

# Revelation, Negative Theology, and Apophasis

Marion and Eriugena on the Incomprehensibility of Revelation

by Connor Ritchie

The central concern of this paper is to explore how Jean-Luc Marion and John Scottus Eriugena approach the incomprehensibility of divine revelation in complementary ways. First, this paper explains how both thinkers understand revelation and rely on negative theology to approach its incomprehensibility. Then, it discusses whether the differences between their terminologies and methodologies amount to two distinctly different accounts of revelation that entail separate understandings of how the incomprehensibility of revelation may be spoken of and known in some way. At stake are two issues: first, whether Eriugena provides a phenomenality of revelation that Marion desires; second, whether Eriugena supports Marion's claim of retrieving the patristic notion of revelation. Finally, this paper concludes by showing that Eriugena appears in how Marion's notion of negative theology appropriates Dionysian themes. For both, the incomprehensible nature of revelation is best approached through what this paper calls a 'refined' apophasis that stays true to Dionysian negative theology.

## 1. Introduction

Jean-Luc Marion and John Scottus Eriugena are not often put into conversation with each other.<sup>1</sup> This is not surprising given that one is a contemporary French philosopher and the other is a lesser-known ninth-century Irish scholar. Despite the seemingly vast distance between these two thinkers, both share similar insights into the nature of revelation as incomprehensible. For example, they agree that revelation lies outside of the rational order of things, though for different reasons. While Marion considers that any rational account of revelation runs the risk of idolatry, Eriugena holds that revelation does not disclose the 'Divine Essence' of God but only its radical inaccessibility. Additionally, both hold that revelation necessarily entails a manifestation, among the phenomena of the world, of something that originates from elsewhere and beyond. According to Marion, revelation is always

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<sup>1</sup> To the author's knowledge, there are currently only two studies that take on Marion and Eriugena together, both of which belong to Wayne Hankey: *Wayne J. Hankey, Misrepresenting Neoplatonism in Contemporary Christian Dionysian Polemic. Eriugena and Nicholas of Cusa versus Vladimir Lossky and Jean-Luc Marion*, in: *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82/4 (2008) 683–703; id., *The Postmodern Retrieval of Neoplatonism in Jean-Luc Marion and John Milbank and the Origins of Western Subjectivity in Augustine and Eriugena*, in: *Hermathena* 165/2 (1998) 9–70.

paradoxical because it is the appearance of the invisible in the visible. Likewise, for Eriugena revelation is paradoxically the communication of that which is incommunicable.

The most remarkable similarity between how Marion and Eriugena approach the incomprehensibility of revelation is their reliance on negative or apophatic theology. Both contend that revelation is the disclosure of a gift whose excess cannot be named and only spoken of in a way that acknowledges this limitation through the inadequacies of human reason and language. Although their notions of negative theology share Dionysius as a common source, they propose different terminologies to develop their accounts of revelation. While Marion understands revelation in terms of absolute givenness as the 'saturated phenomenon,' Eriugena considers revelation to be a 'theophany,' i. e., a self-manifestation of God's Divine Essence in creation. Furthermore, how their accounts of revelation appeal to negative theology are framed by different methodologies and concerns. Marion's account of revelation as the saturated phenomenon attempts to push the limits of phenomenality, and he relies on negative theology to argue for the possibility of such a phenomenon and to articulate the nature of God in a way that onto-theological metaphysics fails to do. Eriugena's account of revelation as theophany draws from Christian Neoplatonism to articulate the presence of Divine Essence in creation and relies on negative theology to explain the super-essential nature of God. Despite these differences, both Eriugena and Marion articulate the fundamental insight that Dionysian negative theology is not apophasis in the basic sense of the term (i. e., a negation) and does not suppose a simple binary between cataphasis and apophasis. Instead, Dionysian negative theology does not merely deny that God is anything but affirms that he remains incomprehensible by transgressing (for Marion) or by harmonizing (for Eriugena) cataphasis and apophasis. Ultimately, this paper argues that although Eriugena falls short in providing a phenomenality of revelation, he does confirm that Marion's account of revelation retrieves a patristic notion of revelation insofar as it posits that the incomprehensibility of revelation is best approached through the kind of 'refined' apophasis that belongs to negative theology. For both, a refined apophasis intends to refer to and preserve the incomprehensible excess of divine revelation as beyond all categories and determinations.

## 2. Marion on Revelation as the Saturated Phenomenon

To explain how Marion approaches the incomprehensibility of revelation requires retracing how his major works push the limits of phenomenality by proposing the 'saturated phenomenon' as the limit of phenomenological knowing. The more significant mention of the saturated phenomenon in Marion's work appears in an essay titled 'The Saturated Phenomenon' that responds to Dominique Janicaud's criticisms of the 'theological turn' in French phenomenology.<sup>2</sup> This essay and Marion's other early works introduce the saturated phenomenon as a way of making space for the religious in phenomenological philosophy. To this end, Marion develops a phenomenology of givenness which proposes

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Saturated Phenomenon*, translated by Thomas A. Carlson, in: *Philosophy Today* 40 (1996) 103–124. This essay was first published in id. et al., *Phénoménologie et théologie*, Paris 1992, 79–128.

givenness itself as the primary principle of phenomenological investigation and grounds his notion of the saturated phenomenon. Necessarily, any discussion of the saturated phenomenon must therefore first attend to Marion's phenomenology of givenness. Simply put, the status of the saturated phenomenon as absolute or pure givenness marks its incomprehensibility. Central to how Marion approaches the incomprehensibility of the saturated phenomenon is his reliance on Dionysian negative theology to articulate how a phenomenology of revelation transgresses both cataphasis and apophysis when speaking about divine unconcealment.

In his foundational work *Reduction and Givenness*, Marion begins to develop a phenomenology of givenness through a critique of Husserl and Heidegger that proposes a third reduction to givenness itself. He argues that their reductions to 'objectness' (Husserl) and to 'beingness' (Heidegger) fail to sufficiently articulate the self-showing of phenomena. Crucially, for Marion, at stake are those phenomena which are not of objects or beings and cannot be experienced in that fashion. According to him, both Husserl and Heidegger lay the foundations for a phenomenology of givenness but do not go far enough in arguing for the primacy of givenness. Though there is some controversy, givenness as *donation* in French translates the German term "Gegebenheit," which was an important Husserlian term and also used by Heidegger. Marion's third reduction to givenness attempts to allow phenomena to show or give themselves more freely and fully than what previous discussions of intentionality have permitted. As he famously puts it: "As much reduction, as much givenness."<sup>3</sup> Phenomena that are given par excellence summon one (as *interloqué*) by the unconditional call of the given as such. For Marion, this call is even more original and primal than Heidegger's call of being. What solicits the call is how certain phenomena give themselves in a way that saturates intuition to the point of exceeding all categories and horizons that might be used to determine or contain them.

Although givenness is at the center of Marion's early phenomenological proposals, the saturated phenomenon has become the most well-known aspect of his philosophy. In *Being Given*, Marion further develops his phenomenology of givenness and explains how it underpins his theory of the saturated phenomenon. Central to his discussion of givenness in this text is how the unconditioned status of the gift serves as a paradigm for the givenness of phenomena more generally. After identifying general features of saturated phenomena – such as surprise, gift, and incomprehensibility – Marion discusses four types of saturated phenomena: the event, the idol, the flesh, and the icon. Beyond these four types of saturated phenomena, Marion proposes a fifth called revelation that contains all four and is saturation par excellence. He defines it as a paradoxical phenomenon "where intuition always submerges the expectation of the intention" and "where givenness not only entirely envelops manifestation but, surpassing it, modifies its common characteristics."<sup>4</sup> In other words, as Robyn Horner puts it, "saturated phenomena disrupt the fulfillment of an intentional

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness. Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, translated by Thomas A. Carlson, Evanston 1998, 203.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given. Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, translated by Jeffrey L. Losky, Stanford 2002, 225. Translation from Robyn Horner, Jean-Luc Marion. *A Theological Introduction*, Aldershot 2005, 123.

aim in intuition, not because intuition is lacking but because it is excessive.”<sup>5</sup> Although *Being Given* does not discuss how negative theology approaches the excess or incomprehensibility of revelation, it is worth noting that in a footnote to Book I Marion clarifies his notion of “negative phenomenology” (a term he first introduces in *God without Being*) by locating it within the boundaries of negative theology. Here he notes that “there is, properly speaking, no ‘negative theology,’ merely a negative way, inseparable from the affirmative way and the way of eminence; the attention paid today to so called ‘negative theology’ often misses this essential point.”<sup>6</sup> This is a claim that Marion first makes in *God without Being* and then furthers in his later works, namely *In Excess* and *The Visible and the Revealed*.<sup>7</sup>

*In Excess*, which completes the trilogy that includes *Reduction and Givenness* and *Being Given*, treats the saturated phenomenon and its incomprehensible nature more thoroughly. Marion begins by streamlining his phenomenology of givenness and then refines his discussion of the four types of saturated phenomena proposed in *Being Given*. For the purposes of this paper, the sixth and final chapter is of the greatest interest since it appeals to negative theology to argue for the possibility of the saturated phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> Here Marion offers a revised version of his essay “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of It” which rehearses his debate with Jacques Derrida on whether negative theology is subject to the same deconstruction as a metaphysics of presence.<sup>9</sup> Against objections raised by Derrida, Marion argues that negative theology is not onto-theological or a metaphysics of presence but a pragmatic theology of absence that secures the possibility of the saturated phenomenon by providing a language for revelation that avoids naming God. Central to Derrida’s objections is the claim that negative theology amounts to onto-theology or a metaphysics of presence on the grounds that it “does not annul the essence, being, or truth of God but denies them so as to better reestablish them in something like a hyperbole.”<sup>10</sup> To refute Derrida’s objections against negative theology, Marion attempts to push beyond the binary of cataphasis and apophasis by proposing a third way of ‘de-nomination’ that denies all relevance to predication and rejects the nominative function of names.

To elaborate on his third way of de-nomination, Marion appeals to Dionysius’s use of the term *hyper* which according to him “reestablishes neither essence nor knowledge but rather transgresses them both in view of praising what precedes and makes possible all essence.”<sup>11</sup> Citing Kevin Hart, he explains that to say God is *hyperousia* is to deny that God is

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Id., *Being Given* (see fn. 4), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, translated by Thomas A. Carlson, Chicago 2012, 152; Jean-Luc Marion, *What Cannot Be Said. Apophasis and the Discourse of Love*, in: *The Visible and the Revealed*, translated by Christina M. Gschwandtner, New York 2008, 101–118.

<sup>8</sup> As some readers of Marion note, instead of arguing for the possibility of the saturated phenomenon the sixth chapter of *In Excess* seems to offer a kind of language appropriate for the divine. Crucially, however, Marion’s claim is that revelation is a possible phenomenon for phenomenological investigation through the language of praise that belongs to negative theology; cf. Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Degrees of Givenness. On Saturation in Jean-Luc Marion*, Bloomington 2014, 146.

<sup>9</sup> The essay first appeared in John D. Caputo; Michael J. Scanlon, *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, Bloomington 1999, 20–42.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess. Studies in Saturated Phenomena*, translated by Robyn Horner and Vincent Bertraud, New York 2002, 141.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 141.

a being of any kind, even the highest or most original.<sup>12</sup> Crucially, the designation of God as super-essential does not entail a strict binary between cataphasis and apophasis but a bringing forth of what is at work in both. To say that God is *hyperousia* praises God as exceeding all categories but denies that there can be a suitable name for God. According to Marion, Dionysian negative theology only reestablishes affirmation insofar as it intends to invert nomination itself. Likewise, his third way of de-nomination is not merely a matter of saying or unsaying but “a naming in view of” that takes on “something close to negation” in an attempt to refer to the Inaccessible Referent.<sup>13</sup> What therefore makes the saturated phenomenon possible for phenomenological investigation is the kind of knowing (or rather unknowing) associated with Dionysian negative theology. As Marion puts it: “God remains incomprehensible, not imperceptible – without adequate concept, not without giving intuition. The infinite proliferation of names does indeed suggest that they are still there, but it also flags as insufficient the concepts they put in play and thereby does justice to what constantly subverts them.”<sup>14</sup> To this, he adds: “The ‘non’ of the so-called negative theology does not say the Name any more than do the ‘names’ of the affirmative way.”<sup>15</sup> In brief, Marion’s claim is that negative theology’s formulation of God as super-essential does not name but de-nominates God through praise in an attempt to speak of that which cannot be spoken. De-nomination excepts God from predication, undoes the concept of essence, and refers to what surpasses all names.

*Negative Certainties* in many ways summarizes the conclusions drawn by Marion’s trilogy of earlier works by clarifying how he pushes the limits of phenomenality. As the limit of phenomenological investigation, saturated phenomena can only be known *negatively* which means to say that they are only known as remaining unknown. Although *Negative Certainties* does not discuss negative theology, it does further Marion’s understanding of the kind of knowledge that the last chapter of *In Excess* proposes in the third way of de-nomination. In short, this work attempts to introduce the term ‘negative certainty’ into phenomenology in order to explain how Marion has broadened its horizons. By challenging the tendency of modern philosophy to associate objective knowledge with certainty, he argues for a mode of knowledge that may attain certainty but not objectivity. In his words: “We can attain certain knowledge not only through positive certainty, by objectifying the nature of a thing as yet unknown, but also, if this affirmation proves to be unattainable, through *negative certainty* that either the thing itself, or our finite condition, renders the experience impossible and the answer unknowable.”<sup>16</sup> Knowledge of the saturated phenomenon, therefore, entails a negative certainty according to which its excess remains known as unknowable, i. e., as not known in the way that objects are. For Marion, approaching the inaccessibility of God through negative theology certainty ultimately breaks

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 140. Cf. also Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign. Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy*, Cambridge 1989, 202.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess* (see fn. 10), 139.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Negative Certainties*, translated by Stephen E. Lewis, Chicago 2015, 5.

the “tie” between God and the concept of essence and thus “in this way meets up with the path of apophasis.”<sup>17</sup>

One of Marion’s more recent works on revelation, *Givenness and Revelation*, originally delivered as the *Gifford Lectures*, offers his most theological discussion of the saturated phenomenon. The first two lectures develop a paradoxical rationality of revelation, and the third and fourth lectures detail what actually can be known about revelation, particularly Christian revelation. While the first lecture argues that Aquinas supports a paradoxical rationality of revelation, the second summarizes Marion’s argument on how metaphysics fails in setting it out and that phenomenology offers the best alternative. The third lecture reflects upon Christ as a saturated phenomenon and his phenomenality as an *anamorphosis*, and the final lecture discusses the trinity as not only the content of revelation but also the mode of how divine revelation appears. Marion claims that Trinitarian revelation is the invisible Father made visible in the icon of the Son who is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The God who is revealed in this way is a union of communication that can only be understood relationally in terms of love (charity), not in metaphysical terms of unicity and plurality.<sup>18</sup> Here Marion returns to the notion of God that he first proposed in his groundbreaking work *God without Being*. Ultimately, as several of his works make clear, Marion intends to recover the God of the mystics who mysteriously reveals himself as love (*agape*) veiled behind divine excess.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, to finish our discussion of how Marion approaches the incomprehensibility of revelation, we may turn to his most recent work on revelation: *D’Ailleurs, La Révélation (Revelation Comes from Elsewhere)*. This is a massive tome that elaborates on some of the topics taken on in *Givenness and Revelation*, especially the notions of *apokalypsis* and *anamorphosis*. Although space here does not permit a thoroughgoing explanation of how this text advances Marion’s account of revelation, his reliance on Dionysian negative theology to approach the incomprehensibility of revelation in his earlier works can still be seen to shape his more recent discussions of revelation. Against the ancient Greek and Heideggerian concept of truth as *aletheia*, Marion proposes *apokalypsis* (uncovering) as an alternative concept of truth. While *aletheia* is a mode of disclosure belonging to the metaphysical and phenomenological traditions that centers on the conditions of the ego, *apokalypsis* is a mode of disclosure that is orientated toward what comes from elsewhere and centers on what cannot be contained by the ego. By elsewhere (*d’ailleurs*), Marion does not mean that revelation comes from somewhere else in a metaphysical sense but that revelation requires a logic that is from elsewhere than the conditions of human understanding. To make way for such a logic, Marion introduces his notion of *anamorphosis* to explain how revelation as *apokalypsis* decentralizes the ego who pays witness to an event whose excess surpasses all concepts. Paying witness to the Revelation of Christ necessitates an *anamorphosis* that opens one to a Trinitarian community grounded on love. Although *D’Ailleurs, La Révélation* only cites Dionysius a handful of times, in chapter thirteen Marion

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*, translated by Stephen E. Lewis, Oxford 2018, 100 f.

<sup>19</sup> Id., *God Without Being* (see fn. 7), 179–181; id., *In Excess* (see fn. 10), 129–134, 143–148, and 158; id., *The Visible and the Revealed* (see fn. 7), 116–118.

invokes Paul's preaching at the Areopagus to Dionysius and the other Athenians about an 'unknown God' to support his argument for the need to shift from *aletheia* as a mode of disclosing truth to an anamorphic logic of *apokalypsis*.<sup>20</sup>

Ultimately, what Dionysian negative theology contributes to Marion's way of approaching the incomprehensibility of revelation is not only an opening of phenomenology to the possibility of saturated phenomena but also an account of knowing (or rather unknowing) appropriate to the divine. As Marion explains in the sixth chapter of *In Excess*, Dionysian negative theology secures the possibility of a saturated phenomenon by providing an appropriate language for the divine that does not name but de-nominates God. According to Marion's interpretation, the designation of God as *super-essential* by Dionysian negative theology is neither wholly cataphatic nor apophatic. Instead, it transgresses both in a way that preserves the excess of God through praise. Although he relies less on Dionysius in his later works, it is evident that Dionysian negative theology clears a path for Marion to develop a mode of knowing that not only pushes the limits of phenomenality but also challenges the concept of truth taken for granted by western philosophy.

### 3. Eriugena on Revelation as Theophany

Although a central theme of Eriugena's magnum opus *Periphyseon* (*The Division of Nature*) is to explain how theophanies that reveal the Divine Essence of God may be spoken of, it does not offer a systematic discussion of revelation. Nonetheless, throughout the text Eriugena consistently takes revelation (*revelatio*) to be synonymous with *theophany*, a term he borrows from Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor.<sup>21</sup> As the appearance of God's self-manifestation in creation, theophanies reveal the hiddenness or incomprehensibility of the Divine Essence. To speak about how theophanies reveal the Divine Essence, Eriugena relies on Dionysian negative theology, especially its super-essential language. Like Marion, he holds that revelation discloses through concealment and that its incomprehensibility can only be known as unknown. Similar to Marion's account of de-nomination, according to Eriugena Dionysian negative theology does not reestablish affirmation (*cataphasis*) through negation (*apophasis*) but achieves a harmony between them in order to praise the Divine Essence as greater than anything that can be predicated of it.

Eriugena's notion as theophany may be understood in a broad sense and in a narrow one. On the one hand, every appearance in phenomenal reality is a theophany, and the natural world (*physis*) is itself one unified theophany. As Eriugena says: "God creates himself in creation" and that God and creation "are best understood as not two things distinct from one another, but as one and the same."<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the revelation of the Word made flesh in Christ is theophany par excellence, i. e., the ultimate manifestation of God in creation. In Book I of the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena draws from Maximus to define theophany

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *D'Ailleurs, La Révélation*, Paris 2020, 327–338.

<sup>21</sup> *Eriugena*, *Periphyseon*, PL 122, 446d, 510a-b, 558a, 615C, and 963a.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, PL 678c.

as a condescension of the divine Word of God to human nature through grace and a simultaneous exaltation of human nature to God through love.<sup>23</sup> Although Eriugena's theology is often panned for lacking a logocentric vision of the cosmic order that humans inhabit, as recent scholarship on his Christology has shown, Eriugena's conception of the universe centers on the theophany of Christ.<sup>24</sup> Crucially, the theophany of Christ's act of suffering on the cross not only redeems the fallen state of humanity but also deifies creation, making possible its return to God.<sup>25</sup> Simply put, Eriugena's theology is best described as logocentric and for him the central point of God's relation to the world is the Incarnation.

Eriugena is careful to distinguish theophany from deification (*theosis*), another term that he borrows from Dionysius and Maximus. Although both theophany and deification entail a condescension of the Word and an exaltation of human nature, only through theophany is the Divine Essence revealed. While theophany is the appearance or revelation of Divine Essence, deification amounts to the participation of creatures in the divine life of the Word. All theophanies, except for the Incarnation, entail a deification of creaturely nature.<sup>26</sup> The theophany of Christ is not a deification on the grounds that it is the direct source of how creatures participate in the divine life of the Word, although Eriugena occasionally calls the Incarnation a deification of human nature.<sup>27</sup> Deification is therefore only possible for creatures and requires becoming a follower of Christ.<sup>28</sup> The difference between theophany and deification may be put succinctly as follows: theophany is the communication or disclosure of the incomprehensible God, whereas deification is a movement of the creature toward God who is its source and also its end.

Simply put, through theophany the *incomprehensible* God somehow becomes *comprehensible*. According to some scholars, Eriugena's epistemology of how theophanies become known to the human intellect anticipates German idealism and its influence can even be seen on this philosophical tradition.<sup>29</sup> Eriugena argues that appearances do not disclose knowledge of the thing itself – here he uses the Greek formulation of *to on* – and that space and time are not categories that inhere in objects but exist in the mind alone. Regardless, *The Periphyseon* does not offer a phenomenology of revelation but an account of what it

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., PL 449a-b.

<sup>24</sup> For more on criticisms of Eriugena's Christology and how they may be refuted, see *John Gavin*, A Celtic Christology. The Incarnation According to John Scottus Eriugena, Eugene 2014, 9–11. For more on Eriugena's logocentric theology, see *ibid.*, 42–46, 61; *John Gavin*, A Theological Itinerary. John Scottus Eriugena's Christological Ascent, in: Adrian Guio (ed.), A Companion to John Scottus Eriugena, Leiden 2020, 134–153; *Adrian Guio*, Eriugena Reads Maximus Confessor: Christology as Cosmic Theophany, in *ibid.*, 296–325.

<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that Eriugena's *Carmina* best captures this point; cf. *Connor Ritchie*, The Christology of Eriugena's *Carmina*. On the Theophany of the Bloodied Christ, in: *Modern Theology* 2025 (forthcoming); *id.*, Reading John Scottus Eriugena's *Carmina* as Devotional Poetry, in: *Medieval Mystical Theology* 33/1 (2024) 47–60.

<sup>26</sup> *Eriugena*, *Periphyseon*, PL 122, 449b-c.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., PL 877a and 897c.

<sup>28</sup> For more on Eriugena's understanding of how humans follow Christ through imitation cf. *John Gavin*, A Celtic Christology (see fn. 24), 89 f.

<sup>29</sup> *Dermot Moran*, Spiritualis Incrassatio. Eriugena's Intellectualist Immaterialism. Is It an Idealism? in: Stephen Gersh; Dermot Moran (eds.), *Eriugena, Berkeley and the Idealist Tradition*, Notre Dame 2006, 123–150; *id.*, Idealism in Medieval Philosophy. The Case of Johannes Scottus Eriugena, in: *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 8 (1999) 53–82.

means for humans to inhabit a theophanous world centered on the theophany of Christ. Crucially, no theophany reveals the Divine Essence itself. Instead, theophanies only reveal the incomprehensibility of God. How theophanies reveal the incomprehensibility of God may be known through affirmative theology (*cataphasis*) but less imperfectly through negative theology (*apophasis*). To say that God is being, truth, love, or beauty is to speak of God in terms of metaphor.<sup>30</sup> To speak more properly about how theophanies reveal God, Eriugena relies on the notion of negative theology provided to him by Dionysius which conceives of God as super-essential or always greater than whatever may be predicated of the Divine Essence.

According to Eriugena's interpretation, Dionysian negative theology does not discard cataphasis in favor of apophasis. Rather, it seeks to achieve a 'harmony' between these two ways of speaking about God by appealing to super-essential language. For Eriugena, negative theology is not a matter of denying what God is but a matter of affirming that there are no adequate names for God. Statements that God is greater than (*plus quam*) essence, truth, love, etc. encompass both the affirmative and negative and intend to explain that what is affirmed about God is neither fully affirmed nor denied. According to Deirdre Carabine, Eriugena proposes what she calls a "hyperphatic" way of speaking about God.<sup>31</sup> Eriugena uses the prefixes *super* and *plus quam* since what can be said of God cannot be said properly in either the affirmative or the negative. The task of negative theology, therefore, is to give intelligibility to the incomprehensibility of the Divine Essence which is radically inaccessible and beyond any kind of determination. In fact, Eriugena even argues that the mind of God is unable to comprehend the Divine Essence itself.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, for Eriugena, the super-essential language of Dionysian negative theology achieves a harmony of cataphasis and apophasis. To say that God is super-essential, as he puts it, is outwardly cataphatic and inwardly apophatic; it is an affirmative statement that amounts to the negation of essence.<sup>33</sup>

According to Eriugena, the super-essential nature of the Divine Essence entails that one of the most appropriate names for God is 'nothing' (*nihilum*). Some readers of Eriugena, such as William Desmond, call his understanding of divine nothingness hyperbolic insofar as it intends to signify the overdetermination or excess of Divine Essence.<sup>34</sup> About halfway through Book III of the *Periphyseon* Eriugena presents his interpretation of how Dionysius uses *nihilum* as a name for God. To make his point, Eriugena explains how theophanies, as the self-manifestation of God in creation, may be called nothing insofar as they conceal the Divine Essence. In his words,

"[The] name [Nothing] (*nihilum*) signifies the ineffable, incomprehensible, and inaccessible brilliance of the Divine Goodness which is unknown to all intellects whether human or angelic – for it is superessential and supernatural –, which while it is contemplated in itself it neither is

<sup>30</sup> Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, PL 122, 460c.

<sup>31</sup> Deirdre Carabine, John Scottus Eriugena, Oxford 2000, 61; id., *The Unknown God. Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition. Plato to Eriugena*, Eugene 1995, 311–316.

<sup>32</sup> Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, PL 122, 586b–c.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., PL 462b.

<sup>34</sup> William Desmond, *Nihilne Plus? God Being Nothing More*, in: Alina N. Feld; Sean J. McGrath (eds.), *Unfinished God. The Speculative Philosophical Theology of Ray L. Hart*, Edinburgh 2024, 45–60.

nor was nor shall be, for it is understood to be in none of the things that exist because it surpasses all things, but when, by a certain ineffable descent into the things that are, it is beheld by the mind's eye, it alone is found to be in all things, and it is and was and shall be. Therefore so long as it is understood to be incomprehensible by reason of its transcendence it is not unreasonably called "Nothing," (*nihilum*) but when it begins to appear in its theophanies it is said to proceed, as it were, out of nothing into something, and that which is properly thought of as beyond all essence is also properly known in all essence, and therefore every visible and invisible creature can be called a theophany, that is, a divine apparition."<sup>35</sup>

The term 'nothing' more generally, for Eriugena, signifies unknowability or incomprehensibility. Creation *ex nihilo* characterizes the kind of nothingness that theophanies emerge from when they 'come into being' in the sensuous world. Before coming into being, theophanies subsist in a state of non-being. The act of the Divine Essence, which is beyond or greater than essence itself, emerging from non-being or nothing and descending into the realm of being is ultimately ineffable and deeply mysterious by virtue of its excess. As a name for God, nothing signifies the radically inaccessible nature of the Divine Essence as it reveals itself through theophanies. In short, nothing is one of, if not, the most appropriate names for God on the grounds that the Divine Essence is greater than anything that may be predicated of it. Instead of presenting a classic onto-theological metaphysics which defines God in terms of being and essence, Eriugena presents what Dermot Moran calls a "deconstruction of a metaphysics of substance."<sup>36</sup> The highest concept of Eriugena's philosophy is not a being or a substance but non-being or what he terms 'non-substance' or 'more-than-substance.'

Having Dionysius as a common source for their understandings of negative theology, there are several notable similarities between how Eriugena and Marion deploy apophasis as a way for articulating that the incomprehensibility of revelation can only be known as unknown. For both, negative theology is not a disguised form of cataphasis cloaked in apophatic language – nor is it a simple form of negation which merely denies that God is anything at all. Although it does distinguish between cataphasis and apophasis, Dionysian negative theology does not simply overlook cataphasis in favor of apophasis. Instead, it proposes a third way that attempts to bring forth what is at work in both by transgressing or harmonizing them when speaking about the incomprehensibility of God. According to Marion and Eriugena, this way of speaking about the incomprehensible God is not actually a way of speaking *per se* but a form of praise. In fact, apophasis does not merely praise God as what he is not but as incomprehensible, inaccessible, and beyond all categories. Another point that Marion and Eriugena agree on is that negative theology is not, as Derrida presumes, a disguised form of atheism. Negative theology or apophasis does not deny that God *is* but denies that God can properly be said *to be* any one thing.

It is worth noting that in the sixth chapter of *In Excess* Marion cites a lengthy passage from Book I of Eriugena's *Periphyseon*. Although he does not offer an extensive discussion,

<sup>35</sup> Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, PL 122, 680d-681a. Unless specified, all translations are from *John Scottus Eriugena, Periphyseon (The Division of Nature)*, translated by I. P. Sheldon-Williams and John J. O'Meara, Montréal 1987, 307.

<sup>36</sup> Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena. A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1989, 122.

Marion claims that Eriugena anticipates the objections raised by Derridean deconstruction against negative theology, and he even calls Eriugena as one of the best interpreters of Dionysius. The passage that Marion cites intends to explain what it means to say that God is super-essential:

“For when one declares [*God*] is *superessential*, one allows nothing else to be understood than a negation of essence. For one who asserts [*God*] to be *superessential* clearly denies that God is essential. And consequently, although the negation does not appear in the words, it is evident to one who considers the matter carefully that it is not lacking in the understanding. For that reason, I think, I am forced to admit the aforesaid designations which seem to lack any negation are more in harmony with negative than affirmative theology.”<sup>37</sup>

What Marion appreciates most about Eriugena is his understanding of what it means for Dionysian negative theology to designate God as super-essential. According to Eriugena, to say that God is super-essential is outwardly cataphatic and inwardly apophatic. In other words, the designation of the Divine Essence as super-essential is an affirmative statement that amounts to the negation of essence. As Eriugena puts it: “One who asserts God to be *superessential* does not say what God is, but what God is not, it is declared that God is not essence but more than essence.”<sup>38</sup> With the support of Eriugena, Marion concludes that Dionysius “denies that negation by itself suffices to define theology, next that negation opposes affirmation in a simple duel, and finally that negation reestablishes affirmation while intending to invert it.”<sup>39</sup> Dionysian negative theology, like de-nomination, thus transgresses both cataphasis and apophasis and is not a matter of saying or denying but of referring to the Inaccessible Referent who remains unnamed.

The final and perhaps most significant point where Marion and Eriugena find common ground is that an applied apophasis of revelation does not understand God as a being among others or as the highest being. On the contrary, it understands God as a communication of love through the Revelation of Christ who extends an invitation to participate in divine life. Like Marion, Eriugena relies on the notion of gift (*donum*) to make this point. Remarkably, Eriugena offers a robust account of what it means to call God and the revelation of Christ a gift. According to him, “by nature [sc. God; C.R.] cannot be called a gift but the Distributor of gifts.”<sup>40</sup> God is only called a gift insofar as he is a gift through the revelation of Christ. Eriugena is also careful to distinguish between gift and grace. While all substances are gifts insofar as they are brought from non-existence into existence, grace is a special kind of gift that pertains exclusively to those worthy of deification.<sup>41</sup> For Marion and Eriugena, revelation does not disclose God as a transcendent being but as an unconditional and unconstrained gift of love hidden behind divine excellence. To approach the incomprehensibility of divine excellency, both rely on Dionysian negative theology to push

<sup>37</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess* (see fn. 10), 141. *Eriugena*, *Periphyseon*, PL 122, 462b. Translation from John Wipfel and Allan Wolter, *Medieval Philosophy from St. Augustine to Nicholas of Cusa*, New York 1969, 130 f.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, PL 462c-d.

<sup>39</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess* (see fn. 10), 142.

<sup>40</sup> *Eriugena*, *Periphyseon*, PL 122, 564c.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, PL 905b.

beyond the binary between cataphasis and apophasis toward a language that discerns what can be said about the hidden God who exceeds all categories.

#### 4. Marion and Eriugena on Revelation

Having detailed how Marion and Eriugena approach the incomprehensibility of revelation through a similar interpretation of Dionysian negative theology, what must be examined next is how their accounts of revelation differ. While Marion's account of revelation as the saturated phenomenon rejects a metaphysical conception of God in favor of a phenomenology of givenness that preserves divine excess, Eriugena grounds his account of revelation as theophany on Neoplatonic metaphysics. Crucially, the question is whether their accounts of revelation entail separate understandings of how the incomprehensibility of revelation may be spoken of and known in some way. At stake are two issues: first, whether Eriugena provides the phenomenality of revelation that Marion desires; second, whether Eriugena supports Marion's claim of retrieving a patristic notion of revelation. Although Eriugena falls short of providing a phenomenality of revelation, he does confirm that Marion retrieves a patristic notion of revelation insofar as he posits that the incomprehensibility of revelation is best approached through the kind of apophasis that belongs to Dionysian negative theology. For both, the incomprehensible excess of revelation can only be articulated by what this paper calls a 'refined' apophasis that stays true to Dionysian negative theology.

The difference between how Marion and Eriugena conceive of revelation is not only a matter of methodology but also a matter of the kind of concerns that surround their thinking on revelation. In short, Marion's thinking on revelation is driven by the post-modern conviction that metaphysics fails in setting out the question of God and that phenomenology provides the best alternative. His notion of the saturated phenomenon makes way for a phenomenology of revelation by broadening the horizon of phenomenality. Obviously, for Eriugena, who preceded Marion by almost twelve centuries, critiques of onto-theology and a metaphysics of presence are not a concern. Eriugena's thinking about revelation is driven by his ambitious project in the *Periphyseon* which synthesizes Latin and Greek Christian Neoplatonism to explain what it means for humans to inhabit a theophanous cosmos where every appearance is in some way a manifestation of God (i. e., a revelation). Although some scholars, including Marion, argue that there are good reasons to interpret Eriugena as one of the medieval thinkers who is immune to condemnations of modern metaphysics, this paper does not discuss the merits of this claim.<sup>42</sup> Instead, the task at hand is to discern whether Eriugena and Marion propose two seemingly different accounts of revelation that converge on similar insights into how the incomprehensibility of God may be approached.

The point that Marion and Eriugena conceive of revelation through different methodologies is manifest in how they permit the category of being to be used when speaking about

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<sup>42</sup> For more on this, see fn. 1.

how revelation appears. For Marion, revelation is strictly otherwise than being.<sup>43</sup> Revelation is the appearance of something other to being that does not, as Eriugena puts it, enter into being. For Eriugena, on the other hand, theophanies are the appearance of God in being (*esse*). In fact, he holds that theophanies are only intelligible at all because they emerge from non-being and enter into being.<sup>44</sup> Central to his thinking are the Neoplatonic notions of *exitus* and *reditus* according to which being is a self-emptying process of the One. Crucially, however, theophany, as the self-manifestation of Divine Essence, is the descent of something greater than being into being. The 'being' (*essentia*) that belongs to the Divine Essence as it appears through theophanies, therefore, is always a transcendence of being. Hence, the Divine Essence may be spoken of metaphorically as Essence but is most properly spoken of as super-essential in terms of praise. Nonetheless, despite the difference in how Marion and Eriugena use the category of being to speak about how revelation appears, they share the fundamental insight that according to Dionysian negative theology God is not a being among others or the highest being. Furthermore, as Marion notes in several places, Eriugena, Dionysius, and other patristic theologians affirm goodness over being as the primary name of God.<sup>45</sup>

Insofar as theophany is the disclosure of something that exceeds all categories and names it may be called a saturated phenomenon. Eriugena's understanding of revelation as theophany, however, is more expansive than Marion's notion of the saturated phenomenon. In other words, Eriugena considers that revelation is possible across a wider field of phenomena. While Marion regards the saturated phenomenon as a unique kind of phenomenon that is unlike and distinct from others, Eriugena holds that all appearances are theophanies and, therefore, a revelation of some kind. Although Marion notes that ordinary phenomena have the potential to become saturated phenomena, unlike Eriugena, he does not hold that all appearances are a revelation of some kind. Moreover, Marion argues that by definition revelation requires that something is revealed to someone, whereas Eriugena does not claim that theophanies require a human witness. For this reason, Eriugena does not provide the phenomenality of revelation that Marion desires but an account of revelation articulated through Neoplatonic metaphysics. As a number of passages in the *Periphyseon* explain, the first order of theophanies, which subsist in the division of the primal causes, are only revealed to angelic intellects.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, all appearances in creation are theophanies – the whole observable cosmic order, for Eriugena, is nothing but theophanic. While certain theophanies, such as the Incarnation, are theophany par excellence, all appearances – even the most seemingly profane theophanies and ones with no human witness – are in fact a manifestation of divine essence.

Despite the differences between their accounts of revelation, as this paper has argued, Marion and Eriugena agree that the incomprehensibility of revelation is best approached through a 'refined' apophysis that stays true to Dionysian negative theology. Both hold that apophysis according to Dionysian negative theology does not discard cataphasis or is

<sup>43</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess* (see fn. 1), 145–147.

<sup>44</sup> Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, PL 122, 681b.

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *D'Ailleurs, La Révélation* (see fn. 20), 103; id., *In Excess* (see fn. 10), 145 f.

<sup>46</sup> Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, PL 122, 446b–447a.

merely apophasis in the simplest sense of the term (a negation). Instead, Dionysian negative theology proposes what this paper calls a refined apophasis that brings forth what is at work in both affirmation and negation. As Denys Turner argues, Dionysian negative theology supposes that there is a “second order” apophasis beyond a simple dialectic between cataphasis and apophasis. This ‘refined’ or “second order” apophasis is brought forth by understanding how the interplay between affirmation and negation leads to a kind of negation best described as a “self-subverting utterance” that amounts to the negation of a negation.<sup>47</sup> In Turner’s words, according to Dionysian negative theology, “what falls away are both our affirmations and our negations, whose inadequacy is demonstrated in the necessity of affirming both.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, the super-essential language of Dionysian negative theology ultimately collapses into a form of silent praise.

Both Marion and Eriugena attempt to articulate this refined sense of apophasis in different but complementary ways. Marion proposes de-nomination as a way for speaking about the excess of revelation that transgresses both cataphasis and apophasis, and he furthers the kind of knowing associated with a refined apophasis in his notions of *negative certainty* and *apokalypsis*. Eriugena, on the other hand, offers an apt analysis of how the designation of God as super-essential achieves a harmony between cataphasis and apophasis. Nonetheless, both shed light on a refined sense of apophasis found in patristic and medieval authors who draw from Dionysian negative theology that ultimately negates negation, not in favor of affirmation, but only because anything that could be said about the divine is in the end inadequate. While Eriugena offers an account that is closer in proximity to the historical sources, Marion sheds light on the relevance of negative theology for contemporary discussions on revelation.

Although Marion rarely cites Eriugena in his works, Eriugena appears in how Marion’s notion negative theology appropriates Dionysian themes. In addition to *In Excess*, Eriugena also appears in one of Marion’s lesser-known essays “Veluti ex nihilo in aliquid: De l’apophasis à la divina philosophia chez Jean Scot Érigène.”<sup>49</sup> This essay furthers Marion’s claim in *In Excess* that Eriugena supports his interpretation of Dionysian negative theology against Derrida’s and also examines Eriugena’s use of the term nothing (*nilhilum*) as a name for God. The first half of the essay explains that according to Eriugena Dionysian negative theology is neither a rejection nor a reduplication of affirmation. Instead, it proposes a third way that appeals to the prefix *hyper* to designate divine excess. Although what is meant by *hyper* certainly falls under negation, according to Marion, it does not deny the content of affirmation but qualifies what is meant by negation. Following Dionysius, Eriugena’s third way implies that God can only be conceived as an “agent” under the names of cause and creator who is without beginning (*anarchos*).<sup>50</sup> This is not the modern conception of God as *causa sui* but the understanding of an incomprehensible God who is simultaneously infinitely other to and deeply intimate with creation. Like Marion’s way of de-nomination,

<sup>47</sup> Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God. Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge 1995, 22, 33–45, 272.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>49</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Veluti ex nihilo in aliquid. De l’apophasis à la divina philosophia chez Jean Scot Érigène*, in: Philippe Bütgen; Jean-Baptiste Rauzy (eds.), *La longue durée. Pour Jean-François Courtine*, Paris 2016, 77–92.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 80.

Eriugena's super-essential language is an attempt to say what cannot be said that takes on the form of praise. For both Marion and Eriugena, praise does not replicate cataphasis or apophasis but is an "original new way of speaking" that pragmatically refers to the incomprehensibility of God's manifestation in creation.<sup>51</sup> As Marion explains, Eriugena's third way entails a divine ignorance from the point of view of human knowing that preserves and maintains God's divinity. This amounts to a kind of unknowing associated with Dionysian negative theology.

In the second half of the essay, Marion argues that Eriugena's way of praising God as nothing (*nihilum*) goes further "than the most radical deconstructionists: when it comes to God, he is no longer a question of knowing something but of approaching in another way through love or praise."<sup>52</sup> Eriugena often refers to God as nothing (*nihil*) but refines his understanding of God as nothing by invoking the term *nihilum*. As Marion notes, while *nihil* is opposed to *esse* as a metaphysical counterpart to being in terms of lack or deprivation, *nihilum* is opposed to *esse* from the point of view of nothingness as a manifestation of excess.<sup>53</sup> This link between apophasis and manifestation, according to Marion, not only gestures toward a phenomenological point on givenness but also elucidates the Dionysian point that apophaticism is deeply connected with manifestation as theophany in a biblical sense.<sup>54</sup> In his words:

"When, in the biblical theophanies, God descends from the incomprehensible *nihilum*, he goes out, in a pre-Hegelian way, towards something external, towards something else, towards another world; he descends into being, but into created being, into *natura*, which is of him, by him and even like him, in another mode. Given by divine goodness, every being can be considered as a gift from God, that is to say as a possible manifestation of God. Biblical theophanies inaugurate a wider possibility, that of any given being appearing as God-giving, and therefore as God-given."<sup>55</sup>

While Eriugena does offer a robust account of Christ as a gift, as Marion is no doubt aware, his account of revelation falls short of providing a phenomenality of revelation and a phenomenological understanding of gift. Nonetheless, the important point here is that apophasis is deeply connected with manifestation on the grounds that absolute transcendence eliminates a distinction between the two because of God's "insurmountable incomprehensibility."<sup>56</sup> God manifests himself beyond his own essence in creatures, but this is not a traveling of God outside himself. Creation is at once other to God and of God. The name *nihilum* holds together this paradox by articulating the super-essential nature of God in terms of excess. As the manifestation of God's incomprehensible nothingness, theophany reveals an Essence beyond essence that does not subsist as a being but through all beings. To conclude, Marion claims that Eriugena offers a correct interpretation of the Scholastic notion of the

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 85. Translation provided by author.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 89. Although Marion does not cite any biblical passage, it is likely that he is thinking of 1 Timothy 6:16, Acts 17:23 and others.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 90.

*concursum ordinarius Dei*. Perhaps Eriugena's metaphor of the 'running God' best captures the ineffable mystery of God's manifestation in creation. In his words, "[God] runs throughout all things and never stays but by His running all things are made, as it is written: 'His Word runneth swiftly' (Psalms 147:15)."<sup>57</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, the main findings of this paper may be summarized as follows. Marion and Eriugena present two seemingly distinct accounts of revelation that propose different terminologies and are framed by different methodologies. Yet, as this paper has argued, both of their accounts of revelation entail complementary ways of approaching the incomprehensibility of revelation through a similar interpretation of Dionysian negative theology.

Marion and Eriugena elucidate the core feature of apophasis or what is commonly known as the *via negativa*. What this paper has called a refined apophasis is not merely a negation and does not entail a strict binary between cataphasis and apophasis. Instead, apophasis is never detached from cataphasis and brings forth what is at work in both affirmation and negation. To articulate this insight, Marion proposes what he calls de-nomination while Eriugena directly draws from Dionysius's use of the terms *hyper* and *nihilum*. Nonetheless, both elucidate how the incomprehensible excess of divine revelation is best spoken of through a way that renders it known insofar as it remains unknown. Ultimately, their thinking on revelation sheds light on the mystical conception of the hidden God who despite our best efforts remains forever out of our reach and grasp.

For Marion and Eriugena, revelation discloses through concealment which means to say that revelation is in the end a disclosure of incomprehensibility. To speak about the incomprehensibility of revelation thus requires language attuned to a refined sense of apophasis that stays true to Dionysian negative theology. Such language must praise God as an excess whose incomprehensible gift of love in Divine Revelation surpasses all categories and names.

Das zentrale Anliegen dieses Beitrages ist es zu untersuchen, wie Jean-Luc Marion und Johannes Scottus Eriugena die Unbegreiflichkeit der göttlichen Offenbarung auf komplementäre Weise verständlich zu machen versuchen. Zunächst wird erläutert, wie beide Denker die Offenbarungswirklichkeit verstehen und sich dabei auf negative Theologie stützen. Anschließend wird erörtert, ob die Unterschiede zwischen ihren Terminologien und Methoden auf zwei deutlich differierenden Darstellungen der Offenbarung hinauslaufen, die ihrerseits divergierende Auffassungen darüber mit sich bringen, wie die Unbegreiflichkeit der Offenbarung in irgendeiner Weise angesprochen und erkannt werden kann. Auf dem Spiel stehen zwei Fragen: Erstens, ob Eriugena jene Phänomenalität der Offenbarung konzeptualisiert, nach der Marion verlangt; Zweitens, ob Eriugena Marions Anspruch unterstützt, den patristischen Begriff von Offenbarung zu restituieren. Abschließend wird gezeigt, dass Eriugena darin Verarbeitung finden, wie

<sup>57</sup> Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, PL 122, 452c.

sich Marions Begriff der negativen Theologie dionysische Themen aneignet. Für beide ist die unbegreifliche Natur der Offenbarung am besten durch eine ‚verfeinerte‘ Apophase zu gewährleisten, die der dionysischen negativen Theologie treu bleibt.