

Exchange and ecstasy: Luther's eucharistic theology in light of Radical Orthodoxy's critique of gift and sacrifice

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Abstract

It is frequently alleged that Martin Luther's doctrine of justification by grace through faith posits absolute human passivity vis-à-vis God and, on account of the past completion of Christ's sacrifice, disconnects Christians from the cross. This article takes issue with this view. Specifically, it disputes the claim that, through his doctrine of justification, Luther became an unwitting advocate of the conceptual juxtaposition of gift and exchange and thus also an ideologue of the shift from an organic to a contractual view of society. Instead, I argue, Luther's eucharistic theology anticipates the concerns of Radical Orthodoxy's critique of gift and sacrifice. It does so, however, in a more forceful manner, in that for Luther gift and exchange are so bound together in his doctrine of justification that the eucharist, instead of being a *mere paradigm* for social relationships (as Radical Orthodoxy would have it), radically restructures those relationships in the *all-embracing* unfolding of its participatory gratuity. An additional merit of Luther's vision lies in its systematic description of the eucharist's gift-character in terms of socially and vocationally construed delay and non-identical repetition, actively involving both God and humans – a description not afforded by Radical Orthodoxy's critique.

Prompted by the ethnographic research of Marcel Mauss, the continuing interdisciplinary inquiry into the nature of gift-giving has, for all its divergences, brought to light modernity's deep-seated fascination with gift and sacrifice as contrasted with the mundane reality of exchange and reciprocity. A distinctly modern sentiment, this fascination has, however, been shown to reflect far more modernity's own dissatisfaction with itself than some lost paradisiacal state of affairs. While some have been led, consequently, to question the possibility of (pure) gift altogether, others, such as the thinkers associated with the Radical Orthodoxy movement, have sought to dismantle the romanticised opposition between gift and exchange – but only in order to provide an imaginative reconfiguration of the closer-than-expected relationship between the two.

If one locates the transition from the medieval to the modern in the emergence of this nostalgic idealisation of gift in reaction to the prevalent transactional mindset, then Martin Luther, as a relentless advocate of justification by grace through faith alone, becomes an obvious target. On one level this article seeks to engage this sort of portrayal of Luther, most recently put forth in an essay by William T. Cavanaugh.¹ According to Cavanaugh, Luther's critique of the sacrifice of the mass led him, unduly and with disastrous consequences, to idealise the concept of gift and so, paradoxically, to reaffirm the crudely contractual character of social processes. As I will show, however, Cavanaugh's reading of Luther is a misreading. In general, whether Martin Luther should be seen as a medieval figure or a champion of modernity is a question that, instead of doing justice to the actual person, seems to be interested more in its own, not always happy, categorisations. Thus, on another level, this article will attempt to outline Luther's eucharistic thought as an outworking of his incredibly rich understanding of justification, showing that, instead of being a harbinger of modernity's self-delusion, Luther actually anticipates the concerns of our contemporary gift debate. All in all, I will demonstrate that not only is Cavanaugh's interpretation of Luther not nuanced enough but that the alleged exclusion of reciprocity from gift in Luther is a fiction. This article will receive its structure from this twofold objective.

Cavanaugh's critique of Luther

According to Cavanaugh, the medieval emphasis on community as a body both fostered a participatory attitude and assured an ongoing circulation of gifts within the socio-ecclesial organism. This corporal imagery, Cavanaugh observes, had its source in the collective celebration of the eucharist, through which the faithful were made participants in the self-sacrifice of Christ. Their participation symbolically indicated the community's wholeness, both in the sense of healthy functioning and interconnectedness, in that it determined the character of sacrificial postures among the community's members and the community's involvement in them. Put differently, because the church participated in Christ's sacrifice, human self-giving – or, on a more mundane level, works of mercy – likewise implied participation by the community, both on earth and in heaven and, therefore, invariably bore within themselves the hope of return. The ethic of an altruistic self-sacrifice of some on behalf of others was alien to the medieval mindset. To understand what Cavanaugh means by this claim, we may invoke John Milbank's description of

¹ William T. Cavanaugh, 'Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Social Imagination in Early Modern Europe', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31/3 (2001), pp. 585–605.

self-sacrificial morality as immoral, impossible and a deformation.² It is immoral in that, as an attempt to possess one's own deed, self-sacrifice prevents genuine openness to, and receptivity from, the other: it objectifies the other.³ Further, it is impossible for a Christian because purely altruistic self-giving demands secularism; and finally, it is a deformation because, by juxtaposing the individual and the community, it creates a rupture within the latter. In short, as a living organism, rather than a structure, the medieval community was characterised by simultaneous giving and receptivity. It was participatory through and through.

Of course, Cavanaugh is far from blaming Luther for orchestrating a wholesale departure from this model. Echoing Luther's concerns, he acknowledges 'the exchangist character of late medieval piety',⁴ and with it, implicitly, a host of other social processes that ultimately gave rise to the modern contractual conception of society.⁵ What Cavanaugh does claim, however, is that Luther became an unwitting ideologue of this shift and even contributed to its acceleration by demolishing the theological foundations of the medieval conception of society. In particular, Luther's harsh criticism of the commercialised piety and the profit-driven ecclesial establishment of his day – deserved as it was – 'led him into the dualism of exchange and gift',⁶ which, ironically, only formalised and legitimated contractual exchange by making gift into an idealised exception to, and an interruption within, social

² John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 139.

³ Cavanaugh comments: 'the attempt to give without receiving in return contradicts its own other-regarding ethic by obliterating the other in the other's particularity. By closing off the possibility of receiving from the other, the other cannot be known as other, but only as an occasion for the exercise of duty by the self' ('Eucharistic Sacrifice', p. 597).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 598.

⁵ Cf. Bernd Moeller's study, *Imperial Cities in the Reformation*, where the medieval city is described as a 'collective individual' and a 'sacred society'. According to Moeller, because the 'community was responsible for the salvation of its members', there was a sense of 'solidarity of the citizens before God'. As a result, '[m]aterial welfare and eternal salvation were not differentiated and thus the borders between the secular and spiritual areas of life disappeared'. As Moeller notes, while the Reformation might have aided the transition to a different conceptualization of the community, it did so only because it was actively embraced by communities that were already experiencing a widening gap between the rich and the poor, oligarchic tendencies on the magistrates' part, and the broadening of the community's worldview as it now – no longer a self-contained universe – had to defend itself against neighbouring lords. *Imperial Cities in the Reformation: Three Essays*, ed. and trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), pp. 42–53.

⁶ Cavanaugh, 'Eucharistic Sacrifice', p. 598.

transactionality. This dualism lies at the root of the commoditisation and alienation of property in modernity.⁷ Because the exchange of property is no longer a process intimately involving the giver and the recipient, modernity is individualistic. Out of this individualism it then creates an ethic of altruism, of pure, non-contractual gift, by means of which, while seemingly striving for something better than itself, it only conserves itself.

According to Cavanaugh, several elements in Luther's theology played a role in formalising the dualism between exchange and gift. First of all, Luther's doctrine of justification by grace through faith, with its focus on the benefits for the individual, undermined the communal dimension of the eucharist. More importantly, the reformer's emphasis on the finality of the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ destabilised the divine-human reciprocity which made the eucharist paradigmatic for the functioning of the community. With Christ's sacrifice understood both as accomplished and as belonging to the past, the gift could no longer be returned. The mass was not sacrificial. Finally, even if it were possible somehow to return the gift, alleges Cavanaugh, Luther's insistence that only passive human receptivity can guarantee the gift-ness of the divine gift meant, ultimately, that no human individual could participate in the self-sacrifice of Christ. There is thus in Luther a 'fundamental asymmetry produced by God's justification of miserable sinners'.⁸ In consequence, human receiving from God can never be a giving back, so as, in this reciprocity, to be constitutive of a community; it can only be altruistic self-giving in the modern sense of sacrificing oneself on behalf of others.

As an antidote to modernity's individualistic and self-preserving ethic, Cavanaugh proposes a recovery of the medieval notion of gift as invariably involving (divine-human) reciprocation. Before I comment on the specific elements of his reform of gift, it is in order, at this point, to look into Luther's view of justification and then, in its light, into his theology of the mass.

Justification as exchange and ecstasy

To understand what Luther means by God's justification of the sinner, it is first necessary to understand the reformer's view of sin as self-justification. The being of a human person, according to Luther, needs to be underwritten, as it were, from the outside. It is not a locus of its own identity. Identity can either be received by one, or else the person may attempt to construct her own identity. In the former case, what one is, as a creature, is determined by the love of God. In the latter case, believing herself to be a free and autonomous

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 592.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 597.

shaper of her destiny, the person embarks on a pursuit of sources of security which could underwrite her being.⁹ She defines herself through her actions and commitments. In this, however, she enslaves herself to her own self-justificatory activity, for to refrain from it would be tantamount to allowing one's being to disintegrate. Thus all of the sinner's works, however good they may appear, are ultimately only a modality of self-interest. Luther describes this enslaving pursuit of self-justification as being turned in on oneself (*homo incurvatus in se ipsum*).¹⁰ For the reformer, the sinner is the arch-individualist, and that in spite of all her activism.

What is significant is that Christians are not immune to the temptation of self-justification. Instead of being open to the self-giving of God, they are constantly tempted to make God's moves predictably dependent on their own. This posture is doubly idolatrous since, first, it overlooks God's providential care of his creation and his provision for all the needs of body and soul.¹¹ No work is simply one's own. Second, it is even more idolatrous to attempt to influence God through his own gifts, which one has disingenuously appropriated, when they are meant, instead, to enrich one's relationship to the neighbour. Works, Luther asserts, have a social, not self-orientated focus.

It is in this light that one must interpret Luther's criticism of the sacrifice of the mass. Significantly, in his denouncement of it, Luther repeatedly conjoins 'sacrifice' with 'good work'.¹² He defines the latter as 'a work which we do for God for the sake of merit. As a result our work for God is glorified in it and not God's grace toward us.'¹³ This implies, first of all, that to say that Luther wishes to exclude human work, in the sense of active participation, from

⁹ '... human nature is so blind that it does not know its own powers, or rather diseases, and so proud as to imagine that it knows and can do everything'; 'Scripture... represents man as one who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick, and dead, but in addition to his other miseries is afflicted, through the agency of Satan his prince, with this misery of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, unfettered, able, well, and alive' ('De Servo Arbitrio' (1525), *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols (St Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1955–86), abbreviated as 'LW', 33:121, 130 = *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke*, 69 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993), abbreviated as 'WA', 18:674, 679).

¹⁰ Cf. 'Lectures on Romans' (1515–16), *LW* 25:291, 313, 345; *WA* 56:304, 325, 356.

¹¹ Cf. Luther's explanation of the first article of the Apostles' Creed in his 'Small Catechism' (1529), II.2 (various English editions available); *WA* 30^I:247–8.

¹² For example, 'As the greatest of all abominations I regard the mass when it is preached or sold as a sacrifice or good work, which is the basis on which all religious foundations and monasteries now stand' ('Confession Concerning Christ's Supper' (1528), *LW* 37:370–1; *WA* 26:508).

¹³ 'Admonition Concerning the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Our Lord' (1530), *LW* 38:118–19; *WA* 30^{II}:611.

the eucharist is a gross overstatement; rather, he seeks to ban participation when it constitutes an attempt to justify oneself before God, instead of being defined through openness to God's justifying action. Second, it is clear that Luther employs the term 'sacrifice' in a highly specific, not to say technical, sense. When he uses it in conjunction with 'a good work', it connotes a sacrificial transaction initiated and controlled by a self-possessed and self-justified self. A major weakness in Cavanaugh's account of Luther's eucharistic theology consists precisely in Cavanaugh's failure properly to distinguish between self-justificatory merit and participation, between a work of self-justification and a work which actualises the sinner's justification by God. Because Cavanaugh does not appear to understand what Luther means by sin, he illicitly universalises Luther's rejection of works and misrepresents the reformer's emphasis on reciprocity.

As a matter of fact, nowhere is this divine-human reciprocity more evident than in Luther's understanding of justification – as a divine gift unfolding itself in terms of a 'fortunate exchange'. Luther offers the following definition of the exchange in his 1531 lectures on Galatians: 'By this fortunate exchange [*feliciter commutans; fröhliche Wechsel*] with us He took upon Himself our sinful person and granted us His innocent and victorious Person'.¹⁴ In return, believers, as those who have received their identity from God, now justify God as God indeed and the only giver of an enduring identity. In acknowledging God as the author and giver of every good, faith, insists Luther, 'consummates the Deity... it is the creator of the Deity, not in the substance of God but in us'. What is returned to God is precisely his Godhood, which is thus shown to be not an abstraction but a reality with a creation-wide impact. As Luther explains, 'God has none of His majesty or divinity where faith is absent'; and further on, 'If you believe... You justify and praise God. In short, you attribute divinity and everything to Him'.¹⁵

The idea of the fortunate exchange is a recurrent theme in Luther's theology. Note that the gratuity of the exchange is accentuated not only by the fact that, in the form of a divinely justified self, the divine gift creates the conditions for its reception and return,¹⁶ but also by its ecstatic character. Already in his sermon on 'Two Kinds of Righteousness' of 1519, Luther states that not only does Christ's righteousness, together with all that he has, become the believers' righteousness, but 'he himself becomes ours'. At the same time, 'he who trusts in Christ exists in Christ; he is one with Christ,

¹⁴ 'Lectures on Galatians' (1535), *LW* 26:284; *WA* 40¹:443.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, *LW* 26:227, 233; *WA* 40¹:360, 369.

¹⁶ Cf. Thesis 28 of Luther's 'Heidelberg Disputation' (1518): 'The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it' (*LW* 31:57; *WA* 1:365).

having the same righteousness as he'.¹⁷ Consequently, the exchange is not a contractual transaction. In it, the gift and the person are inseparable – thus Christ is the believer's even as the believer is in Christ.¹⁸

But justification as an exchange has a much wider scope. Because divine justification frees a person from the need to justify herself, the person is thus free to orient her works towards others and, in so doing, to justify them. Luther's plea that public offices be filled by Christians must be seen in this context. The transactional nature of the law cannot by itself assure justice, for the law can only objectify those who are under it. It is, therefore, imperative that public officers do not lose sight of those under their authority as persons and apply the law with equity.¹⁹ Actually, it is in justifying others through a loving recognition of their personhood that the Christian justifies God, actualising in her freedom from self-concern the power of God's justification and so his Godhood. Believers are thus transformed into the likeness of Christ²⁰ and become Christs to those around them. By virtue of having received Christ's person and being in Christ, and thus 'in the very form of God' (Philippians 2:5), they exhibit in their lives Christ's other-justifying descent. Luther sums up:

a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love.²¹

There is no question of altruistic self sacrifice in this network of mutual justification because divine justification, as such, is actualised in, and mediated through, the body of Christ, the believing community. In the first place, the community's existence and functioning depends on this mutual justification. One receives oneself through openness to the neighbour's descent; the Christ-like recognition of one by the neighbour is what defines

¹⁷ LW 31:298; WA 2:146 (emphasis added).

¹⁸ For an account of Luther's doctrine of justification, see Bruce D. Marshall, 'Justification as Declaration and Deification', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4/1 (2002), pp. 3–28. For a different account, which attempts to construe the participatory and declarative elements of Luther's doctrine in terms of his ethic, see my forthcoming article, 'Nemo iudex in causa sua as the Basis of Law, Justice, and Justification in Luther's Thought' (*Harvard Theological Review* 100:3 (2007)).

¹⁹ 'If we do not make exceptions and strictly follow the law we do the greatest injustice of all' ('Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved' (1526), LW 46:100; WA 19:630).

²⁰ Cf. 'Two Kinds of Righteousness', LW 31:300; WA 2:147.

²¹ 'Freedom of a Christian' (1520), LW 31:371; WA 7:69.

one. At the same time, existing in the incarnational movement of God's love, one actualises it by justifying the neighbour. Hence no member of the community can be dispensed with. Secondly, even if possible (*pace* Milbank), altruistic self-sacrifice, as an act of self-possession, would be nothing but a relapse into self-justification. For this reason, when Luther speaks of Christian suffering, he encourages the faithful to endure it, rather than retaliate, not on account of altruism but because they are 'already sufficiently avenged'.²² The works of Christians are motivated by their trust in divine justification, just as Christ's sacrifice was ultimately an expression of his trust that the Father would justify it through the resurrection of the Son. Thus, when he defines the new priesthood's 'office and sacrifice. . . namely that they should put themselves to death and offer themselves to God as a holy sacrifice',²³ the reformer means nothing but a robust living out of their identity as always and everywhere God-given by refraining from self-justification and 'descending' into the neighbour, whoever he or she might be.²⁴ There are no individualistic 'boundaries between what is mine and what is thine' here, as Cavanaugh fears.²⁵ At the same time, differences between the mutually justifying subjects are clearly preserved: God justifies humanity in his descent to the cross and bearing humanity's sinful flesh, which, in turn brings about the imparting of Christ's righteous humanity to the believers. The believers justify God by actualising their freedom from self-concern in justifying the neighbour. The believers justify each other by approaching each other in *persona Christi*. In short, because justification is always mediated, its ecstatic character does not result in the obliteration of personal identity, one's own or the neighbour's.²⁶

²² 'Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved', *LW* 46:108; *WA* 19:636.

²³ 'The Misuse of the Mass' (1521), *LW* 36:145; *WA* 8:492.

²⁴ For this reason, Luther can affirm, 'Works are necessary to salvation. . . It is necessary to work. Nevertheless, it does not follow that works save on that account, unless we understand necessity very clearly as the necessity that there must be an inward and outward salvation or righteousness. Works save outwardly, that is, they show evidence that we are righteous and that there is faith in a man which saves inwardly' ('The Disputation Concerning Justification' (1536), *LW* 34:165, *WA* 39¹:96a).

²⁵ Cavanaugh, 'Eucharistic Sacrifice', p. 597.

²⁶ Luther's mediatory schema suggests one way of conceptualising the mutual participation of the finite in the infinite, the mode of which, by Milbank's own admission, remains mysterious and incomprehensible. What is at stake here is the identity of the creature, as well as the infinitude of the divine, which Milbank appears to compromise. His attempt to elaborate a theory of truth that is both realist and participatory is laudable. However, the corresponding dynamic notion of essence he has put forth to account for reality's flux leaves one wondering whether it suffices to view essences as series of infinite aspects, without some sort of appeal to realist form.

Interestingly, this last point shows some convergence with Milbank's definition of gift. It may, therefore, be interesting to invoke it, as our inquiry into the nature of the believing community in Luther's thought continues.

Community of priests

For Milbank, 'gifts are always regarded as imbued with the *persona* of the giver, as ultimately inalienable from him and bound one day to return'²⁷ This, as I have shown, is also Luther's understanding of the fortunate exchange. But what, according to Milbank, truly differentiates a gift from straightforward, contractual, exchange is delay of return and non-identical repetition.²⁸ Neither of these conditions, it seems to me, is met by Cavanaugh's insistence that there be, in the eucharist, a *direct* return to God (he criticises Luther for precluding the possibility of directly returning one's offering to God²⁹). By contrast, for Luther, the fortunate exchange retains its gift character precisely because the return is indirect, that is, because it is both variously mediated and delayed. It is with this requirement in mind that one must interpret Luther's accentuation of non-eucharistic modes of return rather than see this emphasis as an undermining of the eucharist.³⁰ Consequently, I

The advantage of Luther's account lies in the careful interlacing of not only individual but also communal elements in the emergence of identity, even as this identity is always seen as proceeding from and returning to God. In other words, through *meditation* identity remains materially open to another while remaining formally self-same. Thus it seems that Luther strikes the right balance between form and aspectual variation, while, in addition, conceiving of creaturely identity as both individual and communal in its thoroughly participatory character. See John Milbank, 'Truth and Identity: The Thomistic Telescope', as well as its critique in Matthew Cuddleback, 'Milbank's Telescope: A Response', both found in *Providence Studies in Western Civilization: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Writings from a Judeo-Christian Perspective* 8/1 (2003), pp. 20–45 and 46–59 respectively.

²⁷ John Milbank, 'Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic', *Modern Theology* 11/1 (1995), p. 127.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 125, 144.

²⁹ Cavanaugh, 'Eucharistic Sacrifice', p. 588.

³⁰ 'What sacrifices, then, are we to offer? Ourselves, and all that we have, with constant prayer, as we say, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven". With this we are to yield ourselves to the will of God, that he may make of us what he will, according to his own pleasure. In addition we are to offer him praise and thanksgiving with our whole heart, for his unspeakable, sweet grace and mercy, which he has promised and given us in this sacrament. And although such a sacrifice occurs apart from the mass, and should so occur – for it does not necessarily and essentially belong to the mass, as has been said – yet it is more precious, more appropriate, more mighty, and also more acceptable when it takes place with the multitude and in the assembly, where

believe, Luther's fortunate exchange fulfils Milbank's criteria better. Besides, Luther's understanding of a work necessitates that the return be appropriately delayed and non-identical. As noted above, works do not simply belong to the person who does them, and they have a social focus. Thus a work is defined by openness to another person, even to God, in that it emerges out of the total context in which the doer and the recipient find themselves. Only then is it a true gift. In other words, though Christians abound in gifts, in non-contractual works of love, these do not circulate randomly or in a forced fashion, but in line with the community's organic needs.³¹ Though Cavanaugh, in essence, advocates the same notion of gift as Milbank, his understanding – unintentionally so perhaps – appears to be far more transactional than Luther's by confining the giving and the return of that which is given within the same eucharistic context. While Luther does not deny this possibility,³² his broader focus accords better with Milbank's definition of gift, not to mention that, on the reformer's understanding, the eucharistic gathering is then not simply a paradigm for the community's functioning – the community is rather an extension of the eucharistic assembly. More on this last point, below.

What must still be noted at this point is that Luther is not afraid to draw conclusions from this deeply inter-subjective, mutually justificatory character of the Christian community and so is led to affirm that all believers are priests. As already indicated, the reformer's rejection of the mass as a sacrifice is motivated only by what he sees as this sacrifice's self-justificatory dimension. This is, as it were, an interpretation from below, from the perspective of those who gather around the altar. But Luther's dismissal may also be given an interpretation from above: to see the mass as a human sacrifice which can be commissioned on someone's behalf or bought for oneself creates an exclusive priesthood and, in the end, commodifies the laity and even the priests. In other words, it destroys the organic nature of the community.³³ To couch this – cautiously – in language reminiscent of Luce Irigaray's critique

men encourage, move, and inflame one another to press close to God and thereby attain without any doubt what they desire' ('A Treatise on the New Testament, that is, the Holy Mass' (1520), *LW* 35:98; *WA* 6:368).

³¹ For Luther's understanding of vocation, see Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl. C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957).

³² '... the mass has been instituted that we may there come together and offer such sacrifice in common' ('A Treatise on the New Testament', *LW* 35:100; *WA* 6:369).

³³ Luther could hardly be more emphatic: 'The sacrament does not belong to the priests but to all the people' ('The Babylonian Captivity of the Church' (1520), *LW* 36:27; *WA* 6:507).

of patriarchal societies,³⁴ we might say, that the eucharist, then, becomes an alibi for the self-perpetuation of relationships within the priestly class. The laity, like women in other contexts, 'have value on the market by virtue of one single quality: that of being a product of [priestly] "labor"... As commodities, [the laity] are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value'. But their value consists only in that they can be exchanged. As such, it is not found, is not recaptured, in them. 'It is only [their] measurement against a third term that remains external to [them], and that makes it possible to compare [them] with [other lay people]'.³⁵ Specifically, the laity – dead or alive – have value in that they require, request and pay for (private) masses. But this sort of perpetuation of the priestly class must come at a considerable cost. Again, to borrow from Irigaray's description, we could say that priests, like men in patriarchal societies,

have drawn the [ecclesial] structure into an ever greater process of abstraction, to the point where they themselves are produced in it as pure concepts: having surmounted all their 'perceptible' qualities and individual differences, they are finally reduced to the average productivity of their labor [justification by works!].... 'The saver thus sacrifices to this fetish all the penchants of his flesh. No one takes the gospel of self-renunciation more seriously than he'.³⁶

In sum, when the mass is founded on a formalised conceptualisation of the participants' roles, it ultimately subverts the community's inter-subjective character. Thus one could reverse Cavanaugh's thesis, based as it is on a thoroughly romanticised view of the medieval community as a well-functioning organism, and claim that the mass of the late Middle Ages itself contributed to the progressing contractuality of social relationships, rather than simply being undermined by the social processes.³⁷

³⁴ I am aware of the kind of baggage Irigaray's thought brings with itself; nonetheless, if it is possible to set this baggage aside for the moment, I would like to give her critical insights this broader application, for I find her language, first, both concise and trenchant, and, second, strangely akin to Luther's critique of the commercialisation of the eucharist in the late Middle Ages (cf. n. 42 below).

³⁵ Luce Irigaray, 'Women on the Market', in Alan D. Schrift (ed.), *The Logic of Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 177–8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

³⁷ As Robert Jenson points out, the necessity to posit a distinct priesthood may have its roots in Chalcedon's failing to conceive of the hypostatic union in any actual, ontological and material way. In the West this has given rise to the prevalence of 'a merely notional analysis of "one hypostasis"', which views Christ's works as always

For only when the mass is nothing but the fount of dynamic, inter-subjective gift exchange will self-renunciation truly be a rejection of self-preservation instead of a mere modality of the self's autonomy. Proper self-renunciation is characterised by total personal and vocational openness to another – to risk and thus also to grace, as Milbank would have it.³⁸ Likewise, only when all contractual exchange is excluded from the mass can it be the case that 'in the Body of Christ . . . no thing is transferred from one to another', as both Cavanaugh³⁹ and Milbank (and for that matter Luther) hold, and true giving and receiving can, therefore, take place. Only when sacrifices by means of which a self-justified self seeks to manipulate God or commerce between two already self-posed selves or classes are finally set aside does it become evident that 'the divine gift . . . is a gift to no-one, but rather establishes creatures as themselves gifts, the divine gift passes across no neutral abyss, no interval of uncertainty during which one waits, with bated breath, to see if the destiny of a gift will be realised'.⁴⁰ In the words of Luther, 'We should, therefore, give careful heed to this word "sacrifice", so that we do not presume to give God something in the sacrament, when it is he who in it gives us all things'. 'All things', as Luther's explanation of the Creed in the *Small Catechism* (1529) makes clear, does not refer to externals but rather to our very being, our very identity. 'What sacrifices, then, are we to offer?' asks Luther. There is in the eucharist reciprocity; human offering to God is not excluded – it is simply not an offering of things. Thus Luther answers that we are to offer '[o]urselves, and all that we have, with constant prayer, as we say, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"'. This self-renunciation, our gift, is nothing but rejection of self-preservation. It is a return of the God-given self to God. More than that: for Luther it is openness to Christ-like being, which becomes ours in consequence of divine justification. And

properly performed according to one of the natures, without regarding the one hypostasis as the actual agent. Consequently, Jenson continues, the Eucharistic presence of Christ's body had to be regarded by medieval theology as a strictly 'supernatural' event, not enabled by the incarnation but always in need of being established anew. In what Jenson calls 'decidedly ad hoc fashion', the fact of this presence was, then, guaranteed through the celebrant's ordination. By contrast, for some of Luther's younger followers, the mystery of the incarnation was itself the mystery of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper – there was no need for any further dogmatic constructs. See Robert W. Jenson, 'Luther's Contemporary Theological Significance', in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), pp. 274–5.

³⁸ Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, pp. 147, 150.

³⁹ Cavanaugh, 'Eucharistic Sacrifice', p. 601.

⁴⁰ Milbank, 'Can a Gift be Given?' p. 135.

Christ-like being is nothing but a descent into the neighbour, a justification of the neighbour – it is openness to risk and to grace, for the neighbour may not yet be ready to justify us, to return us to ourselves, to acknowledge our personhood. Nonetheless, ‘with this we are to yield ourselves to the will of God, that he may make of us what he will, according to his own pleasure’.⁴¹ His justification endures, and so does the community of the justified, the priesthood of believers, the body of Christ.⁴²

Luther on the sacrifice of the mass

By now most of the elements of Luther’s view of the eucharist⁴³ are already in place. Let me briefly summarise the findings so far. As an expression of God’s ongoing justification of the sinner, the eucharist is for Luther the place where the community receives its definition. It does not simply provide a paradigm for social structures; it creates the community as a qualitatively new social reality. Specifically, God’s gift of being- and identity-constitutive justification enables reciprocation in which the creature’s entire existence is an affirmation of, and so a return to, God. This reciprocation, however, is both delayed and non-identical: because it is indirect and, for humans, takes place by means of Christ-like descent into the neighbour in order

⁴¹ Cf. ‘A Treatise on the New Testament’, LW 35:98–101; WA 368–70.

⁴² In the context of this mutual communal openness, Luther does, of course, allow intercession and thanksgiving on behalf of others, as should, indeed, be done within the body of Christ. His only warning is that this function of the community cannot be subject to contractual regulation, nor can it be used as a pretext for removing someone or oneself from the organic life of the community. Luther writes: ‘I also want to concede that they [ministers, priests] may perform these sacrifices of thanksgiving for others, just as I can also thank God apart from the mass, for Christ and all his saints, yes, for all creatures. Therefore, the priest may think thus in his heart: Behold, dear God, I am using and receiving this sacrament to your praise and thanks because you have made Christ and all his saints so glorious. For who does not know that we are in any case obligated to thank God for ourselves, for all people, for all creatures, as St. Paul teaches? For this reason I am indeed able to tolerate the fact that the priests gave thanks to God in the mass for us all, if they do not do this as something special and regard it as being something other than the lay sacrament, as if the layman could not and should not also receive or use the sacrament by expressing the same thanks. I will not tolerate the ‘superpriest’ (*den Sonderling*) in this common and universal sacrament. Much less will I tolerate that they should give thanks for others, that is, on behalf of others, so that when the priest gives thanks it would be as if I gave thanks, and I could give him money so that he would give thanks for me and in my place. No, I do not want to have such commercialism nor do I tolerate such bartering and dealing’ (‘Admonition Concerning the Sacrament’, LW 38:121–2; WA 30^{II}:613–14; emphasis added).

⁴³ Note that Luther himself prefers to speak of ‘the Supper’ (*das Abendmahl*) or ‘the Sacrament of the Altar’ (*das Sakrament des Altars*).

to propagate God's gift, it assures both interdependent closeness and inter-subjective distance within the community. Only by virtue of being such, a gift, does justification – through the fortunate exchange – give rise to the community. The community lives only under grace.

Cavanaugh, as noted, fails to do justice to Luther's distinction between participation and a work. Luther can, for example, affirm, on the one hand, that 'we offer bread and wine, which through God's Word becomes the sacrament, solely for the purpose of giving thanks, in order that we may acknowledge thereby how God feeds us'.⁴⁴ On the other hand, he can chastise the Papists for 'not regard[ing] Christ's body and blood as a sacrifice of thanksgiving but as a sacrifice of works in which they do not thank God for his grace but obtain merits for themselves and others and, first and foremost, secure grace'.⁴⁵ Further, when Cavanaugh stresses, *contra* Luther, that 'the same thing [sic!] can be both received and offered at the same time by the same subject',⁴⁶ he demonstrates his failure properly to distinguish between mutual giving and a delayed, non-identical exchange. Interestingly, Milbank explicitly disqualifies the giving back of the same thing at the same time and to the same person as gift.⁴⁷ Last but not least, Cavanaugh seems unable to tell the difference between the completeness of Christ's sacrifice and its past-ness. It is this last point that I must now address.

When Cavanaugh describes Luther's view of the eucharist as a distribution of the benefits won by Christ on the cross, his passive constructions conceal that, for Luther, Christ is the one who distributes them.⁴⁸ Christ is present in the eucharist both through his body and blood and as the one who offers them to the communicants. Thus when Luther refers to the eucharist as a testament, describes it as remembrance, and denies the repeatability of Christ's sacrifice, these do not, in any way, connote the absence of Christ. Rather, what Luther seeks to accentuate is the sacramental presence of Christ as the crucified One, who is, therefore, present bodily in his concrete, self-same roles of victim and priest. This bodily presence, in turn, constitutes the possibility of our incorporation into Christ's sacrifice – not only the cross but his entire life – as, through the ecstasy of the fortunate exchange, we both receive Christ's person and find ourselves in him. Our cruciform life, then, parallels the relationship of the Father and the Son. Just as Christ

⁴⁴ 'That These Words of Christ, "This is my body", etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics' (1527), *LW* 37:143–4; *WA* 23:273 (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ 'Admonition Concerning the Sacrament', *LW* 38:117; *WA* 30^{II}:610.

⁴⁶ Cavanaugh, 'Eucharistic Sacrifice', p. 599.

⁴⁷ Milbank, 'Can a Gift be Given?' p. 125.

⁴⁸ Cavanaugh, 'Eucharistic Sacrifice', p. 590. Cf., e.g., 'Confession Concerning Christ's Supper', *LW* 37:192–3; *WA* 26:294–7.

appears before God the Father in our humanity, so we, too, appear before God clothed in Christ:

we lay ourselves on Christ by a firm faith in his testament and do not otherwise appear before God with our prayer, praise, and sacrifice except through Christ and his mediation. Nor do we doubt that Christ is our priest or minister in heaven before God. Such faith, truly, brings it to pass that Christ takes up our cause, presents us and our prayer and praise, and also offers himself for us in heaven.⁴⁹

In that the cross is an eternal reality in the relationship between the Father and the Son, in the eucharist it also becomes our share in, with, and through the humanity of Christ, as the latter becomes our humanity. Thus Luther can affirm the cross as a mark of the Church.⁵⁰

Conclusion

As can be seen from the foregoing, to regard Luther as embodying the transition phase between the medieval, organic, conceptualisation of society and the modern, contractual, understanding of social processes is to fail to do justice to the complexity of the reformer's thought. There is in Luther no separation between gift and exchange; if anything the two are so bound together in his doctrine of justification that the eucharist, instead of being a mere *paradigm* for social relationships, radically restructures those relationships in the all-embracing unfolding of its own interpersonal gratuity. The advantage of Luther's vision consists in the fact that, rather than undermine the eucharist, he offers a systematic description of its gift-character in terms of socially and vocationally construed delay and non-identical repetition. Moreover, this formal systematicity – because it is an outworking of the reformer's understanding of justification – in no way precludes genuine attention to the material needs of the neighbour. The community is a living organism. Within it, the presence of Christ, as Luther sees it, necessarily radiates beyond the eucharistic celebration – the eucharist is a way of life.⁵¹

⁴⁹ 'A Treatise on the New Testament', LW 35:99; WA 6:369.

⁵⁰ 'On the Councils and the Church' (1539), LW 41:164–5; WA 50:641–2.

⁵¹ I would like to thank Sarah Coakley for drawing my attention to Cavanaugh's paper, as well as for being so unstintingly generous with her time.