

Toward a Perichoretic Model of Embodied Revelation

by Chad Maxson

Despite its promises of redemption, transformation, and even deification, the Wesleyan tradition includes central voices that recognize the underperformance of Christianity. Christian theologians such as Karl Barth and John Wesley, along with philosophers such as Jean-Luc Marion have offered models in which revelation provides the capacity for its own reception. The question is what such capacity entails. Neal DeRoo's account of political expressivity, coupled with the concept of perichoretic agency that I locate in Kathryn Tanner's work, provides a conceptual and structural basis for that capacity. Divine revelation must dis-organize the moral rationality into which it emerges if it is to be sanctifying in any way. We find here a way of understanding the necessity and the possibility of a perichoretic model of embodied revelation.

1. Introduction

In this article, I will argue for a model of revelation in which revelation enters into the causal structures of the world. Jean-Luc Marion is already developing such a claim with his concept of the saturated phenomenon through which he pushes back against the (exclusivist) claims of sufficient reason and the associated principle of causality. Marion's philosophical position echoes the theological positions of both Karl Barth and John Wesley. What is missing in each of these positions, Marion's, Barth's, and Wesley's, is a recognition of the porous, perichoretic structure of human subjectivity. Without that recognition, revelation can only appear in ways that human life has already been organized to receive it. Consequently, revelation will not produce the type of saturation, liberation, or transformation that these thinkers expect it to produce.

Revelation must work within the structures of the world. Here I understand 'world' nearly in the sense of 'horizon.' The world, in this sense, includes the structures of values and rationality that allow things to appear as reasonable and desirable, or not. I use the term 'moral rationality' in this light. However, just as the human subject is fundamentally porous in ways that Neal DeRoo suggests in his *Political Logic of Experience*, so the world also is porous, and for similar reasons. It is ecologically organized and evolving through many interwoven and complex systems from physics to morality and economics.

Here we start to see the perichoretic element at the heart of my argument, which will have to be understood in terms of expressivity rather than metaphysics. For revelation to enter causally into the world and human life, the world and human subjectivity must themselves be fundamentally interpenetrated and interpenetrating. If we assume that natural processes, that philosophical principles (e. g., reason or causality), and that the human

subject are discrete, if we assume that truth is atomistic rather than ecological (such that the truth of a thing is understood by breaking it down to its component parts and looking at those parts in isolation rather than observing the interactions of the thing with other things and within a larger system), and if we assume that understanding must be objective (as if the subject is not already part of every observation), then revelation will be excluded from the world. I also will argue that in these cases, revelation can never saturate and never bring forth a conversion or a transformation of human subjects or communities that Marion, Barth, and Wesley desire. However, if we recognize that the world and human subjects are themselves expressively interpenetrated and interpenetrating, then we can start to understand revelation as another interpenetration.

2. A Life Well Managed

My first premise is that currently, human life, and the world by extension, is organized economically. Philosophy in the Continental tradition may come at the problem more obliquely. Martin Heidegger talks about the forgetting of Being and the clearing of the space for the appearance of the truth (*aleitheia*, unveiling) of Being. In his essay, *On Escape*, Emmanuel Levinas talks about “the brutal fact of being that assaults [human] freedom” thereby placing humanity in conflicting opposition to the world.¹ However, Friedrich Nietzsche may provide the most illumination when he confessed that reality itself has become a problem for us. What makes reality a problem? In answer, he indicates the causal structure of human reality.² There is no escape, today, from the management of causality, which we call the economy.

While the early Levinas characterized the subject-world relation as one of conflicting opposition, in Heidegger’s early work, he describes Dasein as ‘being-in-the-world.’³ Here, there is almost a foreshadowing or a hint of the perichoretic interpenetration of self, world, and other. Importantly, though, it seems to be the use to which Dasein puts a ‘thing’ that causes its ‘thingness’ to light up in those early texts.⁴ In other words, Dasein seems to project a world in which things are useful. In a world of utility, a world that seems destined for calculation, can Being appear? This is our question.

Behind utility, something is hidden. What is this ‘hiddenness’? What is the source of this ‘hiddenness’? No doubt there are many ways in which we could answer those two questions, but I want to suggest that when things appear to me through their utility for me, what is hidden is what a thing is beyond me and the horizon of utility.

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. by Bettina Bergo, Stanford, CA 2003, 49.

² Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols: Or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer*, trans. by Richard Polt, Indianapolis, IN 1997, 20: “[...] Being is thought into things everywhere as a cause, is *imputed* to things [...]”

³ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York 1962, 297: “In resoluteness we have now arrived at that truth of Dasein which is most primordial because it is *authentic*. Whenever a ‘there’ is disclosed, its whole Being-in-the-world – that is to say, the world, Being-in, and the Self which, as an ‘I am’, this entity is – is disclosed with equal primordially.”

⁴ I am thankful to Jeffrey Bloechl for drawing attention to this point in Heidegger’s work: “What is it that Dasein is familiar with? Why can the worldly character of what is within-the-world be lit up? The presence-at-hand of entities is thrust to the fore by the possible breaks in that referential totality in which circumspection ‘operates’ [...]” (Heidegger, *Being and Time* [see fn. 3], 76).

Another way of talking about modes and relations of utility is the economy and the horizon of the economic. There is something hidden in the way that economics organizes human life, the economic organization that brings forth a particular world. The theologian Kathryn Tanner elucidates the economic organization of human life in her book *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*. We can take her example of the role of debt in organizing human life, thereby bringing forth a particular world. Debt, she says, organizes time in such a way that an immutable past decision comes to “rigidly and comprehensively” determine the present and the future.⁵ Admittedly, time is organized differently for companies and C-Suite executives than for front-line employees and consumers.

The past, in which anyone makes financial commitments, is the source of great risk. Consequently, companies reduce risk by selling their own past commitments to others who then assume that risk. For example, a high interest mortgage or loan to an individual with a bad credit rating will be packaged with similar loans and sold to another company. The loan originator, therefore, assumes little risk from the past while still profiting from it. In contrast, despite the uncertainties and volatility of life, the person who took out the loan is bound to it. Tanner notes that as illnesses arise and cars break down, as companies downsize and lay off their workforce, the recipient of the loan may be forced to take out a second loan to continue to pay off the first loan, or they may be forced to take on additional (bad) jobs at low wages.

In addition to the relationship between time and economy, a certain rationality emerges from that relationship. Certain things become reasonable and rational in light of this temporal-economic structure of debt. Certain values are generated by it – values of discipline, fiscal responsibility, and efficiency. Certain ways of seeing ourselves emerge – ways of making sense of who we are as persons. In a very pragmatic sense, I am my own brand, particularly as I come to relate to myself as a ‘business.’⁶ The rationality of finance-driven capitalism comes to be expressively embodied in people.

Bound as we are to past decisions – decisions such as whether to attend college or trade school, youthful decisions about credit card usage, decisions about car loans and student loans and mortgages, even decisions about children and families – few of us can be free. Freedom requires the minimization of sunk costs, both actual and metaphorical, which often comes at the cost of relationships and loyalty. Companies recognize this and model themselves accordingly. But individual workers and consumers have few such opportunities.

3. John Wesley and James Cone

My second premise is that so long as Christianity is organized economically (see below), Christianity is unsustainable. The economic structures of Western, capitalistic society are

⁵ Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, New Haven, CT 2019, 34.

⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 73, 75: “More than understanding one’s life to require the efficient use of scarce resources in a self-interested pursuit of personal preferences – more than considering oneself a *Homo economicus* – here one considers one’s very self, one’s very person, to be a kind of economic property whose value is to be maximized by highly efficient employment, by increasing productivity in one’s labor on it [...]. One’s own self-understanding becomes no different from that of one’s employer: I am a business [...].”

now normal, and ‘natural’ and obvious to most of us. There is a rationality, and corresponding values emerge from imagining reality fitting together in this capitalist way. What does such a society reveal? More importantly, what can be revealed within such a society?

This “structured structure predisposed to function as a structuring structure,” to borrow the eloquence of Pierre Bourdieu, is a problem for revelation because only what fits the capitalistic rationality can be rational.⁷ The problem this causes for revelation becomes apparent when we reflect on the intuition that James K. A. Smith raises in *Speech and Theology*: “[A]ny revelation must be *given* in terms that are in some sense commensurate with the conditions for its reception by the receiver – in this case, finite human beings.”⁸

The intuition that Smith captures in that assertion is hardly controversial. Would a revelation that we could *not* receive even be a revelation? Such a claim would be hard to support. But what I am arguing is that the conditions to receive revelation are themselves a product of a capitalistic rationality, often of a debt-based or finance-driven rationality, and can, therefore, hardly be the conditions of the gospel, of saturation, or liberation. Phenomenologically and theologically, thinkers such as Heidegger, Levinas, Marion, and Barth have sought to address this constraint. How can God (or *Being*) be revealed if revelation can occur only in the rationality and the values of cultural, social, political, and economic worlds?

The problem is illustrated in John Wesley’s sermon, *Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity*, written just two years before his death. Wesley, who had founded Methodism, who had guided it and nurtured it for decades, who was more optimistic about the sanctifying, transformative power of God’s grace than arguably any other theologian, comes to the end of his life and writes this:

“Christianity, true scriptural Christianity, has a tendency in process of time to undermine and destroy itself[.] For wherever true Christianity spreads it must cause diligence and frugality, which, in the natural course of things, must beget riches. And riches naturally beget pride, love of the world, and every temper that is destructive of Christianity.”⁹

In preparation to write this sermon, Wesley had been wrestling with the question that many people continue to ask: “Why has Christianity done so little good in the world?”¹⁰ Christianity, he notes in this sermon, was intended by God to be the medicinal cure for the disease of corruption and sin, but he laments that it has never fulfilled that purpose. In fact, Wesley goes on to say, Muslims and even heathens often seem to be morally superior to Christians.¹¹ Why is this?

Roughly two centuries later, another Methodist raised a similar concern. In his provocative book, *Good News to the Poor*, Theodore Jennings raises this challenge towards the end of the text:

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. by Richard Nice, New York 2003, 72.

⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation*, New York 2002, 167.

⁹ John Wesley, Sermon 122, “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity,” in: Albert C. Outler; Richard P. Heitzenrater (eds.), *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, Nashville 1991, 556.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 550.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 551.

“How shall we explain to ourselves that nearly one-third of the earth's inhabitants claim to believe the gospel, while leaving human relationships as much characterized by greed and violence as ever they were before the gospel was first sounded forth among the poor of Galilee? If the gospel is about transformation, how is it that two thousand years of proclamation have had so little effect? How is it that the wealthiest nations on earth, and the greediest and most violent, are those that claim the highest proportion of ‘Christians’? How is it that the gospel of Jesus Christ, so far from producing radical change, has instead become a cloak for avarice and arrogance, for a willful deafness to the cry of the poor and of the earth itself? How is it that the message of good news for the poor has become a sedative for the privileged while the poor perish.”¹²

The concerning questions of Wesley and Jennings are not dissimilar in form from the challenge posed to Western Christianity by James Cone. In his book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone attacks white theology as a tool to justify and to advance white society at the expense of blacks. Theology, he argues, is *used to justify the society that we want to perpetuate*.

A revelation that can only appear in the ways that recipients can receive will ever only be a revelation *colonized* by economic, social, and political rationalities. In North American culture, Christianity will be economic. Revelation becomes a raw resource to be processed into a means of social, political, and economic manufacture. Consequently, for revelation to remain revelatory, it cannot be received through the rationality and the values of a people. It must, instead, *form* the rationality and the values of a people. To do that, it must first disorganize the structures that established those rationalities and values to begin with. How would such a thing be possible? It is this question of possibility that will concern us for the remainder of the article.

4. Modeling Revelation

Few philosophers have engaged with the topic of revelation as substantially as Jean-Luc Marion has. No doubt Marion's studies of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Barth contributed to his interest in and development of revelation within the field of phenomenology. Those two thinkers show up in various footnotes as well as textual conversations within Marion's corpus.¹³

For Karl Barth, God's revelation brings with it the capacity for its own reception.¹⁴ On the face of it, such a claim might seem to be a sufficient response to the challenges above. If revelation is to evade capture by the rationalities and values of racism, capitalism, colonialism, Christian nationalism, and so forth, then it cannot be received within those systems of rationality. It cannot appear within that world. Revelation itself must come from elsewhere, and its reception must be otherwise.

¹² Theodore Jennings Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*, Nashville 1990, 186.

¹³ Barth shows up 39 times and von Balthasar 34 times in *Jean-Luc Marion, D'Ailleurs La Révélation. Contribution à une Histoire Critique et à un Concept Phénoménal de Révélation*, Paris 2020.

¹⁴ Cf. Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology*, transl. by Peter Fraenkel. Eugene, OR 2002, 89: “If, nevertheless, there is an encounter and communion between God and man, then God himself must have created for it conditions which are not in the least supplied by the existence of the formal factor.”

Marion's phenomenology can be viewed as the construction of a philosophical account of such a model of revelation. To develop a phenomenology of revelation, Marion must target the principle of sufficient reason, which in turn has ties to transcendentalism, understood as the conditions of possibility. Marion understands the principle of sufficient reason to be metaphysically structured, causally and conceptually: Each being must have a concept and a cause.¹⁵ In this way, religion is rational and thinkable.

However, what I think is most telling about Marion's claims regarding the relation between revelation and the principle of sufficient reason is his statement that reason excludes revelation from the world.¹⁶ Here, 'world' is not the world organized by economics, per se, but rather the world of metaphysics. The two are not unrelated, and arguably, the world of modern metaphysics, organized around the principles of sufficient reason and causality, provides a philosophical basis for economics.

How are we to explain God's relationship with the (metaphysically organized) world without appeal to divine causality and agency? It seems like those things are the conditions of the possibility of God's relation to the world. If "nothing that occurs without cause is true (or hence truly possible)," and if we cannot give an account of divine causality or agency, how does God relate to or act within the world?¹⁷ How does God reveal Godself? Without an account of divine causality, revelation, miracle, and God are excluded from the world.¹⁸

Marion's solution is to take on the principle of sufficient reason and the attendant principle of causality by developing his concept of the saturated phenomenon. Towards this end, Marion argues that "possibility cannot be limited to what sufficient reason ensures, hence possibility cannot be restricted to the actuality that produces the cause."¹⁹ One of the steps in Marion's project is to emphasize the phenomenological method itself: "To return to the things themselves amounts to recognizing phenomena as themselves, without submitting them to the (sufficient) condition of an anterior authority (such as thing in itself, cause, principle, etc.)."²⁰ Even the principle of sufficient reason must submit to the principle of all principles – receiving what gives itself in intuition as it gives itself.²¹ Under the principle of all principles, even the impossible might become possible. Put another way, the only condition of possibility is that the thing gives itself. On this basis, Marion argues that

¹⁵ Jean-Luc Marion, "The Possible and Revelation", in: *The Visible and the Revealed*, transl. by Christina M. Gschwandtner et al., New York 2008, 1–17, here 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷ *Id.*, "Nothing is Impossible for God", in: *id.*, *Believing in Order to See. On the Rationality of Revelation and the Irrationality of Some Believers*, transl. by Christina M. Gschwandtner, New York 2017, 87–101, here 95.

¹⁸ We should note that natural theology is another victim of the principle of sufficient reason. Before Barth's rejection of it on political and soteriological grounds, it was already excluded metaphysically.

¹⁹ Marion, "The Possible and Revelation" (see fn. 15), 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

²¹ Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, 1, trans. by Daniel O. Dahlstrom, Indianapolis, IN 2014, 43: "No conceivable theory can make us stray from the *principle of all principles*: that each intuition affording [something] in an originary way is a legitimate source of knowledge, that whatever presents itself to us in 'Intuition' in an originary way is to be taken simply as what it affords itself as, but only within the limitations in which it affords itself there."

the miracle, that which is “without foresight, cause, or reason,” itself is possible if it gives itself effectively.²²

Marion provides a phenomenological basis for the possibility of miracle and revelation, at least in terms of raw givenness, but there remains the question of the appearance of revelation. The horizon, as well as the constituting I, remain conditions of appearance. How is revelation to appear? Marion argues that “the miracle (understood based on Revelation in the resurrection) must contradict [the constituting I and the horizon].”²³ At this point, we start to see the connection to Karl Barth. For Barth, God’s revelation brings with it the capacity for its reception, and when Marion argues for the contradiction of the constituting I and the horizon, he lands squarely in Barth’s position. Even the possibility of the appearance of revelation must be given, meaning the phenomenon has to be saturated, meaning that revelation provides the capacity for its own reception, namely the excessive saturation of intention by intuition.

I will not repeat here Marion’s earlier argument for the saturated phenomenon.²⁴ However, one of the key elements of his argument arises in the contestation of Kant’s claim that “intuition, which alone gives, is essentially lacking.”²⁵ In this case, the intuition is finite and the constituting I is finite. However, when we turn to Kant’s aesthetics, Marion notes, we find an intuition that exceeds any adequate concept.²⁶ At this point, it is not intuition that is lacking but the *concept* that is lacking. Consequently, language too becomes inadequate to express the intuition intelligibly. At this point, the structure of the saturated phenomenon is apparent, and we have the possibility of a phenomenon capable of giving itself ‘without foresight, cause, or reason’ in that it gives itself excessively, transgressing the categories and principles of understanding. That said, while the concept of the saturated phenomenon gives us a means of accounting for the appearance of the miracle or revelation, more needs to be said on the conditions of the reception of revelation.

Let us return to the ‘I’ that “constitutes its phenomenon.”²⁷ At this point, Marion appeals to the trajectory of phenomenology itself: “From Husserl himself onward, but especially with Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, phenomenology has not stopped relativizing the constituting primacy of the *I* – to relativize it means to make it dependent on a relationship to someone other than itself.”²⁸ Marion, in his earlier work, claims that the saturated phenomenon radicalizes this trajectory as the saturated phenomenon cannot be constituted by, but rather it constitutes the I. By exceeding categories and principles in its disproportionality, “revelation reveals the *I* to itself.”²⁹ Revelation – as Marion has emphasized in his earlier writings – provides its own capacity for reception, but it does so not first by revealing God or the transcendent but, at least at first, by revealing the *I* itself. It is this revelation of the *I*

²² Marion, “Nothing is Impossible for God” (see fn. 17), 97.

²³ Ibid., 97.

²⁴ The reader can find that argument here: id., “The Saturated Phenomenon,” in: *The Visible and the Revealed*, transl. by Thomas A. Carlson, New York 2008, 18–48.

²⁵ Ibid., 29.

²⁶ Ibid., 32.

²⁷ Id., “Nothing is Impossible for God” (see fn. 17), 99.

²⁸ Ibid., 100.

²⁹ Ibid., 100.

to itself that begins the process of providing the capacity for the reception of the further revelation of God.

John Wesley's *ordo salutis* is quite similar to Marion's account of revelation. For Wesley, human persons are born completely incapable of God. God's own gracious activity through the Holy Spirit is required to provide even the possibility that the human subject could consider whether there may be something transcendent, sacred, or possibly divine. Wesley refers to this as the work of prevenient grace, which he says is given universally. Once the person is made capable of wondering about God, the Holy Spirit continues to graciously open the person further to God, potentially making apparent the person's own sinfulness and guilt before God. This revelation of the 'I,' of the person's sinfulness and guilt before God, provokes a crisis moment or a moment of decision. Soteriologically, that moment is the moment of justification and initial sanctification. The order of salvation continues from there, beyond what even Marion has so far accounted for, at least in my presentation of Marion here.

Here is my concern: If John Wesley, Theodore Jennings, and James Cone (who is also part of the Wesleyan tradition, out of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination), recognize the failure of Christian revelation, what confidence should we have in Marion's account of revelation? I do not think we yet have that reason for confidence. Additionally, I do not think the problem is with the structure of saturation or prevenient grace, *per se*, but rather with how we understand the subject-world relationship.

5. Complex Subjectivity and Perichoretic Agency

A third premise of the following considerations consists of the idea that subjectivity is itself porous. Part of the limitation of this phenomenological and theological model of revelation found in Marion, Barth, and Wesley (among others) is that it assumes a simplistic subjectivity structured by linear concepts of causality. Additionally, the subject is largely distinct from nature, creation, or the world.

Human beings are not discrete individuals whose choices, values, and relations flow untouched from explicit personal agency or even from excessive phenomenological intuition. Instead, our choices, values, and relations emerge from a matrix of forces, factors, and influences, not unlike an ecosystem. Causality itself is multi-layered, multi-tiered, and non-linear. The work of many scholars provides constructive analysis of complex subjectivity and agency, including Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*, Neal DeRoo's transcendently expressive subjectivity, and Kathryn Tanner's analysis of finance-driven capitalism, among others. For the purpose of the present project, I will summarize some of DeRoo's account of expressivity as a model of complex subjectivity before turning to Tanner on (perichoretic) agency.

6. DeRoo on Subjectivity

As Marion's work indicates, a large part of what makes revelation a problem for modernity is that revelation, miracle, and God are excluded from the world by virtue of exclusive

causal models. How do we account for God's agency within the laws of nature? How do we account for God's sovereignty concerning human liberty? Both of these questions largely presume linear, mono-leveled, efficient causality.³⁰ However, such models of causality are recognized to be insufficient in complex systems such as economic, social, or ecological systems.³¹ DeRoo's work draws attention to some of this inadequacy as it is reflected in models of subjectivity.

Arguably, after Kant, the 'sense of things' is relativized to the subject. By that, I mean the subject imposes meaning on its world through the way that it organizes sense data. The principle of causality, as an organizational scheme, is one way of organizing sense data that imposes meaning on the relations between events. Events are organized causally, and a certain sense or meaning of things emerges as a result. The subject is privileged in this model as the organizing center. This privileging of the subject resulted from Kant's reversal of the prior philosophical approach of locating meaning or sense in the world (e. g., the *forms*) and then deriving a method (e. g., the disciplined use of reason) for the subject to discover that externally located meaning.

DeRoo's project evolves beyond Kant's model by turning to models of expressive embodiment. Expressivity, as the primary qualification of the subject-world relationship, is one of 'cogenerativity'.³² Kant did not yet recognize the subject's expression of its own embodiment. Importantly, embodiment is itself, as DeRoo argues, politically expressive. In this expression of political embodiment, we start to get a sense of the complex causal and agential forces that coincide in the subject.

It is not my intention to summarize, analyze, or provide commentary on DeRoo's extremely sophisticated project. Rather, I would like to draw attention to certain ramifications that arise from DeRoo's project. The first ramification is that the subject cannot be isolated from the world or from political embodiment. In this sense, who people are and the choices they make are themselves expressions of these cogenerative and constituting relationships. Another way of phrasing this claim is that the subject is porous.

The theological term, perichoresis, may apply here to the *human* person. By 'perichoresis,' I primarily have in mind the structure of mutual interpenetration. While this term has most often been used, perhaps as a black box, to account for the mystery of the Trinity and of the Incarnation, recent literature has sought to apply it to everything from marriage to corporate human resource management.³³ In DeRoo's expressive subjectivity, we discover that embodiment itself is the basis for the interpenetration of the subject-world relation.

³⁰ By linear, mono-level efficient causality, I mean that a change in one variable results in a corresponding and proportional change in another variable; cf. *Christine Domegan et. al.*, "Non-Linear Causal Modelling in Social Marketing for Wicked Problems," in: *Journal of Social Marketing* 7/3 (2017) 305–329, here 306: "Linear causality [...] assumes *little to no interactions among variables* [...]. It is well-suited to restricted problems such as the behaviour of an individual [...]."

³¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 308: "Non-linear causality allows for messy concomitant variation, temporal sequencing theoretical support, non-spurious association and *interactions among variables*. It is necessary as pointed out by Weaver (1948, p. 540) in a defining science and complexity paper, for 'problems which involve dealing with a sizable number of factors which are interrelated into an organic whole', that is, wicked, commons and sustainability problems."

³² *Neal DeRoo*, *The Political Logic of Experience: Expression in Phenomenology*, New York, NY 2022, 48.

³³ In terms of the 'black box' usage of the concept of perichoresis in theology, cf. *Christopher Woznicki*, "Dancing around the Black Box: The Problem and Metaphysics of Perichoresis," in: *Philosophia Christi* 22/1 (2020) 103–121.

A second ramification is that these perichoretic, expressive, and co-generative relationships between the subject and the world imply that the human will itself is, in a way, porously or perichoretically structured. A compatibilist-type model of agency, and possibly causality, is necessitated. In this model, the agency of God would not necessarily come into competition with human liberty, but God's agency could instead open new possibilities for human agency – allowing the human new directions of choice or decision. God could make different ways of life available by allowing for the human subject to express, in its own subjectivity, the divine life. If the subject is discrete, then we find a structure of competition between divine and human agency. However, if the subject is porous, then we find no formal difference between the influence of divine agency within the subject and any other influence (e. g., that of finance-driven capitalism) within the subject.

7. Tanner on (Perichoretic) Agency

In her book, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, Tanner notes the modern and Western “emphasis on human responsibility for the character of our lives.”³⁴ The isolation of human responsibility to God and to nature is an important feature of this model of responsibility. Human responsibility in modernity has tended to require a discrete human subject. Louis Dupré notes that in classical Greek thought, moral responsibility was a facet of the cosmos itself, to which even the gods owed fealty.³⁵ Yet, the trajectory of Western culture has been towards the moral responsibility of the individual.

Ironically, when Barth rejected natural theology, what he seems to be rejecting more than anything else is the isolated moral, soteriological agency of that individual. Barth's theology requires that God provide the capacity to receive revelation at the very outset, implying the incapacity to make even ‘a few strokes’ to aid in our own salvation.³⁶ In other words, what Barth is not doing is rejecting nature so much as he is rejecting human soteriological agency.

Returning to Tanner, I find in her the basis for a perichoretic soteriology, which might be surprising given that Tanner herself rejects the possibility of a perichoretic anthropology, stating, “one should avoid modeling human relations directly on trinitarian ones.”³⁷ She further asserts: “When the indivisible workings of the Persons of the Trinity incorporate us, our relations with the Father in virtue of our union with Christ take on the more

In terms of its application to marriage, cf. *John Jefferson Davis*, “Trinity, Perichoresis, and Christian Marriage: Thinking, Feeling, and Acting Like the Trinity,” in: *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 51/3 (2023) 429–438. In terms of its application to management, see *Halim Wiryadinata*, “Religious Human Resources Management: Perichoresis to Manage or to Be Managed?”, in: *Khazanah Theologia* 2/2 (2020) 103–110.

³⁴ *Kathryn Tanner*, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology*, Minneapolis, MN 2001, 72.

³⁵ *Louis Dupré*, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*, New Haven, CT 1993, 17.

³⁶ Cf. *Emil Brunner*, *Karl Barth*, *Natural Theology: Comprising ‘Nature and Grace’ by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply “No!” by Dr. Karl Barth*, trans. by Peter Fraenkel, Eugene, OR 2002, 79: “If a man had just been saved from drowning by a competent swimmer, would it not be very unsuitable if he proclaimed the fact that he was a man and not a lump of lead as his ‘capacity for being saved’? Unless he could claim to have helped the man who saved him a few strokes or the like!”

³⁷ *Tanner*, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (see fn. 34), 82.

external form of fellowship, not co-inherence, in a way that continues to respect the creature's finite boundedness."³⁸ (Notice the discrete isolation – finite boundedness – of the human person, which I associated with modern notions of human responsibility above.) Now, if by 'co-inherence' we mean something associated with Aristotelian substance metaphysics, then I would agree with Tanner's position. However, that does not seem to be how she understands co-inherence. Rather, she frequently speaks of a union or a correspondence of wills. She understands the Incarnation and soteriology within this type of register. Of course, the type of union or correspondence between creatures and God will not attain the indivisible perfection of the Trinity itself. Nor will inter-human relations attain this divine level of mutuality or co-inherence (though it seems like the NT concept of love would imply a progression in inter-human mutuality and co-inherence). Is this a difference of scale?

DeRoo's work has given us reason to argue that expressivity is itself a mode of co-inherence, inter-penetration, or perichoresis. We could apply DeRoo's model to many of Jesus' claims in the Gospel of John as a heuristic aid for that Gospel. The giving of the Son to the Father is done in such a way that the Son 'effaces' himself in his communication of the Father even while the Father, in turn, faces (or gives face to) the Son. It is DeRoo's notion of expressive, not metaphysical, perichoresis that I am working with. It is this sense of perichoresis that does seem to be present in Tanner's theology, particularly at the level of soteriology.

Specifically, when Tanner rejects the possibility that we could divide the *ordo salutis* into "metaphysically or empirically passive component[s]" we find a form of perichoresis.³⁹ It is not God alone who acts in justification, she continues to say. While she does not use the language of perichoresis to characterize the relationship between divine and human agency, she does use language of layers of causality or layers of agency.⁴⁰ However, the ancient concept of perichoresis may give us ways of understanding what 'layers of causality' or agency might entail.⁴¹

Further, the concept of perichoresis may not be restricted only to a model of the divine and human soteriological context. Tanner's discussion of the agency of debt to organize time gives us a concrete example of perichoretic agencies in the structures that shape ordinary life. We are aware of ways in which debt magnifies "the significance of the past for present and future conduct."⁴² We can think of student loan debt, national debt, credit card debt, or the payday loans that many in the United States workforce increasingly rely on to make ends meet. Debt is 'doing' something in this example. What debt is 'doing' is affecting human subjects, and it also comes to expression in human subjects.

³⁸ Ibid., 83.

³⁹ Ibid., 72.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1, 3.

⁴¹ We should note that while John of Damascus seems to be the first to apply the concept of perichoresis to the Trinity, Gregory of Nyssa previously applied it to christology. If we take Jesus' full humanity seriously and we understand perichoresis to model the human and divine natures in Christ, then while we may still want to qualify the possibilities for the rest of human nature in relation to the divine within history, perichoresis must be a viable manner of modeling the Christian doctrine of soteriology, including deification or sanctification.

⁴² Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (see fn. 5), 34.

In taking on such debt, Tanner notes that we commit ourselves to a future outcome by any means necessary. Despite the unreliability of the old car that we are driving, the unreliability of current employment, the unreliability of my partner's health, and all of the other volatility of the present, Tanner notes that debt requires a commitment to bringing about a future state of affairs – like making payments on my debt – by any means necessary. Those means may require a second (or third) job or taking on further debt, another loan.

We should take note of the way in which capitalism organizes life in such a way that a certain moral rationality arises. This moral rationality, in turn, comes to expression in human choices and behaviors, not through competition with our wills, but as expressions within our wills. Of course, structures of debt (and other economic structures) constrain freedom and choice, but the rationality of capitalism emphasizes the role of human choice in taking on debt to begin with. Consequently, the constraints of capitalism are merely the consequences of human choice.

Further, capitalism provides the means to free ourselves from past choices. Such freedom comes easiest to those with the most capital, such as corporations that can free themselves from the sunk cost of past decisions, for instance, by repackaging the loans and mortgages that they made to consumers and then selling off that debt to other corporations. This is an example that Tanner returns to throughout this text. There is a *via salutis* within capitalism, even if mostly at the corporate level and for corporate executives. For the rest of us, there is the pathway of frugality and discipline that promises eventual emancipation in a distant future, until it does not (e. g., un-repayable student loan debt or medical debt).

At this point, what is most relevant is the perichoretic model of agency and causality within capitalism. Except under extreme debt or poverty, we do not feel our wills to be constrained by capitalism. (Even in those extreme situations, there is a way of explaining such constraint as consequences of prior human choice.) Instead of constraint, capitalism provides a context in which our wills can be meaningfully, morally, and profitably exerted. Notice that it is the way capitalism organizes human life that brings forth both a morality and a basis of rationality in which certain exercises of human choice become 'natural,' justifiable, and reasonable. Through this way of organizing the world, human agency and structures of capitalistic agency interpenetrate in harmonious and mutually productive ways. Even when we do feel our wills constrained by debt or poverty (or growing wealth inequality), capitalism justifies these constraints through its own moral rationality: This is just how things are. This is just how the world is.

While I do not want to reduce divine agency to economic structures, economic structures provide plausible models of how divine structures or divine agency might be conceptualized. Presumably, divine structures would involve more redemptive means of organizing the world. While Tanner is not a phenomenologist and is not giving a phenomenology of debt or of capitalism, the experiences of debt and capitalism that she depicts can certainly be taken up phenomenologically. The structures of capitalism can be phenomenologically described, and those structures can be transferred to revelation.

What structures are required for divine revelation within a Christian context?

8. Perichoretic Structures of Embodied Revelation

My conclusion is that Christian revelation provides an eschatological way of organizing life that must be embodied in a people of God. Accounts of revelation, both within theology and phenomenology, have often been limited to models of linear causality that placed human and divine agency into direct competition. If God is acting, humans cannot be acting. In place of that model, I propose an ‘ecological’ or a perichoretic model, in which agency requires interpenetration between and within agential systems, be they natural, human (e. g., cultural, social, economic, etc.), or divine. If divine agency is consistently perichoretic, as it is within the Trinity itself (and here we should think of Karl Rahner’s argument that “the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity,” and vice versa),⁴³ then God’s revelation is also perichoretic in that God’s revelation is never independent of embodiment in a people of God, be that the Church, Israel, or some other elect and sanctified corporate body. Tanner herself states:

“Our action should show its relation to God not simply in the attitude, disposition, or consciousness with which it is done, but in the structure of that action itself. Something about the pattern of that action as well must glorify God. God’s glory, the effulgence of God’s life and light extended outwards to us, must become visible in action with a similar shape.”⁴⁴

For this reason, in whatever way we are to think about revelation, it seems clear that God’s revelation is not complete until it is embodied in a people, thereby addressing the crisis identified through the Wesleyan tradition.⁴⁵ But what is required for God’s revelation to be embodied in a people?

One of the implicit premises of my argument is that the way that life is organized is the source of morality and rationality.⁴⁶ Presumably, the soteriological role of grace must include a disorganization of the moral rationality that justifies existing political, economic, national, natural, and theological relations. The way that life has been organized, such as through capitalism, must be disorganized in such a way that a new way of organizing life can emerge. Concomitantly, God’s revelation must bring with it its own moral rationality – its own way of organizing life. When St. Paul talks about the law of love (Rom 13:10), the law of Christ (Gal 6:2), or the law of the Spirit (Rom 8:2), I presume my claims of a certain moral rationality arising from Christ, from the Spirit, and love are consistent with Paul’s metaphors in these cases. Given God’s revelation in Christ, given the work of the Spirit, given the role of love, what is our rational act of worship (Rom 12:1)? What way of relating

⁴³ *Karl Rahner*, *The Trinity*, trans. by Joseph Donceel, New York 2004, 22.

⁴⁴ *Tanner*, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (see fn. 34), 79.

⁴⁵ Paul DeHart, commenting on Rowan Williams, notes that “one of the most characteristic positions maintained early on by Williams was an insistence that the Christian story, and the older story of Israel from within which it arose, can only be understood if the notion of divine ‘revelation’ is seen in the closest connection with, indeed in some sense as derivative of, the notion of a ‘people of God.’” (*Paul J. DeHart*, *Creation and Transcendence: Theological Essays on the Divine Sublime*, New York 2021, 128. My argument was directly inspired by this statement as well as further readings from *Rowan Williams*. “The Finality of Christ”, in: id., *On Christian Theology*, Malden, MA 2000, 93–106.

⁴⁶ To support this claim, see Charles Taylor’s concept of social imaginaries in, *Charles Taylor*, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham, NC 2004.

to God, others, and the world makes sense? It is this question of 'what makes sense' in light of the gospel that suggests a divine mode of organizing life.

While we can talk about organizing life around 'the law of Christ' or 'the law of love,' there is a more fundamental and also mundane organizational structure that we need to address: Time. Without addressing the more fundamental organizational structures, abstract structures such as love will always disappoint. Time and space, says Tanner, impose "fundamentally competitive limitations" upon finitude (which explains why time has to be addressed before love can function as intended within the Church).⁴⁷ Capitalism requires a temporal index moving from the past through the present and into the future. In such a temporal structure, management (*eco-nomos*) is possible. The future can be managed and should be managed. Goals should be set. Benchmarks should be established. Status update meetings should be held to gauge whether we are on track to meet our future objectives. Out of this *eco-nomos*, growing out of a particular way of organizing time, all of the discipline of Christianity (whether Protestant discipline or Catholic discipline is of no actual consequence) can be taken up into capitalism. Temporality, as the basis of management, is one of the points-of-contact that must be disorganized.

I propose that eschatology should not be truncated to mean only the 'end things' (*eschata*), such as resurrection or judgement (though it must still include such things). Eschatology, as Jürgen Moltmann indicates, must first reorganize the temporal index, allowing the future to come to bear on the present.⁴⁸ With a reversal of the temporal index, the present cannot lay claim to the future, but it can witness to the future. This witness to what-is-to-come is faith. Faith as witness can only be embodied.

To what, in particular, is such embodied faith to witness? In answer to this question, one of the *eschata*, emerges to structure the present faithful witness. I have in mind, here, the coming communion of Christ, which is characterized by non-competitive fellowship. What it is to be a person, right now in modernity, is not to be another.⁴⁹ Emerging from such an anthropology, the community can hardly be other than a voluntary association of like-minded individuals. Out of such structures of competition, difference, and diversity necessarily threaten community. The other – the political other, national other, moral other, religious other, etc. – is a threat to 'our way of life.' We witness that competitive economic reality by positioning ourselves – defensively or offensively – against the other.

The communion of Christ can be non-competitive because it is already perichoretic. Communion is already porous by the logic of expressivity. The other is already among us and within us, and we are in them. As Tanner argues, the trinitarian union is not based on the opposition to difference. Rather, trinitarian union is the basis of difference. Further, this relation is extended *ad extra* such that "what makes God different from us enables closeness with us."⁵⁰ Karl Rahner was right to reject the 'mere monotheism' of Western Christianity and insist on the priority of the Trinity. The perichoretic union of the Trinity is witnessed through the eschatological communion of Christ, which is witnessed to

⁴⁷ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (see fn. 34), 92.

⁴⁸ See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. by Margaret Kohl, Minneapolis, MN 1996, 13.

⁴⁹ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (see fn. 34), 92.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

through the empirical and historical Church. It is this communion that will have turned out to always have been true about humanity and creation. This communion is difference-generating.

9. Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to provide an explication of my intuition that God's revelation is not complete until it is embodied in a people of God. This seems to be the intuition behind Wesley's late concerns over the efficacy of Christianity and Cone's contestation of white theology.

As much as I appreciate the reason for Barth's forceful rejection of natural theology, as much as I appreciate Tanner's refusal to model human relations on trinitarian ones, and as much as I appreciate Marion's saturated phenomenon, each of these positions should be revised in light of Neal DeRoo's concept of expressivity. DeRoo helps us to recognize the porous and perichoretic structure of subjectivity. One of the consequences of such expressive subjectivity is that revelation itself also comes to express the moral rationality of the context in which it appears. If revelation ends with such contextual expression, then the moral rationality of capitalism effaces the moral rationality of the gospel. Consequently, divine revelation must dis-organize the moral rationality into which it emerges if it is to be in any way sanctifying. *In précis*, we find here a way of understanding the necessity and the possibility of a perichoretic model of embodied revelation.

Trotz ihrer Verheißungen von Erlösung, Verwandlung und sogar Vergöttlichung gibt es in der wesleyanischen Tradition zentrale Stimmen, die die Unzulänglichkeit der aktuellen Performanz des Christentums erkennen. Christliche Theologen wie Karl Barth und John Wesley, aber auch Philosophen wie Jean-Luc Marion haben Modelle vorgeschlagen, in denen Offenbarung die Befähigung zu ihrer eigenen Annahme mit sich führt. Fraglich ist, was genau eine solche Befähigung beinhaltet. Neal DeRoos Darstellung der politischen Ausdrucksfähigkeit in Verbindung mit dem Konzept der perichoretischen Handlungsfähigkeit, das sich in Kathryn Tanners Arbeit finden lässt, bietet eine begriffliche und strukturelle Grundlage für das bessere Verständnis dieser Befähigung. Göttliche Offenbarung muss jene moralische Rationalität, in welche sie einzugehen beabsichtigt, desorganisieren, wenn sie in irgendeiner Weise heiligend sein soll. So eröffnet sich ein Weg, die Notwendigkeit und Möglichkeit eines perichoretischen Modells verkörperter Offenbarung besser zu verstehen.