New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12156

Mission after Marion?

Carolyn Chau

Jean-Luc Marion figures significantly in the movement in contemporary, continental philosophy often termed the theological 'turn' in phenomenology. This shift has been the subject of debate, most famously between Dominique Janicaud and Marion, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida, in which the central challenge has been whether the turn to theology in recent French phenomenology betrays the phenomenological method in its strict sense. The aim of this paper is not to engage the specifics of this debate, but to read the contested ground as a 'sign' itself of the significance of treatments of faith and transcendence in postmodern philosophy for contemporary ecclesial mission. This attention to the religious mode of existing and thinking in philosophy coincides with the emphasis on ethics in postmodern thought. Moving beyond modernistic reason, which orients itself around the subject, the new locus of orientation has been 'the other' and relationality; Marion's phenomenology of love, rooted as it is in his original profound theological engagement with the onto-theological God of the philosophers raises the question of theology to new heights, and presses contemporary philosophy for an engagement with faith in order to truly respond to the other.

Christina Gschwandtner has shown convincingly that there is a strong continuity in Marion's corpus between the concern to overcome metaphysics in theological speech and the phenomenology of love. The common challenge is that Marion's phenomenology fails to accomplish its task without falling into or appealing dogmatically to theology, thus leaving behind the realm of phenomenology as philosophical science proper. In contrast to the submission of Marion's phenomenology to the standards of postmodernism, I will examine the theological intent in Marion's work to explore how the Church may appreciate and appropriate Marion's work in its ongoing task of reflecting on the questions of mission and secularization. That is, I will consider the phenomenology of charity, and Marion's treatment of love in *God Without Being* from the theological perspective, and through this lens, attend to what he hopes to achieve through the site of philosophy, particularly continental phenomenology. The advantage of this approach to Marion is that it seems to resonate to a significant degree with Marion's own self-understanding of his project.

© 2015 The Dominican Council. Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2016, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12156 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Theological interpreters observe: "the dimension... which principally concerns Marion[:] how can Christians speak authentically of God? Can it be sufficient that they praise rather than predicate?" Sandra Wynands notes that a chief aim of Marion's phenomenology of charity is "to write love back into philosophy." David Tracy assesses *God Without Being* as an attempt to write revelation back into philosophy. These readings of Marion suggest that while one may focus on the phenomenological works to evaluate the postmodern ethics of Marion, it seems that both Marion's 'theology' and his 'phenomenology' reveal an ongoing concern regarding the development of a rigorous philosophical treatment of love. So, we will attend to both his theology and phenomenology to explore how Marion fruitfully mediates Christian faith to an ever secularizing culture through refiguring basic categories of thought. The intensity with which the phenomenological and theological movements dovetail in the work of Marion[1] is the main reason we shall explore his work to indicate the missional dimension of postmodern phenomenology for the Church.

Phenomenology as a Site for Mission

How, then, does the postmodern theology and phenomenology of Marion work within the realm of the ethical in a way that fruitfully mediates between Christian faith and culture? At the broadest level, Marion's entire theological and phenomenological project may be seen as an attempt to "write love back into philosophy." This project culminates in a phenomenology of love which, I hope to show, transvalues modernistic Christian ethics and shifts it into Christian *existence*, namely, love for neighbour out of bedazzlement by the icon of the other. The ability to see the other as a refraction of Love arises only with the inclusion of revelation as a basic structure of human experience. Given the complexity of Marion's project, we will distill only the elements of his work pertinent to the development of his phenomenology of love. These include: 1. Marion's refiguration of God as the subject of *theology as praise* 2. the refiguration of the structure of human experience as 'givenness', 3. the refiguration of the modern subject as the one who is structured by the question of love and for love.

[1] A frequent assessment of Marion's work is that it can be grouped according to two foci: the first theology, the second, phenomenology. On this reading, *God Without Being, The Idol and Distance, Prolegomena to Charity* and *The Crossing of the Visible* comprise the theological works; *Reduction and Givenness*, *Being Given*, and *The Erotic Phenomenon*, the phenomenological works.

© 2015 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12156 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Refiguring 'God' as Love: Idols and Icons

The main task of *God Without Being* was to show the inadequacy of metaphysical language for God, to name it as conceptual idolatry. According to Marion, the language of being is idolatrous insofar as it pretends to speak of God when what it speaks of is the speaker: the human gaze returns from God understood as first cause to its own need to conceptualize. Only God as goodness, God as Love, the God of revelation can be iconic; and even then, it is only so because there is an excess indicated in such language. Love is always in excess.

Where an icon helps us to see *beyond the visible*, the idol leaves us with a surface that rebounds the focus of attention back on ourselves. In the case of the idol, we see only the visible, become obsessed only by what can be seen by the physical eye, and, in the end, are brought only to the reality of ourselves as gazers, imperfect and unfree. An icon, in contrast, offers an experience of a gaze that comes from beyond, the divine gaze. The gazer in the case of the icon is God.

> Theology can reach its authentically *theo*logical status only if it does not cease to break with all theo*logy*. Or yet if it claims to speak of God, or rather of that G̲x̲d who strikes out and crosses out every divine idol, sensible or conceptual, if therefore it claims to speak of G̲x̲d, in such a way that this *of* is understood as much as the origin of the discourse as its objective, (I do not say *object*, since G̲x̲d can never serve as an object especially not for theology, except in distinguished blasphemy, following the axiom that only "God can well speak of God" (Pascal); and if finally this strictly inconceivable G̲x̲d, simultaneously speaking and spoken, gives himself as the Word, as the Word given even in the silent immediacy of abandoned flesh – then there is nothing more suitable than that this theology should expose its logic to the repercussions, within it, of the *theos*.[2]

With this exegesis of the icon/idol Marion underscores what Marion perceives to be the superficial and blasphemous character of metaphysical language for God. The language of being does not, in fact, capture anything of God; no theological speech can 'capture' God as such. Marion remains deeply apophatic, and hopes only that we are less idolatrous in our speech about God than we may be.[3] The

[2] Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 139.

[3] On Marion's apophaticism, Tamsin Jones has noted that the distinction between Marion's and Hans Urs von Balthasar's appropriation of Dionysius the Areopagite's apophaticism is traceable to the difference in their respective audiences: for Marion it is his fellow phenomenologists, for von Balthasar it is the Church. Trusting this distinction, it is important to observe that while Marion is not writing to the Church, he is

© 2015 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12156 Published online by Cambridge University Press

language which seems best suited to God who is its subject is, then, the language of praise. Only praise ratifies who God is, as Love. Only praise avoids rendering God an object of human speaking and knowing. Thus, Marion begins to shift the philosophical horizon from thinking about God ('predication') to loving God, through doxology.

'Givenness' as the structure of experience, 'interloqué' as the new marker of personhood

Marion's concern to move beyond the limits we place on God through metaphysics is important in his development of the concept of the 'interloqué', the one who is called. Between God without being and interloqué, Marion makes several moves. Gschwandtner describes these as Marion's epistemological reduction beyond the 'I' of Descartes' 'Cogito' to the metaphysical reduction of gift to givenness.

Marion seeks to complete the phenomenological work necessary for experience to be seen as that which reveals that there is always a call from 'beyond' embedded in experience. In this, he moves into a posture of challenge to Derrida, contesting that even the notion of gift is inscribed by metaphysical categories. Marion prefers to speak, rather, of the phenomenological reality of *givenness*. He argues that the most basic experience of all phenomena is their givenness; the prioricity of givenness is deeper than gift, which presupposes giver, givee, and some interaction of giving and reception. Givenness is the phenomenological horizon that trumps gift and which cannot be further reduced.

Marion claims: "I made it my goal to establish that givenness remains an immanent structure of any kind of phenomenality, whether immanent or transcendent." He acts from within the Heideggerian project which sees the need to move away from domesticated Being, and causality, toward mysticism, trancendence beyond thinking, why-lessness. Givenness accomplishes this, according to Marion, as

> our deepest and most genuine experience of the phenomenon does not deal with any object that we could master, produce, or constitute, no more than with any being which belongs to the horizon of Being, where onto-theology is possible, and where God can for the first time and in the first place play the role of the first cause. Rather, there are

writing for and from the Church. In some sense, rather than contesting Janicaud, this observation feeds the critique, acknowledging that the presence of theology that Janicaud detects in Marion's phenomenology is indeed present. However, the virtue of such a turn both ecclesially and philosophically is the space it opens for love, denying thereby that the introduction of the element of revelation alone disqualifies Marion's work from being considered phenomenological. As mentioned previously, the controversy over the inclusion of revelation in Marion's phenomenology certainly suggests an ecclesial and missional dimension to his work.

© 2015 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12156 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> many situations where phenomena appear as given, that is, without any cause or giver.[4]

For Marion, to raise questions about the experience of a gift remains too much within the causal, conceptual, controlling 'logic' of metaphysics. Continuing to move the ever-resistent modern subject into a stance of praise, Marion thus presses beyond the rational questions raised by the phenomenon of the gift to the point where only a response of openness is possible: in recognizing the phenomenality of 'givenness' in every experience.

The phenomenology of givenness develops into and yields an ethic of love, completed through what Marion calls the erotic reduction. Through this reduction, the human subject is redescribed, and/or rediscovered as lover.

The Phenomenology of Love, Person as Lover

If one could describe Heidegger's critique of onto-theology as, at bottom, a forgetfulness of Being, at the heart of Marion's ongoing concerns in philosophy and phenomenology is, one might say, a desire to expose thinking's forgetfulness of love. Hence, as Sandra Wynands notes succintly, "Marion's primary concern in 'The Erotic Phenomenon' is [. . .] to write love back into philosophy and to develop a new way of thinking and a revised concept of rationality, a 'greater rationality' which starts from love and includes it, instead of branding it as other."[5]

Establishing givenness Marion goes on to talk about the subject not only as one who is called, called to witness to the givenness, to be bedazzled by the saturated phenomena all around, but the one who is the lover. For Marion, fullness of personhood comes in experiencing openness to the other through a paradigmatic stance of passive receptivity. Vulnerability and risk characterize the stance of the lover as opposed to the need for certainty of the Cartesian subject. Marion clarifies that love is annulled where there is any calculation of love in return since experience of the other is itself negated by the expectation of certainty: expectation disables receptivity to the presencing of the other. Thus, to put it most starkly, the ethical relation becomes impossible as there is no 'other.' This phenomenological turn to the lover is Marion's 'erotic reduction', in which the primary question that defines the Cartesian

[4] *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 70.

[5] Sandra Wynands, rvw of 'The Erotic Phenomenon' in *Christianity and Literature,* vol.57, no.1 (Aut 2007): 142.

© 2015 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12156 Published online by Cambridge University Press

subject, how do I know that I exist, the 'cogito', is considered less basic than the question, 'Am I loved?' or 'Do you love me?'

Transformed experience of 'self'

Marion's original arrival on the philosophical scene was through his critical-constructive engagement with Descartes' metaphysics and epistemology. Along with many others, Marion's critique of Cartesian subjectivity is standard fare as a point of entry into postmodern thought. Marion is in line with the prevailing concerns with the metaphysical subject post-Heidegger: the problem with the Cartesian subject is that it counts existence as premised on knowledge and the knowing process as necessarily involving a process of objectification. The gaze of the subject is one of control which leaves no room for the 'otherness of the other' to present itself. The Cartesian subject also requires certainty above all else. Hence, the modern, metaphysical subject faces the problem of solipsism in the highest degree.

Marion's engagement of Descartes is more complex than a mere rejection, however; Marion greatly appreciates, in fact, the dialogical nature, too, that is there, arguably, in Descartes' meditations on the existence of God. Marion's phenomenological work is to complete the trajectory 'after the subject'. As Merold Westphal states, beyond the Cartesian subject and Heideggerian *dasein,* there is, according to Marion, the *interloqué*, the one who is called:

> Somewhat like Kierkegaard's three spheres of existence, where the first finds its telos outside itself in the third, the three reductions present a teleological account of three possible subjectivities, three possible answers to the question, Who am I? The transcendental ego of Descartes, Kant, and Husserl has its telos in Heidegger's Dasein, which in turn has its telos in the interloqué. But in relation to the icon and the saturated phenomenon, I am in this third mode of subjectivity only if and when, beyond seeing them, I find myself addressed by them. It is only when, as Levinas puts it, "the face speaks" that the icon and the saturated phenomenon become visibles that point beyond themselves to what is invisible. We can formulate the reductions thus, theory is in the service of practice and both are in the service of responsibility.[6]

Transformed experience of 'the other' within the order of charity

Marion's refiguration of the self as profoundly open to the other, as having an identity only as a face that is the locus for all of one's *relationships,* gives rise to an ethic that is distinct from that of Levinas,

[6] Merold Westphal, "Vision and Voice: Phenomenology and Theology in the Work of Jean-Luc Marion." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* vol. 60, no. 1-3 (12 2006): 134.

© 2015 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12156 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for example. Whereas Levinas redescribes ethics as 'first philosophy' and Derrida explores the possibility of the notion of the gift as a way toward the other and the Other (but remains largely within a hermeneutic of suspicion regarding both), Marion, we have seen, articulates a robust theological horizon and roots his subsequent ethical work therein. Because the horizon of his ethic is Love, the intersubjective relation between self and other is permeated by an experience of givenness. The phenomenology of givenness underwrites the erotic reduction; thus, the face of the other does not call to me out of an original sense of competitiveness or threat and, only subsequently, call to my freedom and responsibility; rather, the other appears as a phenomenon given to me, and revealing the prior givenness of things. This renders the subject 'gifted' by the other, rather than 'taken hostage' as in the case of Levinas' phenomenology of the other.

Otherwise stated, the relationship between the self and other within Marion's phenomenology of givenness takes place within the ambit of love; the relationship between selves as lovers is non-competitive *agape-eros*. To be is to be affected; the other is thus inscribed in one's personhood.

Marion states the centrality of what he hopes his work in the order of charity, and a phenomenology which presupposes revelation would achieve (in considering whether one can justify Christian philosophy by its formal object):

> The most convincing example relates not to God, or to the world, but to the human person him-or herself – in other words, the phenomenon of the human being, that is, of his or her natural visibility, which is concentrated in the face. One would not deny that this is a phenomenon in its own right, accessible by natural experience to natural reason. But it is not sufficient merely to look at a face in order to see the other who is exposed in it, since one can see the face of the slave without being able to recognize the other in his or her own right. One can also face another face and coldly kill it; we can use our own faces to dissimulate ourselves under masks and hide them from visibility; we even can expose our faces only to lie, hurt, or destroy. In short, the face can objectivize itself, hide itself, not appear. This is why it was not sufficient for ancient thought to settle on the term (theatrical or juridical) *persona* in order to obtain access to the concept of person: in this particular case it lacked the discovery of the primacy of relation over substantiality, as only Trinitarian theology captured it. The face really becomes the phenomenon of a human being when it makes a person appear who is essentially defined as the crux and the origin of his or her relationships. If seeing a face implies reading a net of relationships in it, I will see it only if I experience "an idea of the indefinite" (Emmanuel Levinas), that is, this center of relationships which cannot be objectivized or reduced to me. Experiencing the infinite in the face of the other cannot be expressed in a formula. It is a behaviour that

© 2015 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12156 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> is experimentally verifiable: facing a face disfigured (by poverty, sickness, pain, etc.) or reduced to its extreme shapes (prenatal life, coma, agony, etc.), I either cannot see it, or am no longer able to recognize another for myself in it and continue on my way. Or I still can *see* in it what I do not see in it naturally – the absolute phenomenon of another centre in the world, where my lookalike lives and whose look upon me allows me to live, thanks to him or her. But in this case, to *see* this invisible face, I must *love* it. Love, however, comes from charity. In consequence, one must hold that the natural phenomenon of the face of the other cannot be discovered except through the light of charity, that is, through the "auxiliary" of revelation. Without the revelation of the transcendence of love, the phenomenon of the face, and thus of the other, simply cannot be seen. This is an exemplary case of "Christian philosophy."[7]

Thus, Marion argues that the formal objects that comprise the subject of Christian philosophy are neither philosophy proper nor theology, but precisely the unique objects that arise from revelation, which can only be articulated, revealed, through the language of phenomenological reduction. The formal object that he describes as paradigmatic is the newness of vision of the other that is possible with Christian revelation. It is to see the other as beloved as oneself is beloved, to see the other as icon in relation to whom one experiences oneself as icon, even where the other is disfigured or 'reduced to extreme shapes'. Revelation alone allows the possibility of seeing beyond the visible.

Mission Revisited

Perhaps the greatest gift that Marion's postmodern phenomenology of love offers is the reinscribing of the divine horizon to philosophical understandings of the intersubjective relationship in which Love surpasses and is constitutive of the relation between self and other. Moreover, this phenomenology rewrites the priority on knowledge, with revelation, such that loving is the condition for the possibility of receiving the experience of the other.

Here it is instructive to underscore the importance of Pascal for Marion's erotic reduction. Attempting to disseminate the meaning of the 'knowing of charity' Marion writes at the conclusion of *Prolegomena to Charity*,

> What knowledge, then, if not the knowledge of that which does not depend upon the objectivity of the object: the knowledge of the other? To know following love, and to know what love itself reveals – Pascal called it the third order. In this context, the theology of charity could

[7] Jean-Luc Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed*, translated by Christina Gschwandtner and others (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p.73-74.

© 2015 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12156 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> become the privileged pathway for responding to the aporia that, from Descartes to Levinas, haunts modern philosophy – access to the other, the most faraway neighbour.[8]

Then, Marion himself signals the missional sensibility underlying his work: "It is doubtful that Christians, if they want seriously to contribute to the rationality of the world and manifest what has come to them, have anything better to do than to work in this vein."[9]

Marion's work to reduce idolatrous talk about God by shifting theology away from metaphysics, being, and predication, to phenomenology, goodness, love, and praise, and his phenomenological work on love, the erotic reduction, are some of the ways in which one might say that Marion uses the relational horizon of postmodern thought as a plane for theological mission. We have discussed briefly the charge of Marion's critics that the erotic reduction, inscribed as it is with revelation, ceases to be phenomenology, but seek only to verify that the turn to revelation and love indeed reveal a sense of Marion's work as missional and evangelical where, again, this is distinct from proselytizing.

There is a question of course, of whether Marion's work may be described as 'ethical' at all. Since a premise in this paper is that Marion's phenomenology works, loosely speaking, within the fecund space of postmodern ethics and because an engagement of this critique may clarify the missional capacity of Marion's philosophy, we shall consider this critique at some length. Gerald McKenny expresses concern that Marion's focus on love in terms of knowledge might be to the exclusion of love as deed. McKenny argues that whereas Levinas brought to culmination the trend that began with Descartes, that of inscribing ethics as first philosophy, Marion, in contrast, seems to reverse this 'turn to the ethical' in phenomenology, choosing instead to privilege love, and underscore the 'saturated phenomenon' which gives itself in particularity rather than in universal terms.[10]

McKenny thus asserts that Marion has little or no concern to preserve the privileged place of ethics in postmodern thought, though he neither ignores nor denigrates it.[11] McKenny's judgment proceeds from keen comparative analysis of Levinas' project with that of Marion. Whereas for Levinas, responsibility to the other is primary, for Marion, according to McKenny, the priority is on love, in a way that seems never to reach moral responsibility. McKenny

[8] Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, translated by Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 169.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Gerald McKenny, "(Re)placing Ethics: Jean-Luc Marion and the Horizon of Modern Morality" in *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*. Kevin Hart (editor) Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

[11] Ibid.

© 2015 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12156 Published online by Cambridge University Press

does consider the reading that suggests itself from Marion's writings (*Prolegomena to Charity* and *The Erotic Phenomenon*), that love is the completion of justice, rather than competitively situated over and against justice. McKenny retreats from this reading, however, choosing instead to challenge Marion to go beyond a phenomenological, namely, a conceptual engagement with the 'other' and toward a genuinely ethical response, namely, one of 'works'.[12]

However, it seems that McKenny misunderstands Marion on two key concepts: knowledge and love. The knowledge Marion speaks of 'follows love'; it is the 'third order of charity' of Pascal. Thus, the knowing associated with love is certainly not to the exclusion of deed, for the knowledge is precisely the love that surpasses conceptual, intellectual knowledge of goodness and rightness. It is the personal knowing *of* the other as neighbour, rather than a knowing *that* the other is neighbour; hence, the knowing following love is a way of being toward the other. Moreover, the distinction between love and ethics with which McKenny begins seems far more secular than that which Marion presumes. This distinction is premised on an understanding of love as the meaning of a privileged affection for another; Marion is speaking of *agape* love, however, which is nonetheless not distinct from the love of *eros*.[13]

Nonetheless, McKenny rightly notes that Marion understands love as going beyond ethics, and love as having primacy over ethics. I wish to argue, however, that Marion's 'indifference' to ethics is precisely because of its missiological significance for Catholic theology. Ethics, philosophy, phenomenology, must give way to praise of Love itself. This, Marion learns from one of his theological mentors, Hans Urs von Balthasar. In fact, Marion's apparent 're-placement' (demotion?) of ethics is precisely since he sees it as only occupying one moment in the greater totality of life lived facing the God who is Love. If Marion's point is, as McKenny seems to recognize, indeed to contest the modern reductionism of ethics to a kind of nihilism, particularly through Kant, then it seems strange that McKenny also challenges Marion on this. Rather, the point of contest may be more properly situated at the question of what is the *fullness* of ethics, rather than whether Marion is for or against ethics, in favour of love. The point, it seems, is how far one attends to the philosophy of modernity as well as the degree to which one challenges it. Marion clearly gestures to where he wishes *not* to tread: using phenomenology as a pointer to move beyond a modernistic, nihilistic ethic to ethics that

[12] Ibid.

[13] This is yet another conceptual reframing Marion wishes to overcome: the false distinction in Christianity, as he sees it, between *agape* and *eros*. This is Marion's retrieval of 'flesh' in the erotic reduction.

© 2015 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12156 Published online by Cambridge University Press

flows from love, it seems indeed to be the case that phenomenology, through ethics, functions as a turn to the heart of Christianity.

McKenny acknowledges as much in the conclusion of his astute article. He writes: "Perhaps more important than the relative degrees of attention he has addressed to love and ethics are his gestures beyond the modern fractures between ontology and ethics and between love and justice, fractures that have had such a debilitating effect on modern theology and philosophy alike."[14] Marion's point is, indeed, to show the glory of ethical relation through which shines a hymn to Love; for Love surpasses ethics, Love surpasses all.

Marion's work at the site of postmodern phenomenology, complicating the relationships between phenomenology, theology, and ethics, may reinscribe Christian truth into contemporary cultural imagination by drawing attention to love as the basic phenomenon which then inscribes all other human experiences, particularly one's relational response to the other. Although McKenny raises a fair challenge concerning the ultimate capacity of this phenomenology of love to reveal itself in action, at the least, it retrieves that most important core of Christian truth and experience, Love. In this way, it has the merit of bringing something of the simplicity of Christian existence to light again.

Carolyn Chau

[14] Ibid.

© 2015 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12156 Published online by Cambridge University Press