I juxtapose discussions of dividuality and individuality with an exploration of Maussian ideas relating to gifts, masks, and persons, using my analysis as a framework to examine controversies surrounding the actions of Prosperity (“Health and Wealth”) Christians in Sweden. The article argues that multiple and competing notions of personhood are evident in the case examined. More generally, it claims that a “Prosperity Ethic” can be discerned, which both indicates the transactional character of person-formation and challenges certain normative Protestant ideals of a dematerialized modern subject. This argument indicates the advantages and pitfalls of deploying notions of dividual and individual in a Western context.

Keywords: individuality, dividuality, Protestantism, Prosperity Gospel, Mauss, Sweden

As with most productive debates in anthropology, a focus on individuality and dividuality poses questions at numerous levels of analysis. How might a supposedly Western emphasis on stable, coherent, unique, intentional subjects relate to putatively non-Western variations on dividuals construed as unstable products of relationships, exchanges, and material influences (see also Boddy 1998: 255–56; Marriott 1976)? More generally, in theoretical terms, should we think of these dual concepts as supporting or challenging evolutionary models of human development? From a methodological perspective, is it better to regard them as emerging from observable cultural practices or as abstract ideologies? Indeed, might individualism as ideology mask dividualism as practice? And what light does their juxtaposition shed on debates within the subfield of the anthropology of Christianity, which has been so concerned to trace the trajectory of the religious subject, particularly in encounters involving personal and collective conversion?
I explore such issues in this article, using the work of Marcel Mauss as a touchstone. The metaphor of “touchstone” indicates that I proceed from concepts explored by Mauss—ranging from the person, to the mask, to the gift, to prayer, to sacrifice—rather than necessarily following his original intentions. Thus I sometimes read Mauss anachronistically and, as I term it, synchronically. By synchrony I mean, first, an avoidance of Mauss’ sometimes linear, social evolutionary trajectories; and second, a juxtaposition of Maussian concepts in order to present them working in relation to each other. While Mauss deployed the particular example of Protestant sects in support of an argument that linked individualism to modernity (Hann 2012), I analyze other forms of Protestantism in order to complicate such assumptions and to question what we customarily mean by referring to Protestantism and individualism. In this vein, I reinvoke Mauss’ own notion of the mask, used by him to describe an intermediary stage in humanity’s movement toward the modern self, to suggest that it still has much to say about multiple forms of Protestantism, personhood, materiality, and performance in the contemporary world, not least when it is combined with notions of sacrifice and the gift.  

An implication of my argument is that we can adapt Mauss in order to explore an alternative genealogy of Protestantism, and one where we might rethink what constitutes a plausible “Protestant Ethic.” The Protestants whom I examine in this paper—members of what has loosely been called Prosperity or Health and Wealth Christianity—encourage us to place Weberian and Maussian sociologies in uneasy juxtaposition (Coleman 2004), suggesting ways in which religious adherence might involve cultivation of personal agency through discipline but also immersion in a Christian landscape made up of gifts, exchanges, and mutual interactions that recall models of dividual as much as individual forms of self-cultivation. This juxtaposition also suggests the utility of a reexamination of the relationship between “ascetic” and “romantic” ethics of normative practice as realized in industrial and postindustrial contexts, while challenging the “normative ideal of the dematerialized modern subject” (Wilf 2011: 469; see also Campbell 1989; Coleman 2004)—an ideal that derives in part from certain Protestant notions of the sincere individual, alone before God (compare Keane 2007).

I do not claim that a single model of ascetic, purely autonomous, individualistic Protestantism—or that a coherent notion of “the Protestant subject”—is evident either among believers or in the anthropological literature, but I agree with Fenella Cannell (2006: 7; see also Keane 2007: 43) that an “ascetic stereotype of Christianity . . . has become embedded in anthropology,” and that this asceticism is often twinned with notions of interiority (Cannell 2006: 20), while tending to generalize a Calvinist model of practice as if it were representative of Protestantism as a whole. Webb Keane’s (2007: 203) brilliant analysis of Calvinism points to the inevitable tensions inherent in a Protestantism that both fosters “more socially autonomous selves” and must deal with embeddedness in the carnal world as an inescapable condition of semiotic practice.” My interest here is with a form of Protestantism that calibrates the moral value of both autonomy and certain dimensions

1. See also Naomi Haynes’ (2013) discussion of sacrifice and the social productivity of exchange among Prosperity Christians in the Zambian Copperbelt.
of materiality in rather different ways, and therefore prompts a reconsideration of the salience of models of personhood and exchange.

Debates over dividuality and individuality also have a complex comparative genealogy, linked to South Asian (Marriott 1976), Melanesian (Strathern 1988), African (Werbner 2011) and Amazonian (Vilaça 2011) ethnography. Discussion focused on Christianity is illustrated by Mosko’s (2010) provocative reanalysis of ethnographic studies of conversion as a means of identifying what he sees as the dividual character of personhood and agency contained within various Melanesian populations (Gebusi, Maisin, Karavar, and Urapmin; see also Coleman 2004). Mosko’s argument relies on being able to assert analogies between indigenous “dividualism” and Christian “individualism.” I do not engage with the Melanesian aspects of this debate but rather point to what I take to be a common feature of the responses to Mosko by his interlocutors, to the effect that identifying traces of social exchange and partibility in different contexts does not necessarily tell us very much in itself (Robbins 2010: 242; Barker 2010: 248–49; Errington and Gewertz 2010: 250). Understanding the historical, cultural, and political specificities of how rhetorical and ritual instantiations of individuality and dividuality play out in relation to each other is key, just as we cannot assume that they will exist as fixed or internally consistent categories within Christianity. An equally significant challenge, however, is not to retreat into knee-jerk reassertions of the uniqueness of “the local.” I therefore hope to show that the juxtaposition and examination, but also contextualization, of these concepts can help us to nuance our understandings of the Christian subject both in the case I examine and as we do comparative work.

I begin by exploring Mauss’ discussions of personhood and other key concepts, while relating them to questions raised by considerations of dividuality and individuality. These themes form the context through which to frame my presentation of Swedish Prosperity Christians as I have studied them since the 1980s. The historical dimension of my ethnographic analysis, albeit recent, is significant because I wish to trace how certain ideas of personhood have emerged among believers but also played out in relation to salient aspects of cultural politics relating to autonomy, reason, citizenship, and nationhood in the country over three decades. I argue that dividuality and individuality—or rather local understandings of themes that have strong family resemblances to these terms—have provoked heated and broad debate in Sweden that has revealed significant fault lines in understandings of agency and self-determination at different scales of operation. Finally, I step back from this case study to ask about how such work encourages a nuancing of our understanding of Protestant subjecthood.

Reading Mauss synchronically

If Mauss, with his socialist and Jewish background (see, for example, Cannell 2006: 2) was keen to reflect on links between his intellectual life and wider political and social worlds, we also see in his life some tensions between the obligations of kinship and the ambitions of a scholarly career, between cementing the Durkheimian School of sociology and emerging as an intellectual force in his own right—even between the determinism of Durkheimianism itself and the relatively more
transactional social qualities of his best-known work, *The gift* (Fournier [1994] 2006: 1–3, 323). The latter was also an attack on the English (and, more broadly, the Anglophone) utilitarians of his time, in part because of what Mauss saw as their impoverished, somewhat asocial concept of the person (Douglas 1990: x; Guyer 2014: 17).

Thus, while much of Mauss’ work might be read through its tracing of human moral development toward the supposed individualism of the present, this apparent progress should hardly be seen as untroubled, even within Mauss’ own texts. Howard Morphy (2003: 144) notes for instance Mauss’ juxtaposition of the claim that the individualistic, interiorized appeals of liberal Protestants represent the highest forms of prayer with the assertion that this activity remains a deeply social phenomenon. Mauss (2003: 33; see Morphy 2003: 144) states, almost echoing Bakhtin, that “a prayer is not just the effusion of a soul, a cry which expresses a feeling. It is a fragment of a religion. In it one can hear the echo of numberless phrases; it is a tiny piece of literature.” As a consequence “the individual is borrowing a language he did not invent” (Mauss 2003: 33). Such an observation indicates the likelihood of semiotic exchanges among persons even as they engage in their most intimate engagement with the divine.

Similar ambiguities surround Mauss’ classic work on notions of personhood (1985; originally 1938), which concedes the importance of common human experience even as it displaces fixed notions of selfhood. We are presented with a distinctly evolutionary trajectory, moving from the *personnage*, absorbed within a bounded tribal society (Allen 1985: 31) to the Latin *persona*, through to the modern “self” who is also the citizen of the social democratic state (Carrithers 1985: 235). Mauss has a Christian individualist telos in mind as he moves the reader from the articulation of “roles” and the first use of ceremonial masks in symbolic dances to the development of a private sense of one’s own uniqueness (see also Hollis 1985). As Bryan Turner puts it, “for Mauss, the modern self emerged directly out of the Protestant emphasis on the individual liberty of interior consciousness which liberated the isolated individual from the disciplines of the confessional” (1986: 4). So according to this view one key to the development of “modern” attitudes is the way in which Christianity has made a “metaphysical entity” of the moral person (Mauss 1985: 19). At the same time, such thinking presents proselytizing religions as dedicated to spreading a notion of humanity as everywhere identical—an ideological context in which the individual can become disengaged from any given social matrix (Allen 1985: 34–35). On the one hand, mind and conscience come ever closer together; on the other, individuals can see themselves as set apart from society in a way that would have been impossible for the tribal *personnage*.

But what are we to make of these analytical trajectories? Martin Hollis (1985) worries about the juxtaposition of Mauss’ (1985: 3) admission that there has never been a human being who has not been aware both of their own body and of their individuality with the implication—somewhat hyperbolically stated by Hollis (1985: 220)—that the Maussian story “leads from a start in pure role without self to a finish in pure self without role.” Reflecting on what Hollis (a philosopher) sees as incoherence but that I (an anthropologist) regard as productive tensions, I am drawn back to Mauss’ image of the mask in his tracing of the history of the self through its connections with roles, materialities, and social obligations. In Mauss’ schema,
On Mauss, masks, and gifts

The notion of *persona* follows a route from masks to the articulation of privileges of those with a right to the masks, and eventually toward the idea of a person as a possessor of rights; then, Christianity provides the metaphysical foundation for both a moral consciousness and the sense of a person as indivisible and individual. And yet, the mask cannot be quite so easily left behind. According to Hollis’ (1985: 222) critique of Mauss, the self can never be seen as pure mask since we are never merely beings-for-others; and nor—in Hollis’ shifting metaphors—can it be right to think of the self divorced from social masking, emerging unencumbered as a butterfly from a caterpillar of role and a chrysalis of persona. Perhaps, then, the notion of the mask is more useful if we think of it in performative and transactional terms, and thus as inevitably constitutive of personhood but in inherently dynamic ways; in this sense it reiterates a constant trope in Mauss’ writing, ranging from sacrifice to prayer to the gift, of invoking material mediations between self and other, linking inwardly and outwardly oriented trajectories of sociality articulated over time and space, and thus potentially remaking and not merely abandoning any given social matrix.

Such a view resonates with Turner’s argument (1986: 4–5) that the transition in Europe from persona as mask to persona as self was not as rapid as Mauss implies, since an aspect of feudalism was the notion that one’s self was embedded in material symbols of office, such as a shield. Turner continues that the modern self is ongoingly constructed in face-to-face interactions, exteriorly articulated marks of social difference. This situation is reflected in the development of sociological theory itself, most notably in symbolic interactionism. Charles Cooley’s *Human nature and the social order* (1902) famously presented the notion of the “looking-glass self”—one that cannot exist outside the gaze of other social actors (Turner 1986: 5). Irving Goffman, too, provides numerous interactionist concepts (face-work, strategic interaction, presentation of self) as part of a dramaturgical model of image-management and society as theater (Turner 1986: 6). A recent piece by Chris Shilling and Philip Mellor (2013) is written with similar considerations in mind, as part of an examination of the ways in which the sacred is actively produced in the modern (presumably Western) world. They deploy Mauss’ analysis of sacrifice (Shilling and Mellor 2013: 321) before juxtaposing his work with that of Simmel in the latter’s discussion of how the sacred is produced by individuals “giving up” something of themselves, or objects they own, in exchanges that are transcendent rather than merely utilitarian (Shilling and Mellor 2013: 328; see Simmel 1971). For them, Simmel’s emphasis retains a Christian influence in the idea of sacrifice helping to develop the soul or unique personality of the individual, even as they note that sacrifice may well involve the integration of external objects into the core of the self (Shilling and Mellor 2013: 329).

These analyses might be criticized for telling us little more than that social scientists (especially those writing in Durkheimian traditions) are very good at burrowing out the social from any situation. However, there is much more to be gained from such work in the context of a discussion of the construction of personhood. One point is the often significant contrast between rhetorics of autonomy and the observable workings of microsociological encounters where ideas of self are

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produced and reproduced. Another is that we need to anatomize rather than take for granted the specific sociological and ideological building blocks out of which interaction and exchange, and ultimately forms of personhood, are conceptualized and produced. When we allow Mauss’ categories to interact synchronically rather than diachronically we see, in Edward LiPuma’s terms (1998: 57ff.), how the argument can be made that in all cultures there exist both individual and dividual modalities of personhood, but we need also to ask how and through what means they coexist, mutually constitute each other, or compete. Or, as Janice Boddy notes (1998: 256), if styles of dividuality and individuality are culturally specific, the forms of separation, contexts, and meanings of divisibility, and so on, will vary in important ways. For instance, how do we think productively of dividuality in the context of performance and mutual presentation in relation to multiple framings of urban life and citizenship, divisions between the public and the private, rhetorics of choice and the market, and so on? LiPuma argues that our failure to recognize the presence of dividual aspects of Western personhood is an ideologically loaded feature of the reproduction of the person in specifically capitalist societies (1998: 60).

At a lower scale of observation, we might observe how a Maussian sense of a trajectory between one form of personhood and another in historical, diachronic terms can be replaced by analysis of the tensions between multiple, synchronous forms of personhood, which coexist and surface at different times within the same subject.\(^3\) Furthermore, it may be worth asking whether dividuality always needs to refer to dyadically conceived relationships as the source and outcome of action (see Vilaça 2011: 248), or whether more variation is possible, especially in encounters with anonymous others.\(^4\) Added to these complications is the question of how we might refer such debates to an analysis of Christianity that brings out more of its internal heterogeneities and contradictions, even within the realm of contemporary forms of Protestantism.

Thus I take us back to the image of the mask for a final time in this section: not in a literal sense but figuratively, drawing on Turner’s sense of the transition from fixed shield to movable performance. Such a “mask,” I argue, has the potential to act as a mediating trope (as well as point of tension) between notions of dividuality and individuality, at least in the Western case that I examine. Echoing some of Turner’s points, performance theorist John Emigh (1996: xvii; see also Coleman 2009) discusses ways in which the relationship of the mask to the wearer provides a paradigm for transactional relationships between self and other (and self and self) that lie at the heart of theatrical as well as much ritual process. Emigh points out

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3. My emphasis on conceptualizing different ways in which dividuality and individuality interact might also point us to a Dumontian notion of hierarchy as encompassment, leading to the potential for the latter to subsume the former in Western contexts (compare Macfarlane 1993: 2; Robbins 2004: 12–13).

4. Note Turner’s (1986: 11) distinctions among individualism as a doctrine of rights not concerned with the subjectivity of the individual, individuality as a romantic theory of the interior and private nature of personal life, and individuation as referring to bureaucratic practices and disciplines relating to social regimentation and political surveillance. This article is primarily concerned with individuality but does not see this concept as entirely divorced from either doctrines of rights or social surveillance.
(1996: 7) that, in the West, the mask (literal and metaphorical) is often devalued and is generally regarded as a cosmetic disguise: the tendency is to speak of the mask as *impediment* to expression, hiding the individual behind public, fixed form. But again, we should not simply accept this teleological story of individualization and privatization. Emigh (1996: xviii) describes how the mask calls attention to the often ambiguous, liminal play between self and other; for the actor, the otherness of the mask may become both obstacle and goal, requiring a kind of ontological redefining of the sense of self in order to wear the other’s face and be “true” to it in spirit. I want to argue, then, that the mask as metaphor and theoretical (even, at times, theatrical) trope will help in my analysis of a case where interactions with others may involve mediations between self and sometimes anonymous others, involving transactions and mutual constructions that take place over certain kinds of social but also material and temporal spaces; and furthermore, that it will lead us to consider the construction of the Protestant subject in ways that do not assume the primacy of a striving toward dematerialization, or the valorization of differentiation between either persons and persons, or persons and things.

**Anatomy of a controversy**

*Ulf was a decisive, eager runner and went at speed down the path of faith. First to the United States, just like myself, to be stimulated by the ”world record holders” in the race of faith, Kenneth Hagin, Lester Sumrall, Kenneth Copeland, Oral Roberts. . . . And he learned a lot, among other things that it was more effective to run without being clad in a Lutheran uniform!*

These are the words of Swedish missionary Sten Nilsson (1986: 281), taken from his autobiography *Led by God’s hand*. Like much evangelical discourse the outward simplicity of the words conceals a more complex context of verbal production, reference, and reception. “Ulf” is Ulf Ekman, a former student priest within the Swedish Lutheran Church who in the early 1980s had spent a year training at Kenneth Hagin’s Rhema Bible Training Centre in Tulsa, Oklahoma, before returning to Sweden and founding the Word of Life (*Livets Ord*) ministry in Uppsala in the spring of 1983. Hagin was known at the time as a central figure within the burgeoning American Faith or Prosperity Movement, and his Bible school was a source of both training and networking for preachers from the United States and other parts of the world.

The metaphor of running permeating this passage is common in Word of Life and wider evangelical, especially charismatic circles—an alternative form of “ecstasy” that parallels such activities as tongues and dance in expressing dissatisfaction with spiritual immobility. Here, it also indexes a number of specific liturgical and ideological claims whose significance would have been discernible by most of Nilsson’s Swedish readership. Speed and efficiency are linked with freedom and

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agency, involving the removal of a Lutheran uniform(ity)—and one constituting, one might almost say, a metaphorical mask. Similar imagery was often used in the early days of the Word of Life to separate it from other much older and more established revivalist movements, including the Pentecostal denomination, from which it was deriving many of its supporters at the time.7

During the 1980s, “Ulf” was becoming a figure who did not need to be identified by his last name to achieve recognition (or notoriety) in Christian as well as wider circles, and he is still well-known in Sweden. But note some of the building blocks of that persona. Lutheranism is being shed, a new identity created, and yet it is an identity placed within and constituted through an alternative landscape already peopled by renowned American preachers—personalities whose roots link them to a genealogy of Prosperity practices that stretches back to the immediate postwar period. Emergence from one tradition becomes a form of spiritual, even quasi-apostolic, succession into another. Other more local but significant genealogies are being invoked here as well. Nilsson’s “just like myself” refers to his past career as a Methodist missionary inspired by American revivalism; but he also writes as Ekman’s father-in-law—spiritual affinity combining with that of marital alliance. Thus, with considerable linguistic economy, Ekman is shown speeding down a metaphorical path that is both open and bounded, leading to forms of displacement and replacement at a number of levels: from the Lutheran, Methodist, and Pentecostal to the charismatic and Prosperity-oriented; from the Swedish to the American and back; and across the generations.

Nilsson’s text was aimed primarily at fellow Christians, containing reflections on a long career that had taken him to India as well as North America. But he was also writing in the midst of a remarkable controversy that was raging within and far beyond church circles in Sweden at the time, centered on Ekman and the Word of Life. It was one in which journalists, academics, even national politicians were becoming involved, despite the modest size of the group and the supposed secularity of the country (Coleman 2000). Furthermore, it involved aspects of a moral panic that was to last throughout much of the 1980s and occasionally flares up even today. A summary of the salient issues was contained in another book published in 1986, *A Christian Right in Sweden?*,8 produced by a team of theologians from Uppsala University(where Ekman had studied and worked as a student priest, and the city where he had chosen to locate the Word of Life. The book traces much of the same genealogy sketched out by Nilsson but gives it a very different moral and cultural charge. It is claimed (Brandell et al. 1986: 2–3) that the ministry has affinities with the American Christian Right—supposedly combining religious internationalism with an unhealthy nationalism, and one where state-controlled redistribution of wealth, organized through Sweden’s extensive tax system, is regarded as inherently evil. Furthermore, not only does the Word of Life embody such a foreign phenomenon, it also represents the tip of an iceberg of one hundred or more “para-church”

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7. The Word of Life congregation climbed during the 1980s to over 2000 members but has not increased greatly since. It has graduated some 13,000 students from its Bible School over the years.

8. *Kristen höger i Sverige?* (Brandell et al. 1986).
movements (Brandell et al. 1986: 4–5), working for political as well as religious change in the country and involved in suspiciously concealed networks. These networks are said to be reinforced by the Word of Life’s media business, which publishes books, produces a newsletter for 10,000 subscribers throughout Scandinavia, distributes cassettes of sermons, and so on. There are also comments on attitudes toward both the body and the autonomy of believers. The authoritarian governance of the foundation is said to be combined with a theological view of the body where the spirit, rather than the flesh, determines both action and speech (Brandell et al. 1986: 34).

These themes, significant as they are, contain a fairly standard litany of complaints raised in the Western world against religious groups perceived to be authoritarian and to combine religious with nonreligious functions beyond the surveillance of the state. At the same time, the significance of the controversy in Sweden itself should not be underestimated. At one point—again in 1986—the press even sought to link the Word of Life with a suspect for the recent murder of Olof Palme, the Social Democratic Swedish Prime Minister. If Palme came to represent a civil religious icon, and his death became a symbol that innocent, peaceful Sweden might never be the same again, the presence of the Word of Life, small though it was, provided for some politicians, academics, and more liberal Christians further evidence of a national ethos under threat (Coleman 2000). The early Pentecostalist movement had partially echoed but had also been politically distanced from “folk movements” that had helped to diffuse Social Democracy in Sweden in the first half of the twentieth century, and so in turn the Word of Life maintained an ambiguous relationship with Pentecostalism, both paralleling and challenging it in the context of more self-consciously postmodern, cosmopolitan, charismatic styles of worship and self-presentation. For our purposes, in relation to a Maussian anthropology, Sweden is also intriguing as embodiment of a northern European, Protestant (albeit Lutheran) context, but one that in its valorization of a strong state has also distinguished itself from the individualist, Anglophone utilitarian orientation critiqued by Mauss.

So the ideological stakes have been high in Sweden. They have also contained other, less obvious dimensions, taking us still closer to the central concerns of this article. A further theme raised by the “Christian Right” book is that of the notion of överflöd. This is translatable as both “overflow” and “abundance,” with associated senses of excess and exuberance. The authors note (Brandell et al. 1986: 35) that Bible School students at the Word of Life are instructed to read a core text by the American preacher Kenneth Copeland called in Swedish Överflödets lagar (1985; translatable literally if unidiomatically as “The laws of abundance/overflow”). The English title for the book is in fact “The laws of Prosperity,” so that the local version published by the Word of Life has a very slightly different connotation—more directly a sense of going beyond boundaries.9 The Uppsala theologians take up the concept of överflöd in a discussion of whether the Word of Life’s theology can be condemned as heretical, encouraging a Gnostic search for knowledge that transcends the imperfections of the immanent world. Even here the group is

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9. Swedish terms for prosperity are välstånd (with connotations of well-being), framgång (success), and lycka (happiness, or joy).
regarded as problematically hybrid, as the further observation is made (Brandell et al. 1986: 35) that Word of Lifers in fact see material creation in positive terms, embodied in the ministry’s valuing of money and encouragement of giving as a means of spreading the gospel.

It is not possible to explore all the dimensions of the controversy being laid out here (see Coleman 2000, forthcoming), but an enduring thread has been associated with överflöd in its manifestations as both overflow and abundance—indeed, a kind of overflow that both constitutes and produces abundance. This is a theme that can be traced in many of the controversies that have followed Prosperity denominations around the world even if it has not been picked up much by analysts, but it has also taken on very specific associations in the changing cultural, political, and economic circumstances of Sweden over the past three decades. In addition, it leads us back to two significant tropes in this article: the relationship between dividuality and individuality; and the mask as mediator between these two notions of personhood. Överflöd includes a sense of “going beyond” at different scales of operation, ranging from the person to the nation, and even in relation to one’s own interior, autonomous sense of self. It contains qualities of both transaction and performance—the practices that are required to go beyond temporal, spatial, or physical forms of stasis. Among other references, it points to a consistent emphasis in Prosperity discourses that refer to the Old Testament as source of material covenant with, and material blessings from, God. Semantically and metaphorically, it also suggests links with the much-used word “overvinnare” (“overcomers”) to describe believers. Although they have not always used the specific language of “overflow,” critics of the group have helped to construct it and related concepts as key points of contention, and ones around which to mobilize wider publics of concern and even regulation. We therefore see played out here different discursive means through which to invoke and assess notions with family resemblances to dividuality and individuality, including ones that set these terms and their mutual relationships along incommensurate trajectories. Let me explain what I mean by briefly laying out salient aspects of Word of Life ideology and practice, before noting further dimensions of the critique of the group’s activities.

In many respects the Word of Life has always looked like a conventional Pentecostal congregation, its worship services involving familiar body movements, tongues, emphasis on sermons, and congregational response. Within Sweden, it soon became known for its attractiveness to younger people, its apparently slick, Americanized self-presentation (smart clothes, video screens, professional music), and its staging of large conferences, bringing luminaries of the global Prosperity circuit to faraway and secularized Sweden. What distinguished much of its theology and many of its practices, however, related closely to prosperity in the senses of both “overflow” and “abundance.” In Pentecostal and even Church of Sweden circles the phrase “to reach out” (“att nå ut”) has tended to imply extending social and charitable as much as missionary aid to others, at home and abroad. Within the Word of Life, it took on a different implication, containing the sense of aggressive redrawing of ecclesiastical and cultural landscapes in the pursuit of evangelization, alongside a liturgical revamping of the classic Pentecostal repertoire of tongues and prayer.

These practices, linked with the micropolitics of church activities in Sweden—including apparently “poaching” Christians from established denominations—were
reinforced by engagement with specific orientations toward materiality and giving: accentuating not only the bounty of God, but also how such abundance is activated through the believer’s faith and agency (Coleman 2011). We see here a notable juxtaposition of reliability and risk: the assurance of law-like principles of giving (producing tenfold or hundredfold returns) combines with making the self open to both accepting belief and reaching out toward others. As pointed out by critics in Sweden and elsewhere, such extension involves the donating of resources to churches or sometimes to dubious entrepreneurial schemes, though it may also involve the “investment” (donation) of money to known or anonymous recipients, including friends, acquaintances, or people encountered simply by chance. Such giving therefore extends spiritually charged practice beyond the space and time of worship services into everyday life and into potentially ramifying publics, depending on the self-confidence of the giver (Coleman 2004). It may also involve forms of “currency” that probe more ambiguously than conventional money into divisions between materiality and nonmateriality, self and nonself. As Devaka Premawardhana (2012) has described for a Prosperity-oriented congregation in the United States, and as I have observed in Sweden, believers may convert financial demands into the giving of personal time and effort to church or other significant projects. The wife of one of Premawardhana’s informants says: “I don’t have money to give, but I have my spirit” (2012: 90). In such cases, spirit translates into the medium of labor. Words also provide a powerful medium of self-extension in Prosperity circles, involving the practice of so-called positive confession—a laying claim to one’s own salvation and to divine prosperity that is made in faith. They may be uttered in church as part of a prayer, but equally well in any circumstances over which the believer wishes to assert control, including the workplace or times of emotional need (or both). Externalizing faith, reaching out with words, work, money, and ambition into a world of putative resources and mission, and expecting return on one’s investment, are actions where we see confession and conversion reinforcing each other in their transactional orientation—an orientation that involves a blurring of the line between self and others, but also the need for constant dialectic between inner and outer, self and other, and a cultivation of the sense of “overflow” as both surplus (giving to others, including trying to convert them) and boundary-crossing (going beyond conventional etiquette or expectation in order to do so). Externalization in this economy depends on constant circulation, the assumption not only that money and words must constantly be put into social play for them to retain their agency but also the more Bakhtinian sense that such media of spiritual power are to be passed among and through networks of believers. To listen to the words of a powerful other is also to “drink in” the spiritual power contained in such words. Such action may be seen productive in another sense: while ritual action may not immediately alter objective circumstances (divine laws work in their own time), it can have an effect on how such circumstances are experienced (see Premawardhana 2012). The giver comes to understand him- or herself as someone who is able to give to their church or into the world at large, and is not merely a recipient of its benefits.

10. Of course, Bakhtin’s writings may themselves be considered to have emerged from the context of a general Christian paradigm.
This model comes close to the practices of “sacrificial economics” analyzed by Susan Harding (2000; Coleman 2011) in her study of fundamentalist preacher and businessman, Jerry Falwell. Harding’s book focuses on the language surrounding a Baptist pastor whose theological positions are normally at sharp variance from those of neo-Pentecostalists regarding such issues as speaking in tongues and the workings of the Holy Spirit, but who does at times resemble Health and Wealth orientations in relation to finance. She examines the ambiguities, the moral uncertainties, surrounding practices associated with religious engagement, and notes that the miracles—economic and otherwise—claimed by Falwell have in common a “semantic risk or ambiguity, some sort of excess of gap that demands interpretive attention and engagement, choices which place one inside or outside the faith at hand” (Harding 2000: 85). Sacrificial giving is a form of transaction that has the potential to shift the framing of materiality: “In an important way, the whole point of giving to a God-led ministry is to vacate the commercial economy and to enter another realm, a Christ-centered gospel, or sacrificial, economy in which material expectations are transformed” (Harding 2000: 109; Coleman 2011).

In the context of Word of Life and much Prosperity practice in general, such risk-taking is conceptualized and enacted through means that come close to positive-thinking: acting as if one’s desires were already realized is seen as a means of obtaining one’s wishes. Believers have talked to me of thinking of themselves as already prosperous, even in circumstances where their situation “in the natural” seemed to contradict such a view; and conversely, talking negatively will indeed cause failure in one’s enterprises. This law-like logic applies both to speech and to wider forms of embodied behavior, encapsulated in the notion of the “happy giver” (“glad givare”) where both externalization of materiality and outwardly expressed confidence increase the power of the act. A spiritual authenticity emerges through risks that demonstrate and objectify commitment to the faith: in a sense, remaking the self is constituted through remasking the self.

What I am sketching out here may be seen as a form of Prosperity piety or indeed a Prosperity Ethic, a means of self-disciplining through developing certain orientations toward the social and material world. Arguably, it contains a striking combination of solipsism—the construction of a spiritual reality that is only validated through personal desire and ambition—and the need to reach out beyond the self in order to constitute effective faith. Yet, the system cannot be seen as hermetically sealed in terms of its actual operation. While much Word of Life rhetoric is totalizing in its claim that reaching out enters reliably into all areas of life (not unlike a Maussian “total social fact”), the apparently uncompromising language of much Prosperity discourse is not accompanied by exclusivity of membership or practice: the ministry has some closed meetings but much of the time it is open to people of other theological persuasion, or none. Certainly, when the group was emerging in Uppsala in the 1980s, it was very common for regular visitors to maintain their membership in another congregation (Lutheran, Pentecostal, Methodist, and so on). Similarly, Jonathan Walton (2012: 109) juxtaposes the seeming theological consistency of the American Faith Movement with the creative interpretations and appropriations of it by the demographically and denominationally diverse believers whom he encounters. Here, perhaps, we see a further dimension of överflöd, a sense that it encourages a behavioral idiom that one can opt into, and that involves
an amplification or extension of the powers of the self—or even the creation of another persona that can be operationalized at certain points in one’s life. Thus, some Word of Lifers talked to me of how involvement at times gave them confidence to extend their ambition further than normally would have been sustainable, whether that meant taking a mortgage out on a house, starting a new business, attempting to convert others, or participating in missionary work. Others described the significance of the division of religious labor involved in participating in Word of Life services but retaining membership in other congregations, where the latter offered community but not the sheer energy and outward-orientation that the new group embodied.

Of course, over time the fledgling ministry has changed in certain respects. The Bible School—both Swedish- and English-speaking—has continued and been augmented by other educational programs, including a university. Negative rhetoric pointed directly against other Christians has cooled, and moves toward ecumenism have begun. The latter have resulted in one of the more remarkable developments evident in recent years: the Word of Life’s apparent rapprochement with the Roman Catholic Church. To some commentators such a move seems a violation of fundamental Protestant principles, and a sign of the group’s hypocrisy. In a recent article, Ekman (2013) defends this apparent shift in orientation as a move toward “the unity Jesus prays for,” while admitting that the group has moved away from a “Protestant legacy of anti-Catholic culture and rhetoric, toward more openness and greater understanding for the Body of Christ, including the Catholic Church.”

There is no doubt that Ekman is signaling change that has been underway for about a decade at the group, a move toward a more frequently articulated discourse of love (“kärlek”) toward others. But to see it as a simple contradiction of earlier practice is misleading. As we have seen, the Word of Life has always been open toward engagement with other denominations to the extent that its prosperity rhetoric has been about “amplification” of already existing practices, alongside a willingness to incorporate participants from anywhere. In addition, although far from a Catholic sacramentalism, Prosperity practices incorporate a positive attitude toward materiality as medium and indeed mediator of worship.

What, however, of the group’s many critics? I have already pointed to the more standard defensive reactions, ranging from worries over poaching members from existing congregations to abhorrence over the group’s anomalous mix of functions. Here, I want to highlight a further dimension, which relates more specifically to constructions of personhood and to multivalent notions of överflöd. One of the most powerful responses has involved the psychologization of religious attachment, by which I mean that adherence is explained by critical outsiders (including fellow Christians) through what is taken to be a shift in the mental state of the person, sometimes akin to brainwashing. Thus a journalist from Kyrkans Tidning, a Church of Sweden newspaper, talks of participation in a service as “mass-psychosis, difficult to avoid being pulled into.”

11. My translation. In fact, Ulf Ekman announced that he was joining the Roman Catholic Church in March 2004.

be explored here. We should note, however, how they provide a secular explanation for adherence, and one that both privileges the mind as seat of agency and removes responsibility for apparent irrationality from the individual. The “psychosis” of participation is said to operate at a “mass” level, in a context where it removes the boundaries and responsibilities of individual identity. In this regard, the fact that so many supporters at the beginning of the group were young (in their teens and twenties) is significant, since they were regarded as not yet fully formed adults.

Such critique is echoed in assumptions over the sincerity or otherwise of those who have participated in Word of Life activities. Earlier, we saw how a discourse of dishonest concealment was applied to the Word of Life when it was depicted as an organization embedded in networks of similar ideological persuasion. However, my interviews with priests and pastors from mainstream Christian congregations tended to elicit the opinion that adherents were “honest seekers” who had been led astray (Coleman 1989: 189).

Nonetheless, the complexity of critique is expressed by the fact that characterizations of the powerlessness of adherents have been complemented by frequent allegations of their overbearingness in relation to others. Here, sketches of victimhood are counterbalanced by those of unwarranted aggression. Word of Lifers have been accused of attempting to proselytize in inappropriate contexts, and even of trying to force faith-healing on patients while working as medical staff in local hospitals. Thus critics interpret a Prosperity-driven discourse of entrepreneurialism and overcoming conventional boundaries of normal social interaction (in itself a form of excess) in a radically different way. Assumptions of lack of agency (brainwashing) go along with accusations of hyperagency (overbearingness), implying that debates over the boundaries of the person and of appropriate action in relation to others are being aired. There is also a wider cultural politics at play here. In both formal interviews and informal conversations with clergy and other inhabitants of Uppsala (Coleman 1989) I have found that mention of the Word of Life has prompted cultural tropes—we might equally say stereotypes—presenting the group as profoundly un-Swedish precisely because of its lack of respect for normative models of selfhood and moderation. Such critique points toward much wider political and economic themes that the Word of Life has come to represent: an embodiment of Americanized, indeed global, forces, with different values to traditional Social Democratic faith in a relatively paternalistic state and redistributive economic policies. In this sense, the Word of Life has proved prophetic, as Swedish society since the 1980s has indeed seen the breakup of such a former political hegemony toward a society whose national borders are far more porous, prompted by a more openly market-driven politics as well as waves of immigration that have transformed the demography of the country.

I hope that the incommensurate trajectories of local models of dividuality, individuality, and masking set up by the Word of Life and its Swedish critics are beginning to emerge. The ministry retains a generically Protestant sense of disciplining the self and permanent engagement with the divine alongside a positive conviction that materiality should actively be deployed as part of such engagement. While “the individual” (usually glossed as the “troende,” or “believer”) retains integrity as the fundamental unit of salvation, proper exercise of spiritual agency involves chronic engagement with a wider landscape of action where circulation of words,
objects, even bodily practices forms part of the construction and reconstruction of an “amplified” self. If this constructs a “dividual” form of personhood, it is one well adapted to a religious movement oriented toward a vision of scaling up influence toward the globe, where the very generic, fungible nature of the spirit part of the person allows them to engage with anonymous as well as known others. On the one hand, only by opening the self up to spiritual power derived from others or directly from God can the benefits of believing be obtained. On the other, to reach beyond oneself, it is necessary to engage in public performances akin to a kind of social masking. Spiritual power is explicitly materialized and embodied in an expansive and performative habitus wherein “acting” out a state is also supposedly to cause that state to exist.

In Sweden, the Word of Life variant on a form of dividuality becomes a politically as well as religiously loaded act: it expresses spiritual ambitions that challenge and attempt to remake the borders of personhood, everyday propriety, and conventional Western divisions of religious action into public civility and private conviction. In response, it might seem that critics assert a simple if fragile ideal of the autonomous individual placed under threat by participation in bogus practices of prosperity that in fact prevent people from being their “true” selves. And yet even here the picture is not quite so simple, the trajectory not quite so straight. After all, deep solidarity if not quite consubstantiality with others is expressed through shaping the self in relation to norms of mutual acknowledgement, accommodation, and moderation that are presented as deeply Swedish and indeed Social Democratic. The problem is perhaps less that the Word of Life expresses a form of dividuality: it is that it is the wrong kind of dividuality.

Protestantism: A divided subject?

I make two final, comparative points. The first concerns my aim to reexamine Protestantism and individualism by focusing on religious subjects formed through transactional, materially mediated forms and qualities of action. To make my case, I invoke Jon Bialecki’s recent analysis of what he sees as the unstable subject of Protestant language ideology (2011). Although his focus is mostly on language, Bialecki points to key aspects of the model of personhood that I am laying out in this article. He posits, “Christian language use can be understood by delineating two sharply contrasting, but both valued, forms of speech—‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’—each of which has different implicit concerns about the importance of self-identity and the sorts of boundaries that comprise the ethical subject” (Bialecki 2011: 679). If the centrifugal model highlights the outward origins of language, and “the exterior cardinal orientations” that help to create subjectivity, the centripetal model uses “metalinguistic reflection to lock down language’s polysemous nature, deny its physical substrate, highlight personal agency, and to repress the alterity present in any socially grounded communicative act” (682).

In Bialecki’s account, these two models take expression in two fieldwork contexts. Webb Keane’s model of the Protestant semiotic ideology evident among the Calvinist Sumbanese generalizes toward a tendency of Christianity in general, and Protestantism in particular, to valorize both sincerity and an isomorphism between
externally directed speech and internal subjectivity. The autonomous, bounded subject produced by this stance toward language is “closely related . . . to the confessional, agentive, self-fashioned subject of contemporary modern secular language ideologies” (Bialecki 2011: 682). Key here is an ethic of linguistic spontaneity that “ideally locates proper agency and meaning as arising from the individuated speaker, and not from larger external networks or material items” (682).

By way of contrast, Bialecki uses my analyses of the Word of Life to illustrate a religious logic “where the borders of the self are much more porous, and where the concept of speech acts as being rooted in the specificities of the individuated person does not have the same importance” (2011: 683). He notes how, in this model, words have value because of their exterior source, while the subject's own agency is carried forth beyond the limits of the person by a further circulation of both words and money. Thus expansive circulation and indeed a kind of dividuality are valorized, and both help to form what I call in this article—with Mauss in mind—the “transactional” character of person-formation. In these terms, the very prosperity of such Christians is not only or fundamentally about market capitalism, as its critics allege, but rather about a mediation and reconstruction of the spiritually-empowered self through interaction with both others and certain forms of materiality.

Bialecki adds that a straight opposition between the centrifugal and the centripetal can be collapsed because we are seeing religious modalities that can be found in Christianities in widely diffuse locales, just as there may be a tendency for adherents of each of these language ideologies to take up the practices of the other. In a sense, what we observe here are the “Calvinist” and the “charismatic” or neo-Pentecostal extremes of the Protestant spectrum. But one example where interesting parallels might be drawn is in relation to Keane's analysis of the Protestant creedal paradigm, where he discusses the creed as a publicly circulating, entextualized form of wording that “places the speaker's belief within the context of a public world of words” (Keane 2007: 71). Conversely, an area of Word of Life practice that highlights deep ambiguity over questions of dividuality and individuality relates to the deployment of tongues. Much of the time tongues is deployed as a personal language, indexing direct infilling by the Holy Spirit and indicating the openness but also the uniqueness of the believer; yet, at times I have heard believers echo Ekman's phrases in glossolalia, suggesting the possibility of Ekman himself acting as a key point of circulation of deeply performative, deeply “personal,” language.

My second point takes us back to a consideration of another question I raised early on, about a “romantic” ethic of normative practice and its relationship to the ideal of a dematerialized modern subject. Here again, I draw on a piece that takes Keane's (2007) powerful work on the interiority of the modern subject as a starting-point. Eitan Wilf (2011) juxtaposes Keane's work with that of Colin Campbell (1989) in the latter's The romantic ethic and the spirit of modern consumerism (see also Coleman 2004). In Wilf’s summary, Campbell argues, “that in tandem with a specific Protestant ethic responsible for propelling capitalist production, there existed another Protestant ethic responsible for promoting the spirit of modern consumerism. This ‘other’ Protestant ethic emerged from pietism and later evolved into Sentimentalism and Romanticism” (Wilf 2011: 469). Consumerism interacts
with the subject here through the exercise of the imagination, and the ability vicari-
ously to assume or try out different potential goods (469). Such a normative ideal
works in “situations characterized by open-endedness” (469) and accompanying
risk, where the materiality of semiotic forms can be mobilized and “seen as a condi-
tion of possibility for the self’s articulation” (462).

Wilf’s juxtaposition locks quite well into the centripetal and centrifugal models
discussed above, and it is striking that he uses as one of his examples of a romantic
ethic a case drawn from American self-help literature. Not only does much of the
latter resemble much Prosperity-oriented writing, but the example Wilf presents
involves the subject—Weinstein—exploring possible futures for himself by writ-
ing down different scenarios, so that (2011: 468): “This ideal of self-creation turns
the ideal of sincerity in speech on its head by making the materiality of words a
condition of possibility for the articulation of the modern subject’s interiority. In
this ideal, words precede thoughts and the subject’s interiority.” Indeed, external-
ized words thus help to create interiority. Invoking Bakhtin, Wilf (2011: 476) calls
on us to note how the materiality of semiotic forms, which may manifest in other
people, the body, social conventions, objects, and words, is thus incorporated into
the realization of the self: arguably a dividuality adapted to a (post)modernist sensibility.

To come back for a final time to the motif of the mask, we might say that Wein-
stein engages in a poetics of the self through trying on different scenarios, different
masks, before discovering what “feels” right. At the Word of Life, it is as though
one is publicly or officially offered only one mask, one semiotic realization of a
neo-Pentecostal poetics, and then implicitly allowed to put on or take off that mask
as much as the religious imagination will allow. In so doing, believers illustrate the
power of a transactional, Maussian model of self-cultivation that implicates both
other people and forms of materiality in its workings. Such practice has its own
theological and cultural idiosyncrasies, but from a social scientific point of view we
should not dismiss it as the actions of an “extreme,” “heretical,” or “insincere” form
of Christianity (compare Cannell 2006: 42–43). Rather, it embodies negotiations
between dividuality and individuality that takes on powerful resonances precisely
within the shifting landscapes of religious, cultural, and political life in Sweden.

And so, if I have demonstrated the utility of deploying notions of dividuality
and individuality, I hope also to have shown how they can prompt significant
comparative work—as in my discussion of the Calvinist versus the neocharismatic
subject—without denying the necessity to locate their specific workings within
the church politics of Sweden in the latter part of the twentieth and the begin-
ing of the twenty-first century. Such an approach seeks to problematize not only
individualism but also asceticism as analytical assumptions underpinning con-
temporary conceptions of Protestantism and modernity. My argument is that an
adaptation and “synchronic” use of Mauss’ conceptions of mask, gift, and sac-
rifice helps us to construct a modified genealogy of such Christianity, and one
in which both materiality and mutuality remain central and indeed normative
features of religious practice. At the Word of Life, and no doubt elsewhere, forms
of “overflow” combine generosity and aggression, ambition and risk, in social and
material transactions that are also oriented toward the chronic transgression of boundaries.
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References


A propos de Marcel Mauss, de masques et de dons: Chrétientés, (in-) dividualités, modernités

Résumé : Je juxtapose dans cet article les discussions portant sur la dividualité et l’individualité et une exploration d’idées Maussiennes concernant les dons, les masques, et les personnes; j’utilise cette analyse comme cadre pour l’étude de certaines controverses, au sujet des actions associées à une théologie chrétienne de la Prospérité (“Santé et Richesse”) en Suède. Cet article montre que des notions de subjectivité individuelle (personhood) multiples et s’excluant mutuellement peuvent être identifiées dans le cas considéré. Plus généralement, il souligne également qu’une “éthique de la prospérité” est repérable, qui indique le caractère
Le concept de la divinité et de l’individualité est contesté par l’argument de Mauss. Les idéaux normatifs Protestants associés à un sujet moderne et dématérialisé soulignent les avantages et les écueils du déploiement des principes de divinité et d’individualité dans un contexte occidental.


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