

Dialectical Approaches to Retrieving God after Heidegger: Premises and Consequences (Lacoste and Marion)*

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Abstract: Contemporary European continental thought about God and faith has long struggled with the rise of secularity, whether as a cultural phenomenon or dimension of human nature. This essay outlines and questions a recent variant of that exercise which defines itself especially by a dialogue with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. This approach first concedes that Heidegger's meditations on the "ontological difference" between being and beings furnishes the basis for an apt description of secular existence, but then attempts to reinstate a more radical conception of God "without being" (J. -L. Marion) and human existence anterior to the field of being (J. -Y. Lacoste). Such an approach raises a number of questions asking for further clarification but perhaps also indicating a different response to the phenomenon of secularity, even as supported by Heideggerian thought. This essay thus profiles the positions of Marion and Lacoste primarily against the background of the Heideggerian thought they attempt to outflank, then enumerates some questions accruing to those positions along the way of sketching them, and finally draws those questions into a pointer toward a different post-Heideggerian approach to God and faith.

IF DIALECTICAL ARGUMENTATION IS DEFINED simply by a procedure which first sets up an opposition and then moves to resolve it into a higher unity, one will understand its appeal for contemporary religious thinking, at least where it is a matter of Christian belief, which presently finds itself side by side with unbelief at the levels of both cultural sensibility and rationality. With the establishment of the secular as an independent, and by all appearances self-sufficient, form of life and thought, the form of life and thought that is guided by belief has often wished to outflank its opponent by conceding the difference between them but then presenting an argument for the reasonableness of belief which not even atheists or agnostics could refute. Such would be the nature of apologetics as practiced by, for instance, Maurice Blondel.¹

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1. "Lettre sur les exigences de la pensée contemporaine en matière d'Apologétique", in *Oeuvres complètes II. 1888-1913* (Paris: P.U.F., 1997) 101-173.

The modesty of Blondel's project is significant: the appeal to a form of rationality capable of speaking at one and the same time to both belief and unbelief is unmistakable, but nowhere is there a claim to actually recuperate unbelief into belief.

What is indeed surprising is the more recent application of such efforts even to a discussion with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, in which the distance between thinking centered on belief and thinking centered on unbelief is extended to such a degree that there cannot even be question of waging war in either direction. And yet it is precisely here that one discerns the cause of a contemporary revival of the apologetic impulse: on the one hand, Heidegger would have belief withdraw so far into its own camp that it is no longer clear that it has either the means or the right to speak meaningfully to those who do not believe; on the other hand, secular reason, the reason which is rooted outside of belief, must abandon every effort to take the life of belief as a proper object of inquiry. In a single stroke, Heidegger has ghettoized theology, which he reduces to faith reflecting on faith, *and* contested the very possibility of a truly religious philosophy.² In either case, contemporary rationality will have been defined by a God-lessness which is urged neither in defence of the public sphere from the prejudices of private, inner religious experience (as in the Enlightenment) nor in revolt against diseased idols (Nietzsche), but calmly asserted as the unavoidable implication of true respect for the difference between belief and unbelief.

It is especially this claim to separate belief and unbelief on strictly rational grounds – or, what seems to amount to the same thing: that it is the only possible outcome of unprejudiced reflection on the matter – that has sometimes stimulated Christian apologetics to new heights. After all, one must ask what sort of neutrality knows for certain, and *a priori*, that God cannot enter philosophy. And, on the heels of this, one might then also wonder whether such an alleged neutrality and its accompanying *a priori* closure to the religious does not in fact serve only to illuminate the specific difficulty of thinking of a divine transcendence which, for all of that, does give itself to be thought. Would the establishment of secularity also be a liberation of the properly religious?

THE PATH THROUGH HEIDEGGER

The dialectical response which this line of thinking has elicited is evident already in the pathos evident where it is born. Confessing his debt to the philosophy of Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas defined his own work by “a profound need to leave [its] climate, *as well as* a con-

2. For this restriction on theology, see M. Heidegger, *Phänomenologie und Theologie* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1970) 21-27. Rejections of religious philosophy, especially in the form of “Christian philosophy”, abound in Heidegger's work.

viction that one cannot leave it for a philosophy which would be pre-Heideggerian".³ According to this perspective, in order to respond effectively to Heidegger in the name of the reasonableness of belief, or at least the reasonableness of a notion like "God", it is first necessary to think through Heidegger, but then also, from a point beyond him, to think back against him.

Levinas, of course, is the forefather of this relation to Heidegger. Similar approaches, remaining closer to specifically Christian belief, can be found in the works of, among others, Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Yves Lacoste. For Marion, the response to Heidegger – in his view the rightful heir to Husserl⁴ – is simply a question of increased phenomenological probity. More specifically, the response to Heidegger requires, first, unfolding Heidegger's reduction from our everyday relationship to the world and everything in it to the horizon for that every-day-ness in the ecstatic temporality of *Dasein*, which *Being and Time* conceives as the self-disclosure of being as beings; and secondly, an attempt to penetrate still further, to a givenness which would be even more primordial than Heideggerian being. And from the perspective of that deeper givenness, Heideggerian being – along with Husserlian phenomenality – would have to belong to what Marion calls the screen (*l'écran*) of disclosure.

In short, primordial givenness, such as Marion defines it, is meant to contest the primacy of ontology in rational reflection, above all, according to the final clarifications accomplished by Heidegger, as a philosophy of light and appearance. According to Marion, there is a givenness from beyond light and appearance, and in that sense from beyond the very possibility of a horizon oriented by the perspective of a subject. This thesis is already enough to render philosophy open to finding a positive place for religious experience. In Marion's view, a "paradigm" of such radical self-givenness is to be found in the revelation which occurs in and as Christ.⁵

3. E. Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: Vrin, 1993) 19 (emphasis added).

4. J.-L. Marion, *Réduction et donation: Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger, et la phénoménologie* (Paris: P.U.F., 1989) 117-18. The privilege accorded phenomenology in Marion's work is established on p. 7 of this predominantly methodological work: "In an essential sense, phenomenology assumes in our century the very role of philosophy."

5. J.-L. Marion, *Etant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris: P.U.F., 1997), §24. Needless to say, it would be necessary to dwell much longer over this single paragraph, where the particularity of the figure of Christ is immediately conceded, only to become the linchpin of an argument bent on nothing less than piercing the very flesh of particularity – phenomenality – in search of a more original horizon. It would be necessary to ask, initially, about the unexpected solidarity between an analysis that appears to adopt the method of eidetic description and references to Christ as "saturation of saturation" (p. 327), "paradigm of the phenomenon of revelation" (p. 329), and "paradox of paradoxes" (p. 340). Of course, Marion has foreseen the charges, crude but inevitable, of either introducing a theological prejudice in philosophy or promoting a philosophical reduction of theology (see pp. 328-329). Yet one might then worry that the perspective this implies – neither religious nor non-religious in orientation and thus *willing to speak about the most*

For Lacoste, phenomenology – and this again means Heidegger – provides us with the atheistic account of our humanity best suited to a coherent investigation of who and what we are in the order of our relationship with being, and in turn with the indispensable starting point for an intervention in the name of a higher relation with the Absolute.⁶ Without having yet understood everything that this implies, one already notices that these two closely related responses to Heidegger (an equation is both unnecessary and exaggerated) take up the questions of God and religious experience only after first conceding that it is indeed Heidegger who must speak for the state of secular reason today.

Marion and Lacoste also agree in organizing their initial concession to Heidegger around a single point: to be human, they claim, is to tend innately or perhaps “naturally” toward self-interest; in this same line, Levinas preferred to speak of the “egocentrism” of being human. Marion works this out in an interpretation of the “ontological difference” between beings and being, by which Heidegger thematized the fact that the beingness of beings is not itself a being. For Heidegger, this meant that being cannot itself appear or be thought, but in fact withdraws from appearance and thinking as something which they always presuppose. Marion takes this last point, the claim that thought and appearing always presuppose being, as an assertion that being is thus the screen on which beings must appear in order to have meaning.⁷ And whereas he agrees that this does pass without notice when it is a question only of things found in the world, he interjects that it is profoundly unsuited to what arrives from wholly outside. Contrary to Heidegger’s original concern to describe the transcendence of being over its disclosure to us as beings, Marion thus considers being as the original projection of a subject which assumes itself to be the proper locus of all meaning. Regarding the self-revelation of God, the screen of being would therefore also be a filter (*l’écran*) which Heidegger has imposed on the effort to think about religious experience.

In a similar vein, Lacoste focusses on Heidegger’s conception of *in-der-Welt-Sein*, by which we are said to find ourselves always already in a world and subject to its conditions. His agreement with Heidegger extends all the way to admitting that each of us “is in the world without God”.⁸ This, however, is developed only as one dimension of our

crucial phenomena without prior commitment to the real existence of their objects – risks suffocating in a new variety of the empty formalism from which early phenomenology thought it had liberated philosophy.

6. J.-Y. Lacoste, *Expérience et Absolu: Questions disputées sur l’humanité de l’homme* (Paris: P.U.F., 1993) 2. For the sake of clarity, it should be noted from the beginning that Lacoste uses “existence” when discussing our relation to being, and reserves “humanity” for the wider compass of a relation to being and a relation to the Absolute.

7. J.-L. Marion, *Dieu sans l’être* (Paris: Fayard, 1982) 58-75.

8. Lacoste, *Expérience et Absolu*, 106.

humanity, and then opposed to another, spiritual dimension opened up by an encounter with the Absolute through which we come to what Lacoste calls the "liturgical" relation. And just as Marion's attempt to reintroduce God from beyond being required him to reduce our relation with being to a function of egocentrism, Lacoste's effort to develop an openness to the Absolute leads him to define being-in-the-world by closure.

One ought not accept this thesis without question. Where Heidegger elaborates being-in-the-world as the individual's projection of an "own world" in and through its relation to being, Lacoste discerns a claim that the individual is always already framed in inherent conditions which it can not transgress except in death.⁹ This permits him to refashion Heidegger's more modest assertion that each of us is the living center of *his or her own world* into the more general notion that each of us is lodged in a *place whose rules govern our material existence*. The world thus becomes the site where corporeal life, in all its vulnerability, is constantly limited by the close proximity of death. In short, on Lacoste's reading, the world is no longer Heidegger's dynamic environment maintained by a life always in the process of transformation but a static envelope of immanence which life is powerless to escape. From here, having accepted as the proper spokesperson for our secular existence a Heidegger who is understood to describe a form of life enclosed in material limits, Lacoste moves inevitably to claim that the arrival of the Absolute will involve what he does not hesitate to call "violence" and an "affront" to individual existence. This, too, goes along with the basic steps also taken by Marion. No less so than Marion's appeal to a God without being, Lacoste's philosophy of a liturgical relation with the Absolute implies not only a restriction of being to the orbit of egocentrism, but also a conception of revelation as an event which traumatizes that comfortable identity.¹⁰

Leaving aside the strangely reductive reading of Heidegger which licenses this sort of move, the theme of trauma points to a second

9. Still more questionable is the interpretation – which Lacoste does *not* make – recently proposed in C. Pickstock, *After Writing: The Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 111-16, where one reads of a Heidegger whose attempt to grasp being through death betrays a "fetishization" of the latter. As a matter of addressing what Heidegger has actually written, and as a necessary condition of serious critique, it must be noted that for Heidegger neither death nor being comes within reach except precisely in the mode of ungraspability. As a matter of situating Pickstock's position in relation to that of Lacoste, it must therefore be said, first, that the choice of the word "fetishism", indicating the fixation of desire on an object which thus replaces the desire's original aim, can only express an attempt to reduce the secular thought of Heidegger to a corruption of religious thought – and then secondly, that a conviction that this very gesture is neither possible nor credible represents one of the many stimulating aspects of *Expérience et Absolu*.

10. Marion's own appeal to such a trauma is worked out in his essay, by now well-known, "La phénomène saturé", in J. -F. Courtine, *Phénoménologie et théologie* (Paris: Criterion, 1992) 79-128.

reduction in the area of hermeneutics and narrativity. If the datum of religious experience – what Marion calls “God” and Lacoste calls the “Absolute” – is given from wholly beyond anything to which individuals can give meaning and by which in turn they can orient themselves in the world, then it is possible to dispense with the usual range of questions concerning any impact or influence stemming from the context in which we receive and interpret that experience as a circumscribed problem. Here, one cannot avoid thinking of Hegel who, from an entirely different perspective, also offered a logos impervious to historical alteration. Lacoste does not thematize this implication in his own work, but he is sensitive to the danger as it is found in Hegel, whose “seamless” history of Absolute Spirit betrays a “perfect ignorance” of the theological tradition it both draws on and claims to fulfill. The Hegelian philosophy of religion is ultimately circular, investing each element of concrete history with a concept – Spirit – which is to be found precisely nowhere, thus unfolding “what is only the simulacrum of history, a history without essential opening [...] a non-history”.¹¹ Radically opposed to this, Lacoste tends rather to suppress that concrete history by *assigning a negative evaluation to every element which is opaque to absolute transcendence*. In other words, whereas Hegel gives every moment of human history a place within a larger story, Lacoste risks denying that the story itself, whatever form it may take, can offer anything significantly new to what must always be the same message. The history of theology and philosophy of religion would thus recount no more than different attempts to conceptualize what arrives from a sphere beyond concepts and exceeds representation. Concepts of God and representations of the Absolute will at base be responses to a claim which imposes itself before they could possibly be mobilized.

In the existential domain, the idea that revelation is traumatic, which is to say sudden and unqualified, implies that the contingency of the event lies entirely on the side of how the individual person accepts it and then takes it up.¹² Freedom thus becomes invested with the full weight of evil, which would be attributed to even the slightest degree of non-coincidence with the revolution in human nature elicited by the liturgical encounter. The ethicist will detect here the source of a pervasive and perhaps even definitive guilt: existing means always having one foot on the path leading away from God. With this on the table, it seems no mistake that Marion’s book *God Without Being* ends by calling for a kind of spiritual “martyrdom” as the exemplar of religious consciousness, and Lacoste’s *Expérience et Absolu* ends by urging us to take lessons from the unworldly irony of what the tradition has called

11. Lacoste, *Expérience et Absolu*, 150.

12. Lacoste, *Expérience et Absolu*, 130-31.

“fools for Christ”.¹³ Also in this same line, the philosopher of religion would then require a clearer distinction between that seemingly obsessive guilt and the somewhat different notion of debt to the Absolute which, for the believer, upholds and sustains us.¹⁴ Is there not a difference between confessing one’s dependence on God in order to live virtuously, and confessing that one’s very “existence” leads away from God? The Christian theologian thus misses a more detailed elaboration of the sacramentality of existence, by which it is held that human freedom and its works are good in themselves, independently of their possible commitment consciously to God.

RECONSIDERATIONS: GOD AND THE ABSOLUTE WITHOUT BEING

Having recognized some of the difficulties awaiting a philosophy of religion which takes shape through and after debate with Heidegger, it remains to pose some questions directly to the positions themselves. Let us note first that it is unclear whether this is merely an effort to limit the claims of a rationality of unbelief, or an attempt to discredit it entirely. This latter aim can be attributed persuasively at least to Marion’s earlier work (up to and including *God Without Being*), which seems intent on defending the supremacy of a rationality which starts from the iconic gaze of God, over rationalities which do not. Lacoste seems to grant more right to secularity, which he considers an innate possibility of any individual insofar as he or she is rooted in existence. All the same, existence is eventually defined as the source of our forgetfulness that the world is given to us. And Lacoste sees the other dimension opened up by the violent shock of revelation to be the occasion not only for recalling that gift but also for critiquing the world in which we had forgotten it.¹⁵ At such moments, what seems passed over is the difference between the rationality of unbelief and rationalities which merely suspend the question of belief. For Marion – again, at least in his earlier work – and for Lacoste, only an original commitment to divine revelation as the definitive feature of our humanity can give proper shape to contemporary philosophy. It is not enough for them to profess even a *methodological* neutrality on the question of belief.

This conclusion has the effect of putting each of us in a relationship to an ultimate datum which, then, withdraws from any and all attempts to understand it. While the move to think of revelation as traumatic event is a forceful component of the attempt to reinstate God beyond the screen of being, it also places a great deal of pressure on the effort to actually relate to that God, whether this occurs through prayer or

13. See Marion, *Dieu sans l'être*, 274-277; Lacoste, *Expérience et Absolu*, 216-18, 227-29.

14. This distinction is worked out beautifully in A. Vergote, *Guilt and Desire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 48-9.

15. Lacoste, *Expérience et Absolu*, 191.

rigorous reflection. It would be mistaken to respond to this modest pastoral concern with the reminder that theology has always upheld God's transcendence over the divine names. Here, in the philosophies of Marion and Lacoste, it is no longer a matter of speculative theology and its historically particular God. It is also no longer a matter of apophatic theology, with its indissoluble bond with the affirmative, kataphatic theology which orients its movements and preserves its confidence in a real focus. Both Marion and Lacoste claim a strictly philosophical position which, nonetheless, is open to divine revelation. The sharp reversal of narrative context from its usual status as the frame for receiving and interpreting revelation into the somewhat different status as one stratum of the field created in response to revelation leads one to suspect that Marion's God without being and Lacoste's liturgical Absolute are, at their most radical distance – which is to say the distance which essentially defines them – not only *beyond* names but also *without* names, which comes perilously close to being simply anonymous.

It would be shortsighted to challenge the phenomenological credibility of this quasi-anonymity, which after all appears precisely in the course of an attempt to loosen phenomenology's grip on contemporary rationality. It would also be off target to object that the religious relationships proposed by Marion and Lacoste have in this way taken a form which few people are likely to recognize as applicable in their own case. What will suffice for both Marion and Lacoste is that it proves possible, on their terms, to turn from religious experience to philosophical descriptions of events and structures which the believer then does indeed recognize. And in itself, this move cannot be the occasion for an objection, even from within the field of phenomenology under attack here. Who will deny that the most ephemeral moments and the deepest structures of experience are often far from evident until careful study brings them out? At the same time, it hardly needs to be said that that move has also been made inevitable by a procedure which prefers to *outflank* any threat to the reasonableness of belief, rather than one that would seek to develop that reasoning out of a description of precisely how belief is experienced and lived. The idea that religious experience is defined ultimately by contact with something that is *never* present – something that *never* settles into a content – virtually invites protest in name of the opposite point of view. Is it not the case, contrary to everything Marion and Lacoste have argued, that it is precisely the content of the object or practice where God is revealed that stimulates religious desire and shapes religious experience? Do we not meet the specifically Christian God first and primarily in the bread and wine consecrated and consumed in the liturgy of the eucharist? And is it not

those objects and participation in this rite which enable us also to find that same God in nature, fellowship, and private contemplation?¹⁶

This final objection is probably best articulated in the domain of methodology. Should one not look for the specific rationality that already flows from the life and practices of belief rather than trying *first* to fashion a rationality which not only clarifies belief but also overtakes all the many rationalities that lack or eschew belief? An advantage of that former procedure, the procedure which tries to develop religious rationality directly out of religious attitudes and practices, can be seen where the idea that a religious experience seems to respond to the specific content of an object (bread and wine) or practice (Christian liturgical rite) leads directly to the question as to how a tradition not only provides the context where that object has its specific meaning but also fixes the identity of the person who comes before it, enters into the practice which focusses it, and eventually has the experience.

Precisely where the positions of Marion and Lacoste are at their most rarefied, promoting an event of unqualified self-revelation by the Absolute, this other approach is at its most concrete. Yet, oddly enough, this is also the moment where the entire critical dimension of that former position becomes possible. In the end, only an event which by definition defies representation and understanding could permit Marion and Lacoste to step through and beyond Heidegger, as well as everyone before him, and turn back to charge that entire history with idolatry (Marion) and the promotion of inauthenticity (Lacoste). Having said this much, it can hardly be assumed that a challenge to the phenomenological salience of that event amounts to a *petitio principii*. Marion in particular has often insisted that such a challenge arises from within an immature phenomenology whose incapacity to respect all forms of phenomenality it makes all too clear. But this sort of response cannot conceal the fact that the unique phenomenality in question here, the self-revelation of the Absolute, is in fact nowhere described but simply everywhere asserted, as an all-important possibility.

These differences rejoin an ongoing debate over the future of research into religious reasoning in a secular world. Marion and Lacoste enclose all rationality within a horizon which is ultimately religious, and indeed religious beyond all denominations. The discussion with unbelief thus aims mainly to expose it to the transcendence it excludes. As opposed to this, the religious reasoning which instead starts from the specificity of

16. Though with Marion and Lacoste it is a question of dialogue mainly with Heidegger, this response to them comes not from Heidegger but Wittgenstein, whose "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough" seems to me to be a helpful resource for avoiding the notion – metaphysical through and through – that rituals rest on and enact something deeper, in favour of an attempt – phenomenological through and through – to describe rituals in and of themselves, without ulterior reference to grounds. In C. G. Luckhardt, *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives* (Bristol, UK: Thoemmes, 1996) 61-81.

the experience does not depend on upholding a single, all-embracing religious horizon, and thus feels no need to recuperate unbelief into itself. Though this does not spare it the task of remaining vigilant about its own identity, this other religious reasoning is nonetheless free to learn and even borrow from the developments of fields unabashedly atheistic or agnostic in their methodologies, such as – to cite a prominent example – psychology. And, of course, this kind of dialogue with other disciplines has long been an important element in a living, credible theology.

A final worry about Marion and Lacoste. Might it not be the case that their extreme will to recuperation deafens them to what a field like psychology discovers in the more chaotic regions of the soul, so that what they truly learn from psychology will be restricted to what can be opened to the God without being? Will that restriction not impose a violence of its own on the scientific progress of the fields which might otherwise offer religion something new? Could it not be, in other words, that a God with too much transcendence actually gets in the way of better understanding who and what we are, as humble believers?

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, let us return to the theme of unbelief. From beginning to end, what cannot fail to strike the reader of either Marion or Lacoste is the intense drama of atheism and agnosticism. The path by which each tries to deal with all forms of unbelief proceeds by way of a sharp detour, arriving at a perspective from which unbelief becomes an internal possibility of the finite individual whose deepest relationship, whether she or he realizes it or not, is with the Absolute. On one hand, and without dwelling further on the point, this yields a position which can appear more concerned with rational ascendancy than with direct contact with the belief that it sets out to protect. Marion and Lacoste offer us a general theory of human existence and experience in which the religious horizon is extended beyond the reach of any particular denomination or creed – one that risks, then, becoming detached from the particularity of the experiences which those denominations and creeds profess. On the other hand, the high road around unbelief also seems, paradoxically, not to have taken unbelief seriously enough. It is a simple and incontestable fact of secular culture that unbelief has become a viable form of life, one which endures and is capable of providing satisfaction in many cases equal to that of belief. Accepting this fact would urge against the notion that one can outflank it or contain it in a rationality opened to belief.

Thus relaxed, religious reason could focus on a more modest but also arguably more plausible account of religious experience. In turn, this would open the way to greater respect for the historical and cultural, or

at least denominational, particularity of the tradition and community in which an experience occurs. While this no doubt requires religious reason to confess that its identity is no longer strictly universal (if indeed, it ever was), one also supposes that that sort of honesty will go farther toward keeping the respect of those who subscribe to other ways of thinking and living.