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**THEMES OF CHRISTIAN DOGMATICS IN
THE THOUGHT OF JEAN-LUC MARION**

DOCTORAL THESIS ABSTRACT

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION / 7

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS / 7

SIGNIFICANT BIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS / 8

THE CURRENT STATE OF OUR RESEARCH / 9

THE GOALS OF OUR RESEARCH / 11

1. THEOLOGY, APOLOGETICS, HOLINESS / 14

1.1. MARION BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY / 14

1.1.1. The intersection / 14

1.1.2. The demarcation / 17

1.2. THE TRADITION OF THE CHURCH / 20

1.2.1. The authority of Orthodoxy: the Church Fathers / 20

1.2.2. The Church between criticism and apology / 21

1.2.3. Holiness / 23

1.3. THEOLOGY / 27

1.3.1. The philosophical justification of a theological endeavour / 27

1.3.2. Revealed theology vs. rational theology / 28

1.4. APOLOGETICS / 30

1.4.1. Reason and faith / 30

1.4.2. Faith / 33

1.4.3. Rational constraint vs. conviction of the will / 35

1.4.4. The rational argument as a preparation for the divine one / 37

1.4.5. Grace as an "argument" / 41

1.5. CONCLUSIONS: THEOLOGY, APOLOGETICS, HOLINESS / 44

2. CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY, METAPHYSICS, PHENOMENOLOGY / 46

2.1. CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY / 46

2.2. METAPHYSICS AND ITS MEANINGS / 50

2.3. PHENOMENOLOGY / 53

2.3.1. What is phenomenology? / 53

2.3.2. Reduction / 55

2.3.3. Principles / 60

2.3.4. Intuition / 61

2.4. PHENOMENOLOGY AS A PHILOSOPHICAL PARADIGM FOR THEOLOGY / 62

- 2.4.1. *Phenomenology as a form of exceeding metaphysics / 62*
- 2.4.2. *The phenomenology of givenness as a form of exceeding primary philosophy / 67*
- 2.5. CONCLUSIONS: CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY, METAPHYSICS, PHENOMENOLOGY / 71
- 3. CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES: THE “DEATH OF GOD” AND THE END OF METAPHYSICS / 73**
- 3.1. TWO PHILOSOPHICAL CHALLENGES / 73
- 3.2. “THE DEATH OF GOD” AND ATHEISM / 74
 - 3.2.1. *“The death of God” / 74*
 - 3.2.2. *What is the “death of God” and Nietzsche’s path / 75*
 - 3.2.3. *The criticism of atheism / 78*
 - 3.2.4. *The idolatrous concept of “God” / 80*
 - 3.2.5. *Consequences of “the death of God” / 82*
- 3.3. THE END OF METAPHYSICS / 84
 - 3.3.1. *Theology and the end of metaphysics / 84*
 - 3.3.2. *The end of metaphysics / 85*
 - 3.3.3. *Onto-theology / 88*
 - 3.3.4. *Marion and onto-theology / 93*
 - 3.3.5. *Interlude: faith, between onto-theology and dogmatics / 96*
- 3.4. CONCLUSIONS: CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES / 99
- 4. THE IDOL AND THE ICON. THE THEOLOGY OF THE ICON AND ITS ACTUALITY / 100**
- 4.1. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN IDOL AND ICON / 100
- 4.2. THE IDOL / 102
- 4.3. THE ICON AND THE DISTANCE OF THE INVISIBLE / 106
- 4.4. THE THEOLOGY OF THE ICON / 110
- 4.5. CONCLUSIONS: THE IDOL AND THE ICON / 119
- 5. GOD: THE SUPERCONCEPTUAL AND LOVING TRINITY / 121**
- 5.1. INTRODUCTION / 121
- 5.2. THE CRITICISM OF THE IDOLATROUS GOD / 121
 - 5.2.1. *The conceptual God / 121*
 - 5.2.2. *The self-caused God: the idolatry of metaphysics / 124*
 - 5.2.3. *The anteriority of being: the idolatry of ontology / 127*
- 5.3. THE SUPER-ESSENTIAL GOD / 131
 - 5.3.1. *God without being / 131*

- 5.3.2. *The super-conceptual God of Revelation / 133*
 - 5.3.3. *God as love / 137*
 - 5.4. CONCLUSIONS: THE GOD OF LOVE / 147
- 6. APOPHATIC THEOLOGY, THE THIRD WAY / 149**
 - 6.1. INTRODUCTION / 149
 - 6.2. DISTANCE / 150
 - 6.3. DIONYSIUS AND APOPHATIC THEOLOGY FOR MARION. AN ANSWER TO JACQUES DERRIDA / 152
 - 6.4. APOPHATIC, CATAPHATIC, AND LOGOPHATIC. DISCOURSE AND EXPERIENCE OF GOD / 162
 - 6.5. DOGMAS VS. APOPHATICISM IN ORTHODOX TRADITION / 165
 - 6.5.1. *Dogmas and the mystery of faith / 165*
 - 6.5.2. *Apophaticism / 167*
 - 6.5.3. *Dogmatic antinomies as perspectives towards apophaticism / 170*
 - 6.6. CONCLUSIONS: APOPHATIC THEOLOGY / 180
- 7. THE HOLY SACRAMENTS. THE EUCHARIST / 182**
 - 7.1. THE POSSIBILITY OF TRANSMITTING GRACE THROUGH THE HOLY SACRAMENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS / 182
 - 7.2. MARION AND THE HOLY EUCHARIST / 185
 - 7.2.1. *Introduction / 185*
 - 7.2.2. *The authenticity of theology and Eucharistic hermeneutics / 186*
 - 7.2.3. *The bishop as the authentic theologian. On the necessity of non-discursive experience / 190*
 - 7.2.4. *The Eucharist and Christian temporality / 193*
 - 7.3. THE EUCHARIST IN ORTHODOX EXPERIENCE, GIVEN MARION'S SATURATED PHENOMENON / 199
 - 7.3.1. *The Eucharist / 199*
 - 7.3.2. *The condition of unity in faith / 200*
 - 7.3.3. *Participation and saturation: the mystery of communion and of the Kingdom / 201*
 - 7.3.4. *Poor distance / 202*
 - 7.3.5. *The dynamic phenomenon / 204*
 - 7.4. CONCLUSIONS: THE HOLY SACRAMENTS / 205
- 8. THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE GIFT AND ITS THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES / 207**

- 8.1. THE GIFT / 207
- 8.2. THE REDUCTION OF THE GIVEE / 209
- 8.3. THE REDUCTION OF THE GIVER / 212
- 8.4. THE REDUCTION OF THE GIFT / 213
- 8.5. A THEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE GIFT / 214
- 8.6. CONCLUSIONS: THE GIFT / 217

- 9. THE SATURATED PHENOMENON AND ITS THEOLOGICAL RELEVANCE / 220**
- 9.1. THE SATURATED PHENOMENON / 220
- 9.2. EXCEEDING TRANSCENDENTAL CATEGORIES / 221
- 9.3. COUNTER-EXPERIENCE / 225
- 9.4. THE TOPIC OF THE PHENOMENON / 226
- 9.5. CONCLUSIONS: THE SATURATED PHENOMENON / 229

- 10. THE REVELATION: FROM PHENOMENOLOGICAL POSSIBILITY TO THEOLOGICAL ACTUALITY / 231**
- 10.1. THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL POSSIBILITY OF CHRISTIAN REVELATION / 231
- 10.2. REVELATION *VS.* APOPHATICISM OR EXCESS *VS.* PENURY OF INTUITION / 237
- 10.3. CONCLUSIONS: REVELATION / 239

- 11. MAN: THE UNDEFINABLE AS *IMAGO DEI* AND THE GIFTED ONE / 240**
- 11.1. THE UNDEFINABLE MAN / 240
- 11.2. HE WHO FOLLOWS THE SUBJECT / 242
- 11.3. THE ISSUE OF THE GIFTED ONE IN THE CASE OF APOPHATIC EXPERIENCE / 248
- 11.4. THE ISSUE OF HERMENEUTICS / 252
- 11.5. THE ISSUE OF CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY FOR THE RELIGIOUS GIFTED ONE / 255
- 11.6. CONCLUSIONS: MAN AS THE GIFTED ONE / 260

- 12. THE UNIQUE LOVE / 262**
- 12.1. EROTIC REDUCTION OR ON THE INCAPACITY OF METAPHYSICS TO STAND THE TEST OF FUTILITY / 262
- 12.2. THE IMPASSE OF SELF-HATRED / 263
- 12.3. LOVING BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE / 265
- 12.4. FLESH, NOT THE BODY / 267
- 12.5. LIE AND VERACITY / 269
- 12.6. GOD AND THE FULFILMENT OF LOVE / 271
- 12.7. CONCLUSIONS: THE UNIQUE LOVE / 274

- 13. A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF AUGUSTINE / 276**

- 13.1. CONFESSION AS REDUCTION / 276
- 13.2. THE BELIEVER AS A GIFTED ONE / 278
- 13.3. THE TRUTH OF FAITH AS A SATURATED PHENOMENON / 280
- 13.4. WEAK WILL AND STRONG LOVE / 281
- 13.5. TIME AS A BEGINNING AND AS A CONVERSION / 283
- 13.6. THE CREATION OF THE SELF OR, ONCE AGAIN, THE GIFTED ONE / 284
- 13.7. CONCLUSIONS: AUGUSTINE / 287

CONCLUSIONS. A POST-METAPHYSICAL APOLOGY / 289

BIBLIOGRAPHY / 292

THEMES OF CHRISTIAN DOGMATICS IN THE THOUGHT OF JEAN-LUC MARION

ABSTRACT

Keywords: Jean-Luc Marion, phenomenology and theology, dogmatics, patristics, revealed theology, onto-theology, apologetics, philosophy, Christian philosophy, heuristic, the end of metaphysics, “the death of God”, idol, icon, ontology, cataphatic theology, apophatic theology, Orthodoxy, Eucharist, hermeneutics, saturated phenomenon, the phenomenology of the gift, counter-experience, transcendental, transcendent, Revelation, the gifted one, love, triadology, Christology, soteriology, anthropology, gnoseology.

Introduction

A bold and innovative thinker who specialises in Descartes and combines theological reflection and phenomenological rigour to create a monumental body of work, Jean-Luc Marion is discussed nowadays by philosophers and theologians alike. His thought provides new perspectives to both of these fields and indicates important guidelines for dialogue. As an renowned representative of the direction known, somewhat pejoratively at first, as “the theological turn of French phenomenology”, Jean-Luc Marion brought Christian Revelation, its theological uniqueness, and its phenomenological relevance back into the discussion, joining other exceptional French representatives of contemporary Christian thought such as Michel Henry, Jean-Yves Lacoste, Jean-Louis Chrétien, or Rémi Brague.

As part of our research, we analyse the presence and the role of themes pertaining to Christian dogmatics in Jean-Luc Marion’s thought, as well as the relationship between these themes and his phenomenology. We argue that, from a theological standpoint, Marion’s activity can be classified as a form of post-metaphysical apology, as he remains faithful to the tradition of the Church and to Christian teachings. We also seek to discover what theology really is to the French philosopher and how it is put to use in the vast phenomenological demonstration. Moreover, we attempt to shift the focus of the question “What is phenomenology for the theological meditation of Jean-Luc Marion?” by demonstrating that theology is for phenomenology an inspiration, an example, truth, a form

of exceeding metaphysics and onto-theology, as well as the holder of the meanings of Christian Revelation; as for phenomenology, we show that it acts as a philosophical paradigm for theology, having an important apologetic role.

Since Marion is a phenomenologist who also tackles theology and not a theologian *per se*, we cannot speak of an elaborate dogmatic discourse or of an actual “dogmatics” of his; however, it is also true that we would not have such a clear understanding of Marion’s thought if we overlooked the elements of dogmatic theology it contains and their overall importance.

We must warn readers of philosophy that Marion’s emphasis on theology will provide a perspective that might seem inadequate, though not less fruitful for understanding his works; as for readers with a theological background, they will have to concede the presence of somewhat demanding philosophical meditations and references. In our opinion, both are inevitable and any avoidance of either theology or phenomenology would prove to be disastrous for understanding Jean-Luc Marion’s thought, which is phenomenological and theological alike.

The importance of this topic, justified by the interdisciplinary approach of Marion himself, is given by the need to interpret his works from the perspective of Orthodox dogmatic theology. While the sources of Eastern patristics in Marion’s thought have already been pointed out, a thorough analysis of dogmatic themes and their role in his writings has yet to be conducted.

As far as *methodology* is concerned, the main perspective we provided was an interdisciplinary one, situated at the crossroads between theology and philosophy. We also discussed and used the phenomenological method to understand the complexities of Marion’s writings. Given the subject of our research and the influence of Eastern patristics on Marionian thought, we also used the method of comparison with Orthodox dogmatic theology. Although our approach combined theology and phenomenology insofar as they are combined in the works of Jean-Luc Marion, we kept the distinction between the two domains, a distinction on which the author repeatedly insists in his works.

Without looking to give our paper a dogmatic structure, we took into account the progression of Marion’s thought and we started with the texts on theological matters in order to clarify the relationship between theology, apologetics, and holiness on the one hand and philosophy, metaphysics, and phenomenology on the other. Then, we continued with Marion’s responses to Nietzschean nihilism and the end of metaphysics, clarifying the concepts of *idol* and *icon* in the process and reaching an understanding of the God “without

being”. We also discussed apophatic knowledge and the Holy Sacraments in order to gain more insight into Marion’s phenomenology, reflecting on topics such as the phenomenology of the gift, the saturated phenomenon, the Revelation, and the gifted one (*l’adonné*). The last part of our paper was dedicated to the discussion about love and to the phenomenological interpretation of Augustine’s writings that Marion provides, once again arguing the usefulness of the phenomenology of givenness for theology and of theological phenomena for phenomenology.

1. Theology, apologetics, and holiness

Jean-Luc Marion has a sound knowledge of the Holy Scripture, of the Church’s tradition, and of patristics, operating seamlessly with the history of doctrine even though he has no formal theological studies. In fact, he often acts as a theologian with a philosophical language who constantly defends Orthodoxy against heresies by using arguments of the Holy Fathers. We could argue that, from a dogmatic standpoint, his ideas show a certain faithfulness towards the teachings of the Church and towards the tradition that was common to the Christian East and West in the first millennium. Even when he puts forth new perspectives, they do not seek to overthrow tradition, but rather to enrich it through meditations which emphasise its depth and validity.

Marion makes a clear distinction between philosophy and theology and although he considers himself a Catholic who specialises in philosophy, he rejects expressions such as “Catholic philosopher” and “Christian philosophy”. At the same time, it is also true that philosophy, according to him, can help consolidate certain theological viewpoints through the arguments that it proposes, thus acting in an apologetic manner.

Furthermore, Marion supports the intersection between theology and philosophy by making use of the doctrine of Christ incarnate, which he understands according to the tradition of the Church: Christ is one person with two natures – divine and human. He also states the importance of baptism and the abundance of life that the Church offers to the faithful through its sacraments, highlighting the possibility that through faith and participation to the life of the Church, people can also participate in the communion of the Holy Trinity. Although influenced by the Greek Fathers, Marion remains within the sphere of Catholicism with his belief that the priest and the bishop act in the person of Christ (*in persona Christi*).

As far as holiness is concerned, Marion places it under the paradox of invisibility and links the unknowability of the Father to the invisibility of his holiness.

Marion carefully makes the distinction between revealed theology and rational theology (which he sees as being equivalent to metaphysics), emphasising the authenticity of the former on several occasions. A theologian's discourse must be based on the Revelation, on a certain progress towards holiness, as well as on the exceeding of metaphysics by way of prayer, church life, and communion through love with the Holy Trinity.

This understanding, however, does not cancel the possibility of apology; on the contrary, it nurtures it, because Marion sees the role of the theologian as one which also implies transforming the apostolic *kerygma* into arguments for those who do not believe. Through his masterful combination and demarcation between philosophy and theology, Marion proposes a new form of apologetics inspired by contemporary philosophical discussions and influenced by Christian Tradition. We could call this protection of Christian faith *post-metaphysical apologetics*: while keeping the distinction between the two disciplines and faithfully endorsing the eminence of theology, it does not hesitate to use the most recent conceptual apparatus in its defence of the Church's faith in the era of the end of metaphysics.

2. Christian philosophy, metaphysics, phenomenology

Rejecting the expression "Christian philosophy", which he accuses of being nothing more than a form of hermeneutics and of proving itself incapable to capture the richness of Revelation, Marion contrasts it with a *heuristic* method: it is useful insofar as new phenomena are brought into discussion, which philosophy cannot conceive on its own – such as holiness, forgiveness, communion, the icon, or the Resurrection – and which can be understood only because of the Incarnation of Christ. Theology can provide these phenomena to philosophy while keeping the supremacy of love for itself. Marion's endeavour remains slightly contradictory in this regard, as he practices a sort of Christian philosophy in the form of hermeneutics in books such as *The Idol and Distance* and *God Without Being*, but also exceeds them through his phenomenological progress. The domain of dogmas remains theological, outside of philosophy.

In Marion's thought, *metaphysics* is understood unambiguously, starting with the history of philosophy. He criticises the possibility that metaphysics may understand the

God of Revelation because it reduces him to a mere concept. We must emphasise that, at this point, the prevailing tendency in Marion's thought is that of differentiating between dogmatics and metaphysics, which is why his intentions of exceeding metaphysics do not affect the domain of Christian teachings. For him, dogmas are in some cases "pre-metaphysical", whereas in others they are gifts related to the Revelation. It would seem that this leaves us with an inconsistency criticised by philosophers, one derived straightly from the paradox that exceeding metaphysics does not also imply exceeding dogmatics; even if it may seem that this affects the purity of phenomenology, we must note that from the point of view of dogmatic theology, this is yet another proof of Marion's faithfulness towards the teachings of the Church.

As far as *phenomenology* is concerned, Marion broadens its meaning and proposes a phenomenology of givenness which overcomes the phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger. The reduction to givenness is radical and goes beyond the reduction to objectness (Husserl) and the reduction to beingness (Heidegger). Its role is that of freeing the phenomena from anything *a priori*, which favours the act of discussing the phenomena related to religious experience and Christian Revelation. These phenomena overwhelm human understanding; in Marion's terms, this means that they are given in excess, saturating our concepts with intuition; hence, the name of *saturated phenomena*. Such an understanding is, once again, favourable to dogmatics because all its paradoxes can now be explained as saturated phenomena.

Marion's endeavour proves to serve a *double apologetic* purpose: by analysing phenomena imported from the field of theology, he emphasises them; by admitting their specificity and their theological meanings, he limits the capacity of phenomenology to fully understand them and gives them back to theology, which thus gains its magnificence and its legitimacy. Phenomenology becomes the domain called upon to exceed metaphysics and the one capable of offering a philosophical paradigm for theology, without mistaking itself for the latter and without usurping its rights and procedures. Moreover, phenomenology passes on the torch to theology in matters related to theological phenomena simply because theology can go a step further than phenomenological thought in underlining the meanings of Christian Revelation.

3. Contemporary challenges: the “death of God” and the end of metaphysics

The death of God and the end of metaphysics are philosophical challenges to which Marion responds in an apologetic manner. *The death of God* leads to an atheism which can be broken down to the point of signaling that it operates with a well-defined concept of the divine, which, in Marion’s terms, means that it becomes idolatrous. In this apologetic response, Marion makes reference to the dogma of the unknowability of the divine essence, as well as the apophaticism specific to Eastern tradition. Furthermore, he supports the teaching that the Son of God died on the Cross on Holy Friday only to resurrect on Sunday. To the “death of God” proclaimed by Nietzsche, Marion responds with “the death of God’s death”, as only an idol of the divine could have died, not the real God. Nietzsche’s death of God cancels all values and leads to nihilism, whereas the non-idolatrous God still remains unthought.

To support his arguments, Marion brings up the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, briefly highlighting that the Holy Spirit covers and unifies the distance between the Father and the Son. While the phrasing may seem somewhat ambiguous, we must note that he does not mention *Filioque* at all, choosing to remain silent on this teaching that created a rift between Eastern and Western Christianity; on the other hand, he does not express the Father’s monarchy either, which is more common to the Greek Fathers. Therefore, from a dogmatic standpoint, Marion remains undecided.

The end of metaphysics, the diagnosis given by Heidegger to Western metaphysics, is fully accepted by Marion, whose thesis of exceeding metaphysics will become the purpose of his entire phenomenological and theological endeavour. The end of metaphysics seems to have a direct impact on dogmatics because some postmodern thinkers see dogmas as metaphysics and metaphysical foundations. As we have noted before, Marion inclines towards a position that exceeds rational theology – the only one which could be equivalent to metaphysics – in order to support revealed theology. The dogmatics of the Church has to do with the latter, not with the former, as dogmas are given through the Revelation, not through metaphysical constructions. Their paradoxes step outside of the sphere of onto-theology and point to apophatic experience, to the direct knowledge of God; not through speculative discourse, but through abandon, prayer, and liturgical life.

4. The idol and the icon

Influenced by Christian debates, the idol and the icon are concepts that play a prominent part in Marion's phenomenology and theology. From a phenomenological standpoint, they have to do with the paradigm of the saturated phenomenon; from a theological standpoint, they make a difference in the way in which the understanding of God is either metaphysical, or arises from Revelation.

Marion makes a distinction between the idol and the icon in a manner that is, up to a point, in agreement with the biblical and patristic hermeneutics of these concepts; therefore, it is not surprising that among the references he cites we find classic texts from Saint John of Damascus, Saint Theodore the Studite, Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory the Theologian, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, and Saint Dionysius the Areopagite. The context is given by the discussions against iconoclasm and the decisions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787, which the French phenomenologist respects entirely.

Furthermore, the theoretical results of the well-known controversy between the iconodules and the iconoclasts prove to be particularly useful for contemporary discussions about atheism, the divine, and exceeding metaphysics. The line that crosses and demarcates these debates is the same as the one between truth and error or between the idolatrous god and the living God of the Church. Marion broadens the understanding of these concepts in order to use them in contemporary discussions about phenomenology.

On the one hand, the *idol* hints to self-idolatry, blocks knowledge, cancels all distance and is a full and opaque presence. For instance, insofar as they claim to be exhaustive and do not admit the necessity of distance, our concepts about God are nothing more than idols of the mind.

On the other hand, one could argue that the way in which Marion understands the *icon* is in agreement with the way in which it is conceived in the patristic and neopatristic tradition. Moreover, the icon can also have the meaning of idea, passing from an image to a concept; thus, Marion can use this polysemy to propose solutions in the contemporary philosophical debate. As far as dogmatics is concerned, Marion remains within the sphere of Orthodoxy, admitting the usefulness of the icon for Christian faith and even bringing new arguments based on the phenomenological relationship between visibility and invisibility. The icon does not exhaust what it represents; it beholds more than it is looked at, it summons to prayer and it reveals a distance between the type and the prototype which makes the invisible appear as invisible without reducing it to the ranks of an idol.

Marion's endeavour reveals the same double apologetic dynamic: first, a movement from rational arguments and non-religious examples towards their importance and value for theology; then, a movement from theological truths to his philosophical discourse, in that theology becomes a source of inspiration for philosophy, offering it paradoxes which would otherwise be invisible to the autonomy of reason.

5. God: the superconceptual and loving Trinity

The discussion about God is situated in the context of the death proclaimed by Nietzsche and of Heidegger's thesis regarding the end of metaphysics. Marion responds to both by means of the idol – icon distinction and of the apophaticism specific to Eastern tradition, influenced by Saint Dionysius the Areopagite and Saint Gregory of Nyssa. He criticises any concept of God which claims to be exhaustive, especially the concepts of *causa sui* and *being*, and tries to overcome onto-theology (i.e. rational theology) by returning to the God who exceeds the concept of *being* as understood by Greek philosophy and whom he boldly calls “the God without being”. This name designates the superconceptual God of the Revelation, the God of love.

At this point, we can highlight that Marion's apologetic intentions remain unchanged; however, in his desire to exceed any kind of metaphysical language, a *good* theological language which had incorporated metaphysical terms into a Christian structure was obscured. For instance, in the absence of the term *being*, which Marion rejects, it would be very difficult to understand the dogma of the Trinity, which proclaims the unity of essence of the three *Persons* – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The contradiction in Marion's thought consists in the fact that, while he radically rejects the language of metaphysics, he also speaks of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, presupposing the dogmas referred to by means of this language. In a way, it is as if the cataphatic were removed, while apophatic theology, the theology of direct experience, remained suspended.

The Holy Trinity is seen as love and communion, a type of love which loves man first without requiring reciprocity as a condition, because God loves even when he is not loved back. Marion underlines the existence of a love “without being”, based on the Cross and on intratrinitarian communion. Love's liberation from metaphysics, which the French phenomenologist seeks, accepts love as a *don*, as an abandon which goes all the way to martyrdom (just as Christ abandoned himself to the Father on the Cross), and as pardon.

The don replaces the being and love responds to futility in those areas where metaphysical certainty could not. Marion explicitly states that love is based on the Holy Trinity more than we could say that the Trinity is love, that the Father is invisible and shows himself in the Son, and that the Son came to the world to save it through his passions and by assuming human nature; moreover, he sees the Holy Spirit as the love between the Father and the Son, an echo of the Catholic doctrine based on *Filioque*, although Marion does not mention the latter at all. Lastly, Marion's thought fully assumes the divine unknowability proclaimed by the apophaticism of the Christian East.

6. Apophatic theology, the third way

When discussing apophatic theology, Marion carefully differentiates theological mysticism from irrational mysticism. The former reveals our inability to receive saturated phenomena, which are offered in excess and for which our rational capacity is not adequate. The influence of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite on Marion's phenomenological and theological thought is crucial and can be identified in many of his concepts: the icon, the relationship between visible and invisible, the gift, the unknowability of God, the saturated phenomenon, and the exceeding of the concept of being. None of these concepts could be explained adequately if we were to remove Dionysian influence.

Marion is not an agnostic and claims that God can be known. However, similar to Dionysius, he talks about a type of knowing by unknowing, in which predicative language is exceeded and transformed into doxology, praise, and prayer. Furthermore, he refuses to interpret apophaticism as a way of returning to cataphatism, disputing one of Jacques Derrida's conceptions, and favours the existence of a third way beyond intellectual affirmation and negation. In this regard, Marion comes in contact once again with the Orthodox tradition of direct knowledge, of a second degree apophaticism. The dogma of the possibility of an apophatic knowledge of God is given the same meaning as in Orthodox theology; in this case, the parallel with Lossky's theology is more than welcome.

However, Marion's translation of the "cause" (*aitia*) of all things in which Saint Dionysius sees God remains questionable: *aitia* is translated as "the Requisite One" because the very notion of cause is compromised by metaphysics. Once more, Marion's radicalism in exceeding metaphysics by exceeding its concepts makes a leap which places him outside of dogmatic understanding: if God is, cataphatically, the cause of all things, this is not reduced to the metaphysical understanding of the concept of cause, because no

exhaustivity or conceptual pride can cancel the continuous apophatic correction in the tradition of the Christian East. The Christianisation of Hellenism drastically changed the meanings of these concepts, as well as their function, to the extent to which one can no longer find metaphysics even in traits specific to it, such as “cause” or “being”. Apophaticism saves these concepts from idolatry; thus, theologically, metaphysics is exceeded even as they continue to be used, as long as their meanings are understood by preserving their apophatic dimension, making reference to experience and to spiritual life. For instance, to preserve Marion’s distinction between predicative and non-predicative language, we could invoke God as the “Cause” in prayer, not in a metaphysical demonstration, which changes the equation entirely.

It is also worth mentioning the relationship between doctrine and apophaticism. Marion does not place enough emphasis on the link between them, i.e. on the fact that as a direct experience, apophaticism is based on the dogmas and is not an adogmatic experience, similar to those in pagan religions. A careful reading offers, however, enough arguments to affirm that Marion does not steer things towards a non-Christian direction: both dogma and the experience of knowing by unknowing can be seen as saturated phenomena, which thus offer the excess of the blinding manifestation of the divine. What is more, dogmas are paradoxes and can be considered *icons* in Marion’s understanding of the term, namely that of depicting the invisible as invisible, without destroying its distance and without declaring it absent. In an iconic understanding, dogmas regain the character and the importance that they enjoy in the Church’s cataphatic theology and their relationship with apophaticism becomes clearer.

In spite of these observations, Marion’s understanding of apophaticism is similar to the Orthodox one – as a form of knowledge which exceeds affirmation and negation, which makes it a third way. In this case, the influence of the Greek Fathers is obvious.

7. The Holy Sacraments. The Eucharist

Phenomenological in its structure, the analysis to which Marion subjects the Holy Sacraments admits its own shortcoming of not accessing their theological significance. On the one hand, the relationship between visible and invisible, between the material of the Sacraments and the grace of God, is possible due to the Incarnation of the Word, in which the two natures (divine and human) are reunited into a single divine-human person; on the other hand, Marion considers the theoretical models of substance and accidents, cause and

effect to be metaphysical and lacking distance, which therefore makes them vulnerable to criticism. Marion proposes a phenomenological understanding of the sacraments without claiming to be capable of surmounting their insurmountable mystery and uses the concept of *givenness*: in the Holy Sacraments, God *gives* himself entirely.

We must note that Marion's statement cannot be fully understood unless we point to St Gregory Palamas' doctrine of uncreated grace and of uncreated energies. If God gives a created grace, then he does not give himself, and the phenomenological solution proposed by Marion remains suspended, without having a dogmatic foundation. Marion does not mention this Orthodox teaching, but the influence of the Greek Fathers seems to manifest itself in this regard more than he would be willing to admit. As a result, we can state that the phenomenological solution proposed by Marion could find its theological validation in a theoretical Orthodox context.

Related to the understanding of the Holy Eucharist, Marion shows that any form of theology and of theological hermeneutics finds its fulfilment in this mystery; in this respect, the episode of the disciples on the road to Emmaus who only recognised Christ when he broke the bread, i.e. during the Eucharistic moment, and not as a result of his biblical hermeneutics. In this regard, Marion directly adheres to several dogmatic teachings, stating that theology finds its liturgical fulfilment in the communion of the Church, that the Church is the body of Christ, that it leaves itself to be incorporated in him whenever it celebrates the Eucharist, and that the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection of Christ are acknowledged as dogmatic teachings.

However, his statement that the bishop is the authentic theologian is debatable up to a point: while it can be interpreted from a confessional perspective, referring indirectly to the importance of the Bishop of Rome, it can also be given another hermeneutics. Marion himself gave a possible answer in this respect, claiming that he was referring to the great theologian-bishops of the Eastern Church: Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, and Saint John Chrysostom; another answer could be the following: the fact that theology finds its validation only through liturgical and doxological celebration remains a trait so widely proclaimed in Orthodox theology that all Marion does, influenced by the Eastern Fathers, is bring an additional argument in favour of this thesis, therefore once again having an apologetic role.

In addition, the absence of ascetic preparation on the part of the receiver of the Holy Eucharist remains problematic in the French phenomenologist's thought. By understanding the Eucharist as a gift and of its receiver as the gifted one [*l'adonné*],

Marion does not emphasise this dimension, but he does not exclude it either, as we have shown in the chapter dedicated to the gifted one. In this regard, we tried to provide an answer starting from the perspective of Orthodox spirituality through the conceptual solution of the “dynamic phenomenon”, with the help of which we analysed the liturgical experience of the Holy Eucharist. By the term “dynamic phenomenon”, we understand a phenomenon that can change, being either saturated, or poor, depending on the gifted one. By doing so, we did not reintroduce the transcendental conditions of possibility; instead, we drew upon the receptivity of the gifted one, who can either respond freely to the God’s calling or reject it completely.

By interpreting the Holy Eucharist from the perspective of phenomenological temporality, Marion intersects with liturgical time and its ecclesiastical understanding, which is why his phenomenological arguments thoughtfully establish themselves into a Eucharistic apology which intersects with liturgical thought.

8. The phenomenology of the gift and its theological perspectives

In Marion’s case, the discussion about the gift is animated by the same purpose of exceeding metaphysics. This time, the discourse regarding the gift is meant to protect the phenomenological purity of givenness from accusations that it [givenness] could be reduced to metaphysics or to theology. In order to avoid the situation in which the gift becomes an object of economic exchange, Marion seeks to accomplish a radical reduction of the gift to givenness, which entails bracketing the giver, the givee, or the gift. As a result of any of these reductions, the transformation of the gift in an exchange becomes impossible; therefore, the gift remains in itself. Marion gives the following examples: (a) Christ the Judge who, as a giver, retreats, (b) Abraham, who sacrifices Isaac, the gift of God, thus sacrificing himself, and (c) Christ once again, in his encounter with the Samaritan woman. Let us observe that in this case, through the examples of phenomena that it gives, theology becomes an argument for a phenomenological perspective. However, this favour is returned towards theology in an apologetic manner, whose prestige grows as a result of this exchange of ideas.

Our observation pertaining to Marion’s understanding of the phenomenological purity of the gift is that whenever the exchange does not actually take place due to the lack of perfection of its model, the gift still realises itself as a gift; moreover, from a theological

standpoint, the gift is not completely lost in the exchange, remaining a gift. The degrees to which the perfection of the exchange is not achieved attest to the fact that the model of the gift can insinuate itself in any exchange, just as the model of the exchange could have insinuated itself in any gift. Although Marion believes that the model of the gift as a transcendent exchange cannot be validated in revealed theology, we believe that it can be theologically valid without annihilating the greatness of the gift as a gift; this is because the exchange takes place in the sphere of the *invisibility* of faith. The exchange *can* be valid only for those who believe, as man sells his possessions to have treasure in heaven (Mt. 19, 21); however, for those who do not believe, it is about nothing more than a loss in which the exchange itself does not take place. This should constitute the phenomenological validity of the reduced gift. As the gifts he received from God (the gift of life, the gift of salvation) overwhelm man's response, what man gives back to God is so essentially insignificant that it appears as already reduced, leaving the gift whole. Therefore, from a theological standpoint, the gift can preserve its quality even when the exchange would seem to insinuate itself: either it is a lost gift for those who do not believe, since God does not exist and everything that they sacrifice for him or receive from him is a succession of reduced gifts, without a givee and a giver; or, for those who believe, man's response remains in an insignificance so colossal that the greatness of God will never be repaid no matter how many gifts the exchange model may inspire us to bring, not even the one of our own lives (as in the case of martyrdom). Our conclusion is that the gift remains as such even in the presence of the exchange, as the former overwhelms the latter.

In this discussion about the phenomenology of the gift, several dogmatic themes are also involved, one of them being the Eucharist as a gift. Once again, Marion displays an understanding which does not transgress the Tradition of the Church, a Tradition in which the Eucharist is also referred to as "the Holy Gifts". We also encounter Christological references according to which Christ is sent to the world *ontically* as a gift of the Father and, at the same time, he is also sent *phenomenally* because he reveals the Father. The author stresses the consubstantiality and the equality of the Son with the Father, the messiahship of Christ, as well as his kenosis. Moreover, acknowledging God as a giver has consequences on acknowledging the significance of the gifts given to man by his love. The apologetic dimension is reversed in this case, because theology is not supported by phenomenological arguments; on the contrary, it is brought as an example for validating the purity of the gift. What this does is increase its visibility in the nihilist

theatre of contemporary society; even from a position of *ancilla*, theology appears, as we have already shown, in a favourable light.

9. The saturated phenomenon and its theological relevance

The saturated phenomenon is considered to be one of the most original ideas of Jean-Luc Marion and represents the fulfilment of his phenomenological intentions of exceeding metaphysics. The saturated phenomenon is the phenomenon given in excess by intuition, which exceeds Kantian categories and anything *a priori* offered as astonishment, lack of moderation, unpredictability, or stupefaction. Unpredictable by its quantity, unbearable by its quality, absolute by its relation, and unable to be looked at by modality – this is how the saturated phenomenon is described. This means that the knowing man no longer experiences knowledge, but a counter-experience, in which he no longer applies the categories of his intellect to the phenomena which appear to him; on the contrary, he leaves the phenomena manifest themselves as they are given to him. Marion's favourite examples of saturated phenomena are organised into four categories: the historical event, the idol (work of art), flesh, and the icon. They contain such a large number of saturated phenomena that Marion talks about the "banality of saturation". In a later topic, Marion divides phenomena into two classes, those related to events and those related to objects, saturated phenomena belonging to the former. We can only analyse religious phenomena adequately if we recognize their saturation, including both theophanies and the Revelation.

The analysis of the saturated phenomenon has to do with the purest and the most radical phenomenology of givenness, which is why theology is less present here. Marion sometimes uses as examples phenomena from the sphere of theology, which can only be explained non-metaphysically with the help of the concept of the saturated phenomenon. One could argue that the saturated phenomenon finds its inspiration in theology, which offers it plenty of saturated phenomena, the most important of these being Christian Revelation itself. Among these, the dogmas of the Church understood as paradoxes are saturated phenomena, as is the Revelation in its entirety. Marion insists that Christ is also a saturated phenomenon *par excellence*: blinding and difficult to receive, Christ came among his own, but they did not recognise him and did not receive him, as the Gospel says, because he brought something pertaining to saturation, i.e. the excess of Revelation. The same happens with faith, which does not lack intuitions, but they are offered in excess and cannot be easily understood (as was the case of the disciples which did not recognise

Christ on the road to Emmaus). Therefore, for Marion, the Revelation is saturation to the second degree, because it saturates all horizons.

Starting from the saturated phenomenon, we can provide a new interpretation to Christian life experience. If theology favours religious life and experience, then the concepts are left behind in this adventure that implies a new way of life brought to the world through the Incarnation of Christ. The paradigm of the saturated phenomenon can thus explain why the excess of life is more powerful than our knowledge and why living our faith offers us so much that the words describing it are incapable and insignificant compared to its ineffable. The saturated phenomenon comes as a phenomenological confirmation of those things that all believers knew from experience: that through Christian life they are offered something pertaining to the sublime, to the blinding, to the excess, to the love, and to the gift of God.

10. The Revelation: from phenomenological possibility to theological actuality

Because it integrates the saturated phenomenon, Marion's phenomenological thought can analyse Christian Revelation, albeit without claiming to be exhaustive in its understanding and without the ambition of saying more than theology itself. Marion's thesis is that *phenomenology can only analyse the phenomenon of the Revelation in its possibility, as actuality remains to theology*. This does not mean that Marion does not recognize the Revelation manifested historically through Christ; he simply does not impose on it conditions of possibility which are derived from the subject and which confine it. Through the historical manifestation of the Revelation we must admit a completely new phenomenality, which phenomenology has no justification to leave unnoticed. However, it can only analyse it in what regards its *possibility*.

From a phenomenological standpoint, the Revelation is a saturation of saturation, a paradox of the paradox, a saturated phenomenon in relation to all four groups of the Kantian categories: Christ is invisible according to quantity, unbearable according to quality, absolute according to relation, and which cannot be looked at according to modality. Marion gives biblical arguments for all these assertions and concludes that the Revelation can be considered only *possible* if it is examined phenomenologically from the point of view of saturation, as theology is the only one who can analyse its *meanings* and *actuality*.

In this case as well, Marion practises an implicit form of apologetics, both through the fact that he discusses and provides arguments in favour of the Christian Revelation – even if only in what concerns its possibility –, and because the Revelation appears as a phenomenon in which the saturation and the paradox duplicate each other. Without distinguishing between the natural and the supernatural revelation, Marion seems to talk more about the latter, making an exegesis of certain biblical fragments and introducing the phenomenon of revelation (in lowercase) in his phenomenological analyses. Christian Revelation appears in a new light, in which explanations are given not to *what* it is, but to *how* it appeared in this world. Marion’s discussion has no intention of overturning or of imposing to theology questionable truths about the Revelation; on the contrary, he seeks to impose the possibility of Revelation through the simple rigor of the phenomenology of givenness. We must admit that such a dynamic attests an indisputable apologetic character.

11. Man: the undefinable as *imago Dei* and the gifted one

Metaphysics would not be completely exceeded if the modern subject remained unmodified. Marion first admits what is undefinable in man, appealing to the anthropology of the Holy Fathers, according to which man’s unknowability is owed to the unknowability of God, whose image is man himself. Thus, man appears as a saturated phenomenon, which any humanist ideology only brutalizes by claiming to understand it. The flesh is also a saturated phenomenon, which prompts Marion to tackle the resurrection of the body in accordance with Christian teachings. Marion preserves the dogma of man’s mystery and the teaching that man is an *imago Dei*, while also supporting the necessity of likeness with his statement that man can only be defined by God.

Descartes’ metaphysical subject, Husserl’s transcendental subject, and Heidegger’s *Dasein* are followed by *the gifted one*. Marion proposes this concept to underline that in the case of saturated phenomena, no kind of *a priori* is still in place; on the contrary, the given one receives himself from what he experiences and receives his individuality from relation. This scheme has much to do with the experience of prayer – man prays, but actually receives himself in doing so, as he is immeasurably exceeded by the One to which his prayers are addressed.

The most serious issue raised about this matter has to do with the conditions of possibility for religious experience: if the given one receives himself from the saturated

phenomenon in the absence of any form of *a priori*, then nothing is left of man's entire preparation to become worthy or capable of an encounter with God. Marion responds negatively to this criticism, responding on multiple occasions with remarks which lead to the same conclusion: the given one is receptive, not passive, and in this receptivity lies the positive or negative answer that he is free to give to the calling of God. Marion rejects any kind of Kantian *a priori* situated at the level of the intellect of the knowing subject – because this intellect can only uncover objects, whereas God is not an object –, but does not refuse anterior givenness: dogmas are given, even as paradoxes, thus as saturated phenomena, the Revelation is also given, and so on. Even hermeneutics finds its place, because any saturated phenomenon requires an infinity of interpretations in order to be explained after its overwhelming appearance.

We ended this chapter by giving a theological interpretation through which we affirmed that *preparation and askesis are necessary*, without them being in the forefront of man's meeting with God: even when performing them, those who believe are convinced that their experience is not their own, but belongs completely to the grace of God. Only an antinomy can describe the extent of the meeting between the abundance of the gift of God on the one hand and the belief in one's nothingness and the insignificance of ascetic exercises on the other. Compared to the abundance of God's grace, human virtues, although important, are nothing.

12. The unique love

In Marion's thought, the phenomenological analysis of love starts from the same passion of overcoming metaphysics. If, for Descartes, the subject needed the certainty of his existence, which he gained as a result of the method of doubt, this certainty proves to be insufficient for Marion and cannot deal with the futility raised by the question "What difference does it make?". What is important now is whether or not I am loved, not whether or not I exist, because only love offers *assurance* against futility, unlike the Cartesian *certification* of one's own existence. The theoretical outline of love goes beyond the impasse of hatred towards oneself and towards others, only to reach the progress made by he who loves first without expecting reciprocity, thus practising erotic reduction. When there is also reciprocity and the bodies meet, one receives one's body from the other (which he does not possess!), even though the erotisation of bodies also proves to be finite. Love does not necessarily imply sexuality, as demonstrated by friendship, the love of

parents for their children, and the love of God. Fidelity and vow need a third participant which is usually the child, but especially God. God is the One who loves perfectly with the same love which implies erotic reduction; in this regard, Marion overcame the differences between *eros* and *agape* and intersected with the thought of several Church Fathers.

If thought of in accordance to its own logic, as paradoxical as it may seem, love can give what metaphysics could not, namely an assurance against futility. Marion's phenomenological meditations on love are once again similar to those of theology, revealing the apologetic capability of philosophical discourse and the possibility of talking about the loving God without suspending the meanings of the love that we already practise, regardless if we understand it or not. Biblical references are also present, as theology proves that it can offer models to phenomenological meditations, which implies, as if it had not been stressed enough, a dynamic of the apology.

13. An interpretation of Augustine

In his book on Augustine (*Au lieu de soi*), Marion returns to theology, equipped this time with the concepts gained through the vast phenomenological construction. Augustine is obviously read from a post-metaphysical perspective, in the understanding put forward by the phenomenology of givenness: confession appears as a *reduction*; we can also find erotic reduction, in which God loves in advance; the communion of the ecclesiastical body is emphasised; the believed is presented as the gifted one; lastly, the teaching of faith is presented as a saturated phenomenon. Marion does not tackle Augustine's deviations from Orthodoxy, for instance; however, he interprets that because man cannot *want will*, he needs the gift of God – an interpretation which exceeds Augustinian predestination. Several dogmatic themes are involved, to which Marion adheres as a believer: creation *ex nihilo*, the love of God, the creation of man, participation to the life and communion of the Holy Trinity, man's freedom, and especially the teaching that man receives his own definition only from God.

Some have objected that Marion's return to the theology of Augustine, together with his abandonment of the ideas of Saint Gregory of Nyssa and Saint Dionysios the Areopagite, would mean that the possibilities of interdisciplinary discourse between theology and phenomenology were closed. While we do not believe this criticism to be true, it reveals what becomes relevant from a theological standpoint: the truths of faith to which Marion returns after his phenomenological detour prove their pertinence, as well as

their importance. For Marion, phenomenology and theology remain separated, but the truths of faith keep their dogmatic power, which stems from the Revelation. Even expressed in the language of phenomenology, dogmatic themes remain formulas of faith situated in the sphere of the theology of the gift and exceed the phenomenology of givenness which, although they imply, they exceed theologically by virtue of the same relationship between theology and phenomenology that Marion did not change over the course of the years.

Conclusions. A post-metaphysical apology

After having noted the main themes in his thought, analysing their relationship with the themes related to Christian dogmatics, we can conclude that, *from a theological standpoint*, Marion's works present us *a new form of apologetics*, which we could call "*post-metaphysical apologetics*". The French phenomenologist uses it to try to respond to the latest contemporary philosophical challenges – among which we can mention the end of metaphysics and postmodern nihilism – and does so using the language of those who issue the challenges, i.e. the philosophical language. Marion resorts to philosophical argumentation to avoid the easy pitfall of violent theological criticism in the name of a revealed truth which can no longer be challenged. In this case, Marion intends to transform the *kerygma* into arguments, as he once wrote, and indeed uses rational arguments, *remaining within the sphere of the Church's faith*, towards which he displays *genuine fidelity*.

By analysing some of his writings, we noticed that this new form of apologetics has a double movement – from philosophy towards theology and vice versa. In the first situation, Marion uses rational and phenomenological arguments to support truths of faith. This is the case of those writings which have been called "theological".

However, we also noticed a movement in the opposite direction, one in which theology is a source of material for phenomenology, offering it phenomena which would not be otherwise discussed. This leads both to the expansion of the field of phenomenology and to an increased importance of theology, since it can play a heuristic, and not a hermeneutic role in contemporary philosophical debates. As a man with excellent knowledge of both contemporary philosophy and theology, referring on numerous occasions to the Greek and Latin Fathers, Marion preserves the distinction between the two domains and insists that revealed theology must receive the torch from phenomenology, as

the latter, even when it tackles religious phenomena such as the Revelation, can only advance in the field of *possibility*, not in that of *actuality*.

The dogmatic themes in Marion's thought prove that the French phenomenologist does not attempt to rethink them in a critical way; in fact, he takes them as gifts of the Revelation and as saturated phenomena, acting as a Christian believer. While this attitude is subject to serious criticism from both secular and religious philosophy, which accuse that it were, from a theological standpoint, a dogmatic limitation – a perspective which we adopted in our own research –, it is more than welcome. If we were to present a brief overview of these dogmatic themes, we would have to conclude that Jean-Luc Marion:

- discusses the dogma of the Holy Trinity in the context of his discussion about love, preserving the teaching of the One God in Three Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;
- understands the main teachings of faith in accordance with the Tradition of the Church: the intratrinitarian relationship, the plan of salvation through the Incarnation, the Passions, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Ascension of Christ, supernatural revelation, cataphatic and apophatic knowledge, the importance of the Holy Sacraments and of the Holy Eucharist for the integration of the faithful into Christ's mystical Body and into the communion of the Church, the importance of Holy Friday for Christian faith, and its distinctiveness from Nietzsche's death of God;
- uses the conceptual pair of idol – icon, which he borrows from the iconodule tradition of the Church and develops it phenomenologically, arguing in favour of a theology of the icon;
- proclaims apophatic theology as a third way, beyond intellectual affirmations and negations about God, respecting his unknowability and iconic distance, influenced by Saint Dionysius the Areopagite and Saint Gregory of Nyssa;
- speaks of gift and kenosis, of man as an image of God, and about the uniqueness of love. We encounter elements of triadology, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, soteriology, and theological gnoseology, in which the dogmas and the teachings of the Church are carefully respected.

There are still a few observations which we must point out.

- From the point of view of Orthodox theology, we may signal that Marion does not mention *Filioque*, the Catholic teaching about the proceeding of the Holy

Spirit *from the Son as well*, not even when he talks about the Spirit as being the love between the Father and the Son.

- Moreover, he avoids Augustinian predestination, choosing to talk instead about freedom and about the possibility of creating the self starting from God, who is within us.
- Although influenced by the Fathers of the Christian East in the first millennium, Marion does not resort to those from the second millennium and avoids using the doctrine of uncreated energies, expressed by Saint Gregory Palamas, which illustrates his Catholicity (although we believe that he would have needed this teaching in certain arguments).
- Always active in Marion's thought, the intention of exceeding metaphysics sometimes makes him distance himself from the theological meanings of the terms he sees as inadequate. This is the case of the concept of *being*, which Marion simply gives up, even though theology borrowed it and changed its meaning so much that it could use it to explain the dogma of the Holy Trinity. While he agrees with the dogma itself, Marion refuses the term of being and its metaphysical understanding, boldly affirming "the God without being". He applies the same treatment to the concepts of *cause* and *person*, which, when understood within the sphere of metaphysics, and not of the dogmas of Christian faith, lose their usefulness and are either replaced or met with silence.

In spite of these observations, Marion remains a thinker for which theology and phenomenology intersect in a more than positive manner. Exceeding the deviations of contemporary atheist thought by supporting faith and finding inspiration in it, Marion is one of the most fascinating phenomenologists of our times through his contribution in opening new perspectives in the dialogue between phenomenology and theology. Relevant for exceeding Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenologies through the perspective opened by the radical phenomenology of givenness and proposing concepts such as the saturated phenomenon, counter-experience, the icon, the gift, the revelation, the erotic reduction and the gifted one, Jean-Luc Marion also performs a masterful post-metaphysical apology in which dogmatic themes find their place naturally. Faithful to the tradition of the Church – especially to the common tradition of the first Christian millennium, which brings him very close to Orthodox theology – he proves once again that, after an anti-religious modernity and a nihilist post-modernism, *to believe* and *to think* are two verbs which can

still coexist, even though only up to a certain point, beyond which theology is the only one which can attribute meanings.

Translated by Paul Cenușe

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