

JEAN-LUC MARION ON THE DIVINE AND TAKING THE "THIRD WAY"

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Abstract. In this article, I will investigate Jean-Luc Marion's influential critique of metaphysical and natural theological approaches to the divine which he regards as "idolatrous", and his own proposal of an "iconic" account of God's revelation which he calls the "third way". Marion's idol-icon distinction, I maintain, developed in his early work "God without Being", is the guiding thread of Marion's philosophical project, and the key for an adequate understanding of his own account. While Marion's account is compelling and has provided new perspectives and insights to the contemporary discussion in philosophy of religion, its uncompromising excessiveness and the outright rejection of all hermeneutics leaves it deeply problematic and makes it hard to see how to follow his "third way".

INTRODUCTION

Ever since Jean-Luc Marion published his first major philosophical work "Idol and Distance" in 1977, his work has been intensively discussed, praised and heavily criticized. In this paper, I will investigate Marion's critique and response of metaphysical and natural theological approaches to the divine and his own account of God's revelation. Marion regards all metaphysical accounts as *idolatrous* insofar as they, according to him, reduce God to an object of human understanding and categorization. Such accounts must be criticized and finally overcome in order to open the way for more appropriate account which recognizes God's transcendence and incomprehensibility while preserving the possibility for us to relate to Him in a meaningful way. This account is called the "third way" which is grounded in Marion's conceptions of the icon and the saturated phenomenon, and draws heavily on the tradition of Christian mystical theology. It consists in approaching God in

such way that God's incomprehensibility is recognized and maintained. The "third way" would be a purely pragmatic one. However, Marion's account, which presents the subject as the completely passive recipient of the overwhelming divine revelation, faces numerous difficulties. Marion maintains that we must "dwell" in God's horizon opened up by the excessive "experience" of God's revelation, and let him name and call us. But, how is such a subject able to recognize overwhelming experience as the revelation of God, if at the end all relation to God is impossible?

First, I will consider his early critique of metaphysics and analysis of the idol-icon distinction as it is articulated in his work "God without Being" (originally published in 1982). Marion's Icon-Idol distinction will work as a guiding thread throughout the article. In fact, I maintain that Marion's distinction plays a continuous and central role to Marion's philosophical project. Second, I will take a brief look at his famous and influential theory of saturated phenomena which is crucial for the understanding of own views on the divine. Third, through the examination of Marion's notion of saturated phenomena, I proceed to elucidating one of his most recent account of the "iconic way". I will concentrate on Marion's proposal of a "third way" of approaching God, which is articulated in the last chapter of his book "In Excess". Finally, I will raise some critical questions which arise from Marion's somewhat excessive and radical account, and present and discuss critiques that have been made to him.

CRITIQUE OF METAPHYSICS AS ONTOTHEOLOGY

There are numerous different ways to engage with the problem and critique of the so-called ontotheological constitution of Western metaphysics. The source of this conception is Martin Heidegger, especially his later writings, for whom, as is well known, the difference between being and beings or entities is of high importance. The basic claim is that while western metaphysics operates with this distinction, it has not been able to articulate an account of being as such or in itself. For our purposes here, it is not necessary to enter into the extremely complex Heideggerian account of this difference. I will concentrate on those aspect of Heidegger's critique that important with regard to Marion's own thought. Heidegger writes: "The essential constitu-

tion of metaphysics is based on the unity of beings as such in *the universal and that which is highest*.” (Heidegger 1969, 61.)

Metaphysical thinking demands a first ground for the existence of reality. To answer the question of the being of entities is to look for that which is present in all of them and, thus, what grounds them: the essence or substance of a particular thing determines what it is and what it shares with other particular things. This is what Marion calls “common being”. (Marion 1997, 281.) The next step is crucial to Marion. Since an essence, as Schrijvers states, still refers to the empirical and contingent existence of particular beings, it needs to be, in turn, grounded in a something else. This something else is the highest unifying principle, which is identified as the supreme being or God. The Supreme Being, or God, is introduced in philosophical thinking only insofar as an ultimate present ground or foundation is required to maintain the unity and subsistence of all beings. (Schrijvers 2011, 188–189.) Marion states this in the following manner: “[Being understood as ground] transforms the question of being as well into a question of the *ens suprerum*, itself understood as and posited starting from the requirement (...) of the foundation.” (Marion 1991, 34.) Metaphysics as a theoretical study has a dual structure. It deals both with the universal “the common being” (ontology), that is, what is present in all beings, and with the unifying highest principle and essence, a supremely particular being (theology). The science of metaphysics can deal with both of these at the same time, Marion maintains following Heidegger, because they intersect and function as reciprocal groundings. Marion writes: “The common being grounds beings and even [particular] essences; in return [a particular] essence [i.e. supreme being] grounds, in the mode of causality, the common being”. (Marion 1997, 282.) This is what makes metaphysics onto-theological. In the following, I will reserve the term “metaphysics” as a term referring to metaphysics as onto-theology.

Metaphysics for Marion has less to do with the problem of God as an object of study of philosophy than with a certain *conception* of “God”. (See Schrijvers 2011, 186.) To approach God through metaphysics is to reduce him to a pregiven conception of what it means for beings to be, that is, as an entity — as *esse per se subsistence*. This approach consists fundamentally, according to Marion, in reducing God to a concept which makes the divine available to thought; it is “[the] production of a concept that makes a claim

to equivalence with God.” (Marion 2001, 13.) The notion of causality, in the passage cited above, is crucial. Metaphysics understands “God” as providing a causal foundation of all empirical beings. In order to be such a foundation God must be a being which as a supreme founder supremely finds himself. God as his own cause: *causa sui*. And “God” as *causa sui* is now identified as the God of philosophy.¹

Thus God, according to Marion, is given or indicated a function as a foundational being according to the principle of sufficient reason. God will occupy that place, as Schrijvers states, that reason and rationality will reserve for God. In this regard, the concept of *causa sui* represents the “most complete formulation” of a concept that makes a claim of equivalence with God. This amounts, according to Marion, to idolatry. According to Marion, metaphysics is guilty of idolatry. The “theological discourse of onto-theo-logy” which conceptualizes God as *ens suprerum* and as *causa sui* limits God and the divine. In thinking “God” as *causa sui*, Marion claims, metaphysics, under the figures of efficiency, cause and foundation, has constructed a conception of God’s transcendence to serve its own purpose. “God” understood as *ens suprerum* or as *causa sui* is an idol, which is introduced in to a rational system as a necessary function to account for the totality of beings. (For detailed discussion on Marion’s account see Schrijvers 2011, 179–194, Gschwandtner 2016, 10–14.)

TWO MODES OF APPREHENSION

But what does Marion exactly mean by idolatry? The critique of idolatry might rightly bring to mind the old vetero-testamentary rejection, important to Jewish thought, of all craven images and representations of God as blasphemy. However, Marion is not primarily interested in denouncing man-made images of God as idols, as false Gods that should not be venerated. His interests run deeper. He wants to know what is fundamentally at stake in an idol: what is it that constitutes an idol.

¹ Heidegger writes: “Metaphysics is theology in that it thinks Being as the highest ground above all beings, ultimately as the ground of itself, *causa sui*, which is the metaphysical concept of God. Metaphysics is thus in its very nature onto-theo-logic.” (Heidegger 1969, 15.)

Marion develops his critique of metaphysics and its idolatrous way of talking about God by introducing a distinction between an idol and an icon. This distinction was first articulated in "Idol and Distance" and further developed in "God without Being". He starts by pointing out that by the two (idol and icon) he does not mean particular things or beings, or a class of beings. In Marion's hands, they indicate "a manner of being" or, more precisely, "two modes of apprehension of the divine in visibility". (Marion 1991, 7, 9) It is important to note that, for Marion, the idol should not be too hastily denounced as illusory. The idol consists in being seen and known by seeing it. Furthermore, one should not interpret the idol as ensuing from an untrue or false experience of the divine: "The idol always marks a true and genuine experience of the divine." (Marion 1991, 27.) The problematic character idol does not, then, derive from a failure, but instead from what Marion calls its "conditions of validity". An idol as an expression of the divine presence is a limited form of apprehension of God. Marion describes the idol as something that "dazzles", "fascinates", and "captivates" the gaze. Using an expression that will later become central for his thought, Marion states that the idol "saturates with visibility" the gaze of the viewer. (Marion 1991, 10. See also Horner 2005, 61.) However, something becomes an idol only when the gaze is fixed on it as the point of its own consideration: "The gaze makes the idol, not the idol the gaze." (Marion 1991, 10–11.) While the first intention aims at reaching the divine, the gaze itself stops at the visible, as Marion puts it. The advent of the divine to visibility in the idol is measured by the scope of the gaze. It is constituted by the cognizing subject. An idol is an image of God which, as Ruud Welten states, is adapted to finite human criteria. It is an image made by human imagination. (Welten 2011 177, 180.) Furthermore, Marion claims that the idol does not reflect so much the divine itself as it does our understanding of ourselves. He introduces the metaphor of an "invisible mirror" in order to elucidate this point. In fact, he points out that the true idol is this "invisible mirror" itself. Briefly put, the idol functions as a mirror which reflects our own desires and aspirations. How we "see" and understand the divine reflects what we want ourselves to be, our self-image. Thus, the "essence" of idolatry is self-idolatry. Marion quotes Feuerbach in support and agreement: "So here also Feuerbach's judgement stands: "it is *man* who is the *original model* of his idol." (Marion 1991, 16.)

Marion mentions Greek statues, temples, and sacred sites as examples of idols. Such things are perhaps what come first to mind when we think of an idol. However, the main target of Marion's critique is what he calls "conceptual idolatry". Metaphysics is guilty precisely of conceptual idolatry: "[T]he conceptual idol has a site, metaphysics; a function, the theo-logy in onto-theology; and a definition, *causa sui*. Conceptual idolatry does not remain a universally vague suspicion but inscribes itself in the global strategy of thought taken in its metaphysical figure." (Marion 1991, 36.) To conceptualize God is an attempt to grasp and comprehend Him who is in principle ungraspable and infinite. Conceptual grasp is not measured, Marion argues, as much by divine fullness as it is by the scope of human understanding, which fixes the divine in a specific concept. In other words, the measure of the concept "comes not from God but from the aim of the gaze". Thus, according to Marion, the idol never reaches the divine as such. The divine is present in the idol only indirectly, reflected according to the experience of it; fixed by finite human understanding.

Marion's account is directly opposed to the so-called natural theology understood as a the theoretical attempt to prove (or disprove) God's existence through the use of human reason alone or, as Phillip Blond writes, to give human cognition the possibility of knowing God through sensible apprehension of his effects, his creations. (Blond 1998, 5.) Not only are all attempts to provide rational demonstrations and proofs for the existence of God futile, they are also fundamentally idolatrous and blasphemous exercises because they are guided uncritically by hidden and tacit preconceptions of God's nature. They operate with an idolatrous conception of God. Marion writes by referring to Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, and Leibniz: "Every proof, in fact, demonstrative as it may appear, can only lead to a concept; it remains for it then to go beyond itself, so to speak, to identify this concept with God himself. Saint Thomas implements such an identification by an 'id quod omnes nominunt', repeated at the end of each of his *viae* (*Summa theologiae* Ia,q.2a.3.), as Aristotle concluded the demonstration of *Metaphysics* (A.7.) by *touto gar ho theos* 'for this is god' (1:072b29–30), and as, above all, Leibniz ended the principle of reason asking, 'See at present if that which we have just discovered must not be called God'" (Marion 1991, 32–33.) The same applies to what Marion calls "conceptual atheism": "Proof uses positively what conceptual atheism uses negatively;

in both cases, equivalence to a concept transforms God into “God”, in to the infinitely repeatable “so-called gods”. In both cases the human discourse determines God. The opposition of the determinations, the one demonstrating, the other denying, does not distinguish them as much as their common presupposition identifies them: that the human (...) might, conceptually, reach God, hence might conceptually construct something that would take upon itself to name “God”, either to admit or reject. *The idol works universally, as much for denegation as for proof.* (Marion 1991, 33. Emphasis added.) Marion then goes on to cite Heidegger: “[A] God who must permit his existence to be proved in the first place is ultimately a very ungodly God. The only thing such proof of existence can yield is blasphemy.” (Marion 1991, 35.)

The idolatrous discourse of metaphysics, for Marion, does not reach the divine and, thus, remains utterly inadequate to describe the divine dimension or the truly divine God. One of the main aims of Marion project is to provide an account of a way of approaching and speaking about God which does not succumb to such conceptual idolatry, as he understands it. Gschwandtner acutely states that, for Marion, it is necessary to find “more iconic ways” of speaking about God which no longer rely on traditional metaphysical discourse and conceptual frameworks. What characterizes such “iconic ways” is that, in contrast to “idolatrous ways”, they do not proceed from us, but *directly* from God. In his analysis of the icon, especially in “God without Being”, Marion employs Christian imagery and language and is indebted to the Christian theology of the icon. (See Horner 2005, 61–65; Gschwandtner 2013, 110–111.)

Unlike the idol, Marion states, the icon is not characterized by a reflective return to ourselves. Instead, the icon always points outside its visible appearance towards the invisible, that is, to the divine. According to Marion Saint Paul’s description of Christ as the image/icon of God must serve as a guiding thread for the analysis of the icon. He also draws upon John Damascene’s reflection on the icon. Marion writes: “The icon does not result from a vision but provokes one [...] Where as the idol results from the gaze that aims at it, the icon summons sight in letting the visible [...] be saturated little by little with the invisible [...] The formula that Saint Paul applies to Christ, *eikon tou theou tou aoratou*, icon of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), must serve as our norm; it must even be generalized to every icon, as, indeed, John of Da-

mascus explicitly ventures: *pasa eikon ekphantorike tou kruphiou kai deiktike* [eng. *every icon manifests and indicates the secret*] [...] The icon, on the contrary, attempts to render visible the invisible as such, hence to allow that the visible not cease to refer to an other than itself, without, however, that other ever being reproduced in the visible.” (Marion 1991, 17–18.)

The core idea of Marion’s account of the icon, is that the icon inverts the essential moments of the idol. According to Marion, “the contemplation of the icon” does not lead to a conceptual understanding or grasping. The icon cannot be grasped or “fixed”. (Marion 1991, 21.) Elsewhere, Marion states that the icon is not an object of understanding, it is not a spectacle. (Marion 2004, 21.) Instead, we find ourselves looked at, engaged by gaze of the other (i.e. God) which overwhelms us and “unbalances the human gaze”. (Marion 1991, 24.) Robyn Horner is right in pointing out that what Marion is describing here is a type of kenotic experience. Before the icon the gazer or the ego is emptied of its capacity to control and grasp. One allows oneself to be engaged and, thus, be overcome by the irreducible and inconceivable other, God, who, as it were, looks at me. However, it is important to note that what is crucial for Marion is not only the notion of reversal, but also the notion that the icon *gives* invisibility or God to thought *on its own terms*. (Marion 1991, 24. See Horner 2005, 63–64. See also Welten 2011, 182–182.)

While Marion will rework and revisit his the idol-icon distinction in later works, this “core idea” described above will remain relatively unchanged. In fact, such notions as “saturation”, “giving itself on its own terms”, “reversal”, the idea of an kenotic experience, and all they are supposed to convey, become more and more central to his analysis of religious phenomena and experience.

SATURATION AND POSSIBILITY OF REVELATION

It should be observed that the distinction between the idol and icon is crucial not only for the understanding of Marion’s critique of metaphysics, but for his philosophical enterprise in general. In his subsequent writings, he aims to engage in a more purely phenomenological investigation. This change in focus is most evident in his major philosophical work “Being Given” in which he develops his own version of phenomenology known as “phenom-

enology of givenness”. In this work, the distinction between idol and icon no longer refers to two oppositional modes of seeing or apprehending the divine. Instead, he incorporates these notions in his famous theory of saturated phenomena. Idol and icon are now identified as two positive instances of such phenomena, that is, works of art and the other person respectively.

Marion develops his theory of saturated phenomena in various works and essays, especially, in his major phenomenological work “Being Given”. Marion’s analyses are dense and complex and he develops his theory in conversation with many other philosophers, most notably, Husserl, Heidegger, Kant, Leibniz, Levinas, and Henry. Many of Marion’s insights rely on the thoughts of these thinkers. However, it is not necessary here to venture too far into Marion’s examination of saturated phenomenon. For my own purposes, it suffices to lay out the basic characteristics of Marion’s account. Thus, the obvious question arises: what are saturated phenomena?

A saturated phenomenon is fundamentally, according to Marion, *that which gives itself to us completely without condition or restraint*; on its own terms, as it were. Marion writes: “Because it gives itself without condition or restraint, the saturated phenomenon would offer the paradigm of the phenomenon finally without reserve [...] it alone appears truly as itself, of itself, and on the basis of itself, since it alone appears without the limits of horizon or reduction to an I and constitutes itself.” (Marion 2002, 218–219.) With the notions of “horizon” and “the I” Marion refers to Immanuel Kant’s and Edmund Husserl’s philosophies. Marion has in mind Husserl’s notion of the constituting activity of the intentional-transcendental subjectivity or ego. Briefly put, intentionality is a meaning-giving activity: consciousness is always consciousness of something *as* something. Furthermore, every meaning-giving act, as Steven Crowell acutely puts it, is teleologically oriented toward intuitive fulfillment. Such a fulfillment occurs when the intended object is given in itself in experience as it is intended by the ego. However, no object is given completely. For example, when I perceive the cube in front of me, I perceive only one side of it, even though I intend it as a whole. Thus, when in perceiving the cube as a cube, I co-intend at the same time the other sides of it, which are not intuitively given. The perceptual content or meaning is, as Crowell states, norm-governed in a specific way. It can fail: it may turn out that what I took to be a cube was not a cube at all when perceived from an-

other perspective. This is made possible by the phenomenological essence of perception: it is teleologically oriented toward further acts of perception that would either intuitively fulfill its content or alter it, that is, confirm it or disconfirm it. Intentionality is a correlational relation between the experiencing subject and the world. Thus, it is not entirely accurate to say that there is meaning because there is a constituting subject. Rather, both the subject and the world are necessary for there to be meaning because “to speak of meaning is just speak of that very teleology in its function of disclosing what it is *to be* a thing of such and such a sort, given in such and such away.” (Crowell 2014, 24–25.) Thus, the ego constitutes its object as this or that by a synthetic activity by fixing a meaningful unity through multiple perspectives. To affirm this, as Husserl does, is just to insist on the horizontality of intentional experience. An object is always given against larger context, a horizon of meaning.

In Marion’s view, Husserl’s account is deeply problematic. First, Marion maintains that Husserl fails to comply with the phenomenological method and its fundamental principles or, to put more accurately, does not see its full potential. According to the phenomenological method of bracketing (*epokhee*) the philosopher must put aside all metaphysical and naive preconceptions concerning the world through and affirm the authority of intuition: things must be considered only insofar as they give themselves to us. However, according to Marion, in Husserl such givenness is almost never actually realized. Intuition is usually partially lacking to intention, as fulfillment is lacking to meaning or content, Marion claims. Husserl is only concerned with objects and objectivity. (See Marion 2002a, 12–14, 191.) Second, both poles of the intentional correlation, the I and the world as the horizon of meaning, as necessary conditions of meaningful experience and givenness, limit and restrain the particular phenomenon and its appearing. The phenomenon appears only insofar as it is constituted by the transcendental ego within a horizon. Hence, it does not appear truly as itself, of itself, and on the basis of itself, that is, without constraint and condition, as Marion would want. In fact, Marion contends, staying true to the requirements of the phenomenological method and principles and taking them to their very limit, will enable us to see the possibility and give description of such phenomena which appear and give themselves without condition or restraint. Unlike Husserlian intentional objects, Marionian saturated phenomena are charac-

terized by intuitive excess; intuition surpassing the intention. Marion calls them “paradoxes” insofar as they are characterized as that which happens counter (*para*) to received opinion and appearance (*doxa*). Saturated phenomena give themselves to intuition with such an excessive force that there is no possibility for us to comprehend, grasp, or conceptualize them. They exceed all our preconceptions and pre-understanding and, thus, defy all hermeneutics. In fact, seen from a phenomenological point of view they are not to be considered as objects at all. However, one must bear in mind that in this context by “object” is meant, to use a Kantian turn phrase, whatever conforms to our understanding and knowledge; whatever is given *to us* through constitutive and meaning-giving activity of transcendental subjectivity against a context or horizon. An intentional object is always on *for us*. (Marion 2008, 44–47. See also Marion 2002a, 225–228)

An important part of Marion’s analyses is his distinction between five different instances or types saturated phenomenon. The first three are said to be saturated with regard to horizon and the fourth with regard to the subject or the I. The fifth represents a special case which is saturated with regard to both horizon and the I. Marion uses Kant’s theory of the categories of pure understanding in laying out the different types of saturated phenomenon. For Kant, these categories are the *a priori* rules, as Mason affirms, for organizing the sensory manifold and to structure intuition, and for providing unity and determinacy to experience. They are necessary transcendental conditions for the possibility of objective knowledge and experience. Marion attempts to show that each type of saturated phenomena surpasses and dislocates the categories to which they correspond.

First, some phenomena are saturated in terms of quantity. Historical events are named in this context. They overwhelm us with information and, thus, cannot be controlled. Second, there are phenomena saturated in terms of quality which appear under the aspects of the “unbearable” and “bedazzlement” as they overwhelm us by their excessive visibility. The works of art and paintings are such phenomena. Marion coins the term “idol” for this type saturated phenomena. Third, the human flesh or embodiment is a privileged instance of a saturated phenomenon in terms of relation, because of its possibility to appear immediately as if there was no relation. Fourth, Marion names the face of the other person as the phenomenon saturated in terms of

modality. The face is irreducible and free from all references to the subject and refers to it as “the icon”. The fifth type is the most interesting and important as well as the most problematic one. It is also the one that concerns us here since it is particularly crucial for Marion’s phenomenological analyses of religious phenomena. It is a phenomenon saturated to the second degree, that is, in terms of all the above categories. It is the phenomenon of the revelation of the divine. (see Marion 2002a, 225–241. See also Mason 2014)

The problem that emerges with the introduction of the notion of revelation, is how is one able to give a *purely* phenomenological description of such a phenomenon which is so evidently full of religious and theological baggage. An illuminating example of this is the introduction the figure of Christ as its paradigm of the saturated phenomenon of revelation and in “Being Given”. Marion, however, emphasizes the philosophical nature of his analyses and investigations even though he frequently refers to theological topics and sources in support. Marion maintains that phenomenology examines and describes possibilities. Thus, in a way responding to Dominique Janicaud’s famous criticism and claim that Marion’s thought represents a form crypto-theology, Marion writes that as a phenomenologist he is primarily interested in describing revelation of God as a “mere possibility” and, as it were, he does not presuppose its actuality or reality. Answering the question regarding the “actual manifestation or ontic status” of Revelation, with an capital R is, according to Marion, “the business of revealed theology”, not phenomenology. (Marion 2002a, 235–236.) Thus, Marion claims, that he is engaging any sort theology, nor is his philosophy a form of crypto-theology.

Despite his reservation concerning pure phenomenology being capable of accounting for the actual manifestation of divine Revelation, Marion does seem to think that his phenomenology of givenness and the theory of saturated phenomena provides tools for further phenomenological investigations of religious phenomena. While phenomenology, according to Marion, cannot decide if a Revelation can or should ever give itself actually, it can determine that if ever Revelation does give itself, “it could have, can, or will be able to do so only by giving itself” according to fifth type of saturated phenomenon. (Marion 202a, 235.) Indeed, one of the main motivations behind Marion’s phenomenological investigations of givenness and of the possibility of revelation is to account for the idea of an iconic gift (of the divine giving itself in

the icon in its own terms) which was already present in his previous work but remained uninvestigated. Welten acutely points out that Marion intends to develop a *phenomenology* which specifies the antagonism between idol and icon, which he was not able to do in “God without Being”, because of the theological presuppositions guiding that work. Marion no longer focuses on the different ways of apprehending and talking about God. Instead, he concentrates on investigating whether or not it is possible for us to receive that which does not proceed from our own understanding, that which gives itself in its own terms: the possibility of revelation. If God is precisely not an idol and the revelation of the divine gives itself, then the structure of this givenness must be accounted for without presupposing anything about God, not even his invisibility. This is an essential condition of the phenomenology of God. (See Welten 2011, 186–190)

Yet, in all fairness one must ask whether one is able maintain such a dispassionate and unprejudiced attitude, especially, with regard to religious phenomena. As noted before, one important feature Marion’s critique of metaphysics was that it is informed by an erroneous and idolatrous preconception of God. Even if one might grant that Marion is by and large correct in his Heideggerian diagnosis of traditional metaphysics and even accept it, it remains the case that Marion’s own philosophical exercise is informed by the Christian mystical theology and Judeo-Christian monotheistic conception of the divine. Furthermore, he constantly refers to Biblical texts, Patristic and medieval source, and to contemporary theologians in agreement and sometimes taking support from them for his own philosophical purposes. This is so even though it may be argued that Marion does not regard such sources (the Bible in particular) as philosophical authorities, and that he maintains that their use must be supported by purely phenomenological investigations. What Marion seems to be arguing for is not only the possibility of revelation in general, but he seems to aim at philosophical justification of Christian religiosity in particular, be it in a non-metaphysical and quasi-mystical form. His description of the possibility of revelation as the ultimate saturated phenomenon and Christ as its paradigm draws clearly upon the Christian theological tradition and understanding of religiosity. While I am not advocating Janicaud’s view of Marion as crypto-theologian, I want to make a somewhat more careful observation that his Christian mystical “preunderstanding” of

the relation with divine to hold to the strict distinction between Revelation and revelation and keep them strictly apart from each other might prove to be more difficult to Marion than it seems at first sight.

TAKING THE "THIRD WAY"

Marion claims that the field of religion can simply be described as that what philosophy excludes, that is, the possibility of revelation and of transcendence in general. In "Saturated Phenomenon" Marion argues that this difficulty and antagonism has their root in the fact that religious phenomena cannot simultaneously be considered both as religious and objective. Marion writes: "any possible 'philosophy of religion' would have to describe, produce, and constitute phenomena. It would then find itself confronted with a disastrous alternative: it would be a question either of addressing phenomena that are objectively definable but lose their religious specificity or of addressing phenomena that are specifically religious but cannot be described objectively." Marion also asserts that a phenomenon that is a strict sense religious must "render visible what nevertheless could not be objectified." Marion proceeds to asserting that theology's requirements could help phenomenology to overcome its own limitations and, thus, deliver "the possibility of revelation, hence possibility as revelation, from the grip of the principle of sufficient reason", that is, from the grip of conceptualization and metaphysics. (Marion 2008, 16-17, 18-19; See also Mckinlay 2010, 180-182.) It is somewhat unclear what is by "theology's requirements" here, but I take it that they include, at least, requirement to understading revelation self-disclosing activity of a wholly other and transcendent God who ways and nature remains unknown and impenetrable to finite human reason. Thus, positions which advocate strong metaphysical and theological realist views are henceforth rejected. One must find other routes in order to provide a philosophical account of the divine, and access to God. Marion aim is to provide such an account.

Marion uses his theory saturated phenomenon to make space for the philosophical study of religious phenomena, God in particular; to render visible what nevertheless could not be objectified. In the last last chapter of "In Excess" entitled "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of It". There he engages in a lengthy and scrutinous discussion on Christian negative and mystical

theology, especially that of Dionysius the Areopagite. There Marion responds to Jacques Derrida's critique of negative theology and apophatic discourse, and formulates his own view on mystical theology and religious experience. Marion also returns, in a way, "God without Being", and employs his theory of saturated phenomena to account for the meaning of prayer.

Marion reminds his readers that Derrida's attack against the so-called "negative theology" has nothing to do with the reproach, usually made against "negative theology", according to which such theological endeavor leads inevitably to radical atheism under the pretext of "honoring in silence". On the contrary, Derrida's argument's point is more subtle and fundamental. He maintains that "negative theology", despite its best efforts, persists in making affirmative statements about God, especially about His existence, while simultaneously denying them. Thus, "thereby to point out its failure to think God outside of presence and to free itself from the 'metaphysics of presence.'" (Marion 2002b, 132.) For Marion, of course, this amounts to saying that mystical theology remains metaphysical — a claim which he directly deems as unfounded. He then proceeds to showing that Derrida's treatment of mystical theology as "a play between affirmation and negation" leads to completely missing the main and essential point of such a theology. According to Marion, one can find in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite "a third way" of proceeding, which "does not hide an affirmation beneath a negation, seeing as it means exactly to overcome their duel, just as it means to overcome that between the two truth values wherein metaphysics plays itself out." (Marion 2002a, 173)

In the last section of "In Excess" Marion brings together the "third way" and his account of saturated phenomena. He starts by presenting two possible ways, the kataphatic and the apophatic way, of interpreting of Husserl's account of a phenomenon. According to the first interpretation, "the intention finds itself confirmed, at least partially, by the intuition". It is kataphatic insofar as kataphasis, according to Marion, "proceeds through a conceptual affirmation that justifies an intuition". The second, in turn, may be labeled as apophatic since in it "the intention can exceed all intuitive fulfillment, and in this case the phenomenon does not deliver objective knowledge on account of a lack." For Marion, apophasis "proceeds by negating the concept because of an insufficiency in intuition". However, both of these alternatives remain

within the horizon of predication (of naming, identification, and conceptualization), and thus within metaphysics. But, according to Marion, the relation between intention and intuition can, of course, be understood in a more radical “third way” through the description of saturated phenomena. Marion writes: “In this third way, no predication or naming any longer appears possible, as in the second way [apophasis], but now this is so for the opposite reason: not because the giving intuition would be lacking (...) but because the excess of intuition overcomes, submerges, exceeds—in short, saturates—the measure of each and every concept. What is given disqualifies every concept.” (Marion 2002b, 158–159). The given which “disqualifies every concept” is God’s revelation as the most saturated phenomenon.

The intent of this analysis is to make us see the failure and inadequacy of both kataphatic and apophatic language and approaches vis-à-vis the divine. The Dionysian and Maronian “third way”, instead, consists neither in affirming nor in denying/negating something about God. God in his complete transcendence is beyond all predication and predicative language. In accordance with “God without Being”, predicative language is denounced as idolatrous: “idolatry of the concept”. (Marion 2002b, 150.) Such an idolatrous approach seeks to enter “God within the theoretical horizon of our predication” (Marion 2002b, 157.), that is, to reduce Him to an object of understanding. The “third way” instead by providing a proper “iconic way” of approaching God. It constitutes a “new praxis” which is made of “denomination”. Gschwandtner explains that for Marion the point of denomination is neither naming nor not naming, but “un-naming”, that is, denying and eliminating “the pertinence of all predication”. (Gschwandtner 2014, 151.) Marion claims that the “third way” is a “*radical* apophasis”, which leads to another type of knowledge. It is radical insofar as it supposed to *overcome* both apophatic and kataphatic approaches in single stroke.

This other type of knowledge would consist in knowing “in and through ignorance itself, to know that one does not know, to know incomprehensibility as such—the third way would consist, at least at first glance, in nothing else”. To follow the “third way” is to recognize that *understanding* God is at same time and *at once* acknowledging that in fact we do not know Him as such at all, “but something less than God, seeing as we could easily conceive an other still greater than the one we comprehend. For the one we compre-

hend would always remain less than and below the one we do not comprehend.” Marion proceeds to stating that incomprehensibility belongs to the “formal definition” of God. (See Marion 2002b, 154.) This seems to be a surprising move since all attempts to provide any definitions with regard to God, be it formal, were deemed as unacceptable. Of course, one could point out that Marion too has to use language to express his views, and thus he must conceptualize, name, define, and predicate. But, at the end even such a “formal definition” too must be radically denominated and negated according to the procedure “radical apophasis”. Or, Marion could be taken to be making a Phillipsian point. Briefly put, one must move beyond what such sentence as “God is incomprehensible” seems to mean on the surface, as it were, move beyond the literal propositional content of such claims, and describe what they really mean. “God is comprehensible” is not an indicative sentence, or a factual statement. Instead, it is an expression of faith, an expression of the believer’s fundamental commitments which guides and gives meaning to her life. However, this not what Marion seems to be saying, and if he does, he does not state it clearly. A more accurate interpretation Marion’s claim is the following. What Marion, as a phenomenologist, wants to say is that looking from a phenomenological (and Kantian) point-of-view, God is never nor can He be given as an object of comprehension for us. God’s incomprehensibility is, as he puts it elsewhere, His impossibility *for us*. (See e.g. Marion 2010b, 87–138.) To say that “God is incomprehensible” is not say anything about God, but something fundamental about us. Yet, even in this case it seems, at very least, odd to provide “formal definition” of God, which amounts to putting God under a concept. But maybe Marion is willing to grant this much, though I have my doubts.

Be as it may, for Marion the incomprehensibility of God means we must ultimately remain silent. (See Gschwandtner 2014, 151) However, Gschwandtner points out, this silence does not amount to turning away from or even to outright denial of God. Instead, it is “an appropriate silence” in which the direction of the relation between me and God is reversed. For Marion, this iconic “third way” consists in approaching God in such way that God’s utter transcendence and incomprehensibility is acknowledged. It is matter of orienting to oneself to the divine in the proper and correct way, to expose oneself to God who addresses me and letting myself to be the intentional object,

as it were, of God's activity. According to Marion, the "third way" is a purely pragmatic one. (Marion 2002b, 157.)

But, how is this to be understood? If God and his revelation are totally ungraspable and cannot and *ought* not to be talked about, how does one even start approaching God in the right way. For it seems that, to put in terms of "God without Being", if there is an infinite distance between the one who views the icon and the divine, all "access" to God, even a pragmatic one, is denied for the start?

PRAYER AS ACCESS

In "In Excess" Marion maintains that prayer offers such an "access", even though, in an indirect way. Following Dionysus, Marion understands prayer as "not consist[ing] in causing the invoked one to descend into the realm of our language (he or she exceeds it, but also is found always already among us) but in elevating ourselves toward the one invoked by sustained attention. The approach of prayer always consists simply in de-nominating—not naming properly, but setting out to intend God [*le viser*] in all impropriety (...) As such, the de-nomination operated by prayer (and praise) according to the necessary impropriety of names should not be surprising. In effect, it confirms the function of the third way, no longer predicative (whether this mean predicating an affirmation or a negation) but purely pragmatic." (Marion 2002b, 144.) Gschwandtner points out that Marion's account of prayer is primarily an elucidation of the impossibility of stating anything adequate about God. Prayer would be an entirely passive "iconic" response to the phenomenon of revelation that overwhelms me. Gschwandtner writes: "Prayer simply serves as a name for the awe inspired by the unnamable and as a way of claiming that such awe is no longer predicative." (Gschwandtner 2014, 152.) It is interesting to note that already in "God without Being", Marion describes in similar terms what he calls there "the contemplation of the icon". While contemplation does not lead to a conceptual grasping or fixing of the invisible, it is not described solely in negative terms. According to Marion, the contemplation of the icon is essentially about reverence and veneration. And, it is only through veneration and worship that the invisible God becomes present in the visible icon. He writes: "[I]n reverent contemplation of the icon

[...] the gaze of the invisible, in person, aims at man. The icon regards us — it concerns us, in that it allows the intention of the invisible to occur visible [...] not to be seen, but venerated.” (Marion 1991, 19.)

While Gschwandtner is surely correct, Marion’s account nevertheless seems to make room for one possible way talking about God. Surely, Marion contends, one cannot pray without saying something and without naming, that is, without recognizing the one to whom one prays. However, in prayer, Marion claims, one speaks to God indirectly. To speak in an indirect way, is not to attribute something to something, but to speak of and approach God *as* the principle of goodness, for example. It is to go in the direction of, reckoning with, and to deal with God. Marion writes: “In this way, prayer and praise are carried out in the very same operation of an indirect aim (...) always only to de-nominate as . . . and inasmuch as . . . what this intention can glimpse and interpret of it.” (Marion 2002b, 144.) Mackinley calls this indirect speech the “apophatic as”. (Mckinley 2010, 214.) Nevertheless, while there seems to be for Marion an indirect way of talking about God, at the end the infinite distance between the one who prays and God remains impenetrable. Marion states: “Access to the divine phenomenality is not forbidden to us; in contrast, it is precisely when we become entirely open to it that we find ourselves forbidden from it—frozen, submerged, we are by ourselves forbidden from advancing and likewise from resting.” (Marion 2002b, 161–162.) The “apophatic as” of prayer seems to be nothing more than the realization of the incomprehensibility of God. The “third way” consists in resisting the temptation of idolatry by making distance ever greater between us and God by constantly reaffirming the incomprehensibility of God. Such is proper way of accessing the divine. He writes: “It is not much to say that God remains God even if one is ignorant of God’s essence, concept, and presence—God remains God only on condition that this ignorance be established and admitted definitively. Every thing in the world gains by being known—but God, who is not of the world, gains by not being known conceptually. The idolatry of the concept is the same as that of the gaze: imagining oneself to have attained and to be capable of maintaining God under our gaze, like a thing of the world. And the Revelation of God consists first of all in cleaning the slate of this illusion and its blasphemy. [...] The Name—it has to be dwelt in without saying it, but by letting it say, name, and call us. The Name is not said by

us; it is the Name that calls us. And nothing terrifies us more than this call," (Marion 2002b, 150–162.)

It should be noted that what Marion writes about prayer applies to our relation with the divine in general. Prayer works as a paradigmatic case of a "correct" religious experience and language which, as he writes, "marks the transgression of the predicative, nominative, and therefore metaphysical sense of language". Prayer also marks the end of metaphysical speculation about God and natural theology by revealing their blasphemous and idolatrous nature. (Marion 2002b, 145.) Yet, Mason rightly notes that while in God's case the language of objects ceases as a possibility, there a sense in which naming and predication remain operative in God's revelation. But the roles are now reversed. In accordance with his description of the saturated phenomenon of revelation, it is no longer the I who acts, names or predicates. The saturated phenomenon of revelation is utterly overwhelming and given in such an excessive fullness that the recipient is incapable of intentionally constituting or grasping it. It is no longer the subject who acts, instead it is the one upon whom the saturated phenomenon acts. Marion calls this a "counter-experience" or "counter-intentionality" in which the recipient itself is constituted. (See e.g. Marion 2002b, 113; Marion 2002a, 215-216. See Gschwandtner 2014, 152.) It is God's revelation which names and predicates about me. In speaking to God, I no longer seek to find a name for or describe God; instead, it is God who acts on me, and I am, thus, as Mason puts it, "inscribed within the horizon of God making language performative rather than merely descriptive." (See Mason 2014, 30. (Marion 2002b, 157.) In a similar manner as in "God without Being", the one who speaks to God or contemplates the icon, is an utterly passive recipient of the revelation of God which, in Marion words, imposes on us, and in its intuitive excess overwhelms and obsesses me leaving me in stupor and terror. The definition of the saturated phenomenon of revelation is strikingly similar to the definition of the icon in "God without Being". In fact, in the last paragraph of "Saturated Phenomena" Marion describes the overwhelming effect of the phenomenon of the revelation of God as leading to "the paradox that an invisible gaze visibly envisages me and loves me." (Marion 2008, 47–48.)

Marion holds that we must "dwell" within God's horizon, let God "say, name, and us". However, one must be asked, however, and here I join many

others, that if the saturated phenomena and, especially, the phenomenon of revelation are as excessive as Marion takes them to be, to the point of being constitutive of us who receive them, then how are we to recognize it? If I am not capable of grasping or interpreting such a phenomenon at all how am I to make distinction between a common-law, the first-order saturated phenomena, and the fifth type of saturated phenomena of revelation? How do I, for instance, recognize that I am venerating an idol instead of an icon? Marion is known for his critical stance towards philosophical hermeneutics as for him any interpretative understanding of a given phenomenon based on a preunderstanding introduces restraints and conditions for the appearing of the phenomenon. But, certainly Marion would agree that we are capable, for example, to conceptually idolize God and the Word (e.g. *causa sui*), by way of affirmation or negation, and, thus, succumb to conceptual idolatry. But, whence do I start in order to receive the correct interpretation of the words given by the Word on its own accord?

In the first pages of “God without Being” Marion acknowledges the possibility of an icon turning into an idol and vice versa and seems to suggest that the change in status, from idol to icon, occurs only in veneration. McKinley in his commentary on this passage points out that Marion himself suggests that what is required is that the viewer herself decides to make a reverent approach. (McKinley 2010, 169) Thus, the gazer must deliberate and make a decision whether to venerate the icon and receive it as the focus his veneration or not. Surely, in a similar manner, active engagement from the part of the recipient of revelation is also required in order to pass from an “idolatrous way” to the correct way “iconic way” of relating oneself to the divine which consists in “admitting ignorance”, “to dwell” in God’s horizon, “letting” him call me and so forth. What this suggests is that the recipient of the saturated phenomenon cannot be an utterly passive one. Some interplay is required. Furthermore, surely it is the I who must actively reaffirm the incomprehensibility of God. Gschwandtner makes a similar remark with regard to prayer. She asks: “What does it mean to recognize the divine gaze in prayer, to “feel” the divine calling me or bearing upon me, to sense God speaking to me?” According to Gschwandtner, all of these require significant amount of interpretation in order to “see” God’s gaze and his voice correct Marion way. Marion might emphasize the bedazzling effect the divine gaze has on the one who

prays, but “identifying this effect as an effect of the divine gaze is, however, a hermeneutic exercise. Obviously, such an identification does not happen in a vacuum but is always deeply informed by a whole (and varied) tradition of how God is understood to call or affect people.” (Gschwandtner 2014, 157.) As noted above, Marion relies heavily on his own deeply Christian background, which informs his philosophical work and guides his thinking. And, it seems that for a person to receive God’s revelation in proper Marionian way, she must herself, in one way or another, be informed by such a tradition.

CONCLUSION

According to Marion we are required to receive God’s revelation in the right way, that is, according to the “third way”. Taking this road means rejecting all metaphysical, ontotheological, approaches as erroneous and idolatrous, and traditional natural theology as well. This rejection does not, however, mean a total abandonment of all philosophical analysis of religious phenomena. Instead, one must in a sense start anew and give a more adequate philosophical account which provides a “iconic way” of approaching the divine while acknowledging God’s incompressibility and transcendence with regard to us. Marion is critical of philosophical hermeneutics, yet, his views are difficult to understand without taking into consideration his own theological background. And while Marion’s account is compelling, its uncompromising excessiveness makes it to see how to follow his “third way”. Where does one start?

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