

Book Review for *Pacifica*

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MARK MANOLOPOULOS. *If Creation is a Gift*. State University of New York Press, March 2009. ISBN: 978-0-7914-9393-9. Pp: 183. Rrp: \$US65.

Mark Manolopoulos's book (a volume in the SUNY *Theology and Continental Thought* series) looks to bring together recent Continental philosophical thought on the gift with a strongly ecological perspective via the theological category of creation. While the project is not new, the book stands as fine introduction to the field, while also offering a useful contribution in the metaphor of thought that 'oscillates' among ecologically-responsible modes of dwelling on the earth which nonetheless persist in tension.

The book's introduction sets the scene for the exploration to come:

[O]ne thing we know with any certainty is that creation is a *given*: It is there; we belong to a matrix of beings. However, when we move from the self-evident observation "the world is a given" to the proposition that "the world is a *gift*", we participate in a leap of faith. (p. 1)

'Givenness' (Husserl's *Gegebenheit*) is of course one of the key problems of the phenomenological tradition in its attending to the facticity of finding ourselves in an already meaning-saturated world. In this, that tradition is at one with theology in highlighting the richness of the human context. Unlike theology, however, phenomenology (and philosophy in general) is methodologically far less able to draw two consecutive inferences from this experience of primal immersion in the givenness of the world. First, theology instinctually and almost seamlessly sees in this *givenness* the presence of a *gift* (*Geschenk*). Second, theology sees in the presence of the gift, the overarching presence-in-absence of a transcendent *giver*, "from whom all good things come". While siding clearly with the philosophical reticence to make these two further moves, Manolopoulos' book gains much of its momentum from the way it plays with the possibility of doing so.

After clarifying the Derridean account of the aporetic nature of gift-giving – i.e., the paradox that gifting requires freedom, excess and gratuity, even while being unavoidably marked by reciprocity, exchange, obligation or debt – Manolopoulos's first chapter hones in the idea of deploying the gift aporia vis-à-vis creation. As such, this chapter (with which I engage all-too-briefly below) reads as the book's 'methodology section'.

In Chapter two, Manolopoulos offers a helpful overview of the motif of the gift as it arises scripturally, in pre-contemporary theology, and in the work of three seminal recent Christian theological thinkers in this field: viz, Schmitz, Webb and Marion. In the following chapter, there is a sustained analysis and critique of Marion's phenomenology of the gift, including his engagements with Derrida on the question.

By far the most original sections of the book are chapter four, in which Manolopoulos introduces his hermeneutic motif of oscillation, and chapter five (itself almost a third of the book) that unfolds his proposal for an "oscillational eco-ethos". These chapters embody both critique and positive proposal. Concerning the former, he convincingly outlines the unhelpful yearning for an

eschatological purity of gifting (uncontaminated by presence and exchange) that emerges in Derrida's and Marion's thinking on the theme that contrasts with Derrida's own earlier (perhaps more Heideggerian?) tendency to speak of the need to inhabit the 'impurity' of the (factual) circle of exchange in one's thinking. Manolopoulos's own positive proposal involves an appeal to return to this sense of patient habitation of the aporetic circle, and to do so in such a way as to reconfigure our dwelling within the rich givenness of what-is (aka 'creation'). In this way, chapter five involves a focus not so much any longer on the movement from *Gegebenheit* to *Geschenk*, but from the latter to *Gelassenheit*, and somewhat beyond. Accordingly, he makes four key proposals for living in the context of creation as gift, with ecological living involving a patient oscillation among them: viz, letting-be itself, avoiding violent instrumentalisation of creation; judicious use and enjoyment of the things of creation; delight in creation, whereby the possibility of genuine 'play' is rediscovered; and finally, the possibility of a return to a kind of simultaneously religious-pagan framework.

For all its measured analysis and positive realignment of the thinking of gifting in a strongly ecological context, I nonetheless remained somewhat confused throughout the book by the ambiguity of its theological content and methods. Despite his directly addressing this very issue head on (e.g., p. 14-15, 20 and elsewhere), I was left wondering why Manolopoulos wanted to use the theological category of 'creation' at all. I'm simply not convinced by his reasoning on this point. There are two dimensions to his reticence to embrace a theological agenda per se. First, his focus on the 'gift' of creation can for him only be thought of *as* gift via a playful thought-experiment entangled in aporia. Second, he explicitly holds in near-total abeyance the whole question of God as giver (p. 13-16). Now both moves are entirely legitimate, but one wonders how an (even quasi) theology of creation is possible in this context. Why frame the study as any kind of theology at all? Why introduce such a key theological term only to then delimit it in such a way that it is effectively denied its ability to function as such? Might it not have been better to frame this project as an exercise in hermeneutical ontology which might – through an exploration of the givenness of being – serve the purpose of acting as a prolegomena for a future theology? This seems not to have been an option he considers: 'cosmos' and 'universe' are not the only alternatives to the language of creation (see p. 15). Notwithstanding the post-phenomenological (later Heideggerian) bias against all things metaphysical and purportedly therefore 'onto-theological', the language of 'to-be' offers a perfectly appropriate alternative.

There is also a serious point at issue here concerning Manolopoulos's uncritical conflation of creation (qua process, involving the totality of all creatures in relation) with *poiēsis* which is said to mean "a making; a forming, creating" (p. 13). Here the radicality and distinctiveness of the notion of Divine creation (*ex nihilo*) is cast aside (in practice, even if it is explicitly retained as a "dubious" possibility [p. 17-18] in the context of the imperative to keep the "undecidability" open). In collapsing the qualitative difference between Divine (effectively *Demiurgic*) *poiēsis* and acts of human contrivance (and even the activities of ants and the like), he also implicitly collapses even Aristotle's distinction between *phusis* and *technē*. Such a vision of "creation" confuses a Heideggerian sense of the dynamism of the *phusis* (albeit supplemented with a more "egalitarian" sense that affirms human agency) with the theological category of creation. This is not so much to hold open all possibilities, as to foreclose on one which is conceptually (whether scripturally or not) central for all Abrahamic theologies of creation.

One final quibble concerns Manolopoulos's conception of the structure of a "religious return" as *requiring* a measure of "secular hedonism" (p. 138-45) thereby addressing the sense in which Divine gift involves the incurring of debt. While the logic of his argument is clear enough in some

respects, it seems to me that he owes his reader a far clearer account of why it is that “indebtedness” must be understood as *other* to “joyous affirmation”; why gratitude for the rich profusion of creation (including one’s own being) implies a logic of exchange and return. Again, it seems to me that such an association is only possible on the basis of a failure to give due weight to the qualitative difference of creation to any other kind of gifting. For as the hyperbolic gift par excellence, creation is the condition of possibility of any other gift at all.