

THE GRAMMAR OF A CULTURAL ACT: A Review of Matthew John Paul Tan's *Justice, Unity, and the Hidden Christ*

Matthew John Paul Tan, *Justice, Unity, and the Hidden Christ: The Theopolitical Complex of the Social Justice Approach to Ecumenism in Vatican II*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014, 92+ pp.

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Those who critique the secular liberal order do so at their own risk. Those who dare to raise their voice—however softly—against the hegemony of what could be called the “onto-theology” of capitalist practices are often labeled romantics, communists, Marxists, or socialists. If they do get a reading, they tend to become the victims of eisegetical evaluations that, subtly or not, simplify and undermine their message. The fairest readings usually dismiss critiques of capitalism and liberal democracy as in the last analysis offering little by way of positive solutions or alternatives.

With his *Justice, Unity, and the Hidden Christ*, Matthew John Paul Tan embraces these risks, adding his voice to a growing chorus of theological critiques of Christianity's captivity to capitalist modes of living and breathing. And indeed, it is precisely to the ways that secular modernity compels us to “live” and “breathe” its tenets that Tan is drawn. Tan's voice is a robust addition

to a growing number of voices that contend that the “state/society/market complex” of liberalism is not just a neutral form that can be “filled” with Christian content, like one would fill a glass with a desired beverage, but rather a form that embodies a quite antithetical ontology and anthropology. As Tan sees it, a failure on the part of Christians to adequately comprehend the way that the form and *telos* of an act is never neutral, but always carries and expresses the ethos of the lifeworld from which it issues, has led to critical failures in the engagement of Christianity with the culture of modernity—specifically, with its capitalist ethos and practices. Tan’s particular aim in this book is to explore the fate of social justice and ecumenism in this social context, in the years following the promulgation of Conciliar document *Unitatis Redintegratio*.

Tan’s central argument is that the Conciliar Fathers were too hasty in their baptizing of “a contemporary context where society is circumscribed by the state market” (3). He argues that the framers largely presumed the foundational Maritainian and Murrayite beliefs that i) there is a genuine autonomy of the secular vis-à-vis the sacred, in the precise sense that the latter can have no social embodiment in its own right, and can only expect to have any influence on the forms and practices of the former via indirect and generic interventions of “intentions and hearts,” with a further caveat that such interventions must also “be moulded in accordance with the laws of the temporal realm” (16). The credibility of the preceding was underwritten by ii) the belief that there was a factual overlap between the goals and ideals of Christianity and the liberal espousal of rights, dignity, freedom, and the like. At the time of the Council, a new attitude toward the fruits of modernity was underway (*aggiornamento*), one that famously found its way into the first part of perhaps the most influential document of the Council, *Gaudium et Spes*. This growing belief in the positivity of certain elements of the liberal project contributed to the willingness to cede the affairs of the world to a newly conceived temporal realm. Finally, iii) the cumulative effect of this newfound collegial relationship with liberalism was the belief that the Church could therefore quite comfortably co-exist within the parameters of this new temporal sphere, could be guaranteed freedom within a “neutral civil space” (38) that could be counted on to provide the necessary

protection of all freedoms from any encroaching state ambitions—a level playing field for all social voices and a (relatively) common public discourse.

Tan's concern is to see what effect this stance had on the conception of the task of social justice and ecumenism. The immediate consequence was to place the *telos* of the acts of social justice and ecumenism within the contours of the new bifurcation of sacred and secular. That is, such acts could no longer invoke what was unique and particular about Christian narrativity as such, but were instead compelled to conform to the generic, universally accepted standards of temporal discourse. This is how Tan describes it:

were the Church to engage in those actions [of social justice], the shape of those actions had to be properly framed by technical categories determined by the secular sphere. Critique of these technical categories stood outside the Church sphere of competence. Therefore, it would seem imperative that were the Church to engage the modern world, the physical shape of the Church's action had to conform to the standards set by secular institutions (25).

In other words, the Church could, like any other social body, have input regarding the various domains proper to the world, but by no means could She frame this input from within a properly Christological grammar that might compel a more-than-worldly conception of the social.

The problem with this new strategy, as Tan sees it, was that the neat spiritual-temporal divide presupposed by the Conciliar Fathers was based on a falsely structured engagement rooted in the terms and conditions of a (now usually recognized as defunct) Cartesian structure of knowing and acting. First, the Conciliar Fathers supposed that the Christian subject and the modern subject were, in essentials, the same person, that the "joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1), Christian or otherwise, were roughly coterminous. Placed in a linguistic register, there was thought to be a simple correlation between the words spoken in each world, spiritual and temporal; each refers more or less to the same reality. At the heart of this correlation was a shared belief in the Cartesian agent as "autonomous, self-sufficient and self-defining, and thus ... always certain as to what it knows and

wants” (29). It became a generational assumption that specific narrative particularities only “added to” or qualified as accidents what can for all intents and purposes be called an Aristotelian-Boethian-Thomist account of the person modified by Cartesian and Kantian themes, characterized above all by an individuality that tended to be atomistic, a self-consciousness or rationality that tended to be abstractly ahistorical and acultural, and an autonomy that tended to be defined in naturalistic terms as “freedom from.” Such a “mono-ontological” account of the secular person could not, in its basic substance, be ‘interrupted’ by the spiritual dimension of the person, which seemed to be persistently thought of as a cosmetic veneer that really did not have anything essential to offer for the life of the person in the world, save by way of injecting “Christian spirit” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 12) or working “mysteriously on the heart of those who engage in the practices of secular culture” (24).

Tan counters the tenability of this paradigm by suggesting that “the Church’s continued engagement via such a reading would have limited application in our contemporary context” (25). It can be noted that most have long since abandoned the belief that the anthropology articulated by the Church and secular culture are substantially the same. Whether one reads the current context as “secularized” in the pejorative sense, as the theoretical and practical forgetfulness of God (Joseph Ratzinger) or simply as “plural” or “de-traditionalized” (Lieven Boeve), there can be little doubt that the serenity of the early *aggiornamento*/correlation project has been severely curtailed. For Tan, at the core of this entire ill-fated endeavour was a failure to grasp the ways in which attempts to accommodate the liberal (Cartesian) version of subjectivity that the Church regarded so hopefully at this time was in fact constructed upon an irenic foundation. Here, Tan’s voice resonates with the likes of David L. Schindler, Tracey Rowland, Alasdair MacIntyre, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Charles Taylor, *et al.*, as he develops his critique under the auspices of a sociology of knowledge, relying on figures such as Michel Foucault, Graham Ward, Michel de Certeau, and Peter Berger.

Tan continues fleshing out his argument by pointing out that at the time of the Council there was little consciousness of the mediatory role that culture

plays in the framing or “foregrounding” of knowledge: “there was here an impression that the data yielded by observing these cultural categories were self-explanatory, universally accessible and thus universally valid regardless of the social or cultural context within which the observer was situated” (18). So, again, it was assumed that if liberalism spoke of dignity, freedom, and rights, Christians could be confident that this was more or less something they could agree with (the whole tone and tenor of *Gaudium et Spes* expresses this hope). No one really bothered to ask if apparent surface-level compatibility masked a deeper interior dissonance. Rather, is it not the case that truth is truth wherever you find it? As Rowland has explained it, jumping off a MacIntyrean critique of an instrumental view of language, this is “the idea that it is always possible to distil doctrines from the tradition which embodies them and then represent them in the idiom of an alternative tradition—in this context, the idiom of ‘modern man’—without in any way changing the meaning of the doctrines.”¹ On the above basis, a whole generation of enthusiasts took up the torch of translating Christian ideas into the idiom of liberal discourse.

This strategy is encapsulated nicely by a comment made by one of the American neo-conservative enthusiasts of liberalism, the late Richard John Neuhaus: “Liberalism is freedom, and what we do with freedom is charged to our account.”² Here, “freedom” (whose/which freedom?) is assumed as a self-evident (read: “We hold these truths to be self-evident...”), self-referential good *as liberal*, while intentionality—here *Christian* intentionality—(“what we do, how we do it”) is the sole qualifier that serves to guarantee that “freedom” is always “filled” with appropriate content, qualified by the right “spirit,” motivation, and ends. Left unasked, of course, is the question of whether “freedom” itself is not already circumscribed in advance as itself part of a particular lifeworld or “language game,” and therefore always already interiorly constituted by the particular set of rules and presuppositions that govern the narrative in which it is

¹ Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 2003), 21.

² Richard John Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of John Paul II,” *First Things*, 1997: <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1997/05/001-the-liberalism-of-john-paul-ii>

housed. Also left unaddressed is a cultural question as to the extent to which adopting the language and practices of another tradition would affect the language and practices of the tradition to which you profess loyalty. In other words, are there *cultural* conditions that alter the meaning and *telos* of an act?

Tan approaches this question by framing it within a Foucauldian account of “discursive practices” that always inform this or that position taken in regard to the real (29). Far from being a Cartesian *cogito* that stands in sovereign autonomy over all histories, contexts, and traditions, the subject is in real ways formed by, and is the product of, the social practices of which it has been a participant. Tan follows Ward in the latter’s articulation of the instability of the subject “always ‘in process,’ constantly being affected by the ‘time and spacing within which any subject position is oriented’” (29). What this does is undermine the credibility of the claims made by “pure” reason, for “when the subject is performing an act, he is simultaneously being immersed in and formed by a whole array of other practices and symbols...” (29–30). Thus, the subjects produced—and the range of ideas and practices that they take to be “givens”—are always themselves the unique cultural products of this or that ideology and historical configuration. And this means that we cannot hope to get to the meaning of a term such as “freedom” without a broader, more interrogative form of narrative questioning—a questioning of the social and cultural whole—if we wish to determine just what terms like freedom, equality, and rights mean in different contexts, and in our own case, the extent to which Christian practices can be transliterated into the idioms of these sacred cows of liberalism.

So, exactly what kind of subject does liberalism produce? And, as D.L. Schindler would make thematic, what kind of ontology is presupposed in and reinforced by the practices that the liberal subject participates in? Within, or as a consequence of, an individual imagined to stand sovereignly *above* practices as an autonomous, self-conscious, rational will, liberalism produces a subject whose first or primitive relation is not to the *other* (God, other persons), but rather to itself. As Tan somewhat cheekily puts it, the

anthropological presumptions of both liberalism and capitalism ... begin from a position of idiocy. In its original

Greek meaning, *idios* refers to a position of selfish isolation from the community. Liberalism is idiotic in the sense that it presumes the person to be fundamentally an individual prior to and independent of any communal belonging. The individual is autonomous and self-contained, and thus enters into communal association through no greater force than that of the individual will, hence the modern demarcation of a variety of organisations, social clubs, churches, political, educational and business organisations, as 'voluntary associations.' Furthermore, the will's decision to enter into communion emerges from giving primacy to a rational calculation that aim to maximise the individual's advantage. The rational, autonomous individual is posited as the primary sociological unit and takes precedence over any kind of communal association (48).

Parsed from the perspective of a thick, sacramental notion of belonging and communion articulated by John Paul II,³ there is little resemblance between the above liberal notion of the self and a "*communio personarum*" account, in which the person is first constituted by a primordial, constitutive capacity for relation that penetrates its being to the core, and which forms the ground of all its social relations--and we will see Tan develop a counterpoint to liberalism based on Trinitarian practices in this vein. For now, though, the point is that the first and constitutive level of reality for the liberal is the individual; the second is an optional and merely constructive (and therefore arbitrary) level that is subordinate and takes form and shape according to what defines the individual *qua* individual.

Tan points out that this anthropology, presupposed by liberalism, feeds into social practices watermarked by "relations of violence." (51). Because the self is properly individual, and because there is no common *mythos*, no thick story of original relational harmony that would unite individuals in more than extrinsic relationships, the 'other' must be viewed as a threat, a potential competitor for

³ See for example, John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline, 2006), 163: "Man becomes an image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion. He is, in fact, 'from the beginning' not only an image in which the solitude of one Person, who rules the world, mirrors itself, but also and essentially the image of an inscrutable divine communion of Persons."

goods that I want or need—as a potential obstacle to my own free self-determination. Within this ontology the social imperative must therefore be the “management of violence...” (51). The threat of violence and social upheaval must be controlled by contractual relations that require the threat of force to compel their obligation. This means that the state must take a central role in mediating and protecting the rights of individuals: “Ultimately, the liberal, autonomous individual is dependent on his membership in the social contract with the state, because the state is seen to be the most proficient wielder of force and thus the most efficient protection of the individual” (51). If the state, then, is the guarantee of my liberty, it becomes my prerogative to protect the state at all costs, as the state is the paternal figure that keeps its children from fighting; without it, we have no (or at least a very thin) common mantle under which to work out our disputes. A people that have bracketed thick primordial accounts of their origin need both the authoritative force offered by the state, as well as a *new*, only *sufficiently* thick, alternative *mythos* that can provide a modicum of social glue to tie people together in a common vision. The first guarantees that when there is bickering and conflict among the children of the state, the state has the ultimate power to act as arbiter in deciding which right or freedom to ignore or enshrine, drawing on both constitutional law and legal precedence, but also, increasingly, on the shrillest voices of its children (cf. MacIntyre)—thus the tendency for law to be interpreted as ‘liberally’ as possible within liberalism. The second purports to provide a melting pot account of values and goods purportedly amenable to all, e.g., the liberal canon of rights, toleration, non-discrimination, freedom, etc. The long and short of it all is that an individual as the subjective bearer of rights and freedoms goes hand-in-hand with a “soft” totalitarian state necessary to enforce these freedoms, to which is ascribed a quasi-divine status.⁴ And so Tan explains: “The defence of liberty then would become the justification to the resort to all means necessary to protect the state, even to the point of using violence against the state’s own citizens. Violence

⁴ So, on this reading, John Courtney Murray’s hope that civil society would provide a buffer zone between the state and the individual failed to recognize that, in fact, the state and the individual have always been lovers conspiring to keep civil society under their control.

then, does not become the anomaly that the state fixes, but is built into the maintenance of the state and the relations within it" (51). We could say, then, that the subject produced by liberalism is thus a fragmented self—fundamentally homeless in relation to the world, to others, and to God—who must, in a naturally violent world, look to the state (and the violence it sanctions) as saviour and protector of his basic rights and freedoms.

All of this is buttressed and attenuated by an economic related to the above anthropological foundations, which for Tan completes the whole state/society/market complex of liberalism. When economic life is governed by an ontology of violence, economic exchange will be characterized by the primacy of the accumulation of goods by the individual in a context of merely contractual relations (51). As Tan describes it,

[i]n such relations, the barriers between giver, gift, and recipient as autonomous hermetically sealed categories are maintained. The exchangeability of goods and services works on the idea that what is exchanged can be shorn off from the community from which it comes and the persons that participate in it. Indeed, capitalism ensures the exchangeability of all commodities by dissolving the notion of community altogether, dissolving the communal networks of the village, family and church, and entrenching in their stead a series of hub-and-spokes relations between individuals mediated by contracts (51–52).

Invoking Dan Bell and William T. Cavanaugh, Tan next argues that capitalism is only secondarily premised on creating and maximizing wealth. Its real aim is to create the conditions whereby the self will think that it *must* create and maximize wealth. Tan points out that, unlike a "Trinitarian presumption of plenitude, the market institutionalizes the post-lapsarian notion of fundamental scarcity and competition" (52). Fear of the other, provoked by the egocentric individualist self, means a constant anxiety that I will not get my fair share, that someone else's consumption will curtail my own. "Escape from fear becomes dependent on the accumulation of material goods so as to assure physical, psychological, and emotional integrity" (52). Production and consumption thereby become imperative. But what is consumed is not so much a product or thing as it is

desire itself (Cavanaugh)—for if you become fully *satisfied* with this product and that thing, you are no longer a good consumer. If you are to keep consuming, you must be convinced that you always need, and are incomplete without, the newest products. Modern advertising techniques capitalize on this, not by advertising *things*, but rather by advertising *desire* itself. One could suggest that Facebook is the paradigm of capitalist practices—and the fate of civil society in a liberal society—wherein friendship is literally consumed at the most superficial and instrumental of levels.

Paradoxically, then, capitalist consumers are marked by a curious detachment with regard to the things or persons they buy and consume. Their “fix” or “high” becomes the act of consumption itself, “which leads to either an intensifying of what is essentially nihilistic behavior or a lashing out in acts of violence and domination against other consumers in a desperate attempt to regain control. Left alone, the proliferation and intensification of such relations can only degenerate into cycles of inequality, conflict and conquests” (53). The subject produced by liberalism is thus also the consumer self, the self who—and here is the rub—*unwittingly*, and even *eagerly*, allows the calculative, instrumental, and egocentric market forces to dictate and stimulate its desires at the expense of others.

This then, is the burden of Tan’s assessment of the ontology and practices of liberalism. The detail he puts into articulating the foundations and ensuing practices of liberalism reflects his conviction that liberalism is definitely *not* a neutral form and set of practices that can be filled with Christian content. Rather, as David L. Schindler puts it,

liberalism’s intended strictly juridical order, in the name of avoiding a metaphysics, advances a definite metaphysics centered in freedom of indifference, whose central burden is to displace the person’s natural community with God and others, and with truth and goodness, by an extrinsic and so far voluntaristic community—what is commonly termed a

contractual community—made up of formal-independent, logically self-centered individuals.⁵

The Church, in adopting the grammar of the cultural act of liberalism, would in fact become, as Tan puts it, “the chaplain of the capitalist order” (42). It would necessarily sign over the *ethos* of its own practices inasmuch as it bound itself to the practices—and therefore the metaphysics—of liberal culture. As a consequence, it would now be “extending the cultural logic of the market, and the violent relation that would emit from that logic” (53). More to the point in question, the Church’s attempts to engage ecumenically via the modality of social justice—*i.e.*, to transliterate Christ’s love for other via a language of rights, dignity, freedom and the like—would be but a particular extension of the above logic. As Tan explains, “[w]hen framed by liberalism, any act of social justice eventually can become complicit with maintaining a social fabric which is atomizing and fundamentally grounded in conflict and coercion” (51). When an act of social justice is framed within a liberal context, then what is essential about a specifically *Christian* act—the *person* of Christ!—must give way to the generic, situated, and, from Tan’s perspective, *false* universality of a secular reason that in its original act excludes the very possibility of both Christ and a deeper form of human relating beyond the strictures of liberal ontology. For Tan, it is impossible that such a conception not undermine the real allegiance of the Christian. For “when spatial dominance is ceded to the state/society/market complex, even ostensibly Christian acts can declare the ultimate social reality to be something other than the Body of Christ” (62). Tan is convinced that social-political configurations draw the subject into a bodily way of living, thinking, and acting that cannot help but communicate an anthropology; obviously, the way that liberalism masks its own fundamental commitments and presuppositions only makes the whole process that much more insidious. The real tragedy, Tan laments, is that the ruse perpetrated by liberalism was not something that happened despite the best efforts of Christians. Rather, it was aided and abetted

⁵ David L. Schindler, “The Repressive Logic of Liberal Rights: Religious Freedom, Contraceptives, and the ‘Phony’ Argument of the New York Times.” *Communio* 38 (2011), 533.

by the cultural short-sightedness of a conciliar era that desperately wanted to be relevant and “open to the world.” “In the same way that a ceding of thorns allowed the choking of the Word, the lack of Conciliar analysis of these [liberalism’s] presumptions led to the often-too-easy acceptance of a Theopolitical complex that dulls the confessionally Christian character of the acts of social justice” (83).

But perhaps Tan overstates his claims. Could it not be argued that he places too great an emphasis on the power of the body and concrete practices in the formation of the self? There are those of a certain philosophical and theological ilk who would call Tan a “socialist” or “Marxist” at precisely this point (if indeed they could restrain their invective long enough for him to make his case fully). In light of this tendency, it is worthwhile to pause and further interrogate the case that understands the self to be fundamentally at the “mercy of the body,” to borrow a phrase from Louis-Marie Chauvet.

We have seen Tan articulate the very thick view that “contrary to the presumption of the static Cartesian subject that can decisively impose its will on any object, an agent is always “in process” and being formed by his social context” (45). Tan’s real complaint is thus about a subject duped into the practices of an alternative worldview by the hidden ontology of liberalism. He does not simply bemoan individualism, atheism, consumerism, materialism, and the like in the abstract, as if they were simply the fruits of a moral failure to think “rationally” that could be remedied by better thinking and (perhaps) praying. Rather, his interest lies precisely at the point at which thinking and praying are already rendered void by the *practices* that inexorably pollute the best intentions of the will or heart. Immerse yourself in *these* practices, and you will *become* them: in a liberal society, you will become, to one degree or another, a subject who prizes individuality, freedom “from,” “religious freedom,” and the act of consumption. (In this context, Schindler has spoken of the “practical atheism” in America that thrives quite comfortably—and logically—alongside an otherwise

“incorrigibly religious” society.⁶) Conversely, immerse yourself in *Christian* practices, and you will become a subject who prizes relationship, the “freedom” of being in and for Christ regardless of the cost, and the “consumption” of the Eucharist (cf. Cavanaugh). This is to say that reality is always filtered through practices which themselves are always already “sacramental-liturgical”; practices imprint you with the *ethos* that they signify and mediate. It is here—in the heart and the body, in *this* family, *this* tribe, *this* locale, *this* social body, *this* lifeworld—that “reason” takes shape. To tighten this somewhat, the “body” is the dramatic site or staging of the mind. The body as context, practices, and history is where reason’s “wax nose” (Ratzinger) is massaged: where *this* insight is given precedent over *that* insight—where *this* feature is brought out more strongly than *that* feature—which produces a “reason” rather than *the* “Reason.”

I have become more and more convinced that this operates at a much deeper level than we like to think. Indeed, perhaps what most “realist” theological epistemologies (here I am referring broadly to the “classical” designation in Milbank’s division between “romantic” and “classical” theology today) take to be the timeless and eternal truths and structures of reason accessible to all those of sound and open mind are, rather, always already derived theologically (and *only make sense* theologically); a retroactive illumination prompted by faith in a God who is Love, and as such—and *only* as such, as a Person Who has established real relationship with us—has burst open the boundaries of the mind in and through the loving union established in the sacraments, primordially, in baptism, the opening up of the self to the practices of love that most matter. The mind so touched now has a new dramatic staging that cannot simply be sloughed off. This self is now a son or a daughter, an adopted child of a Father; there is nothing this child can do to escape this new orbit or relation, the way in which

⁶ Referencing Will Herberg, Schindler argues that “religiosity and secularism in America share an inner logic or framework of reality, such that religion is disposed as a matter of principle to slip into secularism. Religion and secularism thus coexist, and indeed, can grow directly rather than inversely in proportion to one another, because they are largely but different sides of the same coin.” David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 70.

the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, continually modifies and conditions the self's ways of thinking and acting.

The problem occurs when Christians with philosophical aims desire to translate their situated, "impure" rationality into cold, impersonal, and abstract categories of Being; these Christians grasp at the "rational" fragments of truth dropped from the plenitude of the theological table (at which said Christians are no longer seated) in order to create a "rational" basis for "truth," the contents of which, now separated from the banquet, are no longer vivified by a primary relation to their ordering Source. They simultaneously perpetrate the illusion of "pure reason" (which is now only a simulacra of Christian belief) while betraying the very source of their argument, cutting off the theological branch upon which are perched. The point is that *they too have been radically informed by their bodily, sacramental practices*, by their context, by their filiation as sons and daughters of the Father, even if they have chosen to downgrade these practices' significance. The point is not to say that intelligibility, truth, reason, or nature are illusions, but rather to point to the manifold ways in which they cannot be thought of as existing outside of worldviews, lifeworlds, practices, culture, and history—indeed, it is to say that they are *only* encountered in the latter. None of this is merely incidental, cosmetic, or can simply be overcome by thinking or praying.

So, Tan's thick account of the cultural dimension of any given act is quite compelling. And it is on the strength of this account that Tan develops his positive alternative. We can begin by noting that in this Tan avoids a double temptation: first, the temptation to move from the culturally constructed nature of an act to a position of either full-blown relativism or a more nuanced position of "radical particularity." This latter position has been developed by "postmodern" Leuven theologian Lieven Boeve, who, against the conciliar project of correlation, argues that we should no longer seek after the chimeric strategies of shared consensus, but should instead be allowed to focus on the particularity of our own traditions—what is unique about them—without being

forced to distil them down to a lowest common denominator.⁷ However, in saying this, Boeve makes the simultaneous move of limiting each particularity to itself, for as *radically* particular, it cannot therefore be claimed that there is anything universally true about a tradition or narrative's particularity. Thus, while Christians, for example, are fully encouraged to celebrate their narrative's particularity, at no point may this celebration operate outside of the group within the practices of everyday life in society. That is, Boeve's purported efforts to salvage the robustness of faith traditions is already informed by a prior commitment to a liberal mapping out of space and time. The particularity of traditions is policed by a hidden (liberal) universality that still demands the blood and guts of the heart of religious claims and the ultimate loyalty of the citizen to the state. What emerges quite clearly with Boeve is that his ultimate loyalty is with the secular status quo, although he masks its determinative ontological status with the far more fluffy and ambiguous language of "pluralization" and "de-traditionalization." The long and short of his proposal is that any chance of a thick or robust notion of Christian "identity," even within the faith narrative itself, collapses under the pressure of secular practices that claim the foremost allegiance of the person. This subsequently serves to condition and qualify the shape of the Christian narrative itself, for the subject, held imaginatively captive to the force of secular practices, tends to recreate their own narrative in its image. Particularity—any *real* difference or diversity—then shrivels up under the generic weight of a secular logic of the same. Against this reading, at no point does Tan give up on a robust, thick account of Christian practices *sui generis*.

The second temptation Tan avoids is the confessional or Constantinian temptation, wherein the Church adopts the state's mapping of space and time in order to enforce particular religious claims or its institutional presence in society with the logic of coercion and force. This is particularly anathema for Tan, for, as we have seen, at no point can the properly Christian act be informed by the *telos* of violence and fragmentation. A thick account of Christian identity—*i.e.*, one that embodies a conviction about its universality and its more than merely

⁷ Cf. Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (London: Continuum, 2007).

private articulation—cannot be the excuse to then enlist a “strategic” occupation of space and time *à la* state/capitalist practices, whereby domination, surveillance, technique, profitability, results, commodification, marketability, rationalization, conformity, management, analysis, regulation, and the like are “virtues” (67–68). These, of course, constitute the *modus operandi* of the modern nation state (read: NSA surveillance) and the institutions, bureaucracies, and corporations within it, all of which create certain social roles and expectations through the above mechanisms. I would argue that this represents the contemporary “Constantinian” temptation for the Church. MacIntyre’s “managerial character” corresponds to these characteristics, being a deployment of the need to “direct and redirect their organizations’ available resources, both human and non-human, as effectively as possible towards these ends.”⁸ One could perhaps expand MacIntyre’s list of characters with the addition of the corporate psychopath: the (usually delusional, less intelligent, and therefore resentful) character who exploits the state/capitalist repertoire of virtues for his or her own career advancement, or who desires control and pursues it through a skilful, usually passive-aggressive, manipulation of persons by intimidation, fear, and the leveraging of power. No one should need to be told that ecclesial institutions today themselves far too often embody these anti-personal—deeply un-Christlike!—modes of operation, as they eagerly ape corporate and legal models of governance. In each case—relativism and what we could call a certain neo-confessionalism—the Church gives herself over to the extrinsic, incommensurable practices of other *ethoi*, and loses Her soul in the process.

Against both, then, Tan articulates his third way. At its heart, the alternative is built around the premise that the Church must have its own visible economy of practices that embody and reinforce the Christian’s fundamental allegiance to Christ (but in a way that does not capitulate to either of the temptations we have articulated). If concrete, embodied cultural practices are the staging whereby reality is mediated, then it is precisely here that the Church must have a presence not reducible to anything else. A religious freedom that is merely a

⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 2007), 25.

freedom that safeguards an interior practice of religion that is (only) embodied behind the closed doors of the assembly of believers, or the merely linguistic freedom to exclaim "God bless America!" is not enough. Instead, what is needed is "a concrete alternative communal site" that "prevents the alternative consciousness that the Church wants to nurture from being domesticated by the dominant cultural form" (63). Tan expresses himself most succinctly when he explains that "the Church must embody itself as public in its own right." Precisely how it achieves this in the present liberal context while avoiding the two temptations outlined above is through what Tan, employing categories of de Certeau, calls a "tactical" mode of action (67). As distinct from a "strategic" mode (which operates within a secular mapping of space and time, described by Pickstock as "the sinister project of *mathēsis* or 'spatializing' knowledge, that is to say, of mapping all knowledge onto a manipulable grid"⁹), a "tactical" mode of operation plays on the fact that the Church's proper locus is not of this world. Rather, "eucharistic space challenges the conception of time within the state/society/market complex" (69). It does so by exceeding and re-qualifying its limits. When worldly time is exceeded in the Eucharist, both space and time enter a new hermeneutics. "Eucharistic practice poses a challenge to the status quo because the Eucharist interrupts this flattened time by having eternity 'enter history,' making the liturgy a simultaneously historical and eschatological event that transforms temporal, and indeed, political experience" (70). Both the Church's identity and its *proclamation* of its identity are distinct from an occupation of space and time in a worldly manner.

The Church can have a trans-strategic occupation of space and time because its operations exist on the neither purely interior nor purely exterior basis of a sacramental-eschatological locus. As sacramental and eschatological, the Christian lives in the world according to a vivified mode of existence fed from the springs of the liturgical-sacramental life and the new eschatological "aim" of the person. This, suggests Tan, excavating the original meaning of *leitourgia* as "not merely the worship by individuals of God, but also a work done for the sake

⁹ Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), xiii.

of a collective occupying a public space” (64), is not meant to affect simply the individual *qua* individual or the gathered community, but rather also affects the individual at the level of action outside the gathered community. As he puts it, “[s]acramental practice ... defines a public context for the act.” Citing *Deus Caritas Est*, Tan stresses that the *diakonia* (the social mission of love) originates in the Word (*kerygma-martyria*) and is given existential shape and form by the *leitourgia*. It cannot therefore in any way be thought of as having a logic all its own, outside of its two essential qualifiers. As Benedict XVI put it, “[f]or the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 25). The Christian is, aside from anything else, simply dishonest—to others and to him or herself—if he or she purports to practice Christ’s love on any other basis. Christian witness is *necessarily* part of the grammar of this act. The Christian’s acts must therefore derive from and conform to this *ethos*.

Of course, the question that such an affirmation raises is always a practical one. What can this *really* look like within a liberal space that imposes its practices on the self? The usual knock on positions such as Tan’s is that they remain romantic, idealistic, and speculative exercises that have very little of practical value to offer, obliging as they do the self to escape to a Christian ghetto and requiring concerns for the world to be jettisoned. Jeremy Beer draws attention to this perception with regard to Schindler and the *Communio* school of theology, suggesting that what hampers Schindler’s influence is that

he comes to conclusions that are uncomfortable and, from a practical political point of view, seemingly useless. No easy fixes, no programs, emerge from Schindler’s work—or, indeed, from the *Communio* perspective as a whole. In fact, the way in which superficial fixes and programs often conceal and even deepen our predicament is in part what Schindler means to reveal.¹⁰

¹⁰ Jeremy Beer, “Philosopher of Love: David L. Schindler.” *The American Conservative*, October 16, 2013. Online: <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/philosopher-of-love-587/>.

Something identical could be said about Tan's project. It is not a program or a strategy; it is not a rallying cry for the Church to take up an activist role vis-à-vis secularity in any way that would concretely invest it in those practices. Nor is it a project that anticipates social victory any time soon. Rather, it is a call for the self to deeply consider his or her fundamental allegiance, and the way this allegiance manifests itself in practices. On this plane, Tan's project is fundamentally theological, ontological, and anthropological at heart. The Christian self is called to discover that their way of being can only be understood "from the standpoint of Trinitarian theology," wherein "a person is no longer looked at as a discrete category. Instead, its definition is set in relation to other categories" (47). As Schindler would say, the self is not first defined by a freedom *from* something, but rather as a freedom that is always already set in relation to God and the other. Therefore, "[l]ove is the basic act and order of things."¹¹ In other words, a Trinitarian order of love is not an addition *ad extra*, not a cosmetic or merely constructed claim—it is reality *par excellence*. We could thus say that Tan's efforts can best be thought of first as an exercise of the imagination: a Christian who understands all of this discovers the full activation of his or her baptism and is invited to make the proverbial "paradigm shift" from a theistically colored existence to an existence lived full in light of this love.

For Tan, the imagination is won first at the level of the deep grammar of sacramental and liturgical practices. In Christian practices, the self comes to concretely realize that he or she is now a citizen of a new Eucharistic community in which divisions between citizens are overcome in the body of Christ. The new relating of selves that occurs in the sacramental and liturgical action—the fundamental locus of the real—makes it no longer possible to image a site outside of this that is somehow immune to these practices. "Sacramental practice as exemplified by the Eucharist thereby enacts an ecclesial public space, one that changes the way one looks at the contours of time and the terms of citizenship. If the terms of sociality become transformed in the Eucharist, then the presumptions and cultural logic of acts of social justice cannot help but

¹¹ David L. Schindler, *Ordering Love: Liberal Societies and the Memory of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 1.

become similarly transformed” (72). Tan draws out the consequences of this argument, concluding that “the liturgical imaginary trains recipients to become gifts to one another” (75). The training that one receives in the liturgy, then, is subversive of the self that liberalism wants you to become. In short, Tan reads Eucharistic practices as utterly subversive of the violent, self-centered, capitalist modes of exchange typified in the ontology of liberalism. He sees all of this as constituting a powerful resource of the imagination, so to speak, whereby the Christian can acquire the imaginative capital necessary to subvert capitalist modes of exchange through cultural acts that are genuinely Christian.

Tan concludes by stressing that at the heart of the mission of the Church vis-à-vis liberal secular culture must be a “great refusal” (92) of secular culture, inasmuch as it “actually embodies a secular gospel” and a “secular *leitourgia*” (91). This, as hinted at before, means that the Christian must be willing to constantly scrutinize, back away from, or even renounce his or her place and standing in the secular world. There is no comfortable or easy solution when a real dialogue or exchange is no longer possible between liberalism and Christianity. There must instead be a stubborn praxis of resistance, characterized both by a commitment never to give up on the world—which has been created for Eucharistic communion—but also never to renounce one’s fundamental allegiance to the “republic” (91) of the Church, the Kingdom to come. Those looking for silver bullets will no doubt be unhappy; Tan’s rejoinder would no doubt be that it is never the path of the Christian to rely on bullets of any kind.

With this book, Tan has crafted a welcome addition to an ever-growing body of literature that continues to deepen its analysis of Christianity’s relation to culture, practices, and the presuppositions of the present state/society/market complex of liberalism. Tan has ably showed how an act is *necessarily* cultural, how it cannot slough off its implicit commitment to the lifeworld that constitutes it, and the way in which a thick account of Christian practices can out-narrate the practices of liberalism by providing a basis for an economy of genuine social practices. While the book could have perhaps been strengthened by an additional chapter that provides more concrete detail on just how an act of social justice and ecumenism within a Christian praxis of resistance might be

performed against the context of the pervasive everyday practices of liberalism, Tan has nevertheless done us an important service by impelling us to start thinking about the context in which such acts are performed, no less than MacIntyre has impelled us to start thinking about the role of context in moral theory. All in all, Tan is clear that a Christian ontology and anthropology need not feel compelled to justify themselves at the bar of secular reason or conform themselves to existing social structures. This clearly marks out Tan's own "radically orthodox" sympathies. Perhaps the only area of ambiguity concerns the particulars of the question of precisely *how* theology is radical. This of course is something of a quibble, as I myself am comfortable with the appellation "radical," and I raise the question here solely with the "ecumenical" goal of an ever-deeper clarification of just what "radical" theology really is, or ought to be.

As I see it, one is on the right track if one begins from the ecclesial-sacramental-liturgical practices of faith. If one wishes to identify oneself as a *Christian* thinker, one *must* be a full participant here; one must drink, taste, and savour these practices and be convinced of their broader significance beyond the mere fact of celebration. In other words, one must recognize in them a much more than nominal or cosmetic character as a psychological or political locus of resistance. They must rather be understood as the articulation of *reality itself—all* reality. My line of questioning thereby asks how Christian practices are to be understood as the fruit of the total recapitulation of all in all in Christ (cf. Col 3:11). A risk that accompanies thick accounts of discursive practices is a reduction of Christian practices to a non-ontology that accents their relativization within an eschatological figuration. That is, some take sacramental practices to rupture or interrupt the "body," subverting and supplanting its "natural" commitments with the eschatological figuration enacted in the liturgy.

For example, Graham Ward denies that there are any thick natural commitments that the Christian might have to a primordial teleology that belongs to the order of creation and is ordered to a Christological fulfillment.¹² In

¹² Stephen Shakespeare identifies something of a difference between Ward and his other Radical Orthodoxy compatriots, Milbank and Pickstock, suggesting the Ward is "apparently more open to dialogue with other disciplines, such as cultural theory and queer studies, and

this light, he denies that there is a normative value ascribed to sexual difference,¹³ and celebrates “relationality, *per se*.”¹⁴ He interprets relationality in a Bataillean way, as a reversible, interchangeable, diverse dynamic, something that he believes the doctrine of Trinity to reinforce. “The labour of Trinitarian love—of difference, in difference, from difference, to different—prescribes the relation of the Godhead to creation and the relation that is possible between two women, two men, or a man and a woman.”¹⁵ With this, Ward commits himself to a relationality that automatically brackets the biological as inessential to what constitutes the eschatological fruitfulness of love in the intratrinitarian relations and in the world to come. In this, Ward’s notion of what constitutes a Christian practice in this context is decidedly thin in relation to received tradition, even if he thinks it has merits on other bases.

So the question then becomes one of how to mediate between various intra-confessional conceptions of what exactly constitutes a thick or thin Christian, sacramental practice—of what constitutes Trinitarian and Eucharistic practices. This I raise to show how the thickness or thinness of accounts of Christian practices *ad intra* have decidedly important implications when you move beyond the battle between Christian practices and liberal practices at the macro-level. This likely goes beyond the scope of what Tan was trying to accomplish, but in closing I would like to suggest that an even thicker and more robust account of sacramental practices is in fact an important part of preventing Christian practices from being paradoxically collapsed back into the very vacuity and generalized intentionality of a liberal conception it had tried to avoid in the first place.

so more willing to discuss how the claims of Christian theology are always conditioned by their context.” Stephen Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2007), 36.

¹³ Cf. Graham Ward, “There is no Sexual Difference.” In *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, edited by Gerald Loughlin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 76-85.

¹⁴ Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 202.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 201–202.

Schindler has described John Paul II's theology of the body in the following way: "The body in its physical structure as such bears a vision of reality: it is an anticipatory sign, and already an expression, of the order of love or gift that most deeply characterizes the meaning of the person and indeed, via an adequately conceived analogy, the meaning of all creaturely being."¹⁶ The conception contrasts immediately with Ward's, inasmuch as the *body itself, as body*, and not just the body constructed by culture and history, bears a primordial vision of reality. This of course rests on a much different reading of the shape and foundation of Christian practices. The emphases of both John Paul II and Schindler rest on the fact that they do not make a sharp distinction between the physical body and the cultural body at the level of Christian anthropology. That is, the physical body *qua* physical is already circumscribed by a certain culture, namely, the culture that Jesus Christ presupposes and establishes anew in his call for us to "the *living forms of the 'new man'*"¹⁷ (cf. Matt 19:3–8). The physical body is thus, paradoxically, always already more than its physicality. Its physicality is symbolic–*sacramental*, even–of the order of love or gift that constitutes space and time in its essence.

Without going into too much detail, we can parse the burden of John Paul II's sacramental ontology through the triple relationship of *origin*, *relation*, and *difference*, viewed through a hermeneutics of the body. First, to be a body is to come from *somewhere* and *someone*. The body is the concrete sign of our being-from-another, or put negatively, of our not-being-the-source-of-ourselves. To be a body is to reference our filial *origins*. Placed in the perspective of divine filiation, to be a son or daughter of God the Father is to be the product of a divine, elective, adoptive love (in Jesus Christ) that places us in concrete historical *relation* to an overflowing plenitude, a primordial font of fecundity—an origin that is itself relation inasmuch as it is an overflowing love that then spills out to contain a third. This vertical relation is embodied horizontally, sacramentally in the man-woman relationship, made possible on the basis of the sexual difference,

¹⁶ David L. Schindler, "The Embodied Person as Gift and the Cultural Task in America: *Status Quaestionis*." *Communio* 35 (2008), 397.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 323.

primordially constituted in the order of creation (Gen 1), and ecclesially constituted in the perspective of the sacrament through Christ's call to go back to "the beginning" (cf. Matt 19:3–8). Within the nuptial relationship, the child is the concrete grammar of origin and relation (manifested at the level of a body iconic of origin and relation), being an echo of the original (Trinitarian) love that cannot be contained and the fruit of spousal relation that is itself fruit of this original (Trinitarian) love. In this, the child is thus also iconic of the structure of *difference*, inasmuch as the child attests to the non-identity of nuptial love with itself—that is, to its sacramental-eschatological structure. The child, whose arrival "surprises" the couple, challenges their love to expand, exposing concretely the very structure and meaning of love as being-from-origin (*e.g.*, to be is to be from love and towards love) and being-towards-divinity (*e.g.*, the eschatological fecundity of the coming Kingdom). The exclusivity of the couple's love—"I love you, and *only* you"—which is constantly threatened by a monistic collapse into itself outside of its properly filial structure, is broken into by the child—always already present in the structure of spousal self-giving as a signifying presence, an immediate fruitfulness of the Spirit—who demands that love consider its filial origins, that it open itself up to the font from whence it came. The logic or grammar of human love is therefore filial-familial/nuptial in its essence.

I would thus suggest that here we have a basis for an even thicker, far more adequate account of Christian practices. It is not, *pace* Ward, "relationality, per se," but rather *the* relationality constituted by the ontology of a body formed by the "culture" and practices of nuptial and filial love. This form of love resists the temptation to simply pour a generic Trinity (*e.g.*, love as intention, love as friendship, love without Trinitarian processions) into any culturally constituted form of relationality in order to call that relationality "Trinitarian." In other words, Christian practices must be formed first and foremost from the very particular account of love that emerges within the sacramental narrative of faith. Indeed, it is precisely within the new filial-nuptial grammar of faith embodied in the sacraments that this becomes clear. Here we can buttress an emphasis on the practices of the Eucharist with the practices of the sacraments of marriage and baptism. John Paul II argued that "the visible sign of marriage 'in the beginning,'

inasmuch as it is linked to the visible sign of Christ and the Church on the summit of God's saving economy, transposes the eternal plan of love into the historical dimensions and makes it the foundation of the whole sacramental order."¹⁸ Further, baptism—"unless you become like this child" (Mk 10:15)—provides the dramatic, existential foreground for the practices of marriage, which is a real belonging to God the Father, through Christ and in the Spirit, that places us and all our activities in a properly sacramental perspective. Not only do marriage and baptism (along with the sacrament of penance) allow a "real," existential overcoming of sin within the *ethos* of redemption, but they also intensify eschatological desire for the fullness of the time, when the marks of our filiation and our capacity for nuptial love will be excessively fulfilled in the Kingdom to come.

Finally returning to Tan's thesis, all of this is simply to suggest that thickening the practices of a Trinitarian anthropology and an economy of Eucharistic practices with the leaven of a concrete ontology of relation suggested by the sacraments of marriage and baptism will provide a robust account of the social practices that might best resist liberal practices. As it stands, Tan's book is to be recommended as essential reading for an understanding of the way the grammar of the Christian act demands its own visible economy of practices. How this might be realized fully in our own times is not something that we can yet foresee but, as Tan makes clear, the first step lies in our willingness to imagine a social space situated not by the practices of liberal capitalism, but by the practices of Love.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 503.