MThZ 75 (2024) 83–96

Measuring up to Hermeneutics

Jean-Luc Marion and Revelation in the Incarnate Christ

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In diesem Beitrag sollen drei Gründe dafür expliziert werden, dass das verstehende Erfassen der göttlichen Selbstoffenbarung hermeneutischer Überlegungen bedarf. Vor diesem Hintergrund wird geprüft, ob Jean-Luc Marions Werk „*D'ailleurs, la Révélation*" dieser hermeneutischen Anforderung gerecht werden kann. Betrachtungs-Schwerpunkt ist dabei insbesondere seine Analyse der Begegnung mit dem menschgewordenen Christus in der Heiligen Schrift. Es wird dafür argumentiert, dass Marions Darstellung in hinreichender Weise als hermeneutisch qualifiziert werden kann – aber nur, wenn seine Erweiterung des Hermeneutik-Begriffs um die alethische und die apokalyptische Dimension berücksichtigt wird.

Is hermeneutics essential for God's self-revelation? This is an important question, but impossible to answer as posed; we would have to first define which of the many variations on "hermeneutics" we would answer for. Instead of limiting the inquiry at the outset to a specific hermeneutic approach, I will draw out instead what I see as the general motivations behind the argument that any experience of God's revelation should require hermeneutics.

To begin with, let's consider why we would need hermeneutics at all. Perhaps we can grant that there are some banal and indisputable truths. Perhaps from time to time an excellent interpretation is powerful enough to disperse ambiguity before the power of its explanation. In such moments, no hermeneutics is necessary. But when something can be understood in many ways, and the answer is not clear, we need to engage in the critical work of discerning truth. Thus, whether it results from the finitude of our understanding or the richness of the world, it is *ambiguity*, or *polysemy*, that calls for hermeneutics. And if ambiguity may be dissolved in simple cases, in complex cases it persists even before our best interpretations – even necessarily so. In the face of something so contentious, so extravagant as claiming that God himself reveals himself, we can only assume this ambiguity or possibility for multiple meanings would be heightened to an extraordinary extent. The ambiguity of the possible experience of God's self-showing, well-attested by the persistence of conflicting interpretations, leads us to our first hermeneutic thesis: *Revelation requires the intervention of human interpretive activity.* To reject this thesis is to conclude that revelation must fall on us without ambiguity, as an undeniable absolute. This clearly is not the case.

This leads immediately to a second point. In such cases of ambiguity, we are left with a *choice*. Do we follow this interpretation, or that one? Do we suspend our choice, holding out for a better explanation yet to come? There are no rules or systems that can instruct us in advance exactly how to resolve every perplexity. But hermeneutics prepares us for the cases where there will be choices to make, and provides us tools to guide us in these

choices. Revelation is clearly one of these cases. From within the Christian religious tradition, God is not a God who forces himself upon us. And from experience itself, isn't it true that many people simply don't see any evidence of a divine revelation? Others give credence to the wrong evidence, counting as revelation what is not a "god" but a "monster," to borrow Richard Kearney's felicitous phrase.[1] Thus, we conclude a second hermeneutic thesis: *Revelation necessarily involves a choice, and this choice is one negotiated by hermeneutics*.

Finally, everything we encounter takes place within the essentially temporal reality of our being, within a context or a place, as shaded by our personal histories and character. As Heidegger tells us, this is structurally necessary in our understanding of anything; *Verstehen* goes hand and hand with *Auslegung*.[2] If we admit this, we should be very suspicious of anything that seems to want to stop short the "long way" of language, philosophical dialogue, and the ongoing struggle of discernment in the messiness of life. A hermeneutic philosophy would insist that any revelation of God would have to occur within these horizons of our human life, related to our conceptions prior to this divine encounter and transforming them in its wake. Thus we can advance a third hermeneutic thesis: *Revelation must cooperate with human inertia, our native modes of being and understanding*. If Revelation failed to do this, it could not be a genuinely human experience.

These are, as I see it, the most relevant lines of hermeneutic concerns when it comes to revelation. To put it together: (1) Revelation must happen as an *ambiguous event,* which thus requires (2) the *free interpretive activities of the knower* based on (3) an e*xistential continuity with one's personal horizon*.

In this paper, I would like to test this hermeneutic approach against Jean-Luc Marion's recent work on "Revelation."[3] It is no secret that from nearly the beginning of his career, Marion has received pushback from the hermeneutic perspective.[4] Some have argued his philosophy excludes hermeneutics, others that he gives insufficient attention to it. Against our first hermeneutic thesis, Marion's focus on the absolute character of the given has been suspected of suppressing ambiguity and yielding sovereign access to an immediate and undeniable truth.[5] Worse, in so doing, some argue that he diminishes the activity of the

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[1] See his book entitled Strangers, Gods, and Monsters. Interpreting Otherness, London 2002.

[2] *Martin Heidegger*, Being and Time. Trans. by Joan Stambaugh and Dennis J. Schmitt, New York 2010, 144 [Sein und Zeit, 149].

[3] See especially *Jean-Luc Marion*, D'Ailleurs, la Révélation, Paris 2020; translated by Stephen E. Lewis and Stephanie Rumpza as Revelation Comes from Elsewhere, forthcoming with Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2024. Marion has published earlier sketches of this work, in English, as his Gifford Lectures, Givenness and Revelation, trans. by Stephen E. Lewis, Oxford 2016, and in German, based on his Papst Benedikt XVI-Gastprofessur chair lectures, Das Erscheinen des Unsichtbaren. Fragen zur Phänomenalität der Offenbarung, trans. by Alwin Letzkus, Freiburg i. Br. 2018. In what follows I will honor Marion's choice of terminology, using capital "R" Revelation to discuss God's self-showing, as distinct from the lower case "r" revelation which includes worldly cases of appearing with a similar phenomenal structure.

[4] See *Christina M. Gschwandtner*'s review and analysis of these debates in: Introduction to Degrees of Givenness. On Saturation in Jean-Luc Marion, Bloomington, IN 2014, 1–24.

[5] *Jean Gresich*, "L'herméneutique dans la 'phénoménologie comme telle'. Trois questions à propos de Reduction et donation", in: Revue de métaphysique de morale 1 (1991) 43–63; "Index sui et non dati. Les paradoxes d'une phénoménologie de la donation", in: Transversalités 70 (1995) 27–54; *Jean Grondin*, "La Tension de la Donation Ultime et de la Pensée Herméneutique de l'Application chez Jean-Luc Marion", in: Dialogue 38 (1999) 547–559;

subject, making it entirely "powerless" and "passive."[6] But that label does not really cut to the heart of the real problem: the passivity question, as I see it, is about whether Marion's subject has any freedom. This would contradict the second hermeneutic thesis: a purely passive experience would leave us with no choices. Finally, while the third thesis argues that all understanding occurs within a context and a situation, Marion claims that our horizons are continually being ruptured by saturated phenomena that burst on the scene, which, some have argued, demands too much of us, stretch us beyond our breaking point, leading to a kind of intellectual solipsism, schizophrenia, violent trauma, or psychosis.[7] My question here is not whether these prior critiques are an accurate assessment of Marion's prior work (although I hold that they are not). Here, I will focus my attention on the present: does Marion's articulation of Revelation in this recent work stand up to the "school of challenges" as articulated above? I will argue here that it does. But only if Marion, in turn, can offer a challenge for traditional hermeneutics.

In what follows, I will first lay out the central lines of the phenomenality of Revelation, as Marion describes it. I will show how Marion sees them at work against a particular, if exemplary, experience, where we might suspect hermeneutics would play a less obvious role: the face-to-face encounter with Christ in the scriptures. Through this we can measure how Marion stands up against this initial hermeneutic challenge.

1. Choosing a Hermeneutic

Christians are used to thinking of God's self-Revelation as connected with the Biblical texts, and rightly so. And if this is the case no one could deny the necessity of hermeneutics, all the more since this discipline was born out of the struggle to rigorously read and understand these texts which are so full of difficulties and ambiguities at a number of different levels. Yet to be more precise, if Revelation is God's self-Revelation, then its defining center is the event of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word. In comparison to the distance of a text that is thousands of years old, some might be tempted think that a face-to-face encounter with the Incarnate Jesus would mitigate the need for hermeneutics, at least to some extent. Yet the Gospels are clear that even in his immediate presence, Christ was not met

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John D. Caputo, "Holy Hermeneutics Versus Devilish Hermeneutics," in: id., More Radical Hermeneutics. On Not Knowing Who We Are, 193–219, Bloomington 2000; *Richard Kearney*, The God Who May Be, Bloomington 2001, 33, 117n25; *Béatrice Han*, "Transcendence and the Hermeneutic Circle. Some Thoughts on Marion and Heidegger", in: James E. Faulconer (ed.), Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion, Bloomington 2003, 137; *François-David Sebbah*, Testing the Limit. Derrida, Henry, Levinas, and the Phenomenological Tradition, trans. by Stephen Barker, Palo Alto, CA 2012; *Shane MacKinlay*, Interpreting Excess. Jean-Luc Marion, Saturated Phenomena, and Hermeneutics, New York 2010.

[6] *Marlène Zarader*, "Phenomenology and Transcendence," in: James E. Faulconer (ed.), Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion, Bloomington 2003, 115; *James Dodd*, "Marion and Phenomenology", in: Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal 25/1 (2004) 161–184; *Tamsin Jones*, A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion. Apparent Darkness, Bloomington 2011, 115; *Kathryn Tanner*, "Theology at the Limits of Phenomenology", in: Kevin Hart (ed.), Counter Experiences. Reading the Work of Jean-Luc Marion, Notre Dame 2007, 225.

[7] *Tamsin Jones*, "Traumatized Subjects. Continental Philosophy of Religion and the Ethics of Alterity", in: The Journal of Religion 94/2 (2014), 143; *Gschwandtner*, Degrees of Givenness (see fn. 4), 22–24.

with easy and immediate recognition. They tell a story of encounter at a point of maximum drama: will the people recognize Jesus as the Christ, as the Son of the invisible Father? Or will they reject the God incarnate? And what are we to make of this decision?

Marion highlights the stakes of this question in Part III, the lengthiest analysis of the five subdivisions of the book. After setting the scene by a contrast between the gods of Greek mythology and the God of the Old Testament (§11), he traces this question through separate tracks through the Epistles of Paul (§12), the Synoptic Gospels (§13), and the Gospel of John (§14). Each inquiry centers on different aspects of the challenge that surrounds the Revelation of Christ, whether or not we will be open to seeing him as Son of the Father, and each involves hermeneutics.

Let us begin with Marion's account of the Pauline Epistles (§12), which opens with the elaboration of a hermeneutical principle that will be critical for the chapters that follow. Unlike the Greek "mystery" religions, which hide their secrets to all but initiates, Jesus widely preaches the "*mystērion*" of the kingdom of God. Nothing is held back. God reveals himself without reserve; the *mystērion* is "laid bare by itself, in person." But, clearly, it is not "uncovered in immediate evidence, open to all and exposed to every gaze" (303). Why? It is not a fault in God's power, or generosity, or goodness. It is not that God is holding something back or hiding it from us. Rather, "it happens that certain hearers conceal it – because they conceal themselves from it" (303). For in order to manifest itself, a revelation "entails not only its own unfolding, but its acceptance by the witness who is meant to see it; for this phenomenon lets itself be seen only to the extent that we will to receive it" (301). And often, as we will discuss shortly, we do not want to receive the truth that is proclaimed, since it judges us. In such cases, we may prefer to remain in our darkness rather than to be called to light, where our flaws will be exposed in the brightness of what is unveiled to us.[8] Since the truth requires a willing witness in order to be unfolded, we encounter "the inevitable paradox" that God's "infinite power of un-covering cannot and *must* not liberate itself from the finite powerlessness of reception" (303–304). Thus, a necessary condition for Revelation, concludes Marion, involves "its proclamation" as well as our "reception (thus its hermeneutics)" (305). "Reception," and "thus its hermeneutics"? This blunt parenthetical conclusion is far from evident, and invites further comment.

In fact, the word "*herméneutique*" appears fairly often – at least thirty times – in this book. While it is not explicitly defined, Marion largely uses this term to indicate an ongoing frame of interpretation that directs patterns of explanation and understanding. A hermeneutic is a guide, not a prison; Marion is clear we are able to exit old interpretive frames and enter new ones. In fact the majority of the book focuses on a very special case of such situations, cases where it is not possible to gradually adopt elements of another frame, where it is necessary to jump from one's old interpretive frame to a new one. Marion illustrates this through the examples of skiing, mountain climbing, or learning a new language, but of course he is interested here in the most radical of these "leaps," where the change happens before we fully understand where we are going. Revelation is precisely such an instance, exemplified in the encounter with person of Christ.

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[8] Marion has discussed this at length elsewhere; most significantly in chapter 3 of: In the Self's Place. The Approach of Saint Augustine, translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky, Stanford 2012.

What kind of a "hermeneutic" of reception is required here? Jesus certainly faces us with an ambiguity that requires an interpretive choice. But, again, it is not related to a scarcity of information, but a surplus of what is proclaimed without reserve. The more freely and widely Jesus reveals himself, the more the choices of alternate paths seem to multiply, the more the resistance to him grows (304). Revelation always results in a "conflict of interpretations" (309), Marion suggests, even to the point that conflict is a clue that a genuine revelation might be taking place (not that all conflicts ensure there is a revelation, but that no genuine *revelation* lacks conflict). And the conflict in this case, about the identity of Jesus and the meaning of his preaching of the kingdom of God, is of a special kind. It is not a matter of "divergence of opinions" or "rival theses" that rest on the same basic presuppositions. The conflict of hermeneutic frames here occurs "in the mode of rationality itself" (311): a battle between the *logos* of the world and the *logos* of the Cross, a radical difference that cannot be bridged by mere discourse. As Marion explains, "what is at stake here is a radical change of modes of phenomenality", that is, two ways that the truth is brought from darkness to light, and here the first must give way to the second, "truth (*alētheia*, un-concealment) cedes to un-covering (*apokalypsis*) of the phenomenon when we are dealing with the phenomenon of God" (306). Let us take a moment to lay out these two modes of phenomenality which were developed in earlier chapters (§8, §10).[9]

Alētheia is a manifestation anchored around my point of view, my world. While the term comes from Heidegger, it is used more broadly than Heidegger here. Its field is not wide enough to account for some of the extreme cases of phenomena, like God. Whether it appears immediately, or after a long process of investigation, the truth is confirmed for anyone who is confronted with its evidence (238 f.). There is no real "choice" here. To see it and still refuse it is to reject rationality and prefer to remain blind. The more clearly it is unveiled, the more its character as "given" recedes, the more it shows up before me as thing that is obvious, under my power, under my mastery (242 f.).

In contrast to this is the phenomenality of *apokalypsis*, which is of course the Greek word for "revelation," which Marion also renders into French as *découvrement*, which can be translated as "uncovering." This is a manifestation of something that would strike me from beyond me, from "*elsewhere*," something I can never master.[10] By heightening the asymmetry of phenomenality, such experiences upset the stability of the transcendental ego proper to *alētheia*. The transcendental ego becomes instead the "gifted," or "*adonné*" – master neither of the phenomena nor myself – and a "witness," who has seen but without being able to grasp or understand the full significance of my experiences (238; 39–42). What is uncovered by *apokalypsis* thus does not lead to greater clarity, but a heightened confusion that faces me with a choice: will I adapt to the point of view of what is offered? Or will I fall back into my comfortable, comprehensible worldview illuminated by *alētheia*?

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[9] Marion adapts these terms from *Jean Vioulac*'*s* Apocalypse of the Truth, translated by Matthew Peterson, Chicago 2021, chapter 4.

[10] While our question here is the Revelation of God, Marion also understands this category of "revelation" as broad enough to include saturated phenomena, where what is given in intuition exceeds our significations and intentions.

It is possible to encounter an apokalyptic uncovering but choose to remain within one's frame of *alētheia* instead, drawing from the significations or concepts they already have lined up, and ignoring the *elsewhere*. To choose to pursue what is uncovered *as* apokalyptic, however, demands much more. To describe this pursuit of a center of organization that is not centered on my point of view, Marion repurposes a term from visual art, "anamorphosis."[11] Just as certain paintings require one to stand at a certain point in order for the scene to manifest fully, so we adapt our viewpoint for these kinds of phenomena to take on their full visibility. Such cases involve a certain "overturning or displacement of intentionality," and the phenomenon will not appear as immediately obvious, or may even contradict our initial assumptions. "Instead," Marion says, "it shifts this gaze toward the point of view, at first undecided and then assessed by feeling our way forward through successive approximations, from which, according to the demands of *this* phenomenon, what gives itself would succeed in showing itself, all at once and in its very own radiance" (308). If I choose to pursue the given in *apokalypsis*, I will not know, from the outset, where I will be directed to, or what will be demanded of me. All I know is that I must let myself be guided step by step by the phenomenon that is given. This is a real ordeal, and it can be a real threat to my understanding of who I am, and so a truth of this kind often evokes resistance. Especially in the case of God, it may become so radical that it takes "nothing less than a *conversion* of the *I* that bears this gaze" (308). To take the anamorphic route is thus not a matter of brute strength or willfulness, but openness, and grit; the courage to choose the truth over what threatens the stability of my ego (239; 42–49).[12] Unlike *alētheia*, the uncovering of *apokalypsis* is rooted in a real choice, not madness or obstinance. I really am free to fall back into *alētheia* anchored around myself, or journey into the *apokalypsis* anchored around what is given. In either case, my response is rational, but it will have a direct impact on what I am able to see of what is given. As Marion writes, "*if what shows itself gives itself, not everything that gives itself shows itself"* (238). It requires that I open myself to receive it. If this is the case, invisibility is not a neutral state of ignorance, but a consequence of my choice.

To sum up the central distinction: Is this truth centered around me and my understanding? Then it calls for a hermeneutic of *alētheia*. Is it centered on the *elsewhere*, something beyond me that is not digestible into my system of knowledge? Then it calls for a hermeneutic of *apokalypsis*. To long-term readers of Marion, this division should sound very familiar: it is a more nuanced philosophical articulation of his early distinction between the idol and the icon in "*God Without Being*". The idol is a concept or thought that aims at God, but however successful it is, however far it is able to reach towards the mysteries, it falls short: it is anchored by my limited aim, my finite capacities. The icon, on the other hand, does not succeed because of a special kind of epistemological trick like symbol or analogy that extends this reach. It succeeds by abandoning my aim as the measure, by reversing intentionality. It is not I who approach God, it is God who approaches me. Only

[11] This idea is first introduced in: *Marion*, Being Given, §13, 174–177; in *D'ailleurs la Révélation* it is explained extensively in §12, see especially 308–315.

[12] See also *Jean-Luc Marion*, The Visible and the Revealed, Trans. by Christina M. Gschwandtner, New York 2008, 140 f.

for a God who would bother to manifest himself can I make any claim about God. If I stop trying to grasp God, and open myself to be reached by him, the solitary I that aims at self-mastery is then immersed in a relationship of communion.

2. Confessing Christ

We can trace out this somewhat abstract characterization of the hermeneutic choice very concretely in Marion's reading of the Synoptic Gospels (§13). In the Synoptic Gospels, especially, we can most see the work of *apokalypsis* through the parable, which opens up a field of understanding that does not so much offer a new content to be understood, but judges the heart of its hearer in presenting them with a choice: will they accept Jesus as the Christ, as the Son of the Father? Consider the parable of the sower, which inaugurates Christ's preaching in the Synoptics. Marion also suggests we should read it as a parable about the parables (339–342). The word is given freely, like the seed is sown, but it is not always received in equal manner. Stony ground, hard soil, thorny interference; the earth, like the heart, has many ways of rejecting what is offered. And this, for Marion, indicates the paradoxical character of God's Revelation. Once again, if Revelation requires a choice in order to receive it, it must admit the possibility not only of acceptance, but also of rejection, misunderstanding, and denial (440).

As Marion hinted in the prior chapter, the need for our "reception" is immediately paired with "hermeneutics" (305). But what kind of "hermeneutics" is involved here, and where does this range of interpretations come from? It is not a question of missing data or different sets of evidence – everyone has seen the miracles, heard the parables – there is nothing lacking in the intuition (355 f.). The choice of rejection is to fall back upon what I suggest we call an "*alethic hermeneutics*"; it is the choice to preserve one's current frame, from the significations or concepts one knows and understands, to refuse the possibility that there is something new at hand. Such a mindset "sees the evidence, the clarity, and the truth perfectly well, but it cares not a whit for them – it does not change its point of view for so little. It keeps to its uncertain certainties with an impassive immobility" (312). We see this attitude frequently in the Scriptures: "We have a father, Abraham" (Lk 3:8), or "Isn't he the son of Joseph?" (Lk 4:22), or "Elijah," "John the Baptist," "Beezlebul," or even a madman (354 f.). These prior hermeneutic frames are used as a grounds for dismissal of the paradoxical phenomenon of Christ as something they already know, something that aligns with a *Vorgriff* which guides them to confirm a certain pre-understanding. This is a real choice available to us, and it is not inherently *irrational*, exactly. But the choice is not an innocent one. It is a circling back on one's own rationality, shoring up oneself based on a prior frame of self-understanding, which, in fact, will collapse into an egotistical self-possession. Marion writes that it is this prior concept, "held and possessed (ἔχειν), which closes [one] in on himself, like one possessed by a demon, shut to the possibility of another signification, that which points in the undecided opening of the parable, that which would come from *elsewhere*" (353). Of course, those who make this choice would not put it in these words. This is because they do not have "ears to hear." They do not see the implications of their judgment is judgment upon them. The parable is a word that calls us into

question, the Revelation of God reveals the stony, thorny, hardened state of our hearts that refuse to receive it. For Christ is the "sign of contradiction" by whom "the thoughts of many hearts will be uncovered (ἀποκαλυφθῶσιν)," (Lk 2:35) (357).

The choice of acceptance, on the other hand, will require an *apokalyptic hermeneutics.* Marion directs us to the Confession of Peter (357–365), which is the first moment in the Synoptic Gospels that a human being successfully passed from the wide variety of human explanations for Christ to the true meaning, come from *elsewhere*: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Mt 16:16). This Confession is already a Trinitarian one, as it recognizes Christ's identity as united with the Father. How is it that Peter can operate this correct hermeneutics? As Marion observes, from the text, it is hardly clear that he has done anything much to prepare himself for this moment, especially since it clearly doesn't stay with him; within a few verses Peter is rightly earning the rebuke to "Get behind me, Satan!" (Mt 16:23) for stumbling against the idea of the Cross. If there is anything particular about Peter, Marion suggests it is that, in contrast to those who seek to possess what they know, Peter is one who is "poor in spirit," who does not seek to remain in the safety of his own intellectual possessions. Because of this, he can accept to be led on an anamorphic journey towards the *elsewhere* demanded by the *apokalypsis* (361–363). As Marion describes it: "Everything is in the way (ὡς, πῶς) of not possessing one's own signification, in the art of receiving another signification from *elsewhere*, without measure, alone adequate to the opening made *possible* by the parable of the Kingdom of God" (353). We might call this "faith" – to accept what arrives from *elsewhere*, without trying to close it up into our possession. It also requires we accept facing the judgment made of us. In confronting the holiness of Jesus, Peter does not demand that the Light be covered up and does not blind his own vision; he has the courage to freely admit its accusation of his own darkness, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Lk 5:8–9) (354).

Peter thus offers a clear and concrete example of the kind of hermeneutics required to accept Revelation. Key to this is that while certain indications suggest Peter may be open to the *elsewhere* of Jesus, they do not in themselves add up to the apokalyptic hermeneutic. He is not able to recognize Jesus on his own; Jesus makes this clear in his response that it is "the Father," and not "flesh and blood" (Mt 16:17) who has revealed his identity as Son (360). The critical move in the apokalyptic hermeneutic is the anamorphosis which is given from *elsewhere*. This does not mean Peter is passive or that his choice has been negated. To see in this way, Peter must "allow himself to be placed in the very place of its phenomenalization: the Trinitarian site opened by the Spirit between the Father and the Son" (362). Only God can give the viewpoint on God; to see Jesus as God means to see him as the Son of the Father, and to do this, we must allow ourselves to be placed at "the point of view of the Father" (364). We cannot reach this aim on our own, but we are not placed there without our free engagement either; we must *accept* to let it happen. To understand more fully this key step of anamorphosis in the case of Christ, let us turn to the more extensive discussion found in Marion's analysis of John.

3. Following the Anamorphosis

If Marion's chapter on the Synoptics primarily considered the conflict surrounding Jesus and his uncovering, building up to a dramatic moment of confession, his analysis of the Gospel of John with its focus on signs and paradoxes allows us to confirm and further parse out the key moves. For in John, confessions of Jesus' true identity abound from the beginning (368 f.): John the Baptist calls him "the Son of God" (Jn 1:34), and "the Lamb of God" (Jn 1:36); Andrew calls him the Messiah (Jn 1:41), Nathaniel calls him the "Son of God" and "King of Israel" (Jn 1:45), Nicodemus recognizes him as a rabbi "come to teach from God" (Jn 3:2); and many others believe in him besides. At the same time, these confessions fail. They are spoken out loud, yes, but by those who do not seem to truly understand what they mean or even to what extent they believe it. Marion explains that even though they are voicing the right signification, they do not have the right point of view to see what is offered; the *apokalypsis* is still only in its first stages, not completed because they have not undergone the necessary anamorphosis. To understand what is uncovered in speaking these confessions, it is necessary to "understand all these titles [i.e. Messiah, Rabbi, King of Israel, Son of God, etc.] as Jesus understands and fulfills them" that is, "starting from the Father," and thus "to receive them as and by the will of the Father." (371).

It is not a question of having the right signification then, nor does the solution rely on advances in the plane of intelligence, as if it were simply a matter of increasing understanding. This is clear in the dialogue with Nicodemus, an intelligent teacher of the law who cannot understand because he cannot recognize the "elsewhere" of Jesus' origin, and its necessary condition to be born "from on high," but continues to interpret by the logic of the world (374–379). It also the case with the Bread of Life Discourse, where "everyone understands *on a certain level* what it is about; but it is precisely for that reason that the majority do not accept it" (380). Again, what is required is more concepts to add to our comprehension; it is a question of whether we are willing "to shift, or not, to the point of view of Jesus" (380), which is a point of view from *elsewhere*. What is missing, in both cases, is not the concept, not the understanding, but the anamorphosis which would involve suspending our original point of view and beginning a shift to a new point of view. It is only after the Bread of Life Discourse that scandalizes the majority of the crowds that we find Peter's confession in John: "We have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (Jn 6:69)." Peter confesses not only with the right signification, but with the right point of view, in recognizing Christ as Son of the Father. This point of view does not arise at will, either from the will of the crowds or the will of Jesus, but "*from elsewhere*, from the will of the Father" (372).

The difficulty in rightly voicing a confession in John is laid out even more clearly than in the Synoptics; it is not simply in the novelty or the measure of divergence of this new point of view from our initial one, which is infinitely removed from us. Rather, the question of *how* we can receive Jesus is intimately related to the question of *who Jesus is*. For as we see clearly in the context of this Bread of Life discourse, Jesus is claiming his identity as the one sent from the Father, whose will is one with the Father, whose identity as Son is defined by perfect abandonment to the Father. Jesus as the Son is thus defined as the one

who always refers back to the Father in everything, and to recognize him as such is always to recognize his perfect reference to this origin, in an infinite distance of filial relation: "Jesus appears as the Holy One of God because nothing in him differs, diverges, or deviates from the will of the Father" (383). In this perfect identity of wills, Marion suggests, we find a second, higher level of anamorphosis, which Christ already "accomplishes to its perfection" and "without end" (387).

And this, in fact, is the anamorphic point that we must unite with in order to see Jesus as the Son. "What is necessary to know how to see – that Jesus appears as the Son when his face opens up onto the depth of the Father – cannot be seen except by believing – precisely by entering into this depth." (383). Peter's confession, Marion suggests, involves not so much a moment of understanding, but the abandonment to this anamorphosis in an act of belief, mirroring Christ's surrender to the will of the Father. To confess Jesus, we must encounter him not simply as a man, but as the one who gives himself without reserve, manifesting thereby the invisible depths of the Father. We must see him, in other words, as "the eikōn of the invisible God" (Col 1:14). This recognition can only come through the Father's gift to us, what Marion later calls the "grace, that is, the gift, art, the manner of taking in view" (485): that is, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, not visible himself, is the one who guides us to the anamorphic place where Christ can be uncovered as he is. I am reminded of the iconographer Leonid Ouspensky, who used to test his students by asking them about the best icon of the Trinity. Many of us would be tempted by the common response: the famous image by Andrei Rublev, of course! But Ouspensky would correct them: the best icon of the Trinity is any icon of Christ. For in Christ, we see the Father, through the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who brings us to the place where we can see God as God. We cannot see God as an object at a distance, but must be taken up within these Trinitarian relations, for to see God is a Trinitarian act. As Marion will conclude in a later chapter:

> "Revelation reveals the Trinity and above all it reveals it *in a trinitarian way;* the way the Trinity is un-covered remains so perfectly and integrally trinitarian that the Trinity alone succeeds in revealing the Trinity, and that it wants only to reveal the Trinity itself. In a word, the Trinity offers not only the content of un-covering, but also its mode of manifestation" (429).

We could plunge much more deeply into the rich Trinitarian theology of this book, but our concern here is more limited: what does all this mean for hermeneutics? Once again, Marion brings us to the conclusion that to see Jesus as he is, "we must pass through a hermeneutic decision" (384). And again, this role of choice is a confirmation of our role in Revelation. But to choose to enter the right hermeneutic frame in this case is not a decision built up over time and through expanding the frame of what we already know, building up significations; it will require an anamorphic shift of frames, and in this case one "so radical that no man can, of himself, accomplish it" (384). If this shift cannot be accomplished by human efforts alone, it must come as a gift from the Father (Jn 6:44.65). Is this not a vicious circle, "that only God grants the ability to take up God's point of view" (384)? Marion recognizes the difficulty. At the same time, he suggests that, even if this is especially intensified in the case of Christ, there is no escape from what is already the case for any

apokalyptic hermeneutics: "there is no access to the *elsewhere* by any other way than the *elsewhere* itself: one must enter it all at once, by anamorphosis, like one enters a hermeneutic circle" (378), guided by the Spirit.

But if this is not fully in our power, is it really hermeneutics, or does it violate the foundational operations of hermeneutics? This is a critical point, so let us consider carefully Marion's description of *apokalypsis* here, starting with ordinary cases and moving to the case of Christ:

> "[T]he one who accomplishes anamorphosis (the lover, the genius, the *adonné*) does not succeed because he can or wants to, but because he has the strength to become *weak* enough, docile enough to let himself be drawn by a saturated phenomenon seizing him, guiding him across the desert on an anamorphic journey, leading him finally to the promised land — the heralded un-covering. And so, to break our powerlessness to see the phenomenon offered by Christ, we must no longer cling to our point of view in order to dodge a logical circle; we must rather strive to enter into the hermeneutic circle all at once (or little by little), but as resolutely as possible." (385)

This dense description leads us to several observations. First, anamorphosis is not an activity of initiative and mastery, like an air traffic controller overseeing and directing the domain of intelligibles. It is an activity, but a more responsive one, more like skiing – a metaphor used in the first chapter (21–23): accepting to be carried, and responding to the movement, or at least "striving" to do so. But this does not make it *anti*-hermeneutic or passive. It is simply a hermeneutic of response, answering a prior call.

Second, and perhaps most critically, to follow an anamorphic path can happen "at once," or it can happen "little by little;" this sequence is then repeated again in reverse a few lines later, "little by little (or all at once)," emphasizing its significance. This serves as an important admission that this movement of anamorphosis is one that often happens *over time*. Even if Marion does not explicitly say it, this is also sufficient to suggest that this movement of anamorphosis can be experienced with less drama than he sometimes makes it sound. After all, we can have our expectations set on grand experiences of confrontation with God, and make this a dazzling idol; but sometimes God comes not in the earthquake but in the gentle whisper, defying expectations by appearing in the tiny everyday acts of self-dispossession demanded by our neighbor. This would all fall within a reasonable application of the same principle which Marion has laid out in the passage above.

Finally, the end goal of this process is not to stop advancing, or have the entire vision within our grasp (which would be to fall away from the genuine movement of *apokalypsis* and settle for an alethic idol). Rather, it is to enter "*the*" (i.e., "the right") "hermeneutic circle." If we take these words seriously, it means that there must be ongoing growth, ongoing movement, ongoing change, ongoing practice in our anamorphic journey across the desert. When Marion says that hermeneutics is necessary for Revelation, he does not mean there is one hermeneutic choice that happens once and then automatically changes everything forever. It is clear by this description that this decentering is always a process, never a complete achievement. We must be continually tuning ourselves to the call, responding to what is given, accepting for it to lead us beyond what we currently know. For, Marion continues, if the right point of view on the phenomenon of Jesus must come from the

"*elsewhere*" of "the Father," "it cannot be the object, on our part, of a will, nor of a decision *of ours*, nor an action that we could or should *produce*, but only a will, a decision and an action that we have to *give*, in this case to *receive*" (385, emphasis mine). In other words, this *is* an action, it *is* a will, but it is one that is given to us – provided we accept it. If we accept to follow the anamorphosis, we will be given the point of view of the Father; under the guidance of the Spirit, we cross from the visibility of Christ's face to the invisible Father who gives himself there. And in doing so, we, too, are transformed: "our face will become the place where the filial icon of the Father will be exposed, precisely because, by letting the anamorphosis be accomplished in us, we will accomplish the Trinitarian anamorphosis" (402).

Thus, to bring together what we have seen from these three chapters (§§12–14), Revelation requires our reception, which Marion classes as a hermeneutics. The drama of this reception is amplified before the face of Christ, which presents us with a choice: will we fall back upon the context we know, the significations we understand? Or will we be open to a truth that comes to us from *elsewhere*, to commit to pursuing a path of understanding that leads us to a place we do not know? To follow this path is difficult. If we follow where it leads, it will open onto the identity of Jesus as the Son of the Father, and it can only be followed by conforming us to this same identity, joining in this same anamorphosis, which is only possible through the gift of the Spirit which comes from the Father. Jesus is not just a paradox because God is a complicated concept. God is difficult to understand as *content*, of course, but by Marion's reading of the Scriptures, it is instead his *way* of revealing himself that serves as the major obstacle: that he sows his word so indiscriminately, he gives himself without reserve to the point that he eats with tax collectors and sinners; a gift so absolute that it would even submit itself to the choice of rejection by the people he has created in the very moment he offers them redemption.[13] That is, it is the Cross which is the primary "stumbling block," the "folly" to worldly wisdom (311), where he gives himself with such abandon that he does not require everyone to glorify him. This is what it looks like to be a Son, to refer back to the Father in everything, to abandon himself to the end, from the invisible depths of love. The *manner* of our interaction with this gift, finally, is the choice itself: do we cut ourselves off from this giving by folding back in on ourselves in self-possession, to the comfort of our aletheic horizon? Or do we open ourselves up beyond our egos, to accept to give of ourselves to be permanently decentered around the other in an apokalyptic openness? The content is a God who gives all, given as the ultimate act of giving; it is accepted by taking on this form of self-gift which lifts us up into this communion, rejected by closing off from it.

[13] *Marion*, D'ailleurs, la Révélation (see fn. 3), 304, footnote 1, states: "Certainly, all *are able to not* receive—(*peuvent ne pas* recevoir)—which, because we have tended to gloss over the problem at least since the Reformation, is different from saying that all *are not able to* receive it (*ne peuvent pas* recevoir), as if the un-covering was refused to all but reserved for only some. But God does not hold any of his gifts in reserve and gives to everyone; it is precisely for this reason, the excess of the gift, that everyone is *able to not want* to receive what is nevertheless given without reserve to everyone."

4. Conclusion: Measuring up Hermeneutics

I do not claim that this brief analysis of the place of hermeneutics before the face of Christ can exhaust the many ways we can wrestle with the role of hermeneutics in this book. A fuller account would of course also need to extend this analysis to the context of our lives here and now, something Marion has begun in chapters §§19–20, which follow as a consequence of the Trinitarian theology elaborated in §§17–18. We would also need to reflect explicitly on the method Marion chose for this complex book, which rallies so many heterogeneous voices and original languages around this central theme of Revelation, a strategy which requires a not inconsiderable hermeneutic finesse.

Yet we are in a position to evaluate the place that Marion allots for hermeneutics in the particular example of Revelation we have discussed, by measuring this account against our initial definition of hermeneutics. The first hermeneutic thesis was that – unless it were to be an unambiguous lightning bolt across a universal or subjective sky – Revelation must require the intervention of human interpretive activity. Is this true for Marion? Yes. Not even the direct presence of the Incarnate God is encountered as a banal and indisputable truth; before the identity of Jesus significations abound. But it is not because God is hiding something; again, the intuition is not lacking. The ambiguity is not the same as in other cases of alethic hermeneutics, caused by merely a difference in our finite perspective or the reserve of the phenomenon that shows itself. The polysemy or multivalence is a result of the fact that to see God as he shows himself – unreserved self-gift – will require us to give up our initial alethic horizon and accept to be given a new horizon we will grow into, grow towards, grow like, but never appropriate as a possession.

The second hermeneutic thesis, deepening these concerns, was that Revelation demands freedom, and one negotiated by hermeneutics. Is this true for Marion? A resounding yes: choice is essential for Revelation. The infinite self-giving of God does not blaze out in unambiguous glory. God gives himself without restraint, but he cannot show up without our choice to receive him; in Marion's own words, again Revelation is limited "by hermeneutics," and "thus," by the condition of human reception. However, there is something a little different about this choice than other cases. Revelation never loses its paradoxical character. We cannot wait to understand before we decide; we must make the choice to move towards the understanding it offers before we can better understand it, and in this sense, it is more akin to a Kierkegaardian "leap" than a good Heideggerian *Vorgriff* or Gadamerian prejudice, and no Ricœurian explanation can totally tame the difficulty of this move. And to amplify it further, the choice is not entirely in our power. In the case of Christ, at least, the ability to see properly is a gift that arrives to us from *elsewhere*, and nothing concrete we *do* is sufficient to *make* this happen. But as the parables indicate, we can prepare, we can cultivate an attitude of self-dispossession or receptivity, to become like the good soil that receives the word at the time it is given, and we must be willing to accept it when it comes.

And this takes us to the third hermeneutic thesis, that Revelation must cooperate with our human context or situation, and not overwrite or shatter or completely ignore it. Is this true in Marion's account? To this we can respond both yes and no. Yes, in the sense that it does really show up in our human experience. It is likely not an accident that many of the

initial or partial confessions come from good Law-abiding Jews: disciples and teachers who are serious about their practice of fidelity to the God of Israel; the confession of Peter was accomplished, finally, by someone who had already abandoned everything to follow Christ, who had already entered an anamorphic path before the confession was given to him to speak. So context is not wholly irrelevant. And yet, we must also answer no, Revelation only shows up in human experience precisely by appearing as what cannot anchor its dwelling there, as what ruptures our peaceful alethic belonging and calls us to pick up our mat and follow on an anamorphic journey beyond who we think we are. This is not a *negation* of horizon, but a constant *exceeding* of it, towards a new horizon that is always centered on another sun than the light of the transcendent ego. Yes, context really does matter, if the choice of self-gift and not self-possession is one that becomes easier to make with practice. Again, yes, since, following the cues of Marion's language, even the most dramatic experience of Revelation requires an anamorphic movement that happens in time, directing us continually toward a new hermeneutic circle, centered on an anchor that is coherent, but never graspable by me. And it will impact who I am in a ways that flow into the most basic structures of my being. But, once again, no, if we think that this anamorphic movement can be a self-originating, self-enabling, self-reflective activity, or a negotiation of frames resting solely the ground of rational discussion. To see God as God takes God, and it requires we become like God. We are not capable of it on our own, and if we take it on we have to accept to become something new and unexpected.

And thus Marion would issue his own challenge. Instead of judging a Revelation by whether it can accommodate hermeneutics, might we not be called to judge a hermeneutics on whether it can accommodate Revelation? For

> "[b]etween the intentionality of the world and the intentionality that the Holy Spirit teaches to the gaze that it puts into anamorphosis lies an infinite divide. It marks out a radical opposition between two visions, which can at times be concerned with the same phenomena" (313).

In other words, with the advent of any revelation hermeneutics is split in two, according to two possibilities of its operation, the alethic hermeneutics which discloses phenomena according to our horizons and an apocalyptic hermeneutics which unveils a truth that exceeds them.

So is hermeneutics necessary for Revelation? At least according to Jean-Luc Marion, the answer is yes. And no. But it depends very much on what kind of hermeneutics.

In this paper, I first lay out three reasons why hermeneutics is necessary for our understanding of God's self-Revelation. I then consider whether Jean-Luc Marion's work, "*D'ailleurs, la Révélation*", can measure up to this definition of hermeneutics by focusing in particular his analysis of the encounter with the Incarnate Christ in the scriptures. I argue that Marion's account is sufficiently hermeneutical, but only if we take into account his expansion of the very notion of hermeneutics to include what he calls its alethic as well as its apokalyptic dimensions.