Theological Trends

POSTMODERNISM AND GOD AS GIVER

By JOHN MARTIS

RABINDRANATH TAGORE, THE BENGALI HINDU, writes in one of his poems of how he has been showered by God's endless gifts, some of which he has used, some ignored, some wasted. Now, however, he begs for something new, an experience of God's own *self*, behind and above God's giving:

> Take, oh take – has now become my cry.
> Shatter all from this beggar's bowl;
> put out this lamp of the importunate
> watcher; hold my hands, raise me from
> the still-gathering heap of your gifts
> into the bare infinity of your uncrowded
> presence.

This poem, which can be found in a modern adaptation of St Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, can engender a powerful, prayerful silence, pregnant with the desire for God's presence, for the God beyond God's gifts.[1]

Postmodernist thought, however, raises serious questions about this desire for divine presence – questions that might destroy, or might redeem by destroying. Tagore wants to find God in a place *beyond* God's gifts. But, in the end, has he not been reduced to seeking God's presence as *another* divine gift? Everyday religious discourse also brings 'presence' and 'gift' together: we speak of the 'gift of God's presence'. Might this not become a final idolatry: the search for God's own presence instead of its giver, God? Perhaps it is not 'presence' which should be Tagore's goal at all, but rather 'bare infinity'. Is there a place beyond 'presence' – our own and God's – where 'bare infinity' might be met as truly 'other'? If so, how is this space to be kept open? How is it to be approached?

Postmodernism, in all its variety, unsettles foundations. It casts healthy suspicion on the schemes by which the modern consciousness absorbs what is strange, what is 'other', into previous concepts and systems. How far is our standard devotional discourse of God as Presence and Giver shaped by the stratagems of controlling modernity? Should this language be subjected to radical critique and purification?

In what follows I will first look at one mainstream contemporary theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar (1906–1988), as a way of illustrating further

the ambivalence of our talk of God as Giver. Then I will look at two writers who might be termed – with all due caution – postmodern, and who offer some important postmodern insights on giving: Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion.

Hans Urs von Balthasar

Von Balthasar's theology combines a distinctive phenomenological method with faith. Each thing we perceive makes itself known as a form (*Gestalt*), which shows itself yet remains within itself, guarded from being mistaken for its appearances. Behind all forms, and the possibility of form itself, is God, the One both ultimately guarded and given in all that has existence. Von Balthasar conceives divine self-revelation and our response to it in terms of gifting, and develops this idea through three interrelated images. His first and overarching image is that of God's giving as *expropriation*. God is 'handing over' personified: the Father gives himself to the Son 'to the point of becoming man and being lost'.[2] We can receive this gift only if we in our turn hand ourselves over, through and in imitation of Jesus himself. We *appropriate* – in this sense 'possess' – God's expropriation only through our own expropriation, through a dispossession of our very selves and identity. Only thus can we be appropriated by God, acting in Christ.

Von Balthasar thinks through with extraordinary thoroughness the Christian commonplace whereby human fulfilment consists in 'receiving by giving'. We cannot 'accept' God's gift at all, except through our own giving. Instead of taking, we must allow ourselves to be taken over, and only in this way can we come to 'own', by participating in, God's self-gift. God in Christ 'appropriates' us, and we in our turn are 'expropriated', given over to God through Christ. Christ both assimilates us into his own expropriation and accepts ours on behalf of his Father: 'I live, and yet it is not I that live, but Christ that lives in me' (Gal 2:20).[3]

A second image which von Balthasar uses for divine giving, complementing that of 'expropriation', is that of *fruitfulness*. Throughout the scriptures – in Genesis, the gospel parables, Paul – we are known as a *planting* of God, whose fruit God owns, seeks and demands.[4] What is received in this fruitfulness, therefore, is an ability and duty to give. Fruitfulness thus takes on the aspect of a loan. But it is loan of a specal kind, being given, not just to us, for handing on or return, but *through* us, 'because what naturally bears fruit bears fruit itself, out of its own potency'.[5] In fact, to describe the having of such a gift, the usual alternatives of loan or possession are obviously inadequate: we are here beyond the alternatives 'of an ability that comes through God and one that comes through oneself, of producing and bearing fruit that is one's own or that comes from outside oneself'.[6]

As a final image of divine giving that goes 'through' rather than 'to' the recipient, von Balthasar offers the biblical idea of *perisseuein*, or 'overflowing'. God's *perisseuein*, God's plenty, transforms human poverty. God's grace overflows into the human situation as a transforming excess, as a stream or

fountain that cannot cease, but must endlessly flow out of itself even to remain itself. This helplessly abundant divine generosity is the point of the stories of Cana, the multiplication of the loaves, the widow's mite and the prodigal son – to name but a few. In Paul too, the emphasis is on the freedom and superabundance of grace. The high point is the letter to the Romans, where even increase in sin provokes a greater increase in grace (Rom 5:20). Those who perpetuate God's *perisseuein* are not impoverished, but rather enriched by imitating Christ in incarnating God's own selflessness (cf 2 Cor 8:2–5).[7] This type of giving by a receiver is not only its own reward, but also in some sense necessary: what is received must be given away, or else it will block the flow of ever more gifts from God.

There is undoubted theological and devotional power in these three images. However, they also provide a postmodernist critic with food for thought, even delectation. While God's giving as expropriation is thoroughly scriptural (developing the Pauline concept of *kenosis*), questions can be raised about the rhetoric of 'selflessness'. Not only is all giving here an intricate 'giving by receiving', but God initiates a circuit of giving from which God, and no other, is properly the final recipient. Here, and again with giving as 'fruitfulness', how is the meaning of 'giving' ultimately supported, since both giver and receiver receive by giving? In the case of giving as 'overflowing', the issue is that giving seems to occur of necessity.

There is another and more general point to be made here, again at the risk of seeming devotionally churlish. All three images present God's giving as ultimately and properly an 'Indian giving': what is produced as fruit, or received as flow, is to be used to make a return to the God from whom it emerged. Theologically and devotionally, this is classical: God has always been the only ultimate destination of divine giving. But postmodernism begs to be allowed to question how such a God is genuinely a 'source'. Is not such a God merely one point in an endless economy of giving?

The foregoing show us some of the ways in which postmodernist suspicion typically unsettles mainstream classical theology. As regards the concept of gift, the suspicion is broadly twofold. Firstly, it seems impossible cleanly to untangle giving from receiving. Secondly, any gift involves some sort of return, some sort of pay-off, some way in which the giver's 'presence' and identity are enhanced. These two considerations inform the two accounts of 'giving' to which I now pass. Jacques Derrida implicitly concludes that giving can disclose no real giver. Jean-Luc Marion, by contrast, finds that the experience of giving allows a 'giver behind giving' to be really evidenced, even while that giver becomes tangled into the shape of the given gift.

Jacques Derrida: a poststructuralist account of giving

To understand Derrida, we need to be aware of Heidegger's challenge to the whole western philosophical tradition. From Plato onwards, western philosophy had concerned itself with theories of existence, of what it means for something to *be*. These theories proposed 'presence' as something real, in

which beings 'participated': 'to be' was 'to have presence'. Presence itself was real only by dint of its participation in 'pure presence', that which by definition could exist on its own account. Presence was described in various ways, and consequently so also was pure presence. Common to all such descriptions was the presentation of pure presence – or pure Being, Being itself – as in some way the 'ground' or explanation of particular beings. In this picture, only 'Being itself' required no explanation: it constituted its own explanation, its own ground.

Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*, written in the thirteenth century, was the first theological work to make thoroughgoing use of this kind of philosophy. Thomas accepted Being as presence, and identified God as 'pure presence', self-subsistent Being. He also identified this 'metaphysical' God with the God of biblical revelation.

Until the twentieth century, reworkings of Greek and medieval philosophy left unchallenged their basic presumption that 'Being' could be understood as 'presence', and God as 'pure presence'. Since Heidegger however, Continental philosophers have begun to explore the notion of 'radical absence'. The basis for this is Heidegger's argument that reality consists, not in 'presences' which 'endure', but in moment-to-moment 'presencings' to consciousness. The human subject, for its part, cannot but treat these dynamic presencings as static presence; we are so constituted as to arrange experience into fixed elements and to comprehend things in terms of ongoing identity. By thus radically challenging the notion of reality as enduring presences, Heidegger also undermines the description of God as self-grounding presence, or Being itself.

Jacques Derrida's poststructuralism goes further still. For poststructuralists reality cannot be had independently of the accounts, or 'texts', within which life and thought are described. Reality becomes something 'constructed' in the reading of a text. There are thus as many realities as readings. No particular reading, moreover, is final: it is always susceptible to the 'deconstructive play' which renders key terms irresolubly ambiguous. For instance, a text by Plato explains the invention of writing as a *pharmakon* or 'drug' for the memory. But 'drug' can mean either 'medicine' or poison'. Derrida shows that the meaning of this text becomes 'split' between these two opposite meanings. It becomes undecidable, within the text, whether writing preserves memories, or, by fatally altering their essence, kills them.[8]

Derrida discusses gift and giving in two recent works: *Given time: i. counterfeit money* (1991), and *The gift of death* (1995).[9] He suggests that it is because we live in time, unable to avoid linking one moment with the next, that any *giving* we do becomes something which endures as a gift. The giving of the gift, moreover, adds unavoidably to the identity of the giver, and in this sense turns into something he or she 'takes'.

In *Given time*, Derrida examines a prose poem by Baudelaire, 'Counterfeit money', in which a man gives a beggar a counterfeit coin, hoping thus 'to pick up gratis the certificate of a charitable man'.[10] Derrida agrees with Baudelaire

that this man's calculation is unforgivably inept; he goes on, however, to argue that all gifts are as counterfeit as this. 'Givers' give away something without really giving; giving is simultaneously a *taking* – a taking of *kudos* and self-identity. One cannot hide one's giving, even from oneself, despite Christ's teaching about the right and left hands (Mt 6:3). Even knowing that one is giving, or even 'wanting to give', already builds one up as giver in this way, and there is no avoiding that.

> What would a gift be in which I gave without wanting to give and without knowing that I am giving, without the explicit intention of giving, or even in spite of myself? This is the paradox in which we have been engaged from the beginning.[11]

More recently, in *The gift of death* we find Derrida again arguing that it is difficult, to the point of being impossible, to 'give' genuinely:

> The moment the gift, however generous it be, is infected with the slightest hint of calculation, the moment it takes account of knowledge [*connaissance*] or recognition [*reconnaissance*], it falls within the ambit of an economy: it exchanges, in short it gives counterfeit money, since it gives it in exchange for payment.[12]

The payment to which he refers here is the building up of the self-identity of the giver, the *kudos* the giver receives, even in the giver's own mind.

As far as I know, Derrida does not specifically extend these reflections to consider God as Giver. But they would imply that God's gifts are as 'counterfeit' as any others. In fact they would be more so, because God, as a presumed origin of all giving, becomes the 'mint' for the counterfeit money that all gifts are.

Von Balthasar's theology, seen in postmodernist light, presents a God who is 'constructed' for our understanding on the basis of the divine giving – as the One who 'gives' openness to infinite mystery, or 'fruitfulness' or 'overflow'. But Derrida's argument suggests that God in fact *receives* presence – reality and identity – from all the 'texts' in which God is named as giver. Then divine 'giving' – with its accompanying impression of a 'source of giving' – becomes an illusion of the text. Through its aid, a founding principle for reality is constructed, and called God. Suspicion also falls on talk of God as the destination of his own giving. God's giving becomes a receiving; moreover, what we receive is giving.

Derrida's analysis of giving makes new demands on the theology of God as Giver. Can God be seen as a giver who does not gain identity and *kudos* from the act of giving? Or, put differently: is it possible to name and worship a God who is not humanly constructed, 'written' by the divine 'gifts'? Jean-Luc Marion aims to meet such requirements. He describes a God experienced through God's giving, yet whom the divine gifts not only present to us, but also hold in distance from us.

Jean-Luc Marion: God as Giver of Being, remaining distinct from Being

Marion does his theology phenomenologically, presuming that insight into a thing or idea comes from allowing it to present itself before our consciousness. In his *God without Being* (*Dieu sans l'être*, 1982, English version 1991) he examines how Being presents itself to consciousness, concluding that Being is revealed as an *icon* rather than an *idol* of God.[13] Being is able to reveal God, to manifest God as its own giver, without thereby being itself mistaken for God.

Marion begins by carefully scrutinizing the phenomenon of gift-giving. He finds that it involves an intricate combination of giving and withholding on the part of the giver. On the one hand, every giving is thus a 'giving over' of the giver to the receiver. It bears the giver's attitude to the recipient, intention to relate, and so on. This also means that gift-giving is experienced as 'turning backwards upon itself'. The giver is given by the gift, since it reveals the giver, or as we say, gives the giver away: 'The gift gives the giver to be seen in repeating the gift backward'.[14] And as we have seen, in so far as this 'creates' for the giver an identity, it is also a taking *by* the giver. So far, Marion's observations seem to reinforce those of Derrida.

But, argues Marion, giving also involves a *withholding* on the part of the giver. Examining the experience of any act of giving-receiving reveals a distancing that operates in parallel with the 'nearing' already described. In any giving, we encounter the giver, not only as given over, but also as 'hidden over' in the act of giving. As a 'giver-giving', the giver is never completely 'there to be read' in the 'gift-given'. It is the act of giving itself which has opened a gap between gift and giver: 'Between the gift-given and the giver-giving, giving . . . preserves distance'.[15]

Marion's point becomes clearer in an ordinary example. You give me a box of chocolates. The chocolates make me think of you; they make you present to me; they construct you in my experience as 'the giver-of-chocolates'. But their presence with me, and your presence with me in this presence, is already, in another sense, your withdrawal from me, even as you stand there with them, offering them to me. The gift is not the giver, and brings the giver only at the expense of having taken the giver away. It must come between us – after all, that is the point of a gift; it is given to me in replacement of, *and to replace*, you.

Giving, then, 'gifts' the presence of the other, and gifts the other as presence, but also withholds the other. This distancing-in-nearness ultimately allows the giver, whom we have re-created, to escape presence. Our gazing at Being as an icon draws us towards an infinite depth; we experience Being as giving but also as withholding God.

It is clear that Marion and Derrida both start and end at different points in analysing the experience of giving. To move towards concluding this exploratory article, let me reflect briefly on the consequences for religious faith of the two approaches and their respective conclusions. In Derrida's case, these are not as unambiguous as might at first be thought. Derrida's insights do not

directly challenge the reality of God. Rather, they ask us to notice how our treatment of God as gift-giver works 'backwards', to 'create' God's presence and identity on the basis of his 'gifts'. Derrida's own (now distant) religious roots are in Judaism. It may be that what he says here ultimately works to protect God *as* God – as the mysterious and profoundly unnameable God of the Torah, disorted through western history by descriptions and titles. Derrida himself is chary of drawing such explicitly religious implications from his own work. Perhaps he senses that to do this would create a text in which God is explained, whereas his own *métier* is the deconstructing of texts in which others explain things, including God, too absolutely.

The complexity of Derrida's position on the sacred has been pointed out recently by Kevin Hart. Hart argues, however, that Derrida need not finally rule out a God who communicates, even from absence:

> Communication occurs between people who, on Derrida's understanding, are not and cannot be self-present. Insofar as communication is the question, then, one need not go so far as to claim that God be self-present in order to hear and answer our prayers.[16]

A God 'communicating from absence' is, for example, explored by the late Emmanuel Lévinas. This God leaves us inklings in present moments of One who has 'always already passed' (cf Exod 33:22–23), becoming, as one commentator says, 'The One who has left a trace behind in the Other who knocks at my door'.[17]

Fully like Derrida, Marion defends neither 'presence' as ultimate reality, nor God as a classic 'origin'. But for him God is an 'origin without original', that is, an original whose originating operates like no other. True, whatever God originates is reshaped as a creation of human consciousness. But God's own giving itself invites our eyes not to be bedazzled by this shape so that we do see beyond it.

Marion's is postmodernism at its theologically most well-directed – reinforcing the meaning and the freedom of the God *as* other, while accepting as a 'given' this other's embodiment and presence. Perhaps more investigation can occur into classic Christian philosophies to see if their Being-centred language might disguise a God *without* Being. I have recently attempted this for St Thomas' philosophy, and something similar might be possible for the theologies of Rahner and von Balthasar.[18]

Conclusion

By way of useful if indeterminate conclusion here, I return to the question with which we began, the questions for theology and prayer. Ought we to seek God's 'presence'? Or does God's 'bare infinity' invite us to a somehow different destination?

Perhaps the service that Derrida and Marion jointly perform is to uncover how the quest for 'presence' is futile if 'presence' means a final way of

possessing an Other. To desire God's presence in this sense is to desire God's presence *instead of* God, just as one can desire any of the divine gifts instead of God. But the way is also open for believers to hold that there is a God to be found beyond any gift, of 'presence' or of anything else, and for faith to trust that God's own initiative raises us even to that infinity. Faith hovers between a God whom we strive to possess and a God who strives to possess us. God's gifts both bestow and withhold God, while inviting us to self-giving. Thought and prayer continually strive to image God in terms of gift and presence. But perhaps, in so doing, they may also sometimes become transparent to God as Other, to God *as* God. I leave you with the poet and martyr Robert Southwell:

> Gift better than himself God doth not know;
> Gift better than his God no man can see.
> This gift doth here the given giver bestow;
> Gift to this gift let each receiver be.
> God is my gift, himself he freely gave me;
> God's gift am I, and none but God shall have me.[19]

NOTES

[1] Rabindranath Tagore, 'Time after time I came to your gate' in Rabindranath Tagore, *Collected poems and plays* (London: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1936); quoted in The Maryland Province for the Society of Jesus, *Place me with your Son: the Spiritual Exercises in daily life* (Georgetown University Press, 1986), p 7.

[2] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The glory of the Lord: a theological aesthetics*, vol 7, *Theology: the new covenant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), p 400.

[3] *Ibid.*, p 407.

[4] *Ibid.*, p 416.

[5] *Ibid.*, p 418.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp 417–418.

[7] *Ibid.*, p 430.

[8] Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's pharmacy' in *Dissemination*, trans and introd. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981), reprinted in Peggy Kamuf (ed), *A Derrida reader between the blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp 112–139.

[9] Derrida, *Given time: i. counterfeit money*, trans Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); *The gift of death*, trans David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[10] Derrida, *Given time*, p 31. The story is found in *Paris spleen*, trans Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1970), pp 58–59. Derrida modifies Varèse's translation, and reproduces full French and English texts of the story in *Given time*, p 175.

[11] Derrida, *Given time*, p 123.

[12] Derrida, *The gift of death*, p 112.

[13] Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: hors texte*, trans Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[14] *Ibid.*, p 104.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Kevin Hart, 'The God effect' in Phillip Blond (ed), *Beyond secular philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1996 [forthcoming]).

[17] Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: an introduction to the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), p 35.

[18] John Martis, 'Thomistic *esse* – idol or icon? Marion's three arguments for a Thomistic God without Being', *Pacifica* vol 9, no 1 (February 1996), pp 55–68.
[19] Robert Southwell SJ, 'The nativity of Christ', quoted in *Daily prayer from the divine office*, version approved for use in Australia, England and Wales, Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland (London: Collins 1974), poem no 67, p 569.