

## **Mission as Icon: Taking Jean Luc Marion to Winnebago, Nebraska**

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An important challenge facing the Christian community and youth ministry in particular is what to do with the short term mission project. The rapid expansion of short term mission trips in the past few decades has transformed youth ministry, affecting how youth pastors and congregations frame the purpose of ministry to young people. It has brought with it some growing pains about cultural diversity, economic stewardship, and what it means to help others without “hurting” them. While the Christian community has certainly improved the way short term missions are done and the way they approach the communities they engage, there remains much to consider.

Much of the discussion remains focused on techniques or processes pertaining to the question “how to do a service project well”. While it is certainly true that this type of mission work has to focus on concrete, pragmatic, practices, there are important theoretical issues to explore as well. A hermeneutical approach to this issue not only interprets the social and cultural elements of this work through an interdisciplinary engagement of cultural theory, economics, sociology, etc., it also opens up important questions that address the theological and philosophical aspects of this work. Attempts to transform mission trips and service projects by focusing on either the social / culture, or the theological, separated from each other is problematic—both lead to their own form of inwardly turned ideology that keeps individuals and communities stuck either in dogmatics or pragmatics. Instead, what is needed is a hermeneutical

approach that recognizes the irreducible nature of any form of ministry as “theory laden practices”.

A significant problem with the more substantial critiques of short term mission projects is that they are unable to escape the strong metaphysical categories of religious and cultural ideology. The realization that mission projects function as an implicit colonization of the poor by the dominant cultural ideology has moved the discussion in a positive direction. Many organizations who lead short term mission projects now make sure that groups are educated about the importance of cultural difference and diversity. There has also been much work focusing on the economic and social impact of service projects, asking important questions about the relationship between the money spent vs. the economic and social impact of these trips. As important and helpful as these critiques have been, however, they do not go far enough to address the ideological or metaphysical paradigm of these short term projects.

To articulate the metaphysical issues related to short term mission projects this paper will engage the work of Jean Luc Marion, specifically his differentiation between the “idol” and the “icon” and his articulation of “givenness” and the possibility of the gift.<sup>1</sup> Put simply, the metaphysical problem of short term mission trips is the problem of the idolatrous gaze that takes the neighbor into the world of the self. Thus, it is important to examine the theory laden practice of short term missions, seeking ways to weaken both the cultural and dogmatic forms of ideology in order to establish a view of short term missions grounded in the given-ness of the icon. To do this, I will use the concrete example of Prairie Serve—a week long serve project that I plan and lead that partners with two primary churches in Iowa and Nebraska.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte, Second Edition* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* (Stanford University Press, 2002).

Prairie Serve is a short term serve project in partnership with Youth Unlimited, Winnebago Reformed Church, and Siouxland Unity Christian Reformed Church. Each summer 40-50 high school students come to Sioux City, Iowa for a time of worship, community, and teaching wrapped around service to the community. Winnebago Reformed Church is located on the Winnebago Reservation, home to the Ho Chunk people. Siouxland Unity church is a Lao community located in downtown Sioux City that ministers to the Asian community as well as other diverse groups. Young people and their leaders come already inculcated with cultural and dogmatic perspectives, many not realizing that the two have become conflated. They come with a particular cultural understanding of Christianity, and what it means to serve or do mission work. They come with social and economic ideologies that undergird their identity, manifesting itself in the way they approach the people they work with, and the projects they undertake. They also come having heard much of the rhetoric concerning missions, service, and short term projects.

Well intended people undertake projects like Prairie Serve with their own ideas of what should be happening, as well as their own beliefs about social and economic issues. This is rendered more problematic as these social and economic views become conflated with religious dogma. The call to love the neighbor and to make disciples is interpreted through a particular cultural paradigm of relationality and sentimentality that merely furthers the agenda of those undertaking the mission project. This is often done with little recognition of the cultural ideology that frames an understanding of poverty and work, which means that very little attention is given to defining poverty within a particular cultural experience or ideological bias that frames how they see work. The most common questions, objections, and suggestions that we receive as feedback from youth leaders and volunteers about Prairie Serve reveal what many of the

participants considered a “successful” project. They focus on three primary issues: 1. Spending time interacting with people (Loving people) 2. Getting large amounts of work done, and 3. Being able to clearly recognize the meaningfulness of the work accomplished.

While on the surface these three outcomes are not in and of themselves bad or wrong, they do reveal a common paradigm for framing these outcomes, demonstrating the prevalence of the idolatrous biases of those undertaking the service project. In this context the people and the work are objectified within the consciousness of the young person, as the neighbor becomes a way to merely fulfill a preconceived notion of mission or social transformation, taking its place within the idealized world created by the self. This establishes an economy of exchange in which the giver and givee enter into a reciprocal relationship, objectifying each other, and objectifying the gift—the work that is being done. This economy of exchange is at the same time economic, cultural, and religious. The powerful grip of the capitalist / consumerist ideology upon these projects is seen in the expectations of the participants regarding the work and the response of those being served. With regard to the work, there is an emphasis on pragmatism—meaning the work must be done efficiently and it must be needed. Over the past few years there are groups that are always concerned that they “stay busy”, and they see the speed with which they complete the projects as important.

Similarly, the current emphasis on working with those we serve, while admirable in the sense of wanting to establish respect and a sense of mutuality, assumes an economic interpretation of identity that frames work in a particular way. Resources like “When Helping Hurts”, though addressing one problem (the messiah complex and the objectification of the other via religious and sociological ideology) ends up creating another problem: an economic ideology

that maintains the reciprocal nature of economic exchange.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis on moving from a needs based approach to an asset based approach does address important issues regarding the way short term missions is undertaken by the Christian community. However, it remains stuck within an economic paradigm, and therefore an economic ideology of exchange. While it eliminates one form of idolatry—the objectification of the neighbor through a messiah complex—it creates a new one that captures the neighbor within the capitalist framework of the alleviation of poverty. Throughout the book the authors emphasize that short term projects are harmful when they are doing work that others in the community can do. Thus, work is seen as life giving only if it is framed within the economic paradigm of capitalism, meaning the mobilization of community assets, including labor, reducing the identity of those being served to fellow workers, consumers, etc. The result is that, while the terms of economic exchange are changed, participants remain trapped within an economic exchange governed by the transcendent metaphysical principles of capitalism, and therefore continue to objectify both those who are being served and those who are engaged in the work. The important questions that come out of this critique are: How might service projects and mission trips help free young people from the metaphysical trappings of an economy of exchange? How do we make sure we are not falling into the trap of objectifying those with whom we work, as well as the work itself?

In the parable of the good Samaritan Jesus tells a story about a man is robbed and left for dead on the road to Jericho. Both the priest and the Levite pass by on the other side—they keep their distance. The Samaritan, on the other hand, “came near him”. The effect of this coming near is that the Samaritan was “moved with pity”. Here we see the consequence of keeping our distance is a form of objectification. The priest and the Levite interpret the half dead man within

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself* (Moody Publishers, 2009).

their own religious conceptual framework. Consequently, they remain on the other side, removed in such a way that it is impossible for them to be “moved” by the man’s plight. The Samaritan, on the other hand, comes near. Rather than apprehend the man according to his own ethnic, cultural, and religious conceptual framework, the Samaritan encounters the man in a way that moves him.

In his essay “The Saturated Phenomenon” Marion provides a critique of a way of knowing does not leave room for experiences that fall outside of the criteria of possibility, meaning the formal conditions of possibility end up privileging the concept or ideal. Knowledge, in this context, is primarily rational.<sup>3</sup> Any discrepancy that occurs is understood to be a lack or failure of intuition as it is unable to present the phenomenon to the conceptual framework of the thinking subject. This means that knowledge of phenomena is grounded in a form of objectivity that privileges the rational concept used by the subject to make sense of the world. It is this privileging of the concept that Marion challenges. Marion argues that the primacy of the concept or the ideal does not lead to objective knowledge of a thing; instead, it represents the imposition of the subject, and the conceptual world of the subject, upon the object. This, according to Marion, is idolatry.

In *God without Being* Marion refers to the idol as that which halts the gaze of the subject, reflecting it back like a mirror. This creates a feedback loop in which the “thing” is caught within the conceptual framework of the subject. Instead of encountering or knowing the “thing”, the subject instead imposes upon it a conceptual framework that inscribes itself. Instead of encountering the “thing” that is intended, the subject reconstructs it in its own image by taking it into its own conceptual orbit. At the center of idolatry is the exercise of power over the thing

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed* (Fordham Univ Press, 2009).

that conforms it to the conceptual reality imposed by the subject. This is what happens in the case of the Levite and High Priest. They interpret the half dead man lying on the road through their own ideological (religious and ethnic) paradigm, and it is the reason why they do not encounter their neighbor in a way that takes responsibility for the neighbor in love.

Marion argues for an approach to phenomenology that is grounded in givenness, meaning that every appearance, every phenomenon, manifests itself in such a way that it gives itself. The significance of Marion's argument is that it represents an attempt to get beyond metaphysics in which every phenomenon is grounded in something outside of itself, something that is transcendent. In the case of idolatry, as the phenomenon is not received as it is given or appears, but it has meaning and identity imposed on it from the outside in relation to something that is transcendent. The consequence of conceptual idolatry is that it reduces every phenomenon to an object to be controlled, understood, and manipulated, rather than an event that is the ground of its own appearance, meaning, and identity in the way it gives itself to consciousness and intuition.

At the heart of this approach is Marion's articulation of the gift. In order to arrive at a phenomenon of givenness Marion must establish the nature of the phenomenon as a gift that is free from imposition from the outside. This means that the gift must not be part of an economy of exchange driven by reciprocity or commodification, as articulated in the work of Mauss and others. *In Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, Marion meticulously argues for the possibility of the gift and givenness that is not locked into reciprocity, and therefore is able to break free from the metaphysical trappings of necessity and causation. He does this by discussing ways in which the characters—the giver, the givee, and the gift itself—can be bracketed, which opens up the possibility for the gift to truly become a gift, grounded in the

possibility of givenness and acceptability. It is this articulation of bracketing that provides important insights for short term missions projects.

Marion uses the language of the “saturated phenomenon” to describe such an encounter. He describes “bedazzlement” as the phenomenon giving itself in such a way that it oversaturates our intuition, overwhelming our conceptual framework. The saturated phenomenon initiates a call that originates with the phenomenon as it gives itself, evoking a response. This call, for Marion, is anonymous, it is not based upon any concepts or rational apprehension on the part of the subject to whom it calls, it is an anonymous call that bedazzles, that is unbearable, and evokes a response. Here we see how the parable of the good Samaritan differentiates between the response of the Levite and priest, who remain separated from the half dead man as they appropriate him through their own conceptual schema. It is the Samaritan who comes close, and in coming close encounters the anonymous call of the half dead man, evoking a response of empathy and love. It is in response to this call that the work of the Samaritan becomes a gift. He bandages his wounds, brings him to an inn and takes care of him, and then he pays the inn keeper to care for him while he is gone. All of this work is done in response to the anonymous call in which the givee is bracketed. The anonymity means that the givee is universalized, and the work that is done is truly a gift that cannot be repaid as it is no longer situated within an economy of exchange. For Marion, this is the meaning of the text in Matthew’s gospel in which the sheep and the goats are separated based on the work that they did or didn’t do on behalf of the “least of these”.<sup>4</sup>

Marion’s work provides an important philosophical and theological foundation for a practical theology of youth ministry, specifically with regard to the way that short term missions

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<sup>4</sup> Marion, *Being Given*, 92.



are integrated as part of the ministry. The point of short term missions is to provide an opportunity, as much as possible, for breaking the cycle of exchange as young people encounter their neighbor. Freeing the work of short term missions from the economic paradigm of capitalism, both in terms of the needs based and asset based approach, is essential for opening the possibility of an actual encounter. The work is not being done to efficiently and effectively meet a need, nor is the work being done to mobilize assets, reorganize labor, and in the process apply capitalist principles. The purpose is to bracket the work, so that the work might truly become a gift, without condition and without reciprocation. How can this be done? A few suggestions:

1. As students and leaders prepare for a short term mission project it is important to help them frame the work in this way. Establishing the purpose of the project, not as helping poor people, but as an encounter of how God is already at work among the people and communities young people will be working in, is crucial. This means continually emphasizing that the purpose of these projects is not efficiency, it is not to get as much done as possible, it is not to save anyone or even to make a difference; it is merely to engage the work for the work's sake, whatever that might be.
2. During the periods of worship and devotions that usually are an important part of these trips it is important to focus on scripture texts and stories that speak to the idea of the "gift", emphasizing God's gift of love in Jesus the obliterates every form of cultural system of exchange. With this focus, the call to discipleship is a call to become responsible for our neighbor by modeling the grace and love God has shown us.

3. Similarly, it is helpful to focus on what God is doing in the lives of the students who are there to do the work. Implementing elements of various spiritual practices (Lectio Divina, prayer, scripture reading, silence, etc.) helps young people to attune themselves to what God is doing, and how they are freed to participate in God's action within the community they are serving.

4. An important way to establish this focus is to stop over-emphasizing the need to work directly with people. Of course, personal interaction is important, and establishing relationships with the people we work with can be enriching, but such an emphasis perpetuates the cycle of exchange. By bracketing the givee, and focusing primarily on the work to be done, we move in the direction of being able to receive our neighbor as a gift in the same way our work is offered as a true gift.

This approach to short term mission projects can be broadened out to a missional approach to youth ministry. Can the work of youth ministry be bracketed in such a way that it becomes a gift, and in becoming a gift it frees young people from the cycle of exchange? Bringing Marion's thought to bear on the practice of youth ministry provides a way of answering "yes" to this question. Within the technocapitalist ideological framework in which young people construct an identity, youth ministry has the opportunity to encounter the saturated phenomenon that is our students by no longer seeing them through the lens of religious or cultural ideology, but by opening ourselves to receive them as they give themselves to us, so that we might, like the Good Samaritan, be moved.