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Folding Power

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> Power in the substantive sense, 'le' *pouvoir*, doesn't exist.
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> ~Michel Foucault[1]

> For the time being, cooperative power may be the best term, especially if it can be enlivened by other connotations: an aesthetic appreciation of jazz performance, the splendor and audacity that emerges from working with resources, limits, insights, and mistakes; a resolute yet ironic memory of our ability to let our good intentions keep us from seeing the damaging effects of our actions; a determined realization that our strategies for acting cooperatively or justly may not work for all situations or for all peoples.
> ~Sharon Welch[2]

> The power of God is the worship he inspires.
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> ~A. N. Whitehead[3]

1   **The Power Paralysis**

        As I understand the stimulant of this gathering, the presumption would not be just the banal one that power can be used for the good. Our conversation begins at a higher and more interesting threshold of presupposition. We are asked to conceptualize divine and

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[1] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (NY: Pantheon,1980), 198.
[2] Sharon Welch, *After Empire: the Art and Ethos of Enduring Peace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 180ff.
[3] Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (NY: Macmillan/Free Press, 1967), 192.

human power as good, and furthermore to affirm that "God's power, rightly understood, grounds rather than subverts good human power." The basis for this vigorous challenge is the perception that intellectual trends of the past half-century have infected theology and culture with a "profound ambivalence" toward power—an ambivalence that may poison the even more profound sources of just and loving action in the world. For the conceptual ambivalence may contribute to a paralysis on the part of those whose thought should be empowering fresh commitments to democratic and—in the case of theologians, Christian— visions of a flourishing common life.

I happily signed on to the project. Alternatives to totalizing power seem constantly beset by a paralysis that spreads through whole populations. In terms of modern politics, the situation was clearly articulated by Hannah Arendt in the 1960s. It was, she wrote, as though humanity "had divided itself between those who believe in human omnipotence (who think that everything is possible if one knows how to organize masses for it) and those for whom powerlessness has become the major experience of their lives."[4] The problem of power within the postmodern context—the scene of an economic globalization backed by unlimited force, in which an intellectual paralysis on the left can only collude with the operative empire—poses new problems. Furthermore, the role of religion in postmodernity, in which, for instance, the more effective Christian politics support right-wing coalitions for U.S. economic, military, and cultural hegemony, reveals with new clarity the need for *theological* reconsiderations of power. And theological conceptualizations of power are truly powerless if they do not go to the heart of the matter, to think afresh what we mean by the power of God. In this paper I find—somewhat inconveniently—that in order to articulate my understanding of God's empowerment of good human actions I need renegotiate the presupposed notion of "good power," divine and human.

At the point of collectively rethinking divine power, however, all bets are off. We may manage to agree with Sharon Welch that human power is best rethought—with a little help from a jazz aesthetic—as "cooperative power."[5] But what construct of divine power will best inspire such a healing alternative, able to resist the complementary delusions of idolatrous human omnipotence and of defeatist human impotence? A standard and still

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[4] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest Books, 1973), vii.
[5] Sharon Welch, *After Empire: The Art and Ethos of Enduring Peace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 180ff.

popular answer, tinted by a Calvinist providence, would be that appropriate human powers can only be rightly exercised through faith in divine power: a trustworthy omnipotence orders all creaturely life toward divine ends. In the face of the omnicidal potentiality of the twentieth century, a Job-like objection has mounted: such a God then bears the blame for every holocaust, and is no longer worthy of the name God. God surely names the good.

Or does it? 'Let God be good' still provokes the antiphonal 'Let God be God!' Contemporary with Arendt, the playwright Archibald MacLeish had his character J.B. tormented by Nickles' chant:

> If God is God He is not good
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> If God is good He is not God. [6]

Somewhere along the line, "God" became virtually synonymous with power. As every Joban protest in the face of horror witnesses, the omnipotence tends to swallow the goodness, indeed tends to make itself the very definition of "God." The tormenting circularity of the logic of omnipotence—whereby God's goodness is inscribed as absolute power, and thus erases its own goodness—continues to spin itself out in the power drives and faith crises of new generation. In my little poll of entering seminary students, of whom I ask "What is your burning theological question?" it wins every year—faintly echoing Rabbi Kushner's "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

The development of process theology since the sixties can be construed as the primary postmodern [sic] Christian response to the mid-century crisis of faith in both divine and human power.[7] Whitehead's interpretation of physics had pushed him in the 1920s to rethink the character of power in the world, leading him to require a God in whom to situate the pure possibilities that admit novelty into the world and interrupt the determinisms of mere force. The power of nature is not the power of God in this view, but creaturely power, like divine power, works as a relationship of influence. And human power models itself more and often less faithfully, or co-operatively, upon the operation of the "divine lure." In his famous metaphor, God appears "as the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty and goodness."[8] God in process theology comes again to be firmly identified with the good, not with the powerful.

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[6] Archibald MacLeish *JB* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1956), The Prologue, p 11.
[7] Cf. especially David Griffin, *God, Power and Evil.*
[8] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: an Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press, 1979) 346.

This deconstruction of omnipotence results not in divine or human impotence but in a fresh construction of power as the relational energy of influence. It is because I have been able to build a feminist theological nest in the systematic process alternative to the logic of omnipotence that I have been able to teach theology to those seminarians and that I could readily assent to our present project. Other persuasive alternatives to the cycle of omnipotence and impotence, with little more than a curtsy toward Whitehead, are making their appearance.[9]

I continue to find the process tradition a key antidote to the popular presumption of God's power to control history—to create it all from an absolute *nihil*, to step in whenever He [sic] likes, and to vindicate himself and his followers in "the End."

However, it becomes tedious among scholars to rehearse the process theological argument, as though, *voilà*, the problem of theodicy has been solved, if only you will open your mind to our metaphysics. Besides, the problem of the paralyzing ambivalence toward power is not the legacy of Whitehead. Nor I think can process theology effectively minister to that paralysis among scholars. Not directly at any rate. For it seems to me that if the presumption of "good power" requires renegotiation, it is precisely my own process feminism that may have blinded me in the first instance to that need.

As I delved into the question of the goodness of power, I found myself nagged by the *daimon* of a 'no.' I could not finally sign off on a proposition in the form of "both divine and human power are good." I hope at any rate that we are considering question and not a foregone conclusion. Indeed I found to my surprise that I could not speak straightforwardly of "good power" at all. All my process and feminist presumptions of an alternative concept of power—as empowerment, as relational influence, indeed as divine Eros—wouldn't swing me over the threshold of "good power." I decided not to withdraw from the project but to probe the resistance. Indeed this inconvenient resistance seemed to put an odd spin on the theme of Foucault's dictum, "where there is power, there is resistance."

Is my own resistance, then, a symptom of the 'profound ambivalence' this project seeks to heal? I confess that it may be. However, oddly enough, the resistance drives a line of thinking that ultimately supports the project—if "good power" may be read as shorthand not for the good of power itself but for the power of the good, human and divine. I am

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[9] Cf. especially Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), ch. 12; and John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

wondering if we may better cure the postmodern paralysis of power not by disciplining the ambivalence but by deepening it.

To elaborate on my *daimon*'s negative hunch: power as such, power in itself—that is, considered in a nominalized abstraction from whatever it is empowering—is not simply good. It is not a creaturely good. And it is not a divine good. For, as Foucault suggests above, power in itself, as substance born by the substantive, does not exactly exist. Creatures do, and as such (and as Foucault does not suggest) are, good. But power is not any thing. It is certainly a useful, indeed indispensable, concept, but as such it is morally neutral. Worse, if it is not recognized as an abstraction, if we do not unleash upon it what Whitehead called "the critic of abstraction," it can be mobilized as a thing, indeed the thing of things: King of Kings, exercising dominance over everything it touches. Then that substantive power gets up to no good. Precisely in the name of the good and the true, it intensifies its own force. It will soon lose patience with whatever checks and balances had been evolved in the interest of maintaining the democratic possibility of cooperative power, a power for flourishing. For the sake of the good that it wants for its constituencies, and these are often real goods, it will build up its power—*as such*. And so for its own sake (is this the point where compromise tips into corruption?). In the world or in our worldly concepts of God, the goods of power usurp the power of the good.

Because power in itself continues not to exist as such, the play of illusion, the dance of high tech media *maya*, develops an unprecedented sophistication. Such power is not content merely to dominate. It seeks to implant itself in—as—our subjectivities, our truths, our theologies: it produces the truth of its own power. One cannot simply step outside of such a regime in order to oppose to it the really true or really good power. From this circle of power no 'hermeneutics of suspicion' will save us. For the liberal-left oppositional strategies are themselves put precariously in question by the desubstantialization of power. Any liberation rhetoric might begin to sound a tin bell of manipulative naïveté. So the power of revolutions, of the people, of the church, of liberation movements—all may express power *for* the good, power *of* the good. But the power of the good does not cash out as "good power" *tout court*.

Clearly this line of thinking emanates from Foucault and his "regimes of truth." Just as well, for I am wondering if in fact what we were all presumptively worrying about—that profound ambivalence about power—is not in an important way his effect. At any rate I

suspect that until we surface that effect we will be shadow-boxing with Foucault. For many worry with reason that his truth regimes may comprise the subtlest form of the paralysis of power, of a circularity from which there is no escape, through neither good nor God. So in what follows I would like to consider certain readings of Foucault, especially by Spivak and Deleuze, cognizant of the danger of this conceptual trap but possibly pointing to ways out of the trap, from within it. If power is not substantively or inherently good whether depicted as human or divine, I ask, how will it empower the good? Following an odd itinerary via Nicholas of Cusa and again Whitehead, the Foucaultian power/knowledge will not fold down but fold into a relationality beyond its own purview.

2   Powers of Foucault

"We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth."[10]

It seems to be from Foucault more than any other single thinker that we have internalized the habit of using "power" as a pejorative, something like a postmodern shorthand for "the powers and principalities" or "the powers that be." We learned that power was not merely repressive but productive. That productivity, however, does not make it positive—not in any ethical sense. For we ourselves are as subjects produced through this power, *subjected*, made subject to power, made subjects in the modern sense. We cannot step clear and clean of it through a transcendent leap of language or truth. For it is the subjection of language, of knowledge, that performs an insidious fusion of truth with power. "Power," continues Foucault, "never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth: it institutionalizes, professionalizes and rewards its pursuit."

This analysis cuts close to the theological bone. As Christendom carries the primary meaning of inquisition, of truth inflicted and demanded by a power that has identified itself with absolute truth, whose power poses as the good, Christian theologians are often alert to the production of truth through power in our own favored traditions. We have reason to suspect that every truth claim we might make—even citations of scripture, even those of the most "prophetic" theologies, even those railing against established power—may reinscribe a truth of power upon its context. We don't have to read Foucault directly to absorb this suspicion—he is merely perhaps its most influential, and so most powerful, voice. But the

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[10] *Power/Knowledge*, 92.

circle twists tighter: our suspicion itself may collude with the truth of power. If there is no trusty truth whereby we can assess, criticize and protest the machinations of Power, how can we begin to discern good power-relations from the pernicious? In other words, how do we avoid the paralysis of political hopelessness?

Strong critique of the Foucault-effect thus arises at various points of the liberal/progressive spectrum. For instance, Jameson, like Habermas, tries to negate the "anti-Marxist" animus of poststructuralism in the interest of a dialectical reason. Foucault counts as a prime mover of an analysis of culture "which would empty cultural production of all its antisystemic capacities, and to 'unmask' even the works of an overtly oppositional or political stance as instruments ultimately programmed by the system itself."[11] Hence the sense of a certain claustrophobia, if not a paralysis.

This double suspicion, this suspicion of suspicion, may be another paraphrase of our motivating presumption for this conference. Like a double negative, it may open up an affirmative alternative. But it may be doubly crucial not to misread Foucault's suspicion of power. As a Jesuit scholar of Foucault argues, "Suspicion was an ally of his hope and its protector from ideological excess." He cites Foucault in a discussion saying: "Despair and hopelessness are one thing; suspicion is another. And if you are suspicious, it is because, of course, you have a certain hope."[12]

I am not intending to analyze Foucault so much as to read certain effects. In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri deploy Foucault's notion of "biopower."[13] For Foucault this designated the diffuse web of modern power over life advanced by the apparatus of medicine, science, psychiatry, prison, and the state. In *Multitude* it is developed as the concept of the new and postmodern sovereignty of an Empire without boundaries. It is the combination of technological, economic, and military might that comprises a transnational corporate globality policed by a military that retains the standing option of nuclear destruction. For them biopower means the power to destroy life *en masse*, and so to produce the global terms of life, that is, of material exchange.[14] But the angle of their terminological

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[11] Fredric Jameson: *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 91.

[12] James Bernauer, in foreword to Michel Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy R. Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999), xvi.

[13] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

[14] It is telling, and not incidental to a renewed interest in the topic of power, that the new millennium has been marked not only by an aggressive manifestation of the US superpower, but by a normalization of the term

deployment is also telling for our worry about how "power" gets used. *Biopower* is virtually identical with this Empire; while the affirmative term that answers it dialectically, that opposes to it a radically democratic alternative, is "bio-*politics*."[15] But problematically, power seems to be decoupled in this way from politics, indeed opposed to it, rendered not just ambiguous but vicious. Where there is power, there is resistance: but then does the resistance have no power of its own? If it mobilizes enough power to make a structural difference rather than a mere gesture of protest, is it immediately contaminated, already swerving toward oppressiveness? Or at any rate marked as such?

Consider Foucault's reflections in 1979 on the two phases of the Iranian revolution: "Last summer the Iranians said: 'We are ready to die by the thousands in order to get the Shah to go.' Today, it is the Ayatollah who says: 'Let Iran bleed so that the revolution may be strong.'" So Foucault asks: "does the horror of the second condemn the ecstasy of the first?"[16] He meditates then on the "enigma of revolt," now that the age of legitimized revolution and the parsing of good from bad revolt has arrived. Hence his influence on the subject-splitting "postcolonial ambivalence" (Homi Bhabha) in interpreting revolting aftermaths of hopeful revolts, whether of a totalitarian, dictatorial, or neo-colonial variety. He asks with Horkheimer: "But is this revolution so desirable? (132)" The point of the question is not to level all resistance that has taken power from the oppressive power, but precisely to "leave the question open." "It is through revolt that subjectivity (not that of great men but that of whomever) introduces itself into history and gives it the breath of life. (134)"

After that almost pneumatological hint—a breath that may belie the claustrophobic circle of suspicion—he offers a startling apothegm: "My ethic," he announces, is not strategic, but rather: "to be respectful when something singular arises, to be intransigent when power offends against the universal." His interest is hardly anarchistic, let alone relativistic, but legal: in strengthening "the rules which limit power." (One may be tempted to stage a comparison with M. Welker's systematic reflections on the legal traditions of Israel.) Foucault's unexpected "universal" remains undefined but suggestive: "It is always

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"empire" to describe it. For this normalization, these two Deleuzian/Foucaultian political theorists are partly and meaningfully responsible.

[15] *Biopolitics* would be the work of the "multitude," a concept like the *ochlos* or the *minjung*, but irreducible to any class or category of the people. Needs more from Multitude.

[16] Michel Foucault, *Religion and Culture*. Ed. Jeremy R Carrette. (New York: Routledge 1999), 131.

necessary to watch out for something, a little beneath history, that breaks with it, that agitates it: it is necessary to look a little behind politics, for that which *ought to limit it, unconditionally*.(134)"

That "something" beneath history, that moving alterity that limits power "unconditionally" leaves off in his theory—let us say apophatically—just about where "God" picks up in ours. But for Foucault it is precisely not power but that which can limit power. Power in the same essay is referred to as "infinite"—seeming again to verge on the demonic. But he insists not: "I am not saying that power is evil by nature; I am saying that, owing to its mechanisms, power is infinite (which does not mean to say that it is all powerful; quite to the contrary)." So neither politics nor power appear here as essentially evil or good, let alone poised in opposition to one another. Nonetheless it surely tilts toward ill.

What "power" itself signifies remains insistently ambiguous. It is in his slightly later and classic definition a "name" for a coded "multiplicity of force relations...either in the form of 'war' or in the form of 'politics.' That field is on principle infinite—and precisely therefore we must limit it with law. So power is "not an institution, and it is not a structure; it is not a certain strength [*puissance*] with which some are endowed; it is the name that one lends to a complex strategic situation in a particular society."[17] Power is then a name—in an avowedly nominalist sense—that can be used "as a grid of intelligibility of the social order." Power, he says in "The Confession of the Flesh," "is in reality an open, more-or-less coordinated (in the event, no doubt, ill-coordinated) cluster of relations."[18] In this sense, as intimated earlier, that "power in the substantive sense, 'le' *pouvoir*, doesn't exist."

With good reason, critics—not only from the radical left—worry about the effect of Foucault's slippery power. "We liberal reformers think that a certain ambiguity between two uses of the word 'power' vitiates Foucault's work: one which is in fact a pejorative term and the other which treats it as a neutral or descriptive term."[19] Rorty suspects the first notion of power of "a certain vacuity," supposedly countered by his own pragmatic project of liberal ironism.

It is indeed helpful to distinguish the two meanings of power in Foucault's writing; and it is the second whose effects worry this consultation. Does the hyperbolic encoding of

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[17] Foucault, *History of Sexuality,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), vol. 1, 93.
[18] *Power/Knowledge,* 199.
[19] Richard Rorty, "Moral Identity and Private Autonomy," in *Foucault: philosophe,* ed. George Canguilhem (Paris: Seuil, 1989), 388.

power with the cultural, subjective, and political deployment of force, however capillary, diffuse, and weblike, not lie at the heart of the problem we are addressing? Yet is it at the same time possible that his description of the pernicious productivity of power—productive in some measure of our own linked subjectivities and reminiscent of original sin, if not total depravity—is indispensable even to our constructive project? The problem may not lie so much in the ambiguity of power itself and the ambivalence it evokes, as in the slide of the neutral toward the pejorative meaning. If the neutral/descriptive sense is not teased out and strengthened in such a way as to support models not only of revolt but of the life after the revolt—that life in which (pejorative) power is constrained by rules—the very potential for the constraint of power is placed in an emptiness outside of power. For how would those rules be imposed and upheld but through an energetic and vigilant exercise of power? The confusion of the two uses may vitiate a more vital ambivalence; thus Foucault may grease the slide toward the sense of hopeless impotence that cripples democracies.

The postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak, however, considers the relation of the two senses of power, the general (neutral or descriptive) and the specific (pejorative), *necessarily* ambiguous: "one bleeds into the other at all times."[20] She welcomes the "catachresis" or crisis and "misfit" of the general sense of power, that generic power which for him becomes a "forcefield" of power relations irreducible to any social constellation, as helpful, for example, in decoding the threat of neocolonialism besetting every postcolonial situation. Foucault argued that the "*practice of liberation does not define the practices of liberty* which will then be necessary for this people, this society and these individuals to define themselves" as an acceptable society.[21] Reading the fiction of Mahasweta Devi, Spivak comments that "the subject-position of the citizen of a recently decolonized 'nation' is epistemically fractured."[22] Such a subject is neither a pure victim of the power (in the pejorative sense) nor a triumph of pure resistance to the power of subjection.

Surely the good—in achievements of collective flourishing—is actualized both in the liberation and in the lawful stabilizations of liberty. Yet at what point would power become simply *good*? Does that fracture—the source of Bhabha's postcolonial ambivalence— necessitate a permanent ambivalence toward power itself? Would the subjects of a (neo-)

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[20] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 28.
[21] "The Ethic of Care for the Self As a Practice of Freedom," in James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, eds. *The Final Foucault* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1988), 113ff.
[22] Spivak, 47.

colonizing state find themselves, ourselves, in the position to overcome the epistemic fracture? Would we not suffer from an inverse form of the same fracture, one deepened by its self-serving convenience? How would we transcend our subject positions within an imperial situation that still produces the daily bread and truth of our collective life? Would any straightforward declaration of "good power" not risk further deepening the fracture?

At any rate I would not see how to escape from the ambiguity of power and an accordingly ambivalent reading of its specific phenomena. This is not to negate all transcendence, that is, the capacity to critically and hopefully exceed the present deformities. On the contrary, this capacity may be best served by acknowledging the radical uncertainties that—in truth—beset our best ethical choices (not to mention our readings of Foucault).

The descriptive neutrality of his first meaning of power, power as a play of forces inextricably enmeshed in the physical energies of the universe we inhabit, may widen the opening for that 'breath" he invoked. As read by Spivak, Foucault pushes in the direction of embedding the grid of intelligibility of social power within a boundless relationality of power. While one is rather primly forbidden to "naturalize" or ontologize this play of forces, nonetheless it seems to me that this dimension of Foucault's thought opens a way out of the trap of the habit of vilifying "power."

Spivak, with her comparativist ear for language, signals the key to this opening. It comes down to the phrase *pouvoir/savoir*. The inevitable translation "power/knowledge," she suggests, "monumentalizes Foucault unnecessarily." She finds it a "pity that there is no word in English corresponding to *pouvoir* as there is 'knowing' for *savoir*. *Pouvoir* is, of course, 'power.' But there is also a sense of 'can-do'-ness in '*pouvoir*,' if only because, in various conjugations, it is the commonest way of saying 'can' in the French language.(34)" The trick would be "to get some of the homely verbiness of *savoir* in *savoir-faire, savoir-vivre*, into *pouvoir...*" Then *pouvoir/savoir* means something like: you are just able to do something as you are able to make sense of it. The relation of truth to power at play in this doublet is neither sinister nor pure, but attentive to the practically possible—after all not so distant from Rorty's pragmatism. But for her this is no return to liberalism but rather a transnationalism mindful of the resourcefulness, say, of the subaltern woman, amidst the everyday impossibilities.

Has a (Foucaultian) way out of a paralyzing (Foucaultian) ambivalence appeared here? This verbiness suggests an antidote to the substantialized, nominalized power, *le*

pouvoir, the power that, as this substance, does not exist. Far from dissolving into nothingness and leaving us helpless and hopeless before the power idols of our world, however, it puts us to work. It sets us to actualizing our own capacities within the boundless relational network of forces. These abilities are potentialities—from the same root as *pouvoir, posse*—as our particular gifts.

These possibilities may translate for theology into the can-do of the interdependently gifted members of the body of Christ. But then neither would that body be rendered with the simple identity and closed borders of a substance metaphysics; nor would it function as the puppet of some hidden Omnipotence, reproducing its power as our truth. We would be working instead together to actualize possibilities which are at once singular and collective; these possibilities bring hope to bear, as a gift and not a given, upon any new situation we find ourselves in. These abilities-to-do, possibilities that when *empowered* become actual and political, compose the seeds of the kingdom of God. They are *potentially* good indeed, as are all our talents, but actually good only as actualized *basileically* in earthly flourishing, in resistance to the empires of this world, repenting of the abuse of Christian power and generative of new networks of cooperative power.

I had suggested that there would be a theological payoff in negating the substantive power. But nothing I have said so far suggests divine power. At best I have made some moves toward its metaphoric recalibration. However there is a theologically profound hint in the can-do, one that opens beyond the permissible bounds of Foucault's analysis, but not so far beyond as to exit its intellectual forcefield—its power.

3   *Posse ipsum.*

So through a theological wormhole we drop into another sort of text, in an incompatible context, for another meditation on "can do." In a dialogue written just before his death in 1464, Nicholas of Cusa reports his "great delight" over several days of contemplative questioning. To his interlocutor Peter's question, *Quid quaeris*, "what are you seeking/asking," the cardinal responds teasingly: 'you ask correctly.' For it is the "whatness" of things he had been seeking—the what of whatness, the *quidditas*, the "whatness itself without which nothing at all can be." From the heart of an inevitable substance metaphysics,

he discloses the name, which will be his final name for ultimate reality: the untranslateable *posse ipsum*—normally translated "possibility itself."[23]

The Latin *posse* is another form of the verb for which English has no straight translation: "to be able." It is related to *potentia*; like *pouvoir*, it doubles as a noun, usually translated "possibility." Peter asks how this is different from Cusanus' earlier neologism *possest,* another untranslateable, which Richard Kearney has rendered the "possibility-to-be."[24] "*Possest* means that possibility itself exists." This name which is "no name" is the very "name of names" of Exodus 3.14. Thus the "possibility-to-be exists insofar as the possibility-to-be is actual. All things are therefore "enfolded" in this "actualized possibility" as a name for God. The new name tellingly loses the "*est,*" thereby heightening an implicit resistance to what is called after Heidegger ontotheology. This name, Cusanus promises, will be truer, clearer, and indeed easier. Peter, wary of the apophasis ever unsaying any kataphasis, is understandably dubious: "nothing is more difficult than something that has always been sought but never entirely found.(294f)" Cusanus admits that he once thought that truth could "be found better in darkness"—referring to his reception of the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition of the brilliant darkness, transmuted into the *docta ignorantia.*

"But of great power is the truth in which *Posse Itself* shines brightly. Indeed it shouts in the streets," he adds, alluding to the Wisdom figure of Proverbs 8.[25] In the power of this truth, he is not recanting his negative theology but offering a final, sunny supplement. Its logic overflows with images of children: "What child or youth does not know *posse ipsum,* since each says I can eat, I can run, or I can speak?" So "can do" here conjugates the infinitive *posse* (and translation into a substantive fails): "homely verbiness" indeed! He offers a series of such buoyant examples: "what young boy or young girl, when asked if they could carry a stone and having answered that they could [are able], when further asked if they could do this without posse [being able], would deny it emphatically?" For the child, he says, would consider the question silly: "as if no one of sane mind would have doubts about this, that anything could be made or become without *Posse Itself.* (295)"

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[23] Nicholas of Cusa, "On the Summit of Contemplation," in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, translated by H. Lawrence Bond (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 293ff.

[24] Richard Kearney, *The God who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 103.

[25] *Idiota de sapientia* I.3.

A grammatological argument for God, hardly resembling an Anselmian proof of existence, has thus cheerfully been offered. If there is anything that you can do, you presuppose "can do" itself, *posse ipsum*. What is not first *possible*, cannot become actual. Yet Cusanus, more reverent than most theologians, has not yet mentioned the word "God—or indeed any substantive entity—and does not until the end of the dialogue, in an irenic recapitulation of differing theologies under the banner of the new name. His Eckhartan resistance to the idolatrous ease with which we refer to God as a known entity, an object, a person, thus allows a new name to be revealed as something more than a qualification of the substance called "God."

I think it is not coincidental that his kataphatic gesture here takes aim, with precise indirection, at the conventional view of divine power. In a recent commentary, Franz Maas begins to harvest the import of this passage for the doctrine of omnipotence. As he translates:

> Thus in what is, lives and knows, nothing other than *posse ipsum* can be seen. The ability to be, to live and to know are manifestations of *posse ipsum*. What else can be seen in any other ability than the ability of the Omnipotence?" *Quid enim aliud in* omni potentiae *videri potest quam posse* omnis potentiae?*[26]

In the *posse* of all powers the all-power is seen: divine omnipotence, classically concentrated in the divine essence, is thus revealed as the can-do of all creatures! Our abilities in some sense actualize the omni-potency, which means the all-possibility or all-potentiality, of the divine.[27] As Maas mildly explicates: "instead of an opposition or competition between divine and human power, Cusanus holds a mutual strengthening." In this way power folded into *posse ipsum* yields an early Renaissance intuition of 'cooperative power' as the proper relationship of the infinite and the finite, of God and creation. "Omnipotence is obviously not God's super-power in opposition to the power and potency of the creatures. On the contrary, the plurality of the powers in the world is the disintegrated, but nevertheless reflecting unity of the *posse ipsum*.(186)" For Cusa is defining omnipotence as "the posse of every potency in the created world."

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[26] Frans Maas, "Divine Omnipotence in the View of Nicholas of Cusa" in *Conflict and Reconciliation: Perspectives on Nicholas of Cusa*. Edited by Inigo Bocken. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 185.

[27] The standard translation makes the stunning pun on omni-potence simply invisible: "for what else can be seen in every power other than the posse of every power?" I am beginning to recognize a certain apologetic control of translation in much Cusa research: which would count as a minor example of the Christian "truth regime."

In other words, the divine power is not operating as an efficient cause upon the world, from its outside; it does not *do for or to us.*[28] It is the potentiality which we actualize— or not—within the constraints of our creaturely freedom. It is our own ability, congruent with our understanding (which is always a knowing of the limits of our knowing), our *pouvoir/savoir*, by which the *posse ipsum* is actualized. "For what could satisfy the longing of the mind other than *Posse* itself, the *posse* of every *posse*, without which nothing whatever can?" The joy that saturates the dialogue seems to flow from the shock of liberation from the *thinginess* of a substantive whatness into its dynamic infinitive: *quidditas* opens almost like Buddhist *tathata*—suchness—right out of the heart, and the box, of a static and bounded essence into the open-ended interactivity of can-do.

So power in itself, one might argue, is translated into *empowerment*: as the all-able that enables all—God empowers all creatures to actualize their abilities, their gifts. Cusanus has added a new fold to his great panentheism of foldings, the *explicatio/implicatio* order.[29] We do not need to absorb his neoplatonic presumptions (including the changeless simplicity of the divine One) in order to appreciate this glimpse—only received late and at a "great distance" by Cusa himself—of an alternative theology of power. It would have been then inconceivable to dispute omnipotence itself—as it still is for most Christians, Jews, and Muslims. So Cusa's redistribution of the concept plants the seed of a more radical reconstruction. Appearing linguistically just a breath away from the orthodox version of divine causation, the meaning of the *posse ipsum* still contains much unrealized potentiality. First of all, it allows us to substitute for the omnipotence the *omnipotentiality* of God.

We may from our later vantage point be *able*—without having to look over our shoulders to see what inquisition is approaching, what truth of power about to re-enforce its orthodoxy of omnipotence—to embrace the metaphor of *posse ipsum* as a point of living theological possibility. While for Cusa of course the divine remains changeless, the metaphor is nonetheless suggestive of the becoming of the divine in and through the endless becoming of the universe. Cusa could barely hint at the dynamism of his apophatic panentheism: that it

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[28] The response to Maas' essay draws oddly upon radical orthodoxy to advance a supposed Old Testament notion of power as efficient causation as a truly biblical alternative to Cusa/Maas. In other words, even Maas' mild exposition of this theological path not taken awakens a conventional resistance. Stephan van Erp, "The Possibilities of God: A Theological Response to Frans Maas' Thesis on Divine Omnipotence in the Thought of Nicholas of Cusa," 190ff.

[29] "God, therefore is the enfolding (*implicatio*) of all in the sense that all are in God, and God is the unfolding (*explicatio*) of all in the sense that God is in all." Book Two of *De Docta Ignorantia,* following the negative theology of the first. *Cusa*, 135.

is precisely through the spontaneous interactivity of creatures with each other that the divine omnipotentiality is actualized. It thus *becomes*—and never merely *is.* In another context I explore an extraordinary postulate of Cusa, definitive of a positive cosmology for negative theology: "Therefore, to say that 'each thing is in each thing' is not other than to say that 'through all things God is in all things' and that 'through all things all are in God.'"[30] God is the infinity—the negative name of the unknowable—as it folds into finitude, and as the infinite reciprocally enfolds the world into itself. Within the terms of a neoplatonized orthodoxy, however, Cusa does not much explicate the character of the relationships, the realizations of abilities, and the webs of power, comprising the collective unfolding of each creature in every other, for good and for ill.

4   Enfolding Foucault's Power

In order to thematize the free interaction of forces which creaturely spontaneity and human responsibility inhabit, Foucault remains helpful. But it is only by reading Foucault through the lenses of Gilles Deleuze—a closet or mostly unknowing Cusan—that the dynamic of neutral forces folds into subjectivity. In *Foucault*, Deleuze repeatedly pronounces the term *possest* without mentioning Cusa, perhaps indicating the impossibility of openly hosting a theologian in the text or context of an atheist orthodoxy. Analyzing the three dimensions of knowledge, power, and self that also mark the three major phases of Foucault's work, he invokes "the '*Possest*', power-Being, as opposed to knowledge-Being." It "introduces us into a different element, an unformable and unformed Outside which gives rise to forces and their changing combinations."[31] This "element that comes from outside: force" is still not the fold. The fold is "subjectivation." This is a rich if anthropocentric contribution to subjectivity after the collapse of the essentialist subject. "The most general formula of the relation to oneself is the affect of self by self, or folded force." He is interpreting—imaginatively—Foucault's late return to the Greeks as well as to Christian confession, in which the body and its pleasures, or, for the Christians, the flesh and its desires, is to be enfolded. That is the first of four folds, the second being the relation between forces folded by law, the third the fold of knowledge (or truth), the fourth 'the fold

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[30] *Docta, Cusa*, 140. I discuss in "Cloud of the Impossible: Feminist Theology, Cosmology and Cusa," in *Apophatic Bodies*, edited C. Boesel & C. Keller, in process with Fordham University Press.
[31] Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, translated by Sean Hand (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986/88), 112ff.

of the outside itself, the ultimate fold. (104)' But as the Outside gives rise to forces, the first three folds are enfolded in the fourth. Kin to the Levinassian exteriority, this Outside emits an odd signal of transcendence within a scheme that repudiates transcendence.

Deleuze wonders whether Foucault "felt slightly uneasy" about *The History of Sexuality*": "had he not trapped himself within the concept of power relations? (94)" We may recognize here a version of our own worry. And he answers on Foucault's behalf that "the most intense spot of our lives, the one where their energy is concentrated, is precisely where they clash with power, struggle with it, endeavour to utilize its forces or to escape its traps.(104)" He means both the traps of power itself, and of the concept that exposes them. In the interest of eluding the trap of a power-fixation, the capacious Deleuzian reading may (despite his own suspicion of *Dieu le Fasciste*) energize our theological quest for a good concept of power, if not for a concept of good power. The movement into the Foucault of "foldings" is marked by an important question: "If power is constitutive of truth, how can we conceive of a 'power of truth' that would no longer be the truth of power...?(94)" This query seems to me a close if inadvertent paraphrase of the theological question we are asking.

"And of great power is the truth," wrote Cusa playfully of the *posse ipsum*. The power of truth seems to draw Deleuze to draw Foucault not only beyond entrapment within power relations, but beyond the inside of a cleanly bounded the Outside. The outside is no longer "a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside, but precisely the inside of the outside.(97)" In the face of Foucault's relentless critique of interiority, Deleuze asks: "is there an inside that lies deeper than any internal world, just as the outside is farther away than any external world?" Thus he gently pushes Foucault's "inside," which is the mere fold of the outside, toward another discourse: "either it is the fold of the infinite, or the constant folds [replies] of finitude which curve the outside and constitute the inside.(97)" So the self is the fold of the infinity of power, of the outside, into subjectivity—whereby I become a subject. And this discourse only allows breathing room when one recognizes that the play of forces of the outside infinitely exceed human fabrication—hence the general or neutral/descriptive sense of power in Foucault, heightened by Deleuze's interest in physical and cosmological forces. Here we sense the Deleuzian affinity for Spinoza.

But it is in *The Fold*, a little book on Leibniz written two years later that Cusa appears—if only as a "neo Pythagorean" mathematician in the footnotes. Only vaguely taking cognizance of the Cusan origins of Bruno's concept of the folding of the infinite into a finitude of creaturely folds as background for the Leibnizian event, which enfolded the infinite in the microcosm, Deleuze moves to Whitehead for a philosophy of the fold in which the concept of the event now opens up the closed monad. The fold is now recognized as the *prehension*. Exceptional as a positive continental reception of Whitehead, this fetching account of the prehension lends us something needful for our redemption of power.[32] Whitehead's "subjective form" is "the form in which the datum is folded in the subject, a 'feeling' or manner..."[33] He notes that the final phase of the "concrescence," the "satisfaction as self-enjoyment," marks the way by which the subject "attains a richer and richer private life, when prehension is filled with its own data." The analogy to his discussion of subjectivation in Foucault lies near to hand.

With a startling absence of disparagement, Deleuze comments that "this is a biblical—and, too, a neo-Platonic—notion." "The plant sings of the glory of God, and while being filled all the more with itself it contemplates and intensely contracts the elements whence it proceeds. It feels in this prehension the self-enjoyment of its own becoming." Where Deleuze finds in this God a Joycian "chaosmos" of prehensive units and changing configurations, I would find rather the ultimate creativity of which the Whiteheadian God is a principle of limitation.[34] But his reading refreshes process theology. "Even God desists from being a Being who compares worlds and chooses the richest compossible. He becomes Process, a process that at once affirms incompossibilities and passes through them."[35] As in Cusa, we may pass in the "cloud of the impossible" right through the wall of the *coniunctio oppositorum* into the presence of God.

A prehension in Whitehead is how we take account of other actual entities or of a novel possibility, the gift of our participation in the vision of God for the world at that

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[32] Who besides Wahl, and very late, Merleau Ponty? [cf. important readings of Whitehead in *Difference and Repetition*; cf. Catherine Keller, "Introduction" and "Process and Chaosmos: The Whiteheadian Fold in the Discourse of Difference," in Catherine Keller and Anne Daniell, ed., *Process and Difference: Between Cosmological and Poststructuralist Postmodernisms* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).

[33] Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, translation by Tom Conley (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 78.

[34] See Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: a theology of becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[35] "compossibility" is a tempting word with which to indicate the compatibility between possible worlds--the relational matrix of possibility. *Fold*, 81.

moment. It becomes part of our real potentiality for the future, inasmuch as it is entertained in our present. The revision of power as *posse* needs this notion of prehension, or rather something surging up through it into the Deleuzian fold. For if divine power is reinscribed as *posse ipsum*, the can-do which empowers all that can happen, it is as possibility to be actualized that its influence takes place. This empowerment of my (interior) ability is always at the same time an actualization of the potentiality which the (outside) world *becomes* for me—as I become. The Deleuzian chaosmos, as enfolding Foucault and Whitehead, adds edge and dissonance to the harmony of a divine process, toward that which Deleuze cannot help gesturing, citing Pierre Boulez, as a "polyphony of polyphonies.(82)"

5   Patient Operations

We have been mapping a heterogeneous set of theories of power, each struggling against a certain nominalization, or substantialism. Whitehead's reflection on power, a keystone to *Process and Reality*, may help move us toward a concluding response to the opening question.

> The notion of 'substance' is transformed into that of 'actual entity'; and the notion of 'power' is transformed into the principle that the reasons for things are always to be found in the composite nature of definite actual entities—in the nature of God for reasons of the highest absoluteness, and in the nature of definite temporal actual entities for reasons which refer to a particular environment.[36]

Power, in other words, is now cashed into a principle of interactive becoming: the past of your environment flows into you inasmuch as you prehend it; it (including the marks on this page and all that you associate with them consciously and mostly not) thereby influences your present becoming. The "causal efficacy" of the past cannot be avoided—an element of force is built into the structure of interrelation. The influx of the past, the other, is the fold of the outside in, whereby a subject is produced. Those relations from the environing past flow in through multiple and active prehensions, constituting the subject as composite: no one force can absolutely exclude all others, because the becoming subject is composed of the manifold, held not in simple unity—not even in God (as the trinity surely hints)—but enfolded as a complex (folding together) unity. The past in Whitehead comprises the potentiality in which you actualize yourself now. But the potentiality of the world crashes in

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[36] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 19.

on me in waves that I prehend but to which I must "conform."[37] The concept of 'conformation' helps to theorize the pressure of relational power: my multiple prehensions of the world as it flows in upon me never fully determine me, but willy-nilly they do form, inform, influence my potentiality.

Mingled in the influx—like the seeds flung by the farmer, like hidden treasure, like the yeast concealed in the flour—are the "pure possibilities" of the initial aim, the divine lure, which we might as well in this context nickname *posse ipsum.* For it does not make me what I am—it empowers me to make myself—but it does make me become: as Irigaray put it, venturing out on the theological edge of poststructuralism: "God forces us to do nothing except *become.*"[38] The divine possibility is precisely the good that is possible for the creature, or as Whitehead put it, recognizing tragic impossibilities: "the best for the impasse." It is injected not as a power that forces or coerces but as an invitation, a lure, truly a grace. Fortunately the possibility (the primordial nature of God) always holds open the breathing room of options for divergent twists upon the given; and the structure of the creation itself is wrought of an irreducible creative freedom, protecting God from overpowering the universe.

For of what interest would it all be for God otherwise—at best a chorus singing hallelujahs that He Himself [sic] has composed and directed, perhaps sending to hell those who by his own inscrutable design sing sour notes?

> The sheer force of things lies in the intermediate physical process. God's role is not the combat of productive force with productive force, of destructive force with destructive force; it lies in the patient operation of the overpowering rationality of his conceptual harmonization.[39]

When the doctrine of omnipotence reinscribes the image of a unilateral hyperpower controlling all destinies from eternity, through direct strikes of will or through a more indirect providential economy—the work of harmonization is confused with the imposition

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[37] "In order to understand power, we must have a correct notion of how each individual actual entity contributes to the datum *from which* its successors arise and *to which* they must conform. The reason why the doctrine of power is peculiarly relevant to the enduring things, which the philosophy of Locke's day conceived as individualized substances, is that any likeness between the successive occasions of a historic route procures a corresponding identity between their contributions to the datum of any subsequent actual entity; and it therefore secures a corresponding intensification in the imposition of conformity." *Process and Reality*, 56.

[38] Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, translated by Gillian C. Gill, (NY: Columbia University Press, 1987/93), 68.

[39] Ibid.

of force. It is upon that "intermediate physical process" that Foucault, especially as enfolded in Deleuze, indispensably recognizes its shifting, boundless, and interiorized relationality. But when God is given a role, the picture of course boundlessly shifts. The ambiguity of power does not disappear. The "sheer force of things" will continue to give rise to combative forces, both beyond and within constraint by human law. But that play of forces forms the medium of our free relationships. In the *tohuvabohu* of that medium our mutual prehensions may grow in godlikeness, or harden in combat and defense. It is, however, kept from sliding toward the mere evasion or vilification of power. I hope I have argued that the edgy ambivalence of the Foucault-effect can be fruitfully deepened into a theology of omnipotentiality and empowerment.

The concept of divine omnipotentiality is proposed as a theological therapy. So I hope I have demonstrated my loyalty to the proposition that "God's power, rightly understood, grounds rather than subverts good human power." For the divine empowerment of the world, the *posse ipsum* of the lure to all becoming, is harvested in love. Thus the *theopoiesis* of the "tender patience" leading the world with the "vision of truth, beauty and goodness." Is this not *good power,* then? A noncoercive divine model of power as empowerment, as cooperative power, as the energy of love and justice, working to shift the elemental forces to the good? Surely. But not as power in itself. That has been my negative point. This is power cashed into possibility and actualized as care. It is the root of a theology that deconstructs at every pass the worship of power that is concealed in the theology of omnipotence: "the power of God is the worship he inspires." This God is neither omnipotent nor impotent; neither are we. In the *posse ipsum* we 'can do.' We may actualize our possibilities—all the more so if in the midst of our daily struggles and the worse struggles of others we do not shut out the spirit of that inspiration, which, like the rain and like the sun, is incessantly offered—permeating, fluid, in-fluencing, inviting.

We are able—*posse*—to evolve toward more cooperative operations of power. Power itself, inasmuch as it can be abstracted from the ebb and flow of our relationships, is not good but morally neutral. Indeed cooperation, like community, can also perpetrate violent exclusions. Without power, however, the good does not unfold; it does not become; it is not actual. I am suggesting that power can be considered good only as the empowerment of the good. Power is never unconditionally good, but it is an indispensable condition of the good. This claim verges on tautology, but nonetheless accomplishes a grammatological swerve:

power only becomes good as "the power *of* love" or the "power *to do* good" or the "power *of* God" or "the power *to do* justice": as constrained and reframed in relational compounds in which flourishing can take place. The fold is a sharp crease, from the worship of power, the love of power, the truth of power, the goodness of power—to the power of worship, the power of love, the power of truth, the power of the good.

In our present planetary condition, wrought of postcolonial disappointments and neocolonial predations, where vast segments of the human population seek forms of peaceful and sustainable cooperation with each other and with other species, Christianity plays many and risky roles. If our theologies seek to meet people and peoples at their moments of greatest intensity, as they struggle *from* the traps of power, we will be competing with theologies that seek to redeem them *for* the traps of a spiritualized omnipotence. In that contest I doubt that discourses of Christological powerlessness, as for instance of Caputo's "weakness of God" (nicely grounded in Paul as it may be) will help to empower the struggles. But neither could I ever acquiesce, for instance, to Cone's early arguments that the Black Church needs the traditional guarantee of success tendered by omnipotence in order to mobilize liberation. Those who are suffering, those who are trapped, do not need false promises.

They do need to know they 'can do'—the *savoir faire* and the *pouvoir/savoir* of responsibility, ability to respond to the real possibilities in their lives now. Theologically, such empowerment requires hope for a life unfolding with enjoyment and integrity: the *omnipotential God.* And it requires hope for the infinite enfolding of their lives in the divine love: *the omniamorous God.* Such empowerment requires not our abstinence from power but our vigorous exercise of power *as influence*, as the flow or fold into one another, into the *manifold*, in vulnerability and creativity. This makes not for simple harmonies but for barely fathomable polyphonies.

So this essay folds back into the trope of the body in which we are members one of another: not dominating each other, not sanctifying control as though it is love, but tempering power to love, such that each of our madly distinctive gifts can flourish—indeed so that our gifts can be *given*—as influences that flow into the next moment, the next member, the next generation of this open-ended and living body. Such a body requires the stabilizing flexibility of its own rules, for if it is to have influence in the body politic, it will need institutional force. Of course within the present oldline denominations, that force is

largely turned against itself, like a cancer. The church may still have the capacity to function as an agile body within the larger bodies of the state and the planet, modeling rather than paralyzing the possibility of democracy. If it does not, the body of Christ will incarnate in new forms. In the meantime, there is so much that is so good that we are—cooperating within and beyond Christianity according to our singular gifts and callings—*able to do*.