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Trade, Usury, and the Incursion of Desire

Allen G. Jorgenson¹

It is a singular honour to be asked to contribute to the Festschrift for the Rev. Dr. Gordon A. Jensen. I first met Gordon when I was a teenager at Camp Kuriakos, where he was a counsellor and I a camper. Our paths have since crossed in many times and ways. Memories of beers shared after sessions at the International Luther Conference in Wittenberg and Helsinki are certainly strong. But I am especially grateful for the Bible Study work we did together in 2015 at the National Convention of the ECLIC, which met under the theme “Liberated by God’s Grace.” At that event we both reflected on Luther’s understanding of grace and we each, in our own ways, refracted those reflections through the contemporary prism of the context of doing theology on stolen land. In what follows, I keep this conversation going, imagining how where we do theology informs its shape and the shape of the liberation with which Christ graces us.²

We live in strange times. Perhaps time is always strange to us, but still, we live in a time when children’s authors are being harassed at borders, walls are being built the world round, women continue to earn less than men, immigrants with PhDs are driving cabs in my city, and while many cannot find a regular family doctor, MD’s who practiced medicine for years in South America and Asia are unable to do so in my country. Polar ice caps melt. Species are disappearing from the continent at unconscionable rates. People kill each other for their differing beliefs about truths not empirically demonstrable. Peace evades us these days. And those of us who pine for peace will recall Hans Kung’s assertion that there will be no world peace until there is peace among the religions. To that I would add that there will be no peace among the religions without peace within the religions.

Some days ago, a friend of mine sent about a call for peace on the internet. In the midst of the flotsam and jetsam of Facebook a gem appears once in a while, and I think I would count this as such. It simply said that for the religions to come to peace, people from differing religions need to eat together, pray together, and hold each other’s babies. Eat together, pray together, and hold each other’s babies. It is quite the formula. I like the way eating and holding bookend a shared desire for intimacy with God. These first and last are both about enjoying the fruits of our labours. On the one side, in eating, we sate our flesh with labour’s fruit, and on the other side, in holding each other’s babies, we enjoy the fruit of our flesh’s satiation. One the one hand we feed on what has given up its life and on the other hand we feed that to which we have given life. Both the food in our hand and the child in our arms speak to us of desire, and desire frames prayer, which instantiates a hunger so deep that it

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² This paper was first presented at a working group meeting at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, CA in 2017. This group of theologians contributed chapters to *The Alternative Luther: Lutheran Theology from the Subaltern* (Fortress, 2019) edited by Elsa Marie Widberg Pedersen. I submitted an earlier paper for that volume, and so this one has never been published. I offer it here in honour of the life, work, and ministry of the Rev. Dr. Gordon A. Jensen.

can be found behind, beyond, and within every hunger, at the heart of every caress, in the eye of each yearning and in our ache to be a part of another, of a family, of a community, of the cosmos. Desire defines us, in our relationship to what we eat, to whom we hold, and to whom we pray.

Vítor Westhelle has provided us with a very fine analysis of desire in an article entitled “Justification as Death and Gift.” In it he explores desire in relationship to the three publics addressed by Luther and others: *oeconomia*, *politia*, and *ecclesia*. He notes that desire names a fundamental drive in the realm of the *oeconomia*, or economy—understood by Luther and his contemporaries to reference the family, while interest in the public names its pair in the *politia*, or realm of the politics.³ He notes, as well, that there is overlap in these, to the end that there is not a neat dividing line between the *oeconomia* and *politia*. It seems that they both speak to a kind of yearning for ends which may or may not overlap, for purposes which may or may not be divinely sanctioned. Desire and interest are both gifts from God, but also possible conduits for sin.⁴ In Westhelle’s *Eschatology and Space* he notes the identification of desire with *eros*, and points to Hegel’s description wherein desire aims at the obliteration of the other.⁵ Consumption comes to mind, along with Hannah Arendt’s analysis of *homo faber*, where consumption names the basest of human activities and politics the highest, with production striking a mean position.⁶ Perhaps for the moment we could simply allow that these three—consumption, production, and politics—admit porous borders and imagine that the erotic, or desire, is found in some way in all of human activity, as Schleiermacher was wont to affirm.⁷ And yet, I think it wise in so doing to affirm that in some fashion, desire is especially potent in the economy, the *oeconomia*, or the household.

The title of my essay is “Trade, Usury, and the Incursion of Desire.” It is to be noted that the last in this sequence of three reads in two directions: on the one hand, the subjective genitive speaks to the manner in which desire wages war, while the objective genitive identifies desire itself as attacked. I intend to attend to both but begin with the former, in service of exploring the fracture of *economia* in North America, with especial attention to Indigenous realities. But first I begin with Luther’s treatment of usury, which first necessitates a few comments on the economic situation of the 16th century.⁸

The Europe that Luther knew was undergoing extensive changes. It was marked by a population explosion accompanied by a large immigration to larger cities, which accordingly grew larger over this period. Accompanying these changes, the early 16th century was marked by a dynamic economy, led by “captains of industry,” which made the developments of the 150 years prior to the 16th century pale by comparison.⁹ Attending these changes was a “notably high rate of inflation” of three to five percent per year—unmatched in Northern

³ Vítor Westhelle, “Justification as Death and Gift,” *Lutheran Quarterly* XXIV (2010): 257.

⁴ Westhelle, “Justification,” 259.

⁵ Tillich, of course, provides a more fulsome description of *eros* as more than “a mere striving for pleasure.” See Elsa Marie Widberg Pedersen, “This is Not about Sex? A Discussion of the Understanding of Love and Grace in Bernard of Clairvaux’s and Martin Luther’s Theologies,” in *Dialogue* 50/1 (March 2011):18.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, ed. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1996), 5.

⁸ In what follows I draw upon Lewis William Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation, 1517-1559* (New York: Harpercollins, 1985).

⁹ Spitz, 18.

Europe until the 20th century.¹⁰ This growth was uneven, but where it took place one could find an active mercantile phenomenon with an “accelerated economic growth and the speedier development of the capitalist economy.”¹¹ While this was not yet the capitalism of our present experience, Westhelle notes that it “is correct that during Luther's life, the economic fundamentals of capitalism were taking seed in southern Germany and northern Italy.”¹² Also taking seed was a discontent with the failure of wages to keep up with costs so that this incipient capitalism, with its growth of costs, cannot be divorced from the phenomenon of protest even while a simple cause and effect cannot be predicated of these emerging phenomena. Torvend notes that these economic inequities were leveraged in a spiritual vein via the concomitant assertion that just as economic surplus can generate capital, so too can we generate spiritual capital.¹³ Subsequently, there was little interest in systemic change from the side of the rich in that the poor existed as the objects of charity. Consequently, Luther's critique of usury, then, included a critical edge for both economic and spiritual matters.¹⁴

An especially significant relevant text for Luther, wherein he addresses the reality of desire run amok—that is, desire driven by human greed, or avarice—is found in his 1524 “Trade and Usury,” where we read the following:

Because of [a merchant's] avarice, therefore, the goods must be priced as much higher as the greater need of the other fellow will allow, so that the neighbor's need becomes as it were the measure of the goods' worth and value. Tell me, isn't that an un-Christian and inhuman thing to do? Isn't that the equivalent to selling a poor man his own need in the same transaction? When he has to buy his wares at a higher price because of his need, that is the same as having to buy his own need; for what is sold to him is not simply the wares as they are, but the wares plus the fact that he must have them.¹⁵

This text is a very fine explication of desire run amok. Here desire become avarice aims for the consumption of all. Luther here clearly names this human propensity to desire for satiation as demonic. The desire to be satiated has been supplanted by the desire for satiation which creates the engine of greed. To be satiated is to have my need met. To desire satiation is to make my need my obsession. It is to worship desire, which then consumes everything in sight. Desire here is the subjective genitive of the incursion of desire. It is desire curved in on itself; it is desire *incurvatus in se*; it is desire as sin. Luther's critique of avarice in this sense is especially fitting, given his context.

¹⁰ Spitz, 18.

¹¹ Spitz, 18.

¹² Vitor Westhelle, *Liberating Luther: A Lutheran Theology from Latin America*, trans. Robert A. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), 200. Westhelle identifies the usurer as a primal relative of the capitalist (p. 201).

¹³ Westhelle, *Liberating Luther*, 22.

¹⁴ It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a survey of critiques of Luther's economic perspectives and proposals. But for a fascinating and insightful assessment of one of the ways in which Luther's theology had negative economic and environmental consequence see Terra Schwerin Rowe, “The Crux of the Matter: Theology of the Cross and the Modern Extractive Imaginary,” in *The Crux of Theology: Luther's Teachings and our Work for Freedom, Justice, and Peace*, ed. Allen G. Jorgenson and Kristen E. Kvam, 153–70, Lanham: Lexington Press, 2022.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1958–86). Hereafter cited as LW. See LW 45, 248.

It is important, then, to set this astounding quotation in context before teasing out its salient features. Luther is often described as simply being a man of his day in decrying usury; a man who has not quite yet caught up with the inevitability of incipient capitalism and its global reach. Yet Elsa Marie Pedersen also points to the theological implications of his practical advice around money:

If one reads some of his key texts carefully, it becomes clear that Luther is not simply advocating an old economy or combating a modern economy per se. Rather, Luther is criticizing an economic system that commercializes the church and exploits the common human being, the people of God.¹⁶

And so we see that there is also theological content to Luther's critique of usury. Luther decried greed in the above quotation as "an un-Christian and inhuman thing to do." It is important to note that Luther is not being idealistic here. He ferrets out a consequence of the emerging financial system which currently has global implications that I benefit from while others suffer under. Luther is not being an idealist, although he can certainly be accused of such in other sections of this text. And so, for instance, he claims that the three best Christian ways of dealing with the exchange of goods are as follows: first, it is best if we are robbed and graciously accept this, second it is better if we give away to those in need and third it is acceptable that we lend to others in need but always without interest.¹⁷ Of course, he recognizes that not all in the world are Christians and so God has established fair commerce in buying and selling with cash as the fourth means by which goods can be exchanged.¹⁸ Luther is mindful that the world cannot be ruled by the gospel, or by love, and so the law has a place here.¹⁹ But note, as well, that the world ruled by law is not left without God. In the above quotation regarding avarice, the fixing of prices to the end that the unjust merchant sells the vulnerable her need is un-Christian and inhuman because both the Gospel and natural law have God as guarantor. Here and at other instance in the text Luther from time to time appeals to natural law to pique consciences.²⁰

Luther is working through his theology of money at a particularly complicated and interesting time in the history of the nascent Western economic system. Trade has increased ever since the crusades, a point that Luther laments—especially when he sees German money flowing east for spices and west for linens.²¹ He joins the long lament of usury, critiquing the *Zinss*, a payment due a money lender on the basis of his losing income from money in the same way that a land owner forgoes crops in lending out his land.²² Luther describes this as a most odious practice, which simply replicates what has been condemned in usury. Luther declares that the allowance of the purchase of a *Zinss* is a novelty and so questionable. He is not satisfied with the logic allowing the *Zinss*, a logic which developed out of a canonical ruling that protects the *Interesse* of lenders who could otherwise use that same money to set up a shop, for instance. The money collected by the lender allowed them to

¹⁶ Pedersen, "Economy and Grace; A Defense of Human Capital," *Dialogue* 54/3 (Fall 2015): 228.

¹⁷ LW 45, 256–58.

¹⁸ LW 45, 249.

¹⁹ LW 45, 264.

²⁰ LW 45, 292, 296.

²¹ LW 45, 246.

²² LW 45, 295 ff.

collect a reasonable return on their investment of 4 to 6 percent. Luther decries this since a businessman who would take that same money and set up a business wagers a loss as much as gain. But when he lends the money in return for a *Zinss*, he accrues no danger of a loss of his money. The document outlines not only this theoretical problem, but many ways in which Luther saw merchants in his days cheat clients and one another. His is a discerning eye with a practical view. At the end of the day, he affirms with Aristotle that money is not to make money.²³ This is more certainly, in Luther's view, both an inhuman and un-Christian practice. Lending money to make money is simply wrong.

We realize, of course, that Luther was on the losing side of this debate. We who live the realities of globalism and the colonialism are well aware that selling people their need is the very basis of advertising, and making money from money is what funds our retirement portfolios and the endowments that underwrite many of the institutions where we study and work. Luther railed against usury, incipient capitalism, international trade and avarice, or desire run amok, and he failed at every turn.²⁴

I know that by knowing the advantages of the success of colonialism, personally. The property on which my house sits, with its comfortable office where I sit and type out articles such as this, was deeded to the Haudenosaunee in our part of the world. How the deed came to name my wife and myself as the owners is both complicated and simple: complicated because the machinations over the last 200 years or so that made it possible for us to buy this property from the prior owners likely involve all of the trickeries Luther names in his list of nefarious business dealings and more; and simple because the land I live on is stolen and that is the singular and inescapable truth of the matter.

Alas, this story is not mine alone, but likely yours if you are a Settler living in the Americas and it may well be your truth as well if you come from other parts of the world. This tale of my house near the Great Lakes is told all across this continent some Indigenous folk call Turtle Island. The region where I was raised, just north of the Great Plains, was once home to and visited by an astounding variety of Indigenous peoples.²⁵ We are gathered here on the west coast of what some First Nations folks call Turtle Island, and so I thought it fitting to speak a little to the experience of some of the folk on this side of the continent. I am a little more familiar with those who live in Canada, and so will speak in a cursory way to their experience in order to explicate something of the calculating chaos of colonialism—the incursion of desire run amok.

²³ LW 45, 299.

²⁴ It would be mistaken to unreservedly equate capitalism with unfettered desire, since the early Calvinist worldview informing capitalism, for instance, had an understanding that capital gained by restraint was to be used for the poor—a point given secular construal in some later articulations of the so-called Protestant work ethic that also made room for interests in social well-being. And yet, the logic of this ethic, with a redirected desire, is still desire: now for a richer spiritual life (for Calvin et al.), or for a safer society for making more money (for Smith et al). This latter and louder desire has, as the horizon of its understanding of the good, economic growth, which is too often now the marker of value.

²⁵ I grew up on a farm just outside of Ponoka, AB—not so very far from Gordon's home community. According to the website native-land, this was territory known to the following groups: Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux), Niitsítpiis-stahkoi (Blackfoot), Nêhiyaw-Askiy (Plains Cree), Įyãhé Nakón maḱóce (Stoney), Michif Piyii (Métis), and Tsuut'ina Peoples. See "Native Land Digital," Native Land, accessed February 8, 2024, <https://native-land.ca/>.

The peoples of the Northwest Coast in Canada included the Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Haisla, Bella Coola, Kwakiutl, Nootka and Coast Salish.²⁶ These nations first encountered Europeans in the 18th century, whereupon exposure to smallpox resulted in significant population losses. Spanish and British explorers exchanged goods for pelts, goods that included firearms, tools, and alcohol. In the middle of the 19th century, some treaties were established by Governor James Douglas, treaties that were soon abandoned.²⁷ Alongside of the failure of the crown to honour treaties was its clearly articulated goal of assimilating Indigenous peoples to the end that there would no longer be an “Indian problem” in Canada. The vehicle for this “solution” was the Indian Act of 1876.²⁸ It established the system of residential schools, a parallel system to the industrial schools in the USA, wherein Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes in order to be “civilized” under the tutelage of the empire.²⁹ At these schools, children were not allowed to see their parents, speak their languages, practice their religion, or visit with their siblings. In many of them physical and sexual abuse also accompanied spiritual and social abuse. It is important to be clear about this: the state in this instance took on an identity of a stern parent, or guardian, whose task it was to curb, to discipline, and to shape a wayward child that was, that is, the Indigenous People, into its own image. It could be called parochialism, and that is a part of the story, but it is, alas, more nefarious. The state was in this instance an instantiation of empire, that human propensity to do the impossible: simultaneously to embrace the world and shut it out; that is, to embrace the world in order to grab fur, tea, oil, gold, diamonds, slaves, the list goes on; and to shut it out in order to keep capital for itself. Luther rightly saw the emergence of a capitalism in concert with usurious expansion as inhuman.

The inhumanity of empire in the Northwest Coast of Turtle Island took another step in 1884, when the Canadian government banned the Northwest Coast Indigenous practice of potlatch, a rite that historically served First Nations in ordering communities and determining the contours of trade. The ceremony involved the giving of gifts to those invited by a local leader to a multi-day celebration. The supposed rationale for this ban, which continued until 1951, was that the reckless giving of gifts was un-Christian. At the heart of this ban, though, was the calculus of empire that sought to order subjects for the Queen within the economics of an emerging capitalism. But let me first say just a little bit more about the potlatch.

In the first instance, there never really was something called a potlatch. This word does not exist in the languages of the Northwest Coast, although it can be seen as a derivation of a verb that means “to give” in Nuuchahnulth.³⁰ What comes to be called the potlatch is really a linguistic convention used by Settler governments and missionaries to reference a number of social phenomena. It has been elsewhere described as follows:

²⁶ For what follows see the Canadian Encyclopedia, “Northwest Coast Indigenous People in Canada,” accessed February 28, 2017. <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/aboriginal-people-northwest-coast/>.

²⁷ And so, for instance, a reserve of 4000 acres for a Coast Salish/Stó:lō group was reduced to 600 acres in 1868 in Chilliwack. Cf. Keith Thor Carlson, *The Power of Place, the Problem of Time* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 195.

²⁸ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

²⁹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *They Came for the Children: Canada, Aboriginal Peoples, and Residential Schools* (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012).

³⁰ Douglas Cole and Ira Chaikin, *An Iron Hand Upon the People: The Law Against the Potlatch on the NW Coast* (Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1990), 6.

Potlatching can be primarily understood as a religious event, a public ceremony linking contemporary individuals and symbols with significantly pristine and sacred persons and objects from the mythic era of creation. Important implications for social structure are evident, but contingent. Economic functions are consequential.³¹

Keith Carlson notes that the two main reasons for potlatching would be the occasion wherein there was a change of name associated with land or property transfer, or ceremonies in which one community leader would try to outdo another in generosity.³² In either event, the potlatch involved extending invitations to an event in which important hereditary possessions were displayed, which associate the holder to the mythic era of creation, the conferring of privilege, and feast that was accompanied by a mass distribution of goods.³³ Carlson notes, as well, that the supposed rationale for outlawing these by the government was the health danger of having so many people together, moral issues since it was rumored that some men prostituted family member in order to amass monies needed, and the anti-work climate it created.³⁴ Ultimately, however, the problem with the potlatch was that it countered empire's calculus of accumulation.³⁵ In stark contrast, among the North West Coastal peoples, prestige was enhanced by depletion to the end that, to give an example, a true Kwakiutl chief died poor.³⁶ In sum, "to give away wealth was to be wealthy."³⁷ Further to these, the potlatch was seen as a place to settle debts, and some have argued that it was a way to ensure that those who were disadvantaged experienced something of a social safety net.³⁸

It should also be noted, in this too short introduction to a very complex religious, social, and environmental phenomenon, that the government crackdowns were largely unsuccessful.³⁹ This was the case despite repeated calls by missionaries to squash potlatching. Local government indifference can be variously explained, but principal among these would be that governments were anxious that stern enforcement of the rule would both further exacerbate First Nations already piqued by unjust land grabs and raise the ire of white traders who made significant gain from the sales of goods for potlatches.⁴⁰

These latter points are not insignificant in that they demonstrate the irrationality of empire and the manner in which its logic of expansion and exclusion is finally and fully illogical. Empire sets itself against itself since greed takes up residence in corporations that work at counter-purposes, and so Homi Bhabha notes that hegemony "depends on the

³¹ Steven Vertovec, "Potlatching and the Mythic Past: Re-evaluation of the Traditional Northwest Coast American Indian Complex," *Religion* 13/4 (October, 1983): 337.

³² Carlson, *The Power of Place*, 204.

³³ Vertovec, "Potlatching and the Mythic Past," 326.

³⁴ Carlson, *The Power of Place*, 201.

³⁵ In a related but different way, Indigenous refusal to abide by colonial strictures against potlatch echoed Luther's vision of a community attending to love of neighbour. Luther's vision of this is clearly seen in his proposal for a community chest. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore these two rich communal responses to the question of caring for the other.

³⁶ Cole and Chaikin, *An Iron Hand*, 11.

³⁷ Cole and Chaikin, *An Iron Hand*, 12.

³⁸ Cf. Cole and Chaikin, *An Iron Hand*, 27. Vertovec, "Potlatching and the Mythic Past," 330 notes that an economic explanation only partially accounts for the phenomena.

³⁹ Cole and Chaikin, *An Iron Hand*, 37.

⁴⁰ Cole and Chaikin, *An Iron Hand*, 52, 50.

production of alternative or antagonistic images that are always produced side by side and in competition with each other.”⁴¹ But even while an empire divided against itself cannot finally stand, it rages all about it while it begins its slow and painful demise. Alas, the collateral damage is legion, and yet, the subaltern strikes back as noted by Bhabha:

Counter-narratives of the nation [of India] that continually evoke and erase [the colonial power’s] totalizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual—disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities.⁴²

The potlatch ban was rescinded in 1951, and in Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) guaranteed and guarantees Indigenous peoples the right to engage their religious tradition in integrity. Moreover, the recent work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has advanced the issue in the national agenda, even while work still needs to be done. But it needs to be underscored that all of the above are finally and fully credited to the indefatigable spirit of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. They have fought and they continue to fight tooth and nail for every recognition, every wrong righted even while governments who claim to work with them take them to court in flagrant violation of treaties. The Indigenous communities of the Americas define resilience, and they do that in the face of empire’s propensity to order their desire. Indigenous people know well the sting of empire: naming their desire for potlatch as immoral, their desire to speak their language as barbaric, their desire to practice their sacred ceremonies as demonic. Indigenous desires have experienced the incursion or attack of empire, and still they rise, like the proverbial phoenix.

It is fitting, I think, to ponder this theologically. In my efforts to know something of the land that I tread daily, and in my need to know the people who know this land, I discover time and again a kind of spirit that is arresting. What sustains a whole people when their desire to be who they are has endured the incursion of cultural genocide for more than a century? What do we make of this fitting desire that is the objective genitive in the face of the subjective genitive, which is the incursion of colonial desire? What can we learn from the desire that is the object of invasion, the desire that suffers the *incurvatus in se* of an empire that cares not for the Indigenous, nor the land they inhabit, nor the water that they traverse—now poisoned with plastic in empire’s propensity for convenience. What is this Indigenous desire, this desire for life that will not bend under the corpulence of empire? Whence this desire to be authentic in the face of assimilation? I believe this desire is data for theological inquiry.

Simone Weil writes of desire that “if we go down into ourselves, we find that we possess exactly what we desire.”⁴³ I think Weil is suggesting that the God whom we desire holds our desire in its hand. We are made by that for which we yearn. This kind of desire here has a revelatory capacity. We too easily reduce desire to a kind of concupiscence, wherein it is at best an ordered ache and at worst a lust that finally consumes all that is good. And yet it might be useful to note that the Latin verbal form behind concupiscence—*concupisco*—is composed of the preposition *com/with* and the verb *cupio/desire*. Perhaps,

⁴¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 29.

⁴² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 149.

⁴³ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crauford (London: Routledge, 1997), 20.

then, there is room to imagine a desire that cannot be reduced to concupiscence as greed for gain. In other words, perhaps the what, or the Who, that accompanies desire as evidenced in the “with” of con-cupiscence warrants further thought about desire. Maybe there is more to desire than greed. Luther intimates this in that he critiqued the “sophists” for reducing original sin to concupiscence, while he considers original sin to be not only the disordering of concupiscence but of all of the human faculties.⁴⁴ Sin cannot be reduced to concupiscence alone since in considering the human faculties, Luther renders the whole human at a loss before God and so driven to a faith that clings to God. Faith finally includes the reception of our very selves as selves before God. But what does it mean to be before God? To be before God is to be naked. We must turn to this image if we are to understand something of desire. Consider Luther again, this time in reflecting on Adam’s realization of his nakedness:

Here Adam’s conscience is roused by the real sting of the Law. It is as if God said: “You know that you are naked, and for this reason you hid. But your nakedness is my creation. You are not condemning it as something shameful, are you?” ... Here, Adam pressed hard in this manner was in the midst of death and in the midst of hell. He was compelled to confess that nakedness was not evil, for it had been created by God. On the other hand, he realized that evil was this: that now he had a bad conscience because of the nakedness in which he had previously glorified as in a unique adornment, and that he was now terrified by God’s voice, which he had previously heard with utmost pleasure.⁴⁵

Adam here experiences two horrors: his realizing that to know his nakedness is now a damnation and hearing God’s voice is now a hell. His skin, his beautiful skin dabbed with the fingerprints of God is now an *aide de memoire* of dismemberment. And his ears, fashioned by God after the twirling delight of the divine voice have now been untwisted so that God’s voice is now straight terror.

Adam’s nakedness was a vulnerability that Luther describes as a “unique adornment.” This was, it seems, an adornment unlike any others. This nakedness is finally and fully exposure of the flesh. Richard Kearney asserts that “flesh is where we experience our greatest vulnerability” in his introduction to the provocatively titled book *Carnal Hermeneutics*.⁴⁶ But that is not yet enough for Kearney. He invites us to think of the flesh differently, not only as an immediate source of sensual knowledge, but as a resource for intimating the sensible, and so he notes that it is flesh’s vulnerability that makes it resourceful.⁴⁷ And at the heart of this vulnerable resourcefulness is the capacity of the flesh to be both agent and patient.⁴⁸ There is something different about the skin, the biggest organ of all. The ear hears but does not speak. The nose smells but does not create odors. The eyes sees but does not create images for other eyes. The tongue tastes but does not create flavours. The skin, however, both touches and is touched; skin is touching. The skin, it seems, is the sense par excellence, with its primordial sense for being in relationship. The skin is the

⁴⁴ Cf. LW 1, 114.

⁴⁵ LW 1, 176.

⁴⁶ Richard Kearney, “Introduction,” in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, ed. Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 21.

⁴⁷ Kearney, “Introduction,” 22.

⁴⁸ Kearney, “Introduction,” 21.

organ of intimacy; the mediating agent of our need for the other, of our need to be touched and our need to touch. This is why Luther has God say that “your nakedness is My creation.”⁴⁹ Naked is an adjective but nakedness is a noun and is identified as belonging to the primal pair. Nakedness is not a how, it is a what, and a what that has a fundamental relationship to the voice of God. When nakedness is received as fullness it is a grace, but when it is seen as a lack, writes Giorgio Agamben, it is for us sin.⁵⁰ To condemn our nakedness, writes Luther, is to hear God’s voice as a terror, which is etymologically related to the word for “to tremble.” Skin trembles, then, in two modes: in horror at incursive threats and in the delight of desire. The latter occurs when we receive our nakedness as the gift it is.

Perhaps, then, we might think differently about desire in the light of this understanding of nakedness as God’s creation. In creation God is making us in the divine image by creating us in nakedness, and so in vulnerability. Simone Weil writes that we “are drawn toward a thing, either because there is some good we are seeking from it, or because we cannot do without it.”⁵¹ Skin desires to touch and to be touched because skin is the primal mode of sensibility, according to Aristotle, and so the condition of possibility of all senses.⁵² Desire, then, announces its arrival first in the skin: trembling, blushing, chafing, and reaching. To declare beauty skin-deep is no small thing. Nakedness is God’s creation, and beauty is the colour of skin, in hues the world over and cast in every imaginable shape. Beauty is the skin of an apple, the bark of the tree and the allure of your pet. Of course, we also desire to reach out and touch other humans. Who can resist the cheek of a baby, the crown of a toddler, the totality of a lover, the artfully wrinkled hand of a senior? We desire to be with each of these because we want to know God’s creation in the richest and fullest form possible—in the flesh.

Of course, desire does run amok. Desire runs amok when we seek to orchestrate beauty, and master truth, and coerce goodness. Desire runs amok when empire assaults desire for the purpose of its expansion. But finally, desire will not be bested because desire is tendered in the skin and the skin is the site of nakedness, God’s creation: skin instantiates the human open and vulnerable, the human expectant and expecting—yes, expecting. Karmen Kendrick writes, in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, “Breath is drawn in as life and breathed out as joyfulness. ... I have wondered ... if every cry of joy might not harbor some trace of divine delight.”⁵³

Divine delight. Yes, we must end with this. God delights in creation, and to know that is to know divine delight, to know that delight speaks of a God who desires us, a God Christians meet in Jesus. Our desire finally rests in divine delight. This desire, desire born from divine delight, might finally be the answer to empire in our times. Divine delight desires us to need our neighbour rather than sell her need to her. Divine desire delights in messianic meals the world over, while empire outlaws potlatch. Divine delight desires that humans eat together, and pray together, and hold each other’s babies in vulnerability, in love, in a subverting and obstinate refusal to give up on the act of hospitality that begins when we reach out and touch and are touched in faith’s gracious wager.

⁴⁹ LW 1, 176.

⁵⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 82.

⁵¹ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Crawford (London: Routledge, 1997), 201.

⁵² Kearney, *Carnal Hermeneutics*, 24.

⁵³ Karmen Kendrick, “Original Breath,” in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, 300.