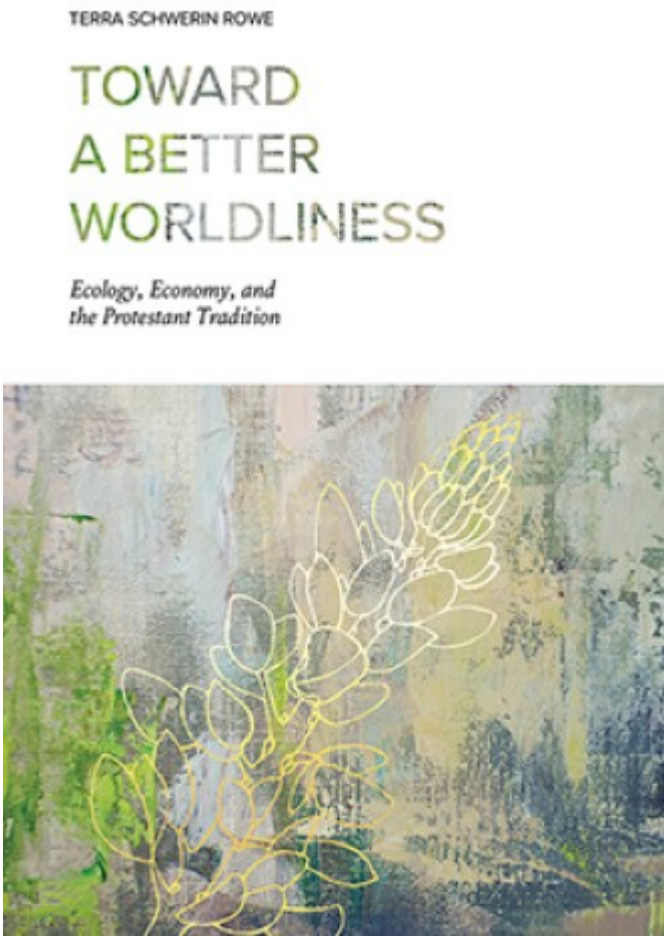
Grace alive among us

Grace is an exchange, says Terra Schwerin Rowe—but not an economic one.

by Alan Van Wyk in the December 6, 2017 issue

In Review



Toward a Better Worldliness

Ecology, Economy, and the Protestant Tradition

By Terra Schwerin Rowe
Fortress

Ours is an age of competition, in which we all play a zero-sum game. Terra Schwerin Rowe, who teaches philosophy and religious studies at the University of North Texas, imagines another way of living. “One of the most pressing tasks facing humanity today is to formulate alternative models of economy and exchange among humans and the other-than-human world. In so doing, we construct new ways of being in the world and new understandings of ourselves in relation to a multitude of others.”

Rowe’s formal task concerns economics and ecology, but she also seeks ways of living gracefully in an age bereft of grace. She develops “a profound and agentially empowering sense of gratitude that acknowledges we belong, body and soul, to a vast and humbling contingency ‘outside ourselves’” through which we can “become liberated from fear and anxiety to accept responsibility for a story larger than ourselves.” To live in grace, and to live through a graceful *eco/nomics*—Rowe’s portmanteau for merging economics and ecology—is to become responsible not simply for ourselves but to the world. It means learning to respond with care and love to the world, to others, and to God.

Rowe is a theoretically rich thinker. Moving from explorations of the gift in contemporary philosophy to christological debates in the early church, subtly weaving a path through the nuances of recent Finnish interpretations of Martin Luther, exploring ecofeminist and Marxist critiques of capitalism and Protestant theology, and picking up forgotten moments in Christian thought and practice, *Toward a Better Worldliness* is quite dense. But it’s also a breathtaking reminder that theology matters, the way to graceful living is not easy, and living well requires that we live thoughtfully.

Thinking theologically about the economy and our current ecological reality is difficult. Christianity has had a complicated and conflicted relationship with economic power. As Max Weber and others have argued, Protestantism is implicated in the development and continuation of some of global capitalism’s most destructive and alienating practices. Further, as Lynn White and a number of ecofeminist theologians have shown, Christianity has not always, to put it mildly, been good for the environment.

What are we to do with these “entanglements of inheritance and responsibility” that we call faith? “Christians must,” Rowe argues, “*both* account for unwelcome ghosts reminding us of the tradition’s (often unwitting) contributions to the rise of global capitalism *and* receive or seek out ghosts in the tradition with a certain prophetic ability to propose alternatives.” We can begin, in other words, by remembering that our traditions are often more than we have been taught, and that within these difficult histories there are prophetic spaces of grace.

Drawing on the critiques of capitalism that arise from the Protestant insistence on the radicality of God’s free gift of grace, Rowe articulates grace as the free and pure gift of God which undermines all economics of exchange, functions outside the closures of reciprocal exchange, and liberates us in love from the bonds of debt. While grace-based critiques of capitalism are important in challenging systems of economic exploitation, they are less helpful for people of faith who seek environmental justice. For, as Rowe reminds us, what else is the natural world than an ecological system of exchange? When we understand grace as a pure and free gift that arrives from outside all systems of exchange, then we risk regarding it as situated over and against the life-sustaining world within which we live.

Our task is not to think simply about the economy *or* ecology, but rather to rethink our systems of exchange as the eco/nomics of our living together. Drawing on Luther’s articulation of the *communicatio idiomatum*—the communication of attributes, a concept used by early Christians to articulate the relationship between humanity and divinity in Christ and that later structured Luther’s social and ethical thought—Rowe proposes living grace as a “mode of indwelling interconnection,” a “noncircular, multilateral gift [that is] communicated, disseminated, and scattered broadly with a disregard for efficiency, profit, or gain and an aim toward continual redistribution, flow, and exchange.” Grace, in other words, is a living gift, the gift of God’s being and life to the world, and the gifting of our lives to each other and all others: human and nonhuman, neighbor and stranger, friend and foreigner. Grace is a gift without return, an “opening event,” as Rowe calls it, “simultaneously turning the self outward to the others who have always already been there and initiating our readiness to respond with care.”

In an age when avarice is mixed with competition and we are asked only to be concerned with our own greatness, grace calls us out of ourselves and into what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “a better worldliness.” Such worldliness is grounded in God’s participation in the world.

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