

Review of Mark Manolopoulos, *If Creation is a Gift*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2009.

Norman Wirzba, Duke Divinity School

In *If Creation is a Gift* Mark Manolopoulos, an Honorary Research Associate at Monash University's Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology, explores the following question: what difference does it make for ecological well-being if we understand the world as "creation", and then specify creation as a "gift"? How the world is named and understood matters. We know this simply by considering the difference between naming a plant a "weed" or a "flower". Dramatically different action will follow from each designation.

Quite rightly, Manolopoulos begins by noting an element of undecidability in the naming of the world as creation. Creation is a theological rather than a scientific term, and so presupposes a faith commitment and a grammar of meaning given through diverse theological traditions that have articulated its use and sense. Given the presupposition of a faith decision, why not simply stick with the more common designation "nature"? This question is not explored in any detail, perhaps because the term is itself fraught with so many varied, even incommensurable, meanings and grammars. We are left to wonder if the term "nature" is amenable to the language and "logic" of gift.

If Creation is a Gift consists of 5 chapters: "Creation-Gift-Aporia", "A Brief History of Gifts", "Unwrapping Marion's Gift", "Oscillation", and "Toward an Oscillational Eco-Ethos". The first begins with a radically egalitarian and inclusive definition of creation to mean all corporeal creatures and entities (humans, other-than-humans, and artificially manufactured things). Manolopoulos argues that our awe and respect should be extended to *all* things (p. 11), even the things we perceive as ordinary or rubbish. Creation is not defined by its usefulness (or harm) to us but rather by the interdependence and relationality that exists between creatures/creations. Creation also refers to the processes of relating and coming-to-be. Manolopoulos leaves open the question about whether or not we should name a "giver" of gifts for fear that an appropriation of a Creator-God (and all the theological entailment that goes with it) will introduce bias and dogmatism into the discussion.

This, to my mind, is a puzzling move, particularly if we grant that creation is a theological term that depends on a particular theological grammar to give it sense. To be sure, theologians can be dogmatic. But so can all other thinkers. The task, it seems to me, is to work out what a rigorous theological articulation of creation looks like—perhaps a Wisdom or Christological account—and then evaluate its illuminative power and usefulness for addressing ecological concerns. Developing a nuanced theological articulation does not need to lead to closure, certitude, hierarchy, instrumentalism, or anthropocentrism, all legitimate worries. The danger with a highly generalized and abstract description of creation, like the one we find here, is that it becomes very difficult to know what a particular creature/creation *is*, what its *sense* or *value* might be, and thus also how we are to relate to it in such a way as to promote its good. There is no view from nowhere, nor is there a faith decision apart from some specific context and particularizing commitment.

Manolopoulos next turns to a brief history of gifts, noting that in many instances, even scriptural ones, gifts are implicated in economies of exchange. Gifts are given and received as payback or reward or to further some end, which means that they are conditioned and thus fall within the orbit of calculation and reciprocity. As such, they are not really gifts at all. Throughout this section Derrida's description of an authentic gift as without reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt is assumed (Manolopoulos says *Given Time* is "the most determinative text" for his reflection on these matters). Not surprisingly, we learn that a Derridean aporetic of gifting leads us to a *khōra*

as the “non-place” where gifting can genuinely occur. True gifts are without location and without recognition or acknowledgement since to recognize something as a gift would already be to place it within an economy.

Manolopoulos understands that we can easily become paralysed by this aporia of the gift. He thus wisely makes several important distinctions between circularity and reciprocity, forgiving and forgetting. If our thinking on the gift is to have an ecological benefit it must finally have economic inspiration and effect (both share the same root as the *oikos* of relationships). After all it is precisely our rapacious, exploitative, degrading, commodifying economy that is causing so much destructive world-wide effect. One wonders, therefore, why this reliance on Derridean aporetics. Is the desire for a pure gift not one more Gnostic, anti-ecological, anti-economic urge to be rid of embodiment and the relational tangles that necessarily go with it? To be embodied is necessarily to be in relationships so complex and deep that we cannot possibly comprehend them all. To be without relationships altogether is to be dead.

If Creation is a Gift makes its most important contribution in the last two chapters where the theme of oscillation is developed. After wisely rejecting both Derrida’s and Marion’s quests for a pure gift (all the while keeping in view the mysteries of giftedness), Manolopoulos now turns to the more practical matter of how we are to receive and interact with the gifts of creation. Oscillation is a rotating, alternating action that enables us to acknowledge a gift without at the same time claiming to comprehend or possess it. It enables us to affirm the excess of a gift even as we are necessarily implicated in economies of exchange. “If thinkers devote too much time to transcendence and individuation, there is a danger that our radical interconnectedness is ignored, marginalized, devalued, and forgotten. A world of ‘pure,’ absolute transcendence would be nonreciprocal, sheer grace and gratuity—unlike this matrix of interrelating, interindebting, intertwining bodies. Therefore, any escape from the interface between the immanent and transcendent is not only theoretically dubious but also ecopolitically disastrous” (pp. 102-103). Exactly! This conclusion needed to be stated clearly and more forcefully much earlier in the book.

Our task, Manolopoulos argues, is to learn to move within a world of gifts so that its giftedness is not dissimulated. To do this Manolopoulos recommends that we learn the arts of silence and trembling, practice the skills of unknowing and letting-be, and then discern the range of proper use. What we need is to recover the world as a place of play and of freedom, a place in which others can be the gifts that they are. To insert ourselves into this play is not easy since we are so inclined to disrupt the games to suit our own ends. This is why we must learn to open ourselves to others and then commit to relations of mutuality rather than exploitation or domination. Moving forward in an oscillating way we may yet find ourselves in a place where the world’s wonder will evoke in us the ecological disciplines of gratitude and care.

This book makes a unique contribution by applying a recent philosophical discussion of the gift (above all as worked out by Derrida, Marion, and Caputo) to a theological articulation of creation. Its strength lies in its descriptions of the gift’s aporetic dimensions. As such, the book will appeal to philosophers working in continental traditions of thought. Those well-versed in theology will likely find the book frustrating because it does not develop enough and then engage with rigorous theological treatments (for instance, Augustine, Bonaventure, and Aquinas, or more recently Barth, Moltmann, and David Bentley Hart) of creation. Perhaps this will be material for a future book, a book Manolopoulos is uniquely situated to write.