Conversations at the Edges of Things

Reflections for the Church in Honor of John Goldingay

Edited by
Francis Bridger *and* James T. Butler

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The Gift of Community

Social Theology for the Twenty-First Century

Francis Bridger

John Goldingay and I are both children of the same social era. He was born in the middle of World War II; I was born only six years after it ended. We are offspring of mid-twentieth century Britain, with all that implies. We grew up at the height of Western modernity confident in itself and its achievements: the triumph of science, the arrival of the welfare state, sustained economic progress, 'progressive' social reforms, enhanced personal freedoms and an assumed future narrative that promised more of the same.

In the second decade of the twenty first century it all looks very different. For one thing, we are now in the throes of postmodernity (or perhaps even post-postmodernity) where many of the assumptions of modernity have either been undermined or have collapsed altogether. Where now is the glad bright morning of permanent economic growth, social welfare and emancipation? And as for value-free, objective science as the only road to truth, the easy confidence of the nineteen fifties and sixties has given way to the suspicion that science has no final answers at all; or, even worse, has been responsible for some of the most horrific events of the last hundred years.

All this is by way of leading into an essay which seeks to offer some reflections upon a central theme that has emerged time and again in the experience of modernity and postmodernity, and which John comments upon in a number of places in his writings, particularly in the third volume of his Old Testament Theology, *Israel's Life*. This theme can be summed up as the *tension between individualism and community in periods of rapid social change*. Or to put it another way: how can individuals relate to one another in community when the very notion of community is under threat?

HEY DUDE, WE'RE ALL INDIVIDUALS AREN'T WE?

The late twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first have seen the full flowering of individualism. However, like so many terms in academic discussion (I do not say this pejoratively), it remains a highly contested concept. Not only is it used to *describe* a state of affairs, it is also employed *evaluatively*. And not infrequently, the second is smuggled into the first. Depending on the philosophical viewpoint of the user, individualism can be seen as desirable ("She's a real character; she's a true individualist"), or as something to be avoided ("He's only concerned with number one"). For our purposes, however, I wish to distinguish between two sorts of individualism.

The first is what we might call *personal/existential*. This sees the individual person as the seat of ultimate value, the final arbiter in all things. People are understood first and foremost as individual beings who make their own choices and decisions, who cannot be dictated to by others, who determine their own lives, who by nature possess certain innate rights and freedoms. They cannot be reduced to mere cogs in a machine. Moreover, on this version individuals must take ethical priority over the collective in all but the most extreme circumstances (such as war). Individual freedoms and rights may be subordinated to those of the community if, and only if, individuals judge it is in their interest to do so, or when their security is threatened by external forces that require collective action. We may, as a matter of fact and necessity, be persons-in-relationship, but the community is nothing greater than the sum of individuals who have chosen to associate together for freely agreed purposes; the collective will is merely the expression of the aggregate of individual wills. Community derives from, and is dependent upon, individual consents for its authority. "The collectivity

exists for the sake of the individual, and not the individual for the sake of the collectivity."[1]

A second kind of individualism has been described as *possessive*. At first sight, this label might be interpreted as already containing a moral judgment. But in the specialist sense in which it was originally coined, and has been developed, this is not the case. In essence, it refers to the way in which Western philosophers of individualism, such as John Locke, moved from viewing individualism as a philosophical or metaphysical notion about persons in the abstract to seeing individuals as actual persons possessing rights, one of which was the right to "mix" their labour with nature to produce goods and services which they then possessed as extensions of themselves that nobody else could claim. This right may seem self-evident to us today, but in an era that still contained remnants of feudal or royal control of individuals' lives and circumstances, the theory of possessive individualism provided a powerful intellectual motor for social change. Put simply, on this account individuals possess rights by virtue of being human and thereby have the right to acquire and own property and possessions. Nobody (including the State) has the right to deprive them of these without consent.[2] This goes a long way to explaining the ideological resistance to government taxation evident, for example, in some sections of the Republican Party in the USA.

Despite their problems, both concepts of individualism hold considerable attractions. For one thing, they articulate a coherent basis for individual freedom that anyone who has lived in a totalitarian or authoritarian state will recognise as a godsend. For another, they make clear that individuals are, in Immanuel Kant's words, "Ends in themselves and not means only," thus establishing that individuals cannot be others' playthings. And by establishing an intellectual justification for the notion of universal human rights, they provide a powerful weapon in the fight against cruelty and atrocity.

But there is a dark side also to these two views of individualism: the phenomenon of consumerism. Much has been written about this, but perhaps the most pertinent comment is that of Philip Sampson: "Once established, a culture of consumption is quite undiscriminating and everything

1. Bridger, *Counselling*, 103.

2. On this view taxation is a necessary evil, not simply because it reduces individuals' wealth but because it constitutes an infringement of their right to own and use their labor and its fruits as they wish.

becomes a consumer item, including meaning, truth and knowledge."[3] Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman further notes that because Western societies have moved from being producer societies to consumer societies, the measure of worth for individuals has shifted from what they produce to what they consume—and woe betide those who do not have the means to consume. They are caught in a twofold trap: on one hand they are assigned low social worth, especially if unemployed or on welfare; on the other, they find themselves forever reaching for the goods and services they cannot afford but which they are expected to have if they are to be counted as worthwhile members of consumer society.

Consumerism also swallows up the self, so that we end up questing after experiences, each more potent than the last, as the self goes in search of the ultimate hit. And since the driving force behind consumerism is the need to turn everything into a commodity designed to deliver instant gratification, it follows that notions of selfhood must be subject to the same imperial process. The individual is seen not as a reflective, feeling, thinking, relating being (as in the models offered by Enlightenment philosophers) but (in Bauman's words), as a "harvester of sensations." The purpose of the individual self is to receive pleasure (now defined as a right), and both mind and body are viewed as no more than instruments to this end. Given that humans are competitive beings, moreover, "One is condemned to live forever in doubt as to whether one's own sensations 'match the standard', and—more poignantly still—whether they reach the peak that other people are capable of climbing."[4] It is little wonder, then, that consumerist societies live in a constant state of psychological and economic anxiety, for who knows how long this frantic existence can be sustained?

The condition charted by Bauman and others describes a world in which individuals are profoundly alienated from themselves and from one another. "The individual is the default state of life."[5] Personhood is defined as individualistic self-fulfilment, and we are invited (nay, required) to see ourselves first and foremost as acquisitive consumers. Luther's description of sin as *curvatus in se* (turned in upon oneself) seems apt.

Individualism, in any of the senses outlined above, poses sizeable challenges for the practise of community. In critiquing them, theology says loudly and clearly that the idea of individuals as abstract entities, separated

3. Quoted in Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 61.

4. Bauman, *Fragments*, 117.

5. Goldingay, *Life*, 20.

from their life contexts and webs of relationships as if they were mere theoretical constructs, is deeply flawed. Not only does it reduce persons to conceptualisations, it threatens the practise of community necessary for human beings simply to be human. "As a person, I am what I am only in relation to other persons. My human being is a relational being. My personal unity is fulfilled in community."[6] In theological language, to be made in the image of God is to be made for community.

Alongside these philosophical analyses of individualism, the British writer Philip Blond has offered an intriguing and penetrating analysis of contemporary social fragmentation. Although he writes about the specifically British context, his analysis can be extended to other Western societies.

Blond begins by offering a narrative of community as having been undermined from both the political left and right. The twentieth century politics of the left, he argues, were concerned with reducing inequality and poverty, empowering the poor and disenfranchised, and enlarging economic freedoms for the worst off. These were (and continue to be) laudable aims. But in doing so, the left assumed that only the power of the centralised State could act (in John Kenneth Galbraith's famous phrase) as a "countervailing power" over and against overmighty capitalism. Entrenched business and other vested interests could be overcome only through collective action by government. And so the combination of governmental intervention in the economy and the establishment of the welfare state came into being, to be continued by governments of the left and right for three decades. In Britain, the vast social experiment launched by the Labour government of 1945–51 involved the creation of universal state health provision, universal state welfare, and state owned industries such as coal, steel and railways. In the USA, Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program of the 1930s pointed in the same direction (though it never went so far as the British program) and can be seen even now (so the argument runs) in the policies of the Obama administration towards healthcare, business regulation and the environment.

In Britain, contends Blond, the effect of this was to create over time a vast centralised bureaucracy responsible for every area of people's lives. By the nineteen seventies, no significant aspect of human life from birth to death fell outside the purview of government. It even took responsibility for determining the individual wage rates of workers through what was known as "incomes policy." The result was that, as government increasingly

6. Ware, *Unity*, 206.

intervened in the lives of individuals and communities, the process of disempowerment of a civil society based on voluntary associations set in. "Local requirements, organisations or practices were gradually ignored and rendered redundant."[7]

By contrast, the politics of the right in the nineteen eighties witnessed a rediscovery of anti-collective individualism. Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the USA espoused a philosophy (though not always the practise) of limited government and the importance of individuals as economic actors. State control of industries was rolled back, the welfare state pruned and the market promoted as the engine of economic recovery. Henceforth, individuals were to be re-empowered through participation in a property-owning democracy. The market and the ballot box would march hand in hand. Democratic individualism, rather than democratic collectivism, was to be the way forward.

Unfortunately, Blond argues, the pendulum swing from left to right produced not a revival of civil society and a resurgence of community, but a further diminishment of it. Whereas thirty five years of an ever-growing centralised government had ""made the populace a supplicant citizenry dependent on the state rather than themselves,"[8] the effect of the Thatcher (and by implication, Reagan) philosophy was to produce a no less disempowered population: "Instead of popular capitalism with open and free markets, what we got instead was a capitalism captured by concentrations of capital and a market dominated by vested interest and dominance of the already wealthy."[9] The witches' brew of "modern consumer capitalism" had come fully into flower.

Blond presents a powerful, and in many ways persuasive, analysis. He offers a narrative that endorses neither the left nor the right, and on closer inspection, affirms insights from both. Above all, he reminds us that even the best-intentioned social and political policies always produce unintended consequences that have far-reaching effects on the nature of civil society and community. But as we reflect on this, we find ourselves facing another question: what kind of theological response can be made beyond simply asserting in a general way that anthropologically, theologically and practically, community lies at the heart of a Christian understanding of the image of God in humanity? It is to this we now turn.

7. Blond, *Tory*, 15.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 18.

COMMUNITY: GIFT AND TASK

Much theological writing about community has centred on the social and political significance of human beings as persons who are formed in, and by, relationships with others. The revival of interest in the Trinity as a model for social life has contributed significantly to this. Indeed, in an essay published in 1992, I argued for the "corporate motifs" of the image of God, covenant people, body of Christ, kingdom of God, incarnation and Trinity as supplying "a radical critique both of individualism and of collectivism."[10] However, in what follows I would like to suggest an additional motif, namely that of *gift*.

Gift is one of those words that Christians recognise as fundamental to their faith. Every dimension of faith is a matter of gift: human life, salvation, redemption, reconciliation with God—all are grace gifts to humanity which cannot be earned through our striving, but only received gratefully by faith. This is the good news of the Christian gospel: everything is gift. The principle is so fundamental that it must be seen as structuring our whole understanding of life. Gift is the governing theological concept that overarches all others.

We can quickly see how this bears upon our discussion of community. For if gift lies at the core of what it means to be human and to be made in the image of God, it follows that since we are created to be communal beings, community itself is a gift. "The human being is made for gift, which expresses and makes present his transcendent dimension."[11]

The concept of gift as applied to community has received one of its fullest expositions in Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth), applauded by Roman Catholics and non-Catholics alike as a decisive contribution to discussions of theology and social justice. That it was welcomed by 175 leading evangelicals in the USA is itself an indication of its significance beyond the Roman Catholic Church.[12]

The encyclical repays careful reading. But for our purposes, it is worth noting four points about gift that offer foundational principles from which we might develop a theology of community.

10. Bridger, "Biblical Theology and the Politics of the Centre."

11. Benedict XVI, *Caritas*, par. 34. All quotations from *Caritas* in the following section are taken from this location; cf. *Charity*, 66–69.

12. See http://www.cpjustice.org/doingthetruth.

Firstly, gift is built into the nature of human existence. It is woven into the fabric of creation. Gift "is present in our lives in many different forms" though we may fail to discern these because the notion of gift has been overlain by self-centeredness. By definition, this is the antithesis of gift. Consequently, the essential nature of human life as gift will "often go unrecognized because of a purely consumerist and utilitarian view of life." This chimes with what we have noted earlier from the writings of sociologists about consumerism and individualism.

Secondly, the principle of gift is not merely a useful anthropological fact or a form of convenient social cement: it reminds us that God is with us and that human beings are created for something greater than themselves. "The human being is made for gift, which expresses and makes present his transcendent dimension . . . It takes first place in our souls as a sign of God's presence in us, a sign of what he expects from us." This last phrase is crucial for it makes clear that the principle of gift carries with it an obligation towards others—a key move, as we shall see, in the application of the concept to community life.

Thirdly, since gift as a fact of creation originates in the graciousness of God, it reflects his overflowing gratuity towards humanity: "Gift by its nature goes beyond merit, its rule is that of superabundance." Once more, the encyclical deftly points us in the direction of a concept of community that goes beyond individualism and the language of rights.

Fourthly, the logical culmination of this theology is that we are called by God to work for communities that express the *nature* of gift (the encyclical uses the language of vocation at this point to suggest that gift is something God actively wills for us). In other words, community should be seen as embodying God's calling to act and live as those called into being by grace: "The human community that we build by ourselves can never, purely by its own strength, be a fully fraternal community, nor can it overcome every division and become a truly universal community. The unity of the human race, a fraternal communion transcending every barrier, is called into being by the word of God-who-is-Love."

Taken together, these four points supply a powerful theological rationale for developing an ethical basis for community that offers something radically different from the assumptions of individualism we observed above. It is to the implications of this that we must now turn.

MUTUALITY AND RECIPROCITY

Is community possible on the principle of gift? At first sight, the idea might seem absurdly idealistic. But when we think about it, societies operate on the gift principle all the time. In doing so, however, they modify the concept of free gift with two further notions: mutuality and reciprocity. Both of these imply that giving in a social context is multi-directional in that although individuals give gifts sometimes in the expectation of return, even where this is not the case, the recipient may choose to reciprocate either out of a sense of obligation or simply out of gratitude. Either way, a pattern of mutual giving is established (think of Christmas gifts) which comes to underlie all kinds of social relationships. Thus is the principle of gift embedded into the structures of society.

Whether a community is built on the notion of *free* gift or gift *exchange*, the result is a social fabric that is much more tightly woven than the free rein of individualistic consumerism would allow. It is the nexus of gift, mutuality and reciprocity that lies at the heart of an alternative vision of community to that identified by Bauman and others as the paradigm of postmodernity.

How this is worked out in differing cultures and societies will inevitably be a question of pragmatics. There can be no single definitive blueprint. Nonetheless, I would suggest that one implication of all that we have said so far is that the practise of community must necessarily involve a combination of mutual action by individuals on one hand (through acts of personal kindness, voluntary associations and charities), and collective action by government on the other. Both are necessary to fulfil the God-given mandate to create and sustain community. Those on the left who remain sceptical about non-state organisations must (as they have increasingly come to recognize) accept that the vocation to gift that *Caritas in Veritate* speaks about is a calling from God *both* to individuals acting as free persons making free choices *and* to the state as the representative of those individuals considered collectively. Those on the right who doubt the value or propriety of state action must accept that the state, too, is called by God to act on behalf of *all* its members in empowering (economically and politically) the poor and vulnerable. They remain members of the community too.

We began by observing that contemporary Western societies are in danger of becoming empty moral shells through the impact of a consumerist form of individualism. Philip Blond's analysis reminds us that the actions of both left and right have undermined community in ways that we have only

now begun to appreciate. In Pope Benedict's encyclical, we see a theological articulation of gift that moves us beyond individualistic self-fulfilment to a realization that there is such a thing as the common good. And thus we are pointed towards a moral basis for the actions of individuals-in-community. Surely now it can be seen that notions both of the all-powerful state and the minimalist state are philosophically and theologically flawed? Neither offers an adequate assessment of the human condition, and neither does justice to the Christian vision of human beings as called to live as members bound together in solidarity. Only through a rediscovery of the profound connections between community, vocation, gift and God will this be so.