Negotiating the Gift
Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange

Edited by
Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner
and Bernhard Jussen

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Religious Discourses of the Gift
in the Middle Ages
Semantic Evidences (Second to Twelfth Centuries)

by

BERNHARD JUSSEN

Some medieval texts read as though their authors had written them as a favor to contemporary scholars. These pleasing texts include Hildegard of Bingen’s (d. 1179) elucidation of the question of why a monk should »persist in the works (opus) of chastity.« Hildegard’s answer corresponds exactly to the standard knowledge of present-day medieval studies:

Because the man has offered these holy gifts (munera) in his vows for the sake of the heavenly counter-gift (remuneration).¹

This passage brings together in close proximity three key words of medieval religious discourse: »work,« »gift,« and »counter-gift.« What more could we want to illustrate the logic of medieval religiosity, which has been more than amply studied empirically as well as condensed into such pithy phrases as »merit mentality,« »bookkeeping of the hereafter,« or »counted piety«?

But what do these words - munus and remunerationio - actually mean? And how significant is Hildegard’s text, which combines these words? The observations that follow arise from the question of how the language of medieval religious literature organized the language of the gift. They should therefore be viewed as a contribution to historical semantics.²

¹ Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias 5,2,9, ed. ADELGUNDIS Führkötter (CCCM 43) Turnhout 1978, p.183 f.: Quapropter urī ille qui in animo suo deliberat ne ullam costam sibi copulet, sed hoc desiderat ut in pudore virginitatis propter amorem Filii mei perseveret, sodalitatem eius accipiet, si tammen in operibus eiusdem castitatis perseverauerit; quia haec sancta munera in uoto sacratissimi pacii ecclesiasticæ religiosis ob gloriam supernæ remunerationis eodem Filio meo obtulit. In what follows, CCSL = Corpus Christianorum Series Latina and CCCM = Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis.

² For a good introduction to what has been achieved and to the current problems of »histori-
I refer in this study to a very broad and heterogeneous body of material, that is, the Collection Cetedoc (which contains the material edited in Corpus Christianorum and a number of other important texts). I extracted three collections of citations from the Cetedoc: a collection of all passages in which an author used the word *munus*, a collection of all passages employing the word *remuneratio*, and a collection of all passages using the term *donum*. I used only the passages from sermons and tractates, all other passages — from legal, liturgical, narrative texts and so on — were put aside. Each collection was divided chronologically into three groups (fourth to fifth centuries, eighth to eleventh centuries, and twelfth century). Crosschecks were carried out on several author-specific samples that are well documented in the Corpus Christianorum (the Venerable Bede, Godfrey of Admont, and Rupert of Deutz).

This method must doubtless be refined and elucidated in more detail, but it has proven useful in the form chosen. It produced the astonishing finding that in the semantics of church discourse the terms *munus* and *remuneratio* by no means referred to each other, and that the authors used them in significantly different contexts. The reciprocal figure »gift-counter-gift,« which scholars tend to equate with medieval thinking, is hardly ever found in the texts I investigated. This observation generated the questions I would like to pursue here.

3 The fourth edition of Cetedoc (2000) contains important texts from other collections (SC, CSEL, PL) in addition to the CCSL and CCCM.

4 In working with the Cetedoc I have defined a passage as »within three sentences,« a decision reached through experiments with smaller and larger contexts. In more extensive studies this decision would doubtless require more detailed justification. For technical reasons the finds in the electronic Migne (Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina, ed. Jacques Paul Migne, 221 volumes, Paris 1844–1864) could only be consulted for the second stage of the investigation, the »classic« hermeneutic analysis of those texts to which the semantic fields discovered in the Corpus Christianorum lead.

5 I refer the reader to Arnold Angenendt, Thomas Braucks, Rolf Busch, and Hubertus Lutterbach, Counting piety in the Early and High Middle Ages, in: Ordering Medieval Society. Perspectives on Intellectual and Practical Modes of Shaping Social Relations, ed. Bernhard Jussen, Philadelphia 2000, pp. 15–54; Thomas Lentés, Counting piety in the late Middle
What did medieval authors use the terms munus and remuneratio for, if not as a conceptual pair and expression of reciprocity? And what about the other possible medieval equivalents for our word »gift«: donum, oblatio, or beneficium? In the search for answers, sections 1 and 2 sketch how the semantic field of the word munus was structured. Section 3 then analyzes the figure remuneratio as a comparison, and section 4 sketches out some conclusions.

1. A Significant Vicinity: munus and cor

What did the word munus stand for? What was the concept behind this term? An analysis of its semantic field, of the distribution of words around the key term munus, may give us some valuable indicators. Given the profound changes that students of religiosity have noted when comparing patristic with early medieval religious writing, the semantic field of munus remains surprisingly stable. An author in the third century associated with the word munus approximately the same attributes as an author in the tenth century. The massive orientation of religious practices towards a »bookkeeping of the hereafter« and »counted piety,« which arose in the seventh century, made scarcely any impact on the way authors used the word munus.

The paradigmatic story

When Christian authors used exemplary historical or mythical figures to write about true and false, good and bad gifts, Cain and Abel were by far their most frequent choice. Even the story of Abraham, who sought to offer his son to God, is used less frequently in the vicinity of munus, although on the whole this story was cited far more often (for instance in the liturgy) than that of Cain and Abel. This narrative from the mythical beginnings of humanity was interesting for them not because of its violent outcome, but because Cain and Abel had addressed their God through the aid of offerings, provoking a striking reaction:

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6 To use the phrases coined by CHIFFOLEAU and ANGENENDT, BRAUCKS, BUSCH, and LUTTERBACH, respectively (as in note 6).
Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of
time Cain brought to the Lord an offering (offedere) of the fruit of the ground, and
Abel brought (offedere) of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the
Lord had regard for Abel and his offering (munus), but for Cain and his offering
(munus) he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The
Lord said to Cain: »Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you
do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not well, sin is couching at the door;
itst desire is for you, but you must master it.« (Gen. 4:2-7)

At least one message of this exemplary tale was easy to understand: God has
the power to ignore offerings. Following the logic of this story, human
beings were incapable of doing precisely what the scholarly term »bookkeep-
ing of the hereafter« presupposes, and what Gregory the Great occasionally
(to be sure only in his correspondence!) declared to be an effective tactic:
»putting God in their debt« (deum debitorem facere). What other messages
the narrative conveys were less clear. Why was one offering ignored and the
other accepted? Medieval authors interpreted God’s words to Cain as mean-
ing that it was not the offering that mattered but the giver. According to
these interpretations, Abel was »innocent,« »humble,« and »just.« He »loved
God above all else,« as a sort of »first member of the church« and »proto-
martyr.« His offering was total: »he held nothing back.« It prefigured the to-
tal gift offered by Christ as well as by the church. Cain’s offering was »un-
worthy,« it was a »deceitful gift« and »a dead offering.« He had »shared
badly,« offered »bad fruits,« »without faith« and »without love.« Cain’s of-
fering revealed the »envious,« »perverse,« and evil man who was »conscious
of his own guilt.« Such a gift was »in vain.« All of this is far removed from

7 This is the text of the Vulgata. English text, The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version.
8 Gregor I, Registrum Epistularum 2,25, ed. DAG NORBERG (CCSL 140) Turnhout 1982,
p.111; also ep. 1,13, p.14; identical wording in ep. 1,60, p.71; almost identical in ep. 1,62,
p.72f. and ep. 5,39, p.314.
9 See, for example, Ambrosius Autpertus, Expositio in Apocalypsin, ed. ROBERT WEBER
(CCCM 27) Turnhout 1975, p.79 (primum Ecclesiae membrum); Godefridus Admontensis, Ho-
miliae festiales, MPL 174, Paris 1854, p.651 (protomartyr); Rupertus Tuitiensis, Liber de divi-
nis officiis, ed. HRABAN HAAKE (CCCM 7) Turnhout 1967, p.47 (non seipsum retinuit); Rupertus
Tuitiensis, De sancta trinitate et operibus eius, ed. HRABAN HAAKE (CCCM 21) Turnhout 1971,
p.9:5 (respiciat Deus ad Abel id est ad Christum et ad munera eius).
10 Agobardus Lugdunensis, De privilegio et iure sacerdotii, ed. L. VAN ACKER (CCCM 52)
Turnhout 1981, p.56 (sine caritate); Rupertus Tuitiensis, De sancta trinitate 4. In Genesim 4, ed.
HRABANUS HAAKE (CCCM 21) Turnhout 1971, p.283n (dignus non erat) and p.285 (inanimatum
et sine fide, mortuum quippe erat sacrificium crudelium); ibid., In Hieremiam, ed. HRABANUS
HAAKE (CCCM 23) Turnhout 1972, p.1583 (male diuisit); Script. ord. Grand., Expl. altera
super Librum Sententiarum beati Stephani, ed. J. BEQUET, p. [linea 864] (Cain uero de loliis siue

any discussion of forms of reciprocity, and we will see that it is precisely in this point that the narrative is exemplary for the ecclesiastical discourse more generally.

A closer look at the semantic field of *munus* in the religious literature of the Middle Ages, at the typical and standardized patterns of expression, will help to substantiate and systematize this observation.

*The semantic surroundings of munus and donum*

When a religious author in the early Middle Ages used the word *munus*, there was a high probability that the word »Lord« (*dominus*, in nine out of ten cases) and a word for »heart« (*cor, mens, animus, anima*, in four out of ten instances) would also appear in his argument. These terms were among the few that dominated the semantic field of *munus*. If we wish to grasp the early medieval concepts of *munus* in religious contexts we need to understand in which situations and for what purposes the pattern »*munus*-heart-Lord« was used.

At first sight we might find the prominence of *dominus* extremely unspecific, virtually omnipresent in church discourses, and therefore useless for understanding the semantic field of *munus*. That this is not the case is easy to demonstrate if one makes the comparison with the semantic field of *donum*. In the early medieval field of *munus*, *dominus* is the most common attribute for God, much more frequent than *deus*. The attribute »King« is almost as frequent as »Father.« Most early medieval authors proceed in a different manner when speaking of *donum*: they call God *deus* much more frequently than *dominus*, and speak much more often of »Father« than »King.« In short, they conveyed a different image of God using the term *donum* than they did using *munus*. *Donum* signifies more the loving God, *munus* more the stern God.

We could continue in this vein, looking for and interpreting differences in the early medieval fields of *munus* and *donum*, but this would take us away from my central question. Such distinctions are less important for my purposes than a significant commonality between the two fields. After all, the simple counting to which I have restricted myself up until now initially produces a negative result: when religious texts speak of the *munus* or *donum*,

the concepts familiar to us from the history of piety scarcely play an important role. »Premium« (premium), »penitence« (poenitentia), or »chastity« (castitas) are not the words that co-occur significantly with munus and dominum only »merit« (meritum) co-occurs more frequently. What, then, were the uses of munus?

The constellation »munus/Lord«

»The greatest offering (munus) that man can offer to God is the good and perfect will to serve God as long as he lives.« In practically all texts that touch on the munus, man’s relationship with God is the explicit theme. In early medieval religious sermons the heavenly opposite number to whom homo offers his munus is mainly referred to as »Lord« (dominus). Of course, the texts also reveal the two faces of the Christian God: those of dominus and pater. But they invoke God as dominus nine times for every reference to him as pater. And even when they do call their heavenly interlocutor »Father,« this turns out to be less a reference to the clementissimus than to the omnipotens Father. There are, to be sure, signs of semantic changes. In patristic and in twelfth-century texts the stress on the deus iudex is less evident than in early medieval ones. Only in the early medieval field of munus is dominus the most common attribute for God, more frequent than deus. Patristic and twelfth-century authors in my very preliminary corpus of texts used deus in the vicinity of munus more often than dominus. The use of the attribute »Almighty« (omnipotens) also increased markedly in the early Middle Ages (it was more or less absent in the twelfth century).

Using the term munus thus usually expresses an extremely unequal power relationship, especially in eighth- to eleventh-century texts. To be sure, it is important to add here that this meaning of munus lay in the language, in the standardized co-occurrence of words, but was scarcely developed argumentatively. The linguistic figurations give the impression that concepts of salvation such as Tertullian’s formed the basis of all human relationships with...
God: »Fear,« Tertullian wrote, »is the foundation of salvation.«¹³ In medi-
val texts, this was an implicit message of munus upon which authors did not
elaborate further. Key words such as »fear« (timor) or the famous »trem-
bling« (tremendum) before the judging God play hardly any role in religious
discussions of gifts. It is rare to find a statement such as that from a twelfth-
century sermon of Hermann of Runa: »He who fears God with all his heart
at all times fills the jug to the brim. God loves the undivided offering, com-
plete submission, total sacrifice.«¹⁴

The constellation »gift/heart«

In thinking about human munera to God, the authors were not interested
in the idea of fear or in the idea of a commercium with God. They devoted
their energy and creativity almost exclusively to a single aspect of munus that
clashes with our usual image of the early Middle Ages: that of the »heart,«
most often expressed with the terms cor or mens, and more rarely with ani-
mus or anima. The dominus regarded not the given object, but the giver. In
his De institutione laicai, Jonah of Orleans, an author of the early ninth cen-
tury, emphasized a significant quintessence of the story of Cain and Abel:

Abel pleased him [God] not because of his offerings, but rather the offerings pleased
him because of Abel.¹⁵

Jonah’s attitude was symptomatic. A dictum of Jesus from St. Matthew’s
Gospel (Mt 5:23–24) was the oft-cited classic text:

So if you are presenting your offering (munus) at the altar, and there remember that
your brother has something against you, leave your offering (munus) there before the
altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your offer-
ing (munus).

It is important to note that neither this biblical text nor the story of Cain and
Abel provided the key words that medieval authors usually employed when
they referred to these reference texts. In this regard both passages are typical
of the biblical semantics of munus in general, even for the books of the pro-

¹³ Tertullian, De cultu feminarum 2,2, ed. Emil Kroymann (CCSL 1) Turnhout 1954, p. 354:
Timor fundamentum salutis est.
¹⁴ Herman of Runa, Sermones festivales 80, ed. E. Mikkers, I. Theuws, and R. DeMuele-
naere (CCCM 64) Turnhout 1986, p. 361: Quisquis omni tempore ex omni corde timet Deum, im-
plexit hydriam usque ad summum. Amat Deus integrum munus, affectum plenum, perfectum sacrifi-
cium.
¹⁵ Jonah of Orleans, De institutione laicai, ed. Paul Migne (Patrologia Latina 106), p. 201:
idcirco non Abel ex muneribus, sed ex Abel munera oblata.
phets. It was the interpreting patristic and medieval authors who first formed the semantic constellation! Only they regularly resorted to the combination of munus with «heart» (cor, mens, anima, animus). The twelfth-century author Andrew of Saint-Victor, interpreting Mt 5:23-24, is just one random example: «He does not accept your offering (munus) if you withhold your heart (cor).»

The usual scholarly assumption that the twelfth century witnessed a new boom in intention-oriented religiosity after many centuries of »archaic« religious logic finds hardly any substantiation in the semantics of munus and donum. This biblical reference text was used no differently in the eighth than in the twelfth century. Ambrose Autpertus (eighth century) was quite typical in this regard:

Our offering (munus) is prayer, and our altar the heart (cor).

This is how the same author used the expression »offering/heart« (munus/donum-anima/cor) in another writing:

What is more valuable to our Creator than our heart (anima)? Our gifts (dona), perhaps? When the heart (anima) within is besmirched, can another, external offering (munus) please him?

The authors play the quality of the heart against the value of the offering. Heiric, a ninth-century monk from Saint Germain in Auxerre, explained the connection between «offering» (which seems to be more fitting than »gift«) and »heart« using a collection of unambiguous key words:

We understand our altar in the temple of the Lord, that is, in the heart (cor) of the elect, to be faith. The offerings (munus) we offer (offerre) there are deep respect and love, learning and psalms, obedience, prayer, compassion and whatever else we reverently offer (offerre) to God. For he will accept nothing that is not supported by the purity of faith. For without faith it is impossible to please God.

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18 Ambrosius Autpertus, Sermo de cupiditate (as in note 10), p. 980.

The twelfth-century Aelred of Rievaulx invoked the story of Jesus' childhood and referred to the gifts of the Magi:

Since we cannot appear before Christ empty-handed and worship him, prepare your offering (*munus*) for him. Offer (*offere*) him gold; that is true love. Offer incense; that is pure prayer. Offer myrrh; that is mortification of the flesh. With such offerings (*munus*) you will win God's favor. 

The Magi were repeatedly invoked in this way to interpret human offerings. Their valuable offerings were spiritual in nature, they were «heart». Here is the twelfth-century Godfrey of Admont:

Thus gold, which is more brilliant than other metals, may be understood as the heart's (*cor*) prayer. Incense, which has the finest fragrance, refers to the sweetness of good deeds. Myrrh, however, which, as they say, is used to embalm the bodies of the dead so that they may not rot away, symbolizes true humility of heart (*cor*). These are the three valuable offerings (*munus*), which are absolutely indispensable for anyone who aspires to true salvation. To offer (*offere*) gold is to approach God with all the devotion of our hearts (*cor*) and everything that is God's.

The message conveyed by this language remained the same over the centuries: the value of an offering depended upon the quality of the giver. It was the «heart» that made the offering.

The choice of such quotations doubtless remains rather random as long as the patterns of expression recognizable in them are not demonstrated to be exemplary. This is precisely what a corpus linguistic approach can help us to do – to test whether the co-occurrence of words in a given writing is rare or common. If we further divide the examples gleaned from the large collections into various text genres or groups of authors and analyze them separately, we would have to differentiate our interpretation. But it becomes clear that the semantic constellation «gift-heart» (*munus/donum-anima/cor*) belongs to the stock common to all of these text groups. In the field of religious text production this constellation did not depend upon a special genre or argumentative intention. It reveals a cultural rather than a genre- or author-specific profile. When it mentions *munera*, Christian literature juxtaposes words to formulate a stereotypical message: the Lord looks not at the *munus*, but at the giver and his quality of heart. In texts on offerings, «heart» is the structuring term.

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20 Aelred of Rievaulx, Sermo 4, ed. GAETANO RACITI (CCCM 2A) Turnhout 1989, p. 45.
Heterogeneities and author-specific shifts of emphasis

The findings up until now create a problem of interpretation, because the semantic constellation »gift-heart« sits ill with the dominant view of the medieval practice of piety. The practices of medieval penitential piety rested on three pillars: (1) the imposing of tariffs on sins, that is, fixed penances for each sin; (2) the conversion of extensive into intensive forms of penance, that is, prayers into psalms, psalms into masses; and (3) the possibility of penance by proxy, that is, by clerics, monks, or surviving spouses. As a religious practice it was thus strongly oriented towards liability for transgressions.22

A figure of meaning that emphasized the spiritual state of the giver, in other words, his or her »heart,« was virtually counterproductive for these religious modes of imposing tariffs on sins, conversion, and penance by proxy. I point out this contradiction between the semantic field of munus (and of donum) and the widespread patterns of piety in order to pursue, at least briefly, the question of how I am able to locate author-specific shifts of emphasis in this culturally specific semantic field of munus. As an example, I have again chosen a Sunday sermon by Godfrey of Admont (twelfth century), in which he interpreted the above-cited words of Christ in Mt 5:23-24:

Thus in this passage [Mt 5:23-24] he [Christ] instructs in the manner of a physician's healing advice, when he says: «if you are placing (offerre) your offering (munus) before the altar,« Our offering (munus), which we present (offerre) to God, is our psalmody. It is our sighs, which come from the innermost stirring of our hearts. It is our tears, which, God permitting, we gratefully present (offerre) to him as an offering (munus).23

Godfrey's text might provide welcome evidence for contemporary scholars of religiosity. It is the usual penitential techniques - sighs, tears, and psalms - that define his notion of the proper munus (at least in this passage). Studying the language of munus, however, we must acknowledge that it is precisely in this argument that Godfrey is not representative. The only representative part of his interpretation of the proper munus is the association between the munus and the heart. This is all that Godfrey shares with most other authors. When Godfrey fills this expression »gift/heart« from the repertoire of the penitential system (tears, sighs, psalms), then we see a shift in the

22 Cf. note 6.
standardized meaning »gift/heart« by this individual author. Only very occasionally did authors bring words such as »sighs,« »tears,« and »psalms« into contact with munus.

This observation may help us to attain more methodological precision: studies such as the present one are often accused of smoothing over the heterogeneity, multiple perspectives, and situation-dependence of the texts. The example of Godfrey, in contrast, shows that only knowledge of the collective use of the word munus allows scholars to locate the meaning of a specific text in the general field of possible arrangements of meaning. Only in this way can we grasp the mixture of shared meaning and individual meaning. It is particularly important here to be able to assess the cultural weight of a generation of meaning such as that undertaken by Godfrey. Godfrey's arrangement of words combining »gift/heart« and »tears/sighs/psalms« was a rare one.

The Verbs of Transaction

A survey of the semantic field of munus reveals a limited range of notions about how a munus was transferred. It was »offered« (offerre) and »accepted« (accipere), »regarded« or »not regarded« (respicere, non respicere); only seldom was it simply »given« (dare). God's reaction was largely restricted to »having regard« and »accepting«. The texts almost never speak of the reciprocation of gifts (referre, remunerare). The oft-addressed basic problem of give and take between this world and the next was not reciprocation, but regard and acceptance. The Lord demonstrated his power by having »no regard« for gifts. This was the message of the story of Cain and Abel.

It was almost always man who »offered« (offerre). This is by no means a self-evident observation. Theology and religiosity were rooted in the liturgical repetition of Christ's sacrifice of himself. Nonetheless we rarely find an author who establishes a connection between the proper munus and Christ's »offering of himself to the Father« (semetipsum obtuli patri). This is striking to the extent that the formula of Christ »who through the Holy Spirit offered himself without blemish to God« (qui per Spiritum sanctum semetipsum obtulit immaculatum Deo; Hebr 9:14) is frequently cited in other contexts. The phrase was well known and quite often used, but not for writing about offerings.

We may at least speculate about the reasons for this when we investigate the contexts in which the formula referring to Christ's self-sacrifice was common. It is frequently found in homily, but not in the liturgy. In the prayers surrounding the Eucharist (ad communionem, super oblata, and post communionem), in which we might expect a ritual remembrance of this self-sacrifice, quite another language dominated: »Lord, we ask thee to accept gra-
ciously the gifts offered.«24 Or: »Lord ..., accept the offering of thy devoted servants.«25

Compared with the biblical and patristic message, in prayer texts of this type the roles of the actors in the Eucharistic event have been reversed. Christ does not offer himself to his father for humankind, but rather is given to the Lord by humankind. Man places the Lord's own son before him as an offering. In these prayers, the formula »we ask thee to accept« (accipe quae-sumus) becomes the constant companion of the offering. This form of trading the offering of Christ with God was an invention of the early Middle Ages, one that was to attain great importance within penitential practice.

2. The Lord's munus

Although the word munus co-occurs with a term for »heart« with significant frequency, in many contexts of munus the structuring words cor, mens, or animus/ anima are absent. These texts demand a crosscheck. On closer scrutiny, in many passages the explanation is simple: these are often texts that speak about God's gifts.

The absence of the language of merits

In order to sketch out what these texts express, I begin with a remark by William of Tyre, a twelfth-century chronicler of the Crusades. William ended one of his chapters with the remark that »the divine gift (munus) is always free (gratie), not the result of merits.«26 Such an explicit rejection of the ideas of merit and reciprocity in the twelfth century will not surprise historians. It is a scholarly commonplace that the attitude of clerics to the theology of merit began to change in the twelfth century. Scholars expect late medieval theologians to deny the connection between human merits and divine gifts. The following formula of Thomas a Kempis (fifteenth century) may stand for many others:

24 Liber Sacramentorum Augustodunensis 19,1, ed. ODLO HEIMING (CCSL 159A) Turnhout 1984, p. 5 (Missa ad sanctam Anastasiam, super oblata); the same prayer in: Gelasianum of Angouleme 8, Gellonense 17, Sacr. of Saint Gall 16, Rheinau 15, Veronense 759, Hadrianum 43, Paduense 11.
25 Sacramentarium Gelasianum vetus 1188 (Secreta), ed. LEO CUNIBERT MOHLBERG, Rome 1960, p. 177; the same prayer in: Gellonense 1242, Sacr. of Saint Gall 1001, Supplementum Anianense ad Hadrianum 1151.
If God gives (dare) you spiritual comfort, accept it gratefully. But know that God's gift (munus) is not your merit.  

The prevalent scholarly view is correct to the extent that it would be difficult to find such explicit statements in the early Middle Ages. The semantics of munus and donum throughout the Middle Ages shows, however, that we cannot derive the authors' mental models from their explicit arguments alone. If, instead of explicit statements, we concentrate on the authors' notions of the divine munus, we arrive at the remarkable finding that early medieval authors did not differ very much from their later colleagues: scarcely any of them thought of associating human merits with a divine munus or donum. These writers did not, to be sure, expressly reject this connection as William of Tyre or Thomas a Kempis were to do, but they did not make the connection either. 

This observation naturally does not deny that early medieval authors elaborated a theology of merits quite vociferously in other contexts. I return to this point later. Where early medieval authors did write about the gift of God, munus Dei, however, they were almost never concerned with human merits. The figure munus Dei confirms what we already saw for human muner a: there is no room here for notions of reciprocity and merit. We thus need to examine what the usage context was. 

The overpowering generosity of the Lord 

An anonymous pseudo-Augustinian treatise from twelfth-century France may serve as an example and point the way to an interpretation. The author asked how God would react if men pointed to their merits and demanded God's gift in return: »We deserve to enjoy your largesse (meruimus a te largiri)«: 

Then that great paterfamilias will answer as Alexander did when a soldier asked for a munus and got an entire city: »Even though you are not worthy to receive so much, I am worthy and powerful enough to give (donare) you so much.«  

The message is clear enough: When medieval clerics wrote of God's munus, they were articulating the conditions of human existence. What was decisive was the omnipotence and unparalleled generosity of God's gifts. God always gave voluntarily, generously, and first. The Creation was his gift. 

27 Thomas a Kempis (+1471), De imitatione Christi 2. Admonitiones ad interna trahentes (Opera omnia 2), ed. Michael Joseph Pohl, Freiburg 1904, p. 75
Man received a double munus as a present from God (Deo donante): the power of reason and the discretion of the will.\textsuperscript{29}

The observations made thus far make it clear why the question of God's return gift played no role in these contexts (although, as the next section shows, it was quite common in other contexts): when clerics discussed the human and the divine munus, they were speaking of a God who had always given. It was always man who had to give in return. Here, too, however, it should be emphasized that this religious message was articulated primarily in semantic formations. It is not an explicit logic of the semantic space »gift of God.« The twelfth-century author Aelred of Rievaulx is a marginal figure in this regard when he expressed concern that »we can at least give back what we owe Him.«\textsuperscript{30}

In short, the semantic space munus-dominus-cor can trigger the idea of reciprocity – in the sense of God's unmerited first gift. Only rarely, though, does a text refer to it. If the idea of reciprocity was present in the semantic field of munus (or donum) to any significant degree, then the relationship between the human and the divine munus was turned on its head: God's Creation was regarded as the generous gift that imposed upon man a permanent state of duty and obedience. Man could count himself fortunate if God had regard for his munus. The liturgical texts never tire of asking for God's regard and acceptance \(\text{respice quaesumus, accipe quaesumus.}\) What, however, could man expect from the God who graciously \(\text{had regard} \) (respexit) for his offerings? Curiously enough, this is scarcely addressed in the texts. At most they mention that man's munus is itself an acknowledgment of Creation. Man owes the offering (which is in fact very close to a tribute) for the unmerited, generous gift of Creation. The language of the gift speaks of the origins of man and society. It belongs to the field of Christian anthropology.

To conclude: If we are searching in medieval religious texts for a specifically Christian version of something that is \textit{prima facie} similar to our notion of »gift,« we are in for a surprise: munus occurs in two usage contexts and has nothing to do with reciprocity in either of them. First, when applied to mankind, the term stands for a duty. Man must offer something without creating counterclaims. »Offering« is almost always the proper translation here, although in certain cases »tribute« would also not be misleading. Second, when applied to God, this word is used expressly to refer to a wholly

\textsuperscript{29} Balduinus de Forda, De commendatione fidei. Praefatio, ed. DAVID N. BELL (CCCM 99) Turnhout 1991.

\textsuperscript{30} Aelred of Rievaulx, Sermo 23 (see note 22), p. 185: \textit{Sed quid ei faciemus? Qua\lspace{1pt}lia munera ei offeremus? Vtinam saltem possemus reddere ei quod debemus illi ex debito!}
free, unmerited transaction. Here, »gift« would appear to be a perfectly good translation. This also applies – interestingly enough – to texts of the early Middle Ages. The logic of this finding will become even clearer after we take a closer look at the semantic field of *remuneratio* in church discourses.

3. A Significant Vicinity: *remuneratio* and *opus*

Everything that has been said here thus far about the key word »gift« deviates strikingly from what we know of medieval religious practice. Little in it points to the system of tariffs contained in the penitentials, to the saints and ascetics upon whose religious acrobatics the ordinary person relied for his or her salvation. There is nary a hint of the terrible fear that scholars claim to see in the late Middle Ages, nor of the gigantic efforts at placating God in the form of innumerable pious bequests. We can nevertheless locate these familiar aspects if we abandon the term *munus* and its uses and instead look more closely at another term: *remuneratio* (or *retributio*). Authors argued far less often in terms of *remuneratio* than in terms of *munus* – the ratio is approximately one to three. Following the Maussian tradition, we might perhaps expect *remuneratio* and *munus* to be closely related. This need not be the case, however. We also should not assume in advance that terms such as *remuneratio* can be translated as »counter-gift.« A brief description of the usage of this term suffices to show how differently *remuneratio* and *munus* were employed.

**God the Requiter**

In contrast to *munus*, the use of *remuneratio* underwent a clear development: the term appears far more frequently in medieval than in patristic texts. *Remunerator* is a common name for God: this God as *remunerator* is the God of good people only. The figure of the *remunerator* depends upon the conception of God, who renders judgment (*iudicium, iusticia*) either kindly (*remunerare*) or – only rarely mentioned – terribly (*condemnare*). The Christian’s hope (in the words of Godfrey of Admont) is to »... meet not the terrible judge but the solicitous returner (*remunerator*).«

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31 Godfridus Admontensis, Homiliae festiuales 8 (see note 10), p.659: *non Judicem terribilem, sed pium sentiamus remuneratorem.*
Human deeds

It is in the semantic field of *remuneratio* that we find the explanation for the observation that *munus* has nothing to do with *remuneratio*. The conceptual pair here is »human deed/Godly return.« God’s *remuneratio* (or *retributio*) is the eternal and merciful (*aeternus, futurus, saeculum, merces*) response (*premium*) not to the *munus*, but to man’s *opus* and *labor* on earth. Unlike the text passages involving *munus*, the examples involving *remuneratio* hold no surprises for present-day scholars. The formula from the Book of Revelation that God judges »according to works« (*secundum opera*) can commonly be found in the vicinity of the terms *remuneratio* or *retributio*. No historian is astonished to find the following viewpoint in the writings of Sedulius Scotus, a ninth-century Irish-Scottish author living on the Continent: »God rewards (*remunerat*) the one, and damns the others. He gives (*reddat*) to each according to his deeds.«32 *Remuneratio* (in the words of an anonymous commentator in the twelfth century) »places before our eyes« a God who »justly punishes sin (*peccati vindicem*) and returns justice (*iustitiae remuneratorem*).«33

When confronted with the semantics of *remuneratio*, particularly the conceptual pair *opus/remuneratio*, medievalists seem to find themselves on familiar ground. Here we discover the language for those ideas that scholars of religiosity and mentality have taught us: »Our faith deserves (*mereri*) justification and expects (*expectat*) rich rewards (*remuneratio*), because we believe in what we cannot see.«34 This passage from a sermon of Aelred of Rievaulx assembles the concepts that scholars might expect here: merit, sure expectation, and reward.

But even in the field of *remuneratio* we have to adjust our picture: the quotations that I have chosen from Godfrey of Admont, Sedulius Scotus, and the anonymous twelfth-century author are misleading insofar as they oppose the rewarding, merciful God to the terrible, punishing God. Even in this context, however, the image of the frightening and punishing God (*punire, vindicare, damnare*) is hardly ever developed. The authors usually talked about reward without referring to frightening images of God.

The difference from *munus* is clear enough. The semantics of *remuneratio* relates to the normative treatment of behavior: good behavior is followed by

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33 Commentarium in Ruth e codice Genovefensi 45, ed. G. de Martel (CCCM 81) Turnhout 1990, pp.61-312, p.287.
34 Aelred von Rievaulx, Sermo 13,3 (see note 22), p. 105.
a reward. Here, in the case of *remuneratio*, we indeed find reciprocity – the reciprocity not of the gift/counter-gift in the Maussian tradition, but (one is tempted to say) of the contract. The appropriate translation is generally »reward,« not »counter-gift.«

4. Interpreting the Evidence

If, in summing up, we wish to put the semantic constellation of *munus* and *remuneratio* in perspective, it might look like this: Although scholars tend to translate the term »gift« almost automatically as »gift exchange,« thus melding »gift« and »counter-gift« into a single figure of meaning, the semantics of *munus* and *donum* in medieval religious texts completely contradicts this interpretation. *Munus* and *remuneratio* (like *donum* and *redonatio*) cannot be forced into a scheme of gift and counter-gift. The semantics of *remuneratio* is, to be sure, a semantics of reciprocity (and to this extent it substantiates the picture that scholars of religiosity have been painting), but not of reciprocity in a discourse on gifts. It is the reciprocity of rewards, more a question of bookkeeping than of gift exchange. The authors have deployed their vocabularies with surprising coherence.

*Remuneratio* and *munus* represent two separate problem complexes: *remuneratio* made it possible to articulate expectations of behavior: *opus* – *remuneratio*. The focus here is on the outer man (*homo exterior*). *Munus* surveys the inner man (*homo interior*) and the dependence of human existence upon the Creation and the Redemption. This semantic constellation is oriented towards intention, and it is non-reciprocal: *cor* – *munus*.

Medieval Christian authors managed to retain in their language a semantics of *munus* that they inherited from their patristic predecessors, while at the same time establishing a contradictory new figure, *remuneratio*, which was oriented towards reciprocity, and which enjoys great popularity among medievalists. Over and over again, throughout the whole Middle Ages, the very same persons who spread the logic of the penitentials in concepts such as *poenitentia*, *meritum*, *opus*, *deus index*, *vindicatio*, or *remuneratio* also reproduced a very different concept: a «heart»-oriented, non-reciprocal, non-quantifiable figure of meaning around the term *munus*. As we have seen, the different contexts of usage for both terms may be easily distinguished from each other.

It remains to be said that my experiment has its limits as regards both materials and method. It has been no more than a test-drill into the formations of medieval religious language. In many respects, my observations will have
to wait for further substantiation. First, they need to be tested in equally extensive explorations of the semantic spaces of donum, beneficium, and oblatio, which I have treated only briefly here. The findings also need to be tested against studies of texts outside the temporal range considered here. How, for example, did confessional controversies change the language of Catholic argumentation? Second, we should keep in mind that the analysis of collocations of words argues only on the level of editions. This view does not take into account that texts with a wide distribution may have had more influence on linguistic habits than texts with a narrower distribution. Editions allow us to capture only the linguistic habits of authors. Third, at the moment we lack the basis for assessing whether concepts such as “offering/gift/tribute” (munus, donum, oblatio) and “reward/requital/return” (remuneration, retributio, redonatio) had a discourse-organizing function in medieval religious language in the first place. In order to find this out, we need information about the general distribution of words in medieval religious literature on the one hand, and the connection between the words and the concepts on the other. Scarcely any studies on this subject are available at the moment, though.

What have we gained by learning that munus and remuneration were not a conceptual pair? In essence this insight poses a new problem. Present-day readers cannot read the medieval texts without their previous knowledge of the history of ideas or theology. After all, we know about the medieval culture of penance, the concept of merit, of liability for transgressions, and penitential tariffs. This previous knowledge inevitably means that the linguistic signals of this very culture of penance – remuneration, poenitentia, meritum, deus index, vindicatio, and so forth – jump off the page of every text.

No comparable previous knowledge guides our gaze to the complex of meaning that formed around the term munus. None of the widespread explanatory models help us perceive that the linguistic signals of the culture of penance did not displace, or even significantly change, an opposing semantics – that of munus. The logic of liability for transgression in religious practice and in a multiplicity of texts did nothing to change the fact that the same texts simultaneously articulated a counter-model: the non-reciprocal, non-quantifiable, heart-centered semantics of munus.

Put another way, we find a permanent coexistence of opposing figures of meaning. Figures such as munus and remuneration are each islands of (relative) coherence in their own right. This insight points to a blind spot in the history of ideas, which does not ask how (or whether) figures of meaning such as munus and remuneration were connected. For a historiography interested in historically specific semantics, however, the question of the connection or non-connection between semantic constellations is crucial. These is-
lands of coherence, which can be found in semantic fields such as *munus* and *remuneratio*, may be considered the most extreme reductions and at the same time most reliable conveyers of indigenous theories. The storehouse of attributes, exemplary characters and stories, typologies, and associations surrounding a basic word shows in which associations the authors invested their energies. The example of *munus* demonstrates how far removed research on medieval religiosity can be from these formations of meaning.

Unusual thinkers, whose ideas often attract the particular interest of scholars because of their originality, can only be viewed in proper perspective within the context of the study of culturally specific formations of meaning. One may wish to portray a Bernard of Clairvaux as one of the great minds of the twelfth century, but never as a representative or tradition-founding user of a common semantics or common figures of speech and thought. What interests us here are not the most innovative authors, the most beautifully and subtly constructed texts, but those texts that were standardized and whose building blocks were continually recycled.

Contemporary definitions such as that proposed by John of Salisbury, whose *Policraticus* pursues the question of when a gift may be accepted and when it may not, or that of the ninth-century bishop Amalar of Metz (d. ca. 850), whose »Explanation of the Mass« defines *munus*, are also of little interest from my perspective. According to Amalar, *dona* are given voluntarily, whereas *munera* are given for the sake of another *munus*. This definition fits splendidly with what scholars of early medieval religiosity think, but it is a lone voice among the everyday semantics of authors and preachers in whose texts *munus* precisely did not have the meaning that Amalar invoked. Although definitions such as Amalar’s appear highly seductive for historians, they are the »consciously worked-out« concepts about which Lévi-Strauss already warned us – not without reason – in his introduction to Mauss’s *Oeuvres*. It is in those cases in which a concept is not discussed, but rather applied, that we can hope to discover fundamental orientations.

This hope also has its limits, of course. They lie, needless to say, in the relationship between semantics and social organization. And they lie in the experience that we are sometimes confronted with formations of meaning that have a limited degree of linguistic standardization. It is unclear whether our look at the standardized terms actually encompasses all the central aspects

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of a concept. Some phenomena were grasped by contemporaries using a multiplicity of similar articulations and circumlocutions, without becoming lexicalized.\textsuperscript{37} The prominence of the concept »heart« in the semantic field of \textit{munus}, too, can only be comprehended when several Latin terms (\textit{cor}, \textit{mens}, \textit{animus}, \textit{anima}) are viewed together as »heart«. The less lexicalized a mental model is, the more it resists a semantic field analysis.\textsuperscript{38} Methodological problems of this kind, however, can be solved, and they do nothing to change the astonishing results that the (doubtless preliminary) semantic analyses of \textit{munus} and \textit{remuneratio} have uncovered.

\textsuperscript{37} Examples are the Revenants, a rather short-lived phenomenon of the late Middle Ages, and the Iconoclasts of the Reformation period; on the Revenants, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, \textit{Les revenants. Les vivants et les morts dans la société médiévale}, Paris 1994. Contemporaries acknowledged the phenomenon but did not develop a single term for it. These returners from the dead were first simply subsumed under the collective name »Helpers« and later were called »Ghosts«. See Mireille Othenin-Girard, »Helfer« und »Gespenster«, Die Toten und der Tauschhandel mit den Lebenden, in: Kulturelle Reformation. Sinnformationen im Umbruch 1400-1600, ed. Bernhard JusSEN and Craig KosLOFSKY (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte) Göttingen 1999, pp. 159-191. In the sixteenth century there was no specific term for iconoclasm; at most there were descriptions such as »church-breaking«: cf. Norbert SchNitzler, »Kirchenbruch« und »lose Rotten«. Gewalt, Recht und Reformation (Stralsund 1525), in: Kulturelle Reformation, ibid., pp. 285-315.

\textsuperscript{38} A sketch of current problems can be found in Günther LOTTES, »The state of the Art«, Stand und Perspektiven der »intellectual history«, in: Neue Wege der Ideengeschichte. Fs. Kurt Kluxen, ed. Frank-Lothar KROLL, Paderborn 1996, pp. 27-45.