reason for studying the gift is also notably different from what we have seen in Mauss, because for Derrida, “giving” or “givenness” are also foundational theoretical concepts of phenomenology in which a phenomenon is thought to “give” itself to the mind.

Derrida starts from a common-sense understanding of the gift: A gift should be the opposite of contract and outside economic relations; one should not be put in debt by accepting it or feel any kind of dependency or obligation on account of it. Yet, in Derrida’s view, this understanding evades us when we begin to really *think it*. He uses the figure of the circle to explain the aporia: “If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain *aneconomic* ... it must *keep* a relation of foreignness to the circle, a relation without relation of familiar foreignness. It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible”.<sup>10</sup> The problem is that whenever there is a gift-event there is also a circle. At the very least, the gift always gives back a symbolic equivalent, and thus enters the circle again.<sup>11</sup> This means that one actually returns a counter-gift just by accepting or receiving the gift *as gift*. Therefore, it cannot ever be recognized, and has to be subject to an absolute forgetting. It cannot be something present, presentable, determinable, sensible or meaningful, but at the same time it cannot be *nothing*.<sup>12</sup>

Derrida does not in this way want to say that the gift is simply impossible, but rather that it figures for *the impossible*. Its possibility is possible as impossible.<sup>13</sup> If a person is to experience the gift – similarly to experiencing “the present” – the person has to experience it as impossible. Milbank comments on this in his reading of Derrida: “Giving becomes as real and unreal as being, since it is identical with the ‘passing away’ of time”.<sup>14</sup> Still, we should desire the gift, long to experience it, and look for traces of it in our lives. This is not a simple movement of faith, but an attempt to “render an account of the possibility of this simulacrum and of the desire that impels toward this simulacrum”.<sup>15</sup> Derrida’s intentions here are not specifically theological, but they nevertheless offer an opportunity for a negative theology. The gift and God become strangely analogous in that they both figure for the impossible, and as impossible we could still *desire* to know and *try* to think them.<sup>16</sup> What Derrida calls attention to in his deconstruction of the gift also becomes problematic for central aspects of the “grammar” of Christianity. An important question in the following is therefore how these problems are answered in Tanner’s and Milbank’s theology of “gift”.

### *Kathryn Tanner – unconditional giving in a community of mutual benefit*

A central idea for Tanner is that human relations should be structured in a way that reflects the character of God’s own giving – a giving that is, to her, marked by *unconditionality*.<sup>17</sup> God gives always for our benefit; the giving is unconditional in the sense that it “remains faithful to the effort to benefit us whatever happens”.<sup>18</sup> Whatever we do (or do not do), God always gives – out of God’s abundant triune fullness, God seeks to communicate the goods of God outwards to what God is not. Tanner often describes God’s history of giving in a threefold manner. As creator, God sets up a relation of total giver to total gift. This giving is universal in kind, and it cannot fail to be received. In creating, God does not give out of a response to anything the creature has done, and nothing therefore obligates God’s giving. The same thing happens when God makes a covenant with Israel “from sheer free beneficence and not because of this particular people’s special merits”.<sup>19</sup> In the covenant, the triune God moves beyond the created gifts and gives Godself relationally as covenant partner.<sup>20</sup> But the gifts of the covenant prove only temporary and unsettled: God’s gifts can only be firmly secured in Christ, to whom God attaches us, in all our frailty and finitude.<sup>21</sup>

God gives the fullness of God's own life through the outworkings of the incarnation, through which we are made strong images of God by the gift of divinity exceeding our created nature, enabling our participation in the divine life.<sup>22</sup> God's giving in creation, covenant, and salvation only follows need, it is exempt of any *do ut des* giving, and happens only for our benefit. The goal is always the same: to give as much as possible of what God is to what God is not.<sup>23</sup>

Tanner does not engage Mauss or Derrida at length in her writings, but they nevertheless clearly form an important background to her account in *Economy of Grace*.<sup>24</sup> In this book she tries to imagine a viable alternative to global capitalism. Mauss suggested that a gift-exchange economy might hold some promise in achieving this, but for Tanner, noncommodity gift-exchange exhibits many of the same problems that pertain to capitalism and is therefore unsuited as a foundation for an economy marked by grace. This is the case for a number of reasons: (1) the gifts' non-alienability from their giver suggests a debt economy, (2) these exchanges do not bring about the meeting of needs, (3) they have a competitive tendency, and (4) the social aspects of this sort of giving easily become an ineradicable domination. Thus she concludes: "If God is such a giver, God is just the biggest of 'big men.'"<sup>25</sup> She strongly emphasizes that God's giving should clearly undercut any notions of exchange: "Notions of debt, contractual obligation, loan, even stewardship, should be written out of the Christian story about God's relations to the world and our relations with God and one another".<sup>26</sup> This last remark is especially interesting because it provides an opening for a revision of central aspects of the theology of the Reformation – she notes that Calvin's theology (and Luther's also, we might say) "seem as prone to subvert the language of gift as to subvert the language of debt and loan" when construing these aspects in such close relation.<sup>27</sup>

So, after turning away from noncommodity gift-exchanges, Tanner goes on to develop an understanding of the gift which is closer to what we usually mean by gift (i.e. something like a common-sense definition). This sort of gift is without need of reciprocity or exchange and happens only for the well-being or pleasure of the other.<sup>28</sup> Thus, she enters the aporetic landscape I have discussed above in relation to Derrida's work. But in this landscape, she takes a very pragmatic approach: We should not care whether or not our giving is "pure" – pure giving is by definition cleansed of the economic and cannot be an instrument for economic change. She also notes that pure giving always presupposes economy in some way.<sup>29</sup> If there is no economy, there cannot be anything

for the gift to interrupt. She therefore concludes her brief discussion of Derrida in the following way: "In the best-case scenario you sacrifice your own interests and those of others on the altar of a pure motive. No one else benefits, and you don't either. Hardly a promising economic vision of social well-being".<sup>30</sup>

Disinterest, then, is not the focal point of giving, but rather unconditionality. Tanner is also very clear that one cannot make an adequate return to God. At the same time, she does not rule out the possibility of making a return, but this can only be done by giving *to others* what we have received from God. Since God's giving is both universal and unconditional, our main concern should be to distribute God's gifts to all in the same unconditional manner. Here gift and right come together in the sense that if everyone is given the same universally, giving to those in need only gives them what is their right.<sup>31</sup> The community she imagines is one of mutual benefit, or of non-competitive relations, where giving happens only for the benefit of the other. This giving should not be self-sacrificial, we are not to give out of our poverty, but rather out of our plenitude, just like the persons of the Trinity give to one another without suffering loss.<sup>32</sup> In the actual world of human relations, this sort of giving may give rise to a community of mutual benefit since, where I might be poor, another might be rich and vice versa.

In Tanner's account, the gift relation is always unilateral. God gives, indeed always gives, despite all our refusal and misuse of what is given. We cannot give anything back to God and are passive receivers of what God gives at every turn. This does not mean that we are merely passive, but that God's transcendence implies that God and the creature are on different planes of causality, which means that even our activity has been received by us. Tanner's handling of this issue is reminiscent of Aquinas' notion of secondary causation.<sup>33</sup> One might therefore be "passive or active on the plane of created reality, in dependence upon, as the passive recipient of, God's gifts".<sup>34</sup> Still, Tanner speaks of "a proper return" and "a proper response" to God. There is in this sense an inherent tension between unilateralism and reciprocity in her account. On the one hand, she says that "rather than offer something in return, we are to remain open in gratitude for the reception of further gifts of God, inexhaustible in their fullness".<sup>35</sup> On the other, she says "indeed, in all our acts of prayer, praise and service together, we direct our lives to the father as Jesus did, in a return to the Father that reflects the Father's own acts of giving to us".<sup>36</sup> I shall argue in my comparison of Milbank and Tanner below that this tension

between unilateralism and reciprocity comes down to a problem of relationality.

*John Milbank – donum, methexis, and agape*

Milbank writes about the gift from within a theological sensibility called Radical Orthodoxy. This sensibility, with its strong critique of modernity and secular reason, engages philosophy more directly than the “Yale School” to which Tanner owes her theological training. While both authors work in an interdisciplinary manner, Tanner tends to give theological discourse a larger degree of self-standing, whereas Milbank wants to open his language up to philosophical discourse without subverting the former. Milbank therefore naturally engages metaphysical questions more directly than Tanner does, seeing the possibility of conceiving both things and persons ontologically as gifts.<sup>37</sup> To him “it is arguable that ‘giving’ is just as ‘transcendental’ a term as ‘being’”.<sup>38</sup> When we experience our world, we can indeed only experience it to the degree that it “gives itself” to us. We can therefore talk of a transcendental “giving” in all things.<sup>39</sup> Within the limits of this article, I shall not go into detail on Milbank’s attempt to develop a “trinitarian metaphysic” and his discussion of Jean-Luc Marion and Martin Heidegger in that regard. In the following, I shall rather mainly focus on his account of “purified gift-exchange” and some of the theological outworkings of his gift language that intersect with Tanner.

Milbank’s main critique of Derrida is, briefly stated, that Derrida does not completely escape the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy and that his Kantian “other-regarding” ethic, whose paradigm is self-sacrifice, is in the end essentially nihilistic. Regarding the former, Derrida is, Milbank says, right in concluding that the completely unilateral and sacrificial gift cannot occur. Derrida’s mistake is rather his unnecessary “Cartesian” starting point; he succumbs to the myth of a prior subjectivity when starting his deconstruction, not seeing that gift-giving is indeed *the* mode of social being, where subject and object come together.<sup>40</sup> Derrida of course tries to avoid this starting point, but, without merging subject and object, it seems that the only possible giver has to be an impossible Cartesian ego. Since subject and object in Derrida’s account are not merged, but instead kept apart, the gift becomes impossible, seeing that “pure giving subjectivity” is in the same way impossible. In Milbank’s account, the starting point is rather that the giving subject has only a certain *relative* autonomy, because its own giving is



always non-identical repetitions of other gifts, made possible by the first divine gift (1 Jn 4:19).

Regarding the latter, the ethical side of his critique, Milbank says the following: "As regards the Derridean notion that 'rewards' to self intrinsic to giving cancel the gift, this seems allied to the questionable Kantian understanding of the goodness of the gift as residing in purity of will or motivation".<sup>41</sup> Contrary to this, Milbank wants to argue that "the content of a gift alone determines whether it is an *appropriate* gift, and therefore a gift at all".<sup>42</sup> One could extend Milbank's argument at this point and say that Derrida's view of the gift is coupled both with a Kantian ethic of disinterest *and* a certain sense of Protestant pessimism concerning human nature: for Derrida, giving necessarily leads to "a sort of auto-recognition, self-approval, and narcissistic gratitude".<sup>43</sup> Is this really always the case? Any notion of "love" is missing from Derrida's understanding of the gift, and this is where Milbank enters with a solution: Into the primordial give and take comes the historical irruption of *agape*.<sup>44</sup>

Milbank maintains: "If there is a gift that can truly be, then this must be the event of reciprocal but asymmetrical and non-identically repeated exchange".<sup>45</sup> Where we saw Tanner turning away from noncommodity gift-exchanges, Milbank instead explicitly appeals to them. Milbank believes that "local" gift-economy societies possessed an "advent" or preparatory function, only fully realized in the new covenant. He sees the same problems with these exchanges that Tanner did: "localized gift-exchange was lacking in equity, in principles of just distribution, and in ability to meet contingent, individual needs".<sup>46</sup> But he believes that "the sphere of *ecclesia* as necessarily both personal and material, is the fulfilment of gift-exchange as the social transcendental".<sup>47</sup> He therefore calls his understanding of the gift a "purified" gift-exchange.

A key notion here, as mentioned above, is *agape*. Milbank first of all rejects a strong contrast between *eros* as "desiring" love and *agape* as "giving" love, since "human erotic attachments are only sustained by the incessant exchange of gifts".<sup>48</sup> Desire is never fulfilled as possession – as a unilateral gift – it can only be fulfilled in reciprocal relations. Likewise, Christian *agape* is not a pure sacrificial gift, but a purified gift-exchange – the ecstatic joy of being with the other, of giving to, and receiving from the other. A purely unilateral understanding of *agape* dissociates it "from the giver's own happiness or well-being" and "then from *eros* or any kind of desire to be *with* the recipient of your love".<sup>49</sup> *Agape* purifies gift-exchange so that the true gift can take place. The same archaic cultural practices that are rejected by Tanner can therefore,

according to Milbank, be seen as “a natural anticipation in all human societies of the society of supernatural grace”.<sup>50</sup> In Milbank’s account of gift-giving our social nature is transformed rather than suppressed. Asymmetry in space and non-identical repetition in time can be seen – together with the necessary “purging ... of all archaic agonistic components”<sup>51</sup> – as that which separates “gift” from contract.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, Milbank’s gift is more like a spiral than a circle, which means that what comes back is never exactly the same as what was given. “Gift” is different from contract in that what matters is not identity, but creative appropriateness.

How, then, does this relate to God’s own giving? In the heading to this section, I have suggested three terms that might characterize Milbank’s work on the gift in this regard. So far we have seen that for Milbank, giving “is most free where it is *yet* most bound, most mutual and most reciprocally demanded”.<sup>53</sup> Here he also notes very importantly that “the logic of divine *agape* plays above such play” – we should of course not say that God is most free when he is most bound in relation – yet Milbank adds that “this height must not be conceived in a fashion that renders it in fact more base, more mean and solipsistic, in the name of apparent ‘self-sacrifice’”, i.e. we should not render God’s giving too unilaterally.<sup>54</sup> Milbank instead refers to the Augustinian notion of the Holy Spirit as *donum*, the realization of a perpetual exchange between the Father and the Son.<sup>55</sup> Augustinian trinitarianism is then coupled with a notion of participation in the trinitarian exchange – the *methexis* of donation – which enables him to say that “because gift is gift-exchange, participation of the created gifts in the divine giver is also participation in a Trinitarian God”.<sup>56</sup>

In theology, an emphasis on participation is often linked with an emphasis on incarnation. Milbank is no exception here, but he also links his incarnational thinking with a Mariological accentuation. God offers Godself to humanity by offering Godself to Mary. This gift is *offered*, but not yet *given*, which is reminiscent of the kenotic self-giving of the incarnation: “Without this reception, without this ‘reciprocity’, the gift would be so thwarted that it could not even begin to be *this* gift – the incarnate God”.<sup>57</sup> Milbank’s emphasis, as we have seen, is on reciprocity almost everywhere in his thinking. But it is important that we see that it is God’s first giving that in turn enables our giving. Human giving is only truly possible as a series of delayed, creative, and non-identical responses to the original divine gift of creation and grace.

*Tanner and Milbank – unilateral gift or purified exchange?*

Theology is concerned, not only with the horizontal gift occurring between humans, as I have discussed in Derrida and Mauss above, but also with the vertical gifts from God to humans. These two planes of giving – the vertical and horizontal – should, as we have seen in both Tanner and Milbank, somehow inform each other. Tanner takes a top-down route; we start with God's giving (theologically conceived) and revise our own giving from there. Milbank takes, not exactly a bottom-up route, but rather a historical route, through the stormy waters of human giving (and taking) into the irruption of *agape* where the vertical and the horizontal meet.<sup>58</sup> On the way, both try to rid themselves of Derrida's scepticism and the oppression and injustice of Mauss' societies. Whereas Tanner is vulnerable to fail in the former, Milbank is prone to criticism of not escaping the latter.

Again, the figure of the circle is helpful: Tanner wants to obliterate the circle in the vertical plane of giving and attenuate its significance in the horizontal. God's giving is unilateral, without reciprocity of any sort. In our giving, we should of course try to imitate the divine gifts, but in the end, all that matters is that our gifts fulfil the needs of others – be it unilateral or reciprocal. Milbank is more concerned with maintaining the reality of the gift against Derrida's scepticism. "Pure gift" in the Derridean sense is left behind; he believes that what is for Derrida a figure of economy – the circle – is also a figure for the gift, but only if the circle is purified by *agape*, as not completely separable from *eros*. This concerns mainly the horizontal plane of giving, but Milbank also extends it to the vertical divine gifts, meaning that when God engages humanity, he really *engages* humanity. Any purely unilateral gift cannot for him properly account for the relational intent of God's giving; the desire of the giver to be with the recipient and the recipient's desire to know the giver and even give something back, although in reality this can to a certain degree only be recognition and gratitude.

But are these differences in some respects more apparent than real? On the one hand, their common emphasis on "gift" brings them closer together rather than farther apart, despite their very different stance on the unilateral-reciprocal axis. On the other hand, their differences might not only be apparent, but also substantive when it comes to some very fundamental concerns about God's relation to the world, which guide their theology of "gift". This is mainly because Tanner, when emphasizing both unilateralism and participation, is brought into a larger degree of conceptual difficulty than Milbank. Therefore,

as I will elaborate further below, she does not escape reciprocity completely.

A unilateral gift can only be seen as properly operating by negation; if God is *all* in the sense that God is *giver of all without return*, then God could be seen as consuming the creature. If this is true, then Tanner's notion of non-competition would be imperilled. This is so because, according to Tanner's notion of non-competition, God's action cannot be seen to negate or cancel human action because the two should be understood as operating on different levels. The paradoxical question could therefore be raised, whether construing the gift unilaterally actually makes the principle of non-competition incoherent. I shall, however, argue that these differences are more rhetorical than substantive, which will lead me to suggest that Milbank's emphasis on gift-exchange can already be seen as implicitly present in Tanner's theology.

In the doctrine of creation, we have seen that Tanner sets up a relationship of total gift to total giver. This is also emphasized by Milbank, but at the same time he suggests "that this absolute degree of gratuity also involves an extreme pitch of exchange".<sup>59</sup> For what is it that actually happens according to the logic of creation *ex nihilo*? First of all, it means that creatures themselves *are* gifts and exist only *as* gifts – "the creature's very being resides in its reception of itself as gift, the gift is, in itself, the gift of a return".<sup>60</sup> For both Tanner and Milbank, God does not in any way *need* our return. But Tanner goes further in saying that "such a return is impossible in any case ... God already has all that one might want to give back".<sup>61</sup> But surely, God does not already have *me*, before I somehow give myself to God? This of course happens by grace, but unless one wants to avoid grace as forensic imputation (as both Milbank and Tanner want to), it is difficult to not speak of some sort of return on behalf of the creature.

Secondly, the logic of creation *ex nihilo* implies that the creature itself exists only as a gift, and always carries with it something of the giver. Milbank writes in a book on Henri de Lubac: "[T]o will, know, and feel is to render gratitude, else we would refuse ourselves as constituted as gift. Such gratitude to an implied infinite source can only be, as gratitude, openness to an unlimited reception from this source which is tantamount to a desire to know the giver".<sup>62</sup> As we have seen in Derrida, gratitude is a return to the gift, and when applied to theology this seems indeed to imply gift-exchange rather than a unilateral and pure gift. Furthermore, Tanner's claim that "we can only give back gifts received"<sup>63</sup> also seems to imply some sort of exchange rather than a one-way gift. And does it not also remind us of what we have seen in

Mauss? In fact, it is hard to simply characterize Tanner's account as purely "unilateral" because she also maintains that "God wants a return from us of a particular sort – our love and gratitude and devotion to God's mission of giving to others".<sup>64</sup> It therefore seems that Tanner's account is not bereft of reciprocity, but only leaves it unthematized, hidden underneath a rhetoric of unconditionality, benefit, and need.

Both Tanner and Milbank also place an emphasis on participation in their theologies. Tanner puts it in this way: "United with Christ by the Holy Spirit we go with Christ to the Father, from whom we receive, as the humanity of Christ did, gifts from the Father".<sup>65</sup> Participation here takes the form of unilateral gifts, in which "gifts" only flow in one direction. Here, again, since participation presumes relationality, one could ask whether, if "God wants to give us the fullness of God's own life through the closest possible relationship with us",<sup>66</sup> it not be even closer if we somehow also participate in the divine gift? Milbank seems to go in this direction: "Of course, there is an absolute priority of the distance of the Trinity *from us* over our 'exchange' with the Trinity, yet we participate in the trinitarian exchange such that the divine gift only begins to be as gift to us at all ... *after* it has been received – which is to say returned with the return of gratitude and charitable giving-in-turn – by us".<sup>67</sup> To receive the gift is at the same time to return it. Here we also see an important likeness between Milbank and Tanner: Both see charitably distributing the divine gifts as a return to God.<sup>68</sup> But for Milbank, this can only happen by means of a reciprocal gift, which is something Tanner's emphasis on unilateralism obfuscates.

In the last instance, therefore, it seems that the main goal for Tanner is not to escape reciprocity, but rather primarily to emphasize that God gives *unconditionally* without regarding what is given in return. This can be seen as a cornerstone in a Christian understanding of grace and is also present in Milbank, at least ontologically: "To refuse Being as a gift is to refuse the condition of all receptivity as such, and turns out to mean a refusal of the gift of Being. In such circumstances, God does indeed continue to give, and it is as if, after all, the divine gift hovers in the desert".<sup>69</sup> Yet even so, for Tanner unconditionality can only happen as a unilateral gift, which is relationally problematic. Milbank also sees this: "For a gift as anonymous unilateral passage is *not* logically unthinkable; it is indeed a pure self-identity. The problem is rather that this cannot be any recognisably interpersonal gift, nor constitute any real human habitat".<sup>70</sup> Instead, we should think of the desire behind the gift not merely as a desire to "partake", but also as a desire to "consort" with

the divine nature – “a complex request to be in partnership with that which already includes us”.<sup>71</sup> In light of this, my conclusion is that Tanner’s account should be adjusted in terms of bringing themes of reciprocity more clearly to the surface and nuancing her notions of “pure” and “completely unilateral” gifts. It also seems that an important difference between them is whether or not they want to go the route through anthropology before arriving at a theological understanding of gift-giving. Tanner’s account might actually be helped by Milbank’s purified gift-exchange, considering that it is already implicitly present in her theology.<sup>72</sup> Exchange or unilateralism – the gift and grace seem to be bound up in the ever-ecstatic reciprocal joy of receiving from and giving to our loved ones, both fellow human beings and God.

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### *Disclosure statement*

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### *Notes*

1. Tanner, “Christian Claims: How My Mind Has Changed”, (*The Christian Century*, February 23, 2010). This is especially the case in Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and Economy of Grace*.
2. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, ix.
3. Coakley, “Why Gift?” 229.
4. Mauss, *The Gift*. This monograph first appeared in the French sociological journal *L’année sociologique* in 1924.
5. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
6. *Ibid.*, 4.
7. Derrida, *Given Time*, 24.
8. *Ibid.*, 24.
9. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears*, 160.
10. Derrida, *Given Time*, 7.
11. *Ibid.*, 13.
12. *Ibid.*, 17.
13. This is how Derrida puts it in the Villanova discussion. See Derrida and Marion, “On the Gift,” 60.
14. Milbank, “Can a Gift?” 131.

15. Derrida, *Given Time*, 31.
16. Derrida and Marion, "On the Gift," 73.
17. Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, 63.
18. *Ibid.*, 71.
19. *Ibid.*, 63.
20. Tanner draws on Karl Barth here. See *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 40: "He does not merely give out of His fulness. In His fulness He gives Himself to be with man and for man ... He gives Himself, and in so doing gives him all things".
21. Tanner, *Christ the Key*, viii.
22. *Ibid.*, 59.
23. Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity*, 15.
24. In a footnote, Tanner calls Derrida's *Given Time* "the most famous hyperbolic effort to purify the category of gift" (*Economy of Grace*, 147).
25. *Ibid.*, 52–5.
26. *Ibid.*, 56–7.
27. *Ibid.*, 49.
28. *Ibid.*, 57.
29. *Ibid.*, 59.
30. *Ibid.*, 61.
31. See Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity*, 89–90.
32. Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, 83.
33. See the footnotes in Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity*, 3, 44. See also *ibid.*, *God and Creation*.
34. Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity*, 4.
35. *Ibid.*, 87.
36. *Ibid.*, 62.
37. *Ibid.*, 355.
38. Milbank, "Can a Gift?" 120. See also Milbank, *The Future of Love*, 355: "Heidegger suggested that *es gibt* was the deeper name for being".
39. Milbank, "Can a Gift?" 121.
40. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 156.
41. Milbank, "Can a Gift?" 132. J. Todd Billings has claimed that Milbank is misinterpreting Kant at this point, saying that "Kant is quite willing to speak of the importance of reciprocity and mutual regard", still a correct interpretation of Kant is not really what matters in Milbank's argument, but rather whether or not, as in Billings' own words, "these Kantian and post-Kantian figures make 'disinterested' self-sacrifice the high point of their ethic", which indeed seems to be the case. See Billings, "John Milbank's Theology", 89.
42. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 156.
43. Derrida, *Given Time*, 23.
44. Milbank, "Can a Gift?" 119.
45. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 157.
46. Milbank, *The Future of Love*, 360.
47. *Ibid.*, 361.
48. Milbank, "Can a Gift?" 124.
49. *Ibid.*, 132. Milbank notes that this tension between the unilateral and the reciprocal can be found in the New Testament itself. He contrasts Luke (especially 6:32–35 and 14:12) with John, and notes that in John, "there is no mention of loving enemies ... love seems to ceaselessly circulate amongst friends". See Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 160.
50. Milbank, *Future of Love*, 360.

51. Milbank, "Can a Gift?" 131.
52. Milbank is building on Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.
53. Milbank, "Can a Gift?" 124.
54. Ibid.
55. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, x.
56. Ibid., xi.
57. Milbank, "Can a Gift?" 136.
58. In this sense Milbank's work on "gift" can be seen as a continuation and elaboration of his ecclesiology in *Theology and Social Theory*, 428–9: "By extending the space of just exchange, it can be hoped that the space of arbitrary exchange, motivated by the search for maximum profit, and dominated by manipulation ... can be made to recede, even if it cannot ever, within fallen human time, altogether disappear ... In elaborating the metanarrative of a counter-historical interruption of history, one elaborates also a distinctive practice, a counter-ethics, embodying a social ontology".
59. Milbank, "Can a Gift?" 134.
60. Ibid., 135.
61. Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity*, 84.
62. Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 49.
63. Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity*, 85.
64. Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, 71.
65. Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity*, 54.
66. Ibid., vii.
67. Milbank, "Can a Gift?" 136. Robyn Horner objects to Milbank at this point, saying that "I cannot believe in a God who obliges my belief, and similarly, a God who constantly places me in debt seems not particularly loving", see Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift*, 17. Here, Horner does not see that for Milbank, "God continues to give even though our refusal of the very condition of our receptivity" (Milbank, "Can a Gift?" 135).
68. See Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, 69.
69. Milbank, "Can a Gift?" 135.
70. See the fourth of Milbank's 2011 Stanton Lectures, which is entitled "Transcendence without Participation".
71. This is argued by Pickstock, *After Writing*, 242.
72. See for example Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, 71: "Far from forbidding a return, God graciously accepts back the gifts of that proper response. God accepts them, indeed, so as to return them to us, refreshed and renewed, elevated beyond our imagining".

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