Review Essays

Critical Study of Jason W. Alvis, *The Inconspicuous God. Heidegger, French Phenomenology and the Theological Turn* (Indiana UP, 2018)

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Jason Alvis' book is a welcome voice in the field of continental philosophy of religion. Alvis focuses on the influence of Martin Heidegger on French phenomenology. He takes his cue not only from Heidegger but also from Guy Debord's study *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) which entailed a devastating critique of our addiction to spectacles, excesses and 'the next big thing'. Heidegger and Debord are here lined up in their appeal to a more sober account of appearances: most important about this or that appearance might not be that which stares you in the face, as it were, with an oppressive excessiveness one cannot ignore but rather that which usually does not get noted and which remains out of sight. This is, for Alvis, one way to delineate Heidegger's (contradictory) insistence on a *Phänomenologie des Unscheinbaren*. Alvis points out that the various translations of '*unscheinbar*' wrongly confuse its 'inconspicuousness' with invisibility or irrationality even (17).

Alvis' book is a thought-provoking study of the relation of Heidegger's phenomenology of the inconspicuous to a theology issuing from "the new phenomenology." Although Alvis' own theological stance is not always clear – sometimes he remains a philosopher, sometimes faith is just assumed – he traces the avant-garde of French philosophy to its origin in Heidegger:

each of the chapters has demonstrated [that] an inconspicuous God calls for an inconspicuous revelation [Jean-Luc Marion] because its phenom-

enality is counter to expectation, which usually anticipates such manifestation to be spectacular. There is an 'inconspicuous religious lifeworld' [Michel Henry] because life, which is inconspicuous, destabilizes any totalizing neutrality of the world in a way that calls us to become the carburetors of the tensions between life and world. There is an active inconspicuous liturgy [Jean-Yves Lacoste] that might open from within [...] a dwelling of the Absolute or a space of 'Godhood'. Then, the adoration of this God is inconspicuous [Jean-Luc Nancy] because it finds the adored to have the uniquely divine ability to be on the touch line between the ordinary and the obscure as ever differentiating from itself (221–222).

With further chapters on the 'faithing' of faith, inspired by Jean-Louis Chrétien, and on religious experience, the theological goals of the book are clear. Yet, for philosophers too, there is a lot to learn here. In his first chapters, Alvis offers a thorough reading of Heidegger's phenomenology that didn't get noticed in quite that way by most Heidegger scholars. Alvis' aim is fourfold: he wants first to introduce a thinking of God that sidetracks the current attention in contemporary culture but in some phenomenologies of excess as well, to excesses. His is a phenomenology "in favor of banality and ordinariness" (2). Alvis does so, secondly, by focusing on Janicaud's critique of 'the theological turn' that French phenomenology had high-jacked Heidegger's phenomenology of the inconspicuous. Yet Alvis is clear that phenomenology, for him, is the method that allows "attention to the phenomenality of theological life" (3). If it wasn't capable of doing this, then phenomenology would not add anything "to what the ontic sciences of theology already are capable of providing" (3).

In the *Introduction* Alvis focuses on Heidegger's phenomenology of the inconspicuous by way of Heidegger's 1973 seminars in Zahringen and his letters to Roger Munier, shortly after these seminars, in which Heidegger compared his approach to that of Husserl and states that these seminars "actually perform[ed] an exercise in a phenomenology of the inconspicuous" (20). Here Alvis finds a first clue for his phenomenology of God and of theological life, for in the retreat from what is obvious and spectacular to what is inconspicuous and fading one in effect finds the means "to treat this approach as a particular [...] reduction that involves one's becoming attuned to the various modes of potential hiddenness" (5).

Chapter One explores how Marion's thought runs parallel to Heidegger's attention for what does not (yet) appear. If Heidegger's phenomenology of presencing, as it is now called, focuses on *that out of which* phenomena come into appearance (as in *Being and Time* all phenomena appeared from out of the horizon of the world), Marion can be seen as focusing on such a broadened

horizon of givenness – more broad than just the finite world. Alvis attends to Marion's insistence of the paradox involved in saturated phenomena, which run counter to the expectations of the subject's intentionality and blur one's vision to such an extent that nothing seems to appear clearly. Yet although no phenomena appears in a determinate form, this does not mean that nothing is given. It is to such givenness that Marion's phenomenology is directed, to the 'how' of a phenomenon's being given *prior* to its appearing as it were. It took Marion some time to rid himself from his obsession with excesses of all sorts – to the essay 'The Banality of Saturation' to be precise – and Alvis is quick to add that "poor or common law phenomena [need not be disqualified automatically] from having any uncanny potential" (33).

Alvis turns to Marion's *Reduction of Givenness* (1989). Here Marion is less occupied by the excess of givenness and more with close textual analysis of Husserl and Heidegger. Such analysis first allowed him to discover his phenomenology of givenness. Two examples might help here. The first one, employed regularly by Alvis, is that of categorial intuition in its relation to sense data starting from Heidegger's comparison of his own thinking to that of Husserl (20): when seeing a horse, in effect, I do not see its hair or its hooves only then to infer that this living thing here in front of me is indeed a horse. On the contrary, I quite immediately see that this is a horse, and in this sense see and intuit its inconspicuous essence before I even pay attention to the existence of these hooves here or that hair there. The 'being of beings' is not available to sight, Heidegger would teach – it is inconspicuous. A second example: suppose I am looking at a table and this table here appears clearly and distinctly. Even when I would intuit both its 'essence' (the table is essentially a plateau with four legs) and its 'existence' (this table here) this phenomenon here, in its full-fledged appearance, still allows for – as Marion has it – a distinction between 'what is apparent' and what is not (35–37). If I focus exclusively on the presence of this table here, I forget or otherwise leave out that out of which this table here is capable of appearing. One might think here of its manufacturers, the house in which it finds its place, etc. Yet all these things gather to bring this phenomenon to presence and serve as that out of which its presence is able to presence – as Heidegger would say.

It is such a "wedding between manifestation and the manifested that Marion [...] interweaves into his version of 'revelation'" (39). What is manifested – this phenomenon here – stems from a manifestation but not every manifestation entails a specific manifested phenomenon, or, as Alvis says, "although revelation clearly gives, it does not give clearly" (44). Revelation for Marion and Heidegger (who Alvis impressively reads alongside Marion) is "in its alternation between revealing and being a phenomenon that reveals [...] inherently a par-

ticular inconspicuous phenomenon" (ibid.). Marion focuses on Christ, yet even for Christians it is the case that although Christ is the full and definitive manifestation of God Christians can never fully comprehend what Christ teaches us about God. In this sense, the phenomenon that reveals does not fully exhaust the act of revealing.

How does one arrive at inconspicuous phenomena such as these? If phenomenology is to teach us a thing or two about how we live, breathe and move, should it not show us the way to a particular way of "phenomenological seeing"? Alvis turns to Heidegger's "exercise in phenomenology" in *Zahringen*: this exercise provides "the clearing of the phenomenology of the inapparent" (ibid.). It shows us the way *from* the phenomenon being given – the what – *to* its givenness – the how – the way *from* what is revealed *to* the act of revealing in general. Alvis will speak of a "reduction to the inconspicuous" (74). Alvis concludes with stating that Marion's insistence on excess contributes to contemporary culture's compulsion towards a "bedazzling spectacularity" (48). Yet this lacuna in Marion offers a starting-point for Alvis' own investigations: what if revelation is so inconspicuous that it is "incarnate" and "integrated into the whole of life of the one who experiences it" (50)?

Although there are small leaps from chapter to chapter, it is clear that Alvis seeks a "phenomenology of religious experience" (58). This phenomenology is not to be held "to previous held beliefs" (ibid.). Alvis takes his liberty from certain traditions yet it is not always certain from whence this liberty and to where it extends. *Chapter two* instructs us about the "reduction to the inapparent": it shows we can see what we most often cannot see. Alvis states that the back and forth between categorial (essence) and sensual intuition (existence) should lead us to the hypothesis that phenomenology also must study "how one looks past things" (62). This "attunement" (63) to presencing rather than to sheer presence is something we must, and can, learn. It is here that Heidegger's insistence on *Lichtung* starts to make sense: how do we see what we otherwise gloss over yet nevertheless functions as a condition of possibility to see this thing (e.g. the table) at all? What concerns Heidegger as a phenomenologist here is to make appear that which otherwise withdraws from appearance: when I look at a table (and constitute it) what is it that makes possible this vision? What is it that I 'leap over' to be able to just constitute this table?

In Heidegger's *Parmenides* Alvis finds ways to explore this concealment. Such concealment obviously has something mysterious. Why can I see this table, gather what is essential to tables 'in general' but not see what makes possible the appearance of this table at all? The mystery, in Heidegger, quite often takes up the contours of something uncanny. Both the mysterious and

the uncanny are inconspicuous: they do not show themselves. If a mystery is explained, it is no longer a mystery. If the uncanny becomes familiar, it is no longer uncanny. Heidegger's point is twofold: it is to show that the ordinary *is* extraordinary (or not to be taken for granted) and to show that this dimension of inconspicuous (prior to what is being given and what is *just* present) has something uncanny (69).

Can one attain presencing as such, and reach givenness without being stuck at the being given? Derridean ears will be raised and Heidegger will be cautious: apparently, one can reach into the *Bereich des Unscheinbaren* or "the domain of the inconspicuous" (70) but this domain, at the least, is not there once and for all (nor for all perhaps). Such a "tautology of presencing" – presence presences – for Heidegger is the primordial sense of phenomenology and, not coincidentally, the step Heidegger takes beyond Husserl. By showing that the presencing of this table here takes us beyond dialectic, it is phenomenology that moves beyond much of modern philosophy. For this move, not "yet polarized with other phenomena" (71), attunes us precisely to *this table here*. This table here, in its individuality, although made possible against a horizon of inconspicuousness is in the final resort unlike all other tables, it demands attention and allows not (yet at least) for any comparison with other tables. It is precisely to bring presencing under attention that Heidegger uses languages as 'shining forth', 'bring into light', etc. The presencing of this present table here might be unlike the presencing of all other tables (although it could be). One shouldn't forget that Heidegger's philosophical journey started with probing into the *haeccitas* of a thing – through Duns Scot.

Alvis is right to point to this "exercise" in Heidegger: one must bring thinking "itself into the clearing of the appearing of the unapparent" (71). A thought or two about how this constitution of the table gets itself constituted, this is all that is needed: Merleau-Ponty's thinking of institution (and a lot of Derrida, who took his cue on this issue from Husserl) starts here. But when Merleau-Ponty and Derrida focused on the past, Heidegger always looked for the future to think about such presencing – this is why he is more radical and 'progressive' than these other thinkers.

Alvis' *third chapter* turns to Henry's account of 'life' and its relation to Heidegger. Not unlike Lacoste, Henry asks whether all phenomena necessarily show themselves in the horizon of the world and whether, through such worldly appearance, truth would not be restricted to the horizon of visibility (88). Alvis argues "the inherent challenge, to which a development of the [...] inconspicuous [...] provides some solutions [...] consists in how the understanding of the world as the neutral [...] theatre in which all experience takes place, can be thought otherwise" (ibid.).

How to rid oneself of world, given that “the world [...] is precisely in, how, and through which meaningful descriptions of the world as a phenomenon can be given” (91)? How can the world itself show up as a phenomenon when all phenomena first show themselves *in* the world? “It is in this shifting between a thing-as-such and a thing-as-indicative-of-involvement-in-the-world that an engagement with ‘inconspicuousness’ might provide further clarification” (93). This back and forth between the phenomenon showing up in the world and the ‘worldhood of world’ might have led Heidegger to substitute the stress on ‘the world’ with attention to a *Lichtung* that is prior to world. This “clearing,” Alvis argues, “reinterpret[s] the fundamental nature of the world, not as a place for revelation or manifestation, but rather as the temporal and spatial instance at/in which [...] revealing and concealing actively takes place” (94). We become attuned to such presencing and can be trained in experiencing through a “wonder at what is simple” (94 and 78).

For Henry what is most important about our lives shows itself in and through affective moods. Affectivity, for Henry, is prior to the (neutral) perception of visible things within the world. Affectivity is how a being within-the-world senses that ‘it lives’: it is this subjective focus on life – I can see this or that but no one might really notice how I feel about these things – that makes for a (fully immanent) ‘invisibility’ prior to world. Alvis notes that Henry’s subjectivism is not easy to swallow for Heideggerians or Husserlians (trained to see “things” more precisely): one may very well say that it is through the very fact of me living that I first get a hold on things, the fact remains that it is hard to see how one “arrives at some level of objectivity” when one “associates life with interiority and, the world with exteriority” (98). Alvis is however quick to remedy every dualism or “dichotomy” (101) in Henry. In its stead, he seeks to show how affections “are the couriers of relation between ourselves and the world” (*ibid.*). Life is what “allows a phenomenon to be a phenomenon” (99), it is the dimension in which the neutral phenomena of the world first crystallize. Yet what matters is what lies before this crystallization of phenomena, that is, how these phenomena are first made or created (Cf. 98) as ever so many revelations of “the mysteries of being” (101). This explains how it happens that we most often overlook both worldhood and life (and being) – we are struck by phenomena always and already “present at hand”. Yet our affections, Alvis argues, “act as levers for disrupting the everyday world [and bracket] how one takes something to be obvious” (102). They function as a phenomenological medium: at issue is not “a getting-over of the world by conjuring an invisible [...] space [but] rather a turn to the paradoxical nature of the world itself” (*ibid.*).

How “to interpret the world of life in its religious element, [so that] an experience of an inconspicuous God might be given description” (100)? Here Alvis

launches a novel way of applying phenomenology to theology. Alvis indicates that this blurring of the distinction between world and life and the pointing to its paradoxical givenness – without givenness no phenomena, yet without phenomena one would not know of its givenness – “is the clarion to [...] active engagement of the life of living religiously” (103). Suddenly Alvis’s language becomes biblical. He emphasizes the tension between world and life that pertains to Jesus’ followers who are not of the world yet are sent into the world (ibid.). For Alvis, this tension is a way of “taking the world itself into view” (ibid.) and depends on the “revivification of aletheia” (104), on serious philosophy therefore: it demands a step back from our preoccupations with technology “so that a different reality can be experienced” (104) or, better, so that reality might be experienced differently and “the technological condition of man [...] ail[ed]” (123).

In seeking something (or someone) outside of the world, Alvis turns to Lacoste in *chapter four*. Alvis sees Lacoste’s liturgical reduction as a “theological illumination of *Being and Time*” (115) but finds the contrast Lacoste erects with Heidegger “suspect” (ibid.). Lacoste “appears to conflate Heidegger’s interests with an antitheistic impulse” (ibid.). This was surely the case at the time of his *Expérience et Absolu* (1994) but seems to have been abandoned in later work. *Être en danger* (2011) for instance develops liturgical experience precisely from out of Heidegger thinking of the ‘thing’. Furthermore, Alvis argues that Lacoste’s liturgy is too quickly pitched against an “incomplete understanding of Dasein as a static being there” (ibid.). Lacoste in effect understands the ecstasy of Dasein as a mere openness to things in the world but with no regard for the ‘worlding’ or the event of world itself. Alvis aims “to extend Lacoste’s contribution” (116) in this direction.

Alvis goes a long way with Lacoste: the liturgical reduction is topological in nature and attempts to provide an answer to the question where we stand in relation to God. For this, Lacoste uses the example of the recluse who no longer finds any place on earth to live out the relation to the Absolute. The recluse prefigures what Lacoste in his 1994 book calls “nonexperience”: our distance from the world in and through the liturgical reduction is not substituted with any enlightened intuition whatsoever. Alvis to add: “the nonexperience [...] provides [...] a clearing that [...] is reliable as a meaningfully present intelligibility” (117) so drawing Lacoste into his account of “meaningful presence” (e.g. 70), in which one may recognize Thomas Sheehan’s reading of Heidegger.¹

1 Thomas Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger. A Paradigm-Shift* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

Alvis applauds Lacoste because this attempt at liturgical nonexperience “is a move that Heidegger initiated, for the experience of the inconspicuous [...] is to some degree experienced without its being grasped [...] by consciousness” (118). Alvis disagrees with the fact that what is so inconspicuous would be mere(ly) world overcome. Instead, ‘presencing’ or appearing should be conceived as an “always rising” (94), and “ever-giving” (119) of which world is but one constellation. It is, Alvis proposes, from out of such a rising and giving, from out of “the event of world”, that the divine should be first thought. “Heidegger by no means sought a world closed-off to the possibilities of God, but [...] challenged attempts to ‘enclose’ God within it as *causa sui*” (121).

Alvis intriguingly concludes: “the inconspicuous hidden of the world has openings onto its outside from within it, thus merging [...] the intertwining of inside/outside in a radical way” (122). One cannot underestimate the consensus in contemporary continental philosophy when it concerns such a transcendence within immanence and its concomitant critique of a closed immanent frame. It is present, for instance, in Derrida’s full subscription to Levinas’ “*au-delà-dans*” (“the beyond within”) in his *À-Dieu* (1995) and in Nancy’s thinking of a ‘transimmanence’. Alvis’ theological question adds to this rethinking: “can this ‘dwelling in’ be thought of in [...] a way that inconspicuously reveals [...] the sacred [as] an in-dwelling” (127). The theme of incarnation is abundantly present in contemporary philosophy: it is up to theology, though, to show how this understanding of incarnation leads up to a thinking of the Incarnation.

Alvis concludes his take on Lacoste by showing that if the reduction of the later Heidegger to a “vague spirituality” (122), in which one acknowledges “an immanent sacred [...] may be a fair critique of Heidegger”, the same is not true of the claim that in Heidegger “the sacred [...] holds power over any potential being-before-God” (123), given the fact that “this sacred clearing allows for the worlding of the world” (*ibid.*). Alvis, in a sense, wants an *upgrade* of the sacred. On this score, it is a pity that Alvis’ book came too early to address Lacoste’s theological ‘update’ in *Recherches sur la parole* (2015) where Lacoste distinguishes between a mute ‘sacred’ and the revelatory speech of God to the human being. Yet Alvis is right when arguing that “Lacoste’s approach appears to exude aspects of Heideggerian phenomenology of the inconspicuous” (125) without really acknowledging these aspects.

Alvis does not buy into Lacoste’s liturgical reduction conceived as a nonexperience happening in a nonplace pertaining to a nonworld for a simple reason: “if the *coram Deo* is not [a] dwelling in the world, then how can it [...] be possible for this nonworldly experience to [...] feedback into truly transgressive, world-altering differentiation” (129). This is the reason why Henry plays but a marginal role in Alvis’s thinking: whereas for Heidegger, it matters to attain

Being from within beings only to return to these beings differently, Henry's approach to what kind of phenomenology is needed to first come up with a phenomenon similarly disregards this *return* to world and life in which one deals with these phenomena.

Can existence's ecstasy, no longer directed solely at world, but at the inconspicuous, as the nonappearing that belongs to all appearing, redress our 'being-with' as a being-held by or as a radical 'being-in' the Absolute by which we are "an 'inn' for the Absolute to dwell" (131)? Is our being surrounded by hiddenness such that it intimates the Absolute surrounding us? It are these questions that Alvis' book seeks to answer. What if the Absolute we seek 'over there' is "uncannily close, even taking on a mundane or banal form" (131) and so close in fact that one, upon one's return from the event of world to what worlds there, no longer disregards the obviousness with which the Absolute here dwells? Theological questions put aside, Alvis's aim here is to prove through phenomenology's "inversion of the 'in' [that] religious experience [can be] safeguard[ed] from being reducible to pure sentiment" (131) and to spectacularity.

Alvis' *fifth chapter* turns to Nancy "for whom the disenclousure of things in their wonder is what invokes [...] adoration" (141). Alvis rehearses Nancy's gesture of adoration because it can be seen, first, as the response to "being-before the Inconspicuous God" (145) and, secondly, because such a response of adoration is not one of appropriation but rather of "being-appropriated-by [...] a divinity of pure differentiation" (145).

Adoration is what opens us to the outside that is here (150), it is that through which, to use the terminology used above, one reaches the outside from within. Adoration is indeed twofold. It is, as Nancy argues, a word addressed to someone/something which largely is inaccessible, yet somehow there is some sense of direction on the part of the adorer to at least turn to the adored (*ibid.*). But what is this turn toward a "nonpresent opening" (150) precisely? It opens to the finite as finite, that is, as infinitely "bound to change" (152). Often one overlooks such contingency and settles for the firm grip of conceptualization (extended in institutionalized religion). Very much in Heideggerian fashion, openings occur "only briefly, like flashes of lightning" (152) and so show "the constant newness [and] differentiation" (152) of the infinitely finite event of world. Adoration serves as the "touchline between the outside and the inside" (152). Nancy points to the mouth as an example of such a touchline: is the mouth inside or outside the body? Once these lines between the out- and inside (or the transcendent and immanent) blurred, one realizes that "it is precisely the making strange or making uncanny that characterizes revelation" (153).

Alvis concludes with a question to Nancy: what stops this infinite finitude from becoming an infinite regress in which differentiation and newness be-

come themselves a spectacle? Alvis again turns to the Bible for answers: adoration differs from idolatrous reveling in sheer simulacra by its very address – it is after all addressed to someone in particular. The life of Christ shows the particularity of this address: instead of a spectacular superbeing, Christ showed God as a “humble omnipotence that is always different and counter-to-expectation” (155): Christ shows up where he was least expected. Yet, what should worry here in this halting of the regress is that exactly the characteristic that Alvis critiqued Nancy for is repeated and rehearsed on the level of divinity: to stop the ‘infinite finitude’ from becoming an infinite regress, the “ability to be ever-different” is itself attributed divine properties or “marks the power of the holy” (ibid.). This might not be enough to avoid the accusation of ontotheology which, in short, judges the infinite and the finite according to similar standards.

In his *sixth chapter*, Alvis queries whether there is any evidence for these experiences. His emphasis is on the “intersocial” aspects of such evidence (161). We cannot help but feel that the discussion of the theological turn is a bit side-tracked here. Instead, Alvis looks to William James, Merold Westphal, and Anthony Steinbock to find an answer as to how evidence is provided for religious experience. For religious experience, Alvis argues, the proof of the pudding is in the eating: religious experience is to be verified if and only if it is embedded in a “life lived religiously whereby the integration of the holy within everyday life is” realized (173). Such experience shrouds itself in the clothes of apophaticism: if the experience of divinity could be proven then it is most likely not the divinity that one has experienced. Although the argument is respectable, one hopes for more once Alvis turns to the ‘intersocial aspects’ of these experiences: what if several people share a similar experience and, God knows, start a tradition from within such experiences? Here Alvis wavers: on the one hand, the act of faith is “an act unlike any other” (9), yet on the other he insists that the concomitant experience “is not isolatable” (175) from the entirety of our existence.

Chapter seven extends on the nature of faith by elaborating on Chrétien’s thinking of the *unhoped for*: “this unhoped for is a hope for what is impossible to ever dream of hoping, and to achieve this, forgetfulness must be total” (181). Faith is related to this notion “because an ‘intention’ of faith is not capable of controlling what will or could come” (186). Next to a sort of emptying of presence, this incapability of faith ‘to petition the Lord with prayers’, and therefore overly relying on ‘grace’ rather than ‘nature’, is characteristic of what I call the protestant trait of continental philosophy.² Nothing proves faith: not even the ‘works’ as another tradition once argued. This is evident in several passages.

2 See *Between Faith and Belief: Toward A Contemporary Phenomenology of Religious Life* (New York: SUNY, 2016).

Furthermore, the 'intersocial' element of faith is always reduced to a one-on-one with God as the "interpersonal act between oneself and God" (187 and 191). This is a missed opportunity, I think, because phenomenology could have provided the means to think about the shared intentionalities of those who seek faith from within tradition and 'live' the intersocial element of faith together. Similarly, the strange stress on an evidence and proof for faith leads Alvis to an awkward *petitio principii*: "the 'unseen' reality has a proof that corresponds to it uniquely. This proof [...] is faith" (ibid.). Alvis is aware of the circular nature of this argument, but one expects more than the statement that faith in an unseen reality is present if and only if some have faith in such an unseen reality ...

Alvis' concern to keep this faith safe from any belief and halt it in a somewhat empty gesture of testimony is odd: what testimony can one give if one knows not what to testify of? To be sure, Alvis corrects his views when arguing that in Heidegger's *Phenomenology of Religious Life* Paul's letters provide a "conception of the life of faith that is [...] intertwined with [...] intersocial elements of [...] witness. This intertwining is not about the communication of what one comprehends, but rather how and what one does *not know*" (178–8). As Alvis nicely puts it: "in the context of faith, having is a kind of *not having*" (188). Here too, however, first an experience of what one thinks one has and knows, and what is handed down through tradition and beliefs is needed to even come up with the thought that one must not 'have' faith and dispel certain beliefs. It is this coconstitution of faith and belief in traditions that Alvis omits from his thinking.

It must be signaled that for such a vacated faith Alvis creates some accurate metaphors, for "like the task of driving a car, in which the focus is on driving but not on the car itself, the act of faith is brought about by an active willing of forgetting" (190), a will not to control what one hopes for, a will not to 'comprehend' the Absolute. One hears this often in continental philosophy of religion – in Caputo's 'religion without religion' just as well as in Nancy's faith without belief – the question is: is it something we can do? Can one reach a second naiveté that is entirely without the first naiveté?

Chapter eight asks about "the question of the givenness of God to thought" (195). Although it at first erects a similar dichotomy between idolatrous conceptualization and iconic inconspicuousness as the chapter on faith did between a faith that clings to certain beliefs or spectacular revelations and a faith that forever escapes such a firm grip, Alvis concludes with inspiring ideas about God's being and takes care not to slip into an apophaticism reveling in God's unknowability. Instead this chapter "seeks to think [...] carefully the givenness

of God [...] in terms of inconspicuousness. [W]hether or not one thinks 'there is' a God, there is or 'it gives' the thought of God" (197). Alvis indicates that the metaphysical tradition privileged "one particular type of [God's] how", namely "clarity [and] luminescence" (196).

Alvis repeats how Heidegger's phenomenology of the inconspicuous proceeds: it indicates "how intelligibility comes about in an oscillation between light and dark" (197). It is not phenomenology's goal to draw the phenomenon into the light, it is to realize that the "phenomenon never fully shows itself, but [that] this not-showing is [...] part and parcel of the phenomenon as shown" (200). Alvis mentions Heidegger's attention to symptoms of a disease, which announce the coming of the phenomenon of a disease. The point is that such a phenomenology of presencing can also be addressed theologically. In this case, God's non-appearing or absence is something that truly is – it would not primarily point to God's non-existence. On the contrary, God's non-appearing might belong to who God is. The 'humble omnipotence' of God might need just this: a divinity that refrains from omnipresence and omnipotency in order to allow us to autonomously live 'in His absence'. Yet Alvis also points out that there are many ways of being given and that givenness itself, importantly, "is [not] an inherently religious form of appearing" (201). Even for the atheist the world is (a) given.

If the metaphysics of presence focuses on the end-result of this being given, so to speak, on beings in their very presence, the phenomenology of inconspicuous givenness focuses on the how of givenness *prior* to its presence here and now. It is such an attention to what retreats from presence, or what is present in its absence that is here applied to God. Alvis speaks of "God's simultaneous entry and withdrawal from the very appearance in which God arrives" (204). This involves a loosening of the "God-like-data one previously had been given" (*ibid.*) which is, often, "preferred over an actively differentiating God" (*ibid.*). A phenomenology of the inconspicuous so incites us to 'unknow' what the tradition teaches about divinity through attention to the God's "attributes" (*ibid.*). It inspires "a way of experiencing the givenness of that which cannot be directly aimed at, yet at the same time is something at which one might be directed" (207). Omnipresence, for example, is rethought in the manner of an "omni-potence" (209), focusing not on the God that is present always and everywhere but a God that has the potency to find "new ways [of] being given" (204), a God that can *become present* whenever and wherever God wills.

In his conclusion, Alvis returns to Debord's discussion of the spectacle. Alvis thinks certain ideas of God collaborate with such a society of the spectacle. The spectacle satisfies the gaze, it is here for everyone to see just as

long as everyone wants to see. Yet such spectacles, Alvis argues, come “with [their] own unique theology” (219): they become omnipresent themselves and Godself becomes a sort of spectacle, “at best a celebrity of a higher order” (220).

Alvis wrote an important book: his analyses are always accurate and he often offers inspiring interpretations. There are just two things that I would want to call attention to: first, there is a sort of theological appropriation of Nancy’s thought that sometimes veers into the direction of our “ontotheological condition” (208) and second, it is not clear why the phenomenology of the inconspicuous would blend solely with only the Christian tradition.

As for the first critique, namely that Alvis’ book at times indicates our ontotheological condition, I noted already that Nancy’s infinite finitude of finite differences is kept in check by God as the great controller of differentiation. There is a subtle shift from what Heidegger would call the being of beings to the being of God so that what is bad at a finite level, namely the capacity to be different, becomes a good thing once it falls under God’s jurisdiction. A similar confusion between being and God occurs in Alvis’ handling of the question of being and the question of God. If the question of being is at issue Alvis follows Heidegger, for “the task is not to bring Being into further manifestation per se, but rather to be appropriated by its *lethe*, to be instilled with [its] wonder” (183). Yet just as the ever-different infinite finitude is never allowed to play its role, so too this wonder is but a prelude to the grand finale that Alvis allows God to play, for it is via such wonder that one learns to adore (and gets appropriated by) the divinity. Again there is this subtle shift from being to God to the extent that one who simply wonders at the question of the being seems *not yet properly appropriated* by God and is, so to say, stuck half-way. The question of being once more gets shoved into and redressed as a question of the being of God.

As for the second question, I am struck by the fact how adamantly Alvis seems to think that the phenomenology of the inconspicuous points to the Christian idea of God. This seems to be a very clear and distinct view of what ought to remain inconspicuous! A certain agnosticism would be in order here, for although I would not want to exclude that a divinity is at play in what appears, it is not yet decided whether this divinity would verify what most of our traditions have to say about this divinity. This is obvious in Alvis’ references to the incarnation, even up to the final sentence of the book in which he speaks of “God’s incarnate integration” (209).

Yet does not the phenomenology of the inconspicuous point in the opposite direction? Is not for such a phenomenology, that which flees from appearance, that what refuses to present itself, that which, in other words, never becomes

quite so 'incarnate' in one unique, definitive and exhaustive figure, what matters the most? In short, for all its phenomenological merits, Alvis seems to have some prejudices toward *a* Christian story that is not, at least not immediately, confirmed by the phenomena it tries to bring into view.

On the Inconspicuousness of God: A Reply to Joeri Schrijvers

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In our current academic climate in which a) we don't even make time to read the work of our colleagues in the office next door, and b) entire books get reduced to paragraph-length blurbs, Joeri Schrijvers' detailed reviews are both an exception and an example. It is a gift to see that more developed scholars take the work of us junior scholars seriously and earnestly, hopefully leading dialogues in our subfield one step further.

His review locates various tensions in the book: a disciplinary one (religion/philosophy/theology), a topical one (visibility/invisibility) and a specifically religious/confessional one (protestant/catholic, christian/agnostic). These tensions then are used as hermeneutic springboards for how to read and judge the book, not just as a descriptive project of a recent movement in phenomenology, but also as a more constructive attempt at a kind of socio-cultural "theo-poetics." Schrijvers' essay does its own hermeneutic phenomenology, shifting the ideas subtly, testing them from different angles, and describing uniquely my hopes that the book expose at least one of the drives latently operative in our contemporary social imaginary. The book aimed to shift attention away from the highly polarized dyads of visibility/invisibility or presence/absence, by pointing to how beneath them are other dyads that in fact are operative phenomenal experiences. I specifically developed the idea of "inconspicuousness" as a way to counter our cultural overemphasis upon its etymological opposite, "the spectacle." The (especially theological and phenomenological) dialogues regarding invisibility, inconceivability, or hiddenness tend to not recognize their soci-political consequences, one of which being the colonization of all social and moral life by the dialectic of bedazzlement in "appearance" and "non-appearance." Guy Debord and Feuerbach both correctly assessed the inseparability of theology and anthropology.

Schrijvers' review nevertheless raises some reasonable concerns about all of this. For example, I never offered a clear presentation of my own personal

positions in regards to Christianity in the book. Although this omission can give the impression that my position is ambiguous or ambivalent, its absence indeed was intentional, and for various reasons. This book was written by an American who has a fundamentalist protestant upbringing, presently adheres to a charismatic/renewal theology, and interprets a number of Post-Thomistic French Catholics' appropriations of a German "Atheist" Heidegger beholden to an often Gnostic Greek philosophy and culture! This wide array of influences led me to think that a straightforward explanation of my theological and confessional positions would have posed more of a distraction than a clarification. It also is important to note that the book served as the basis of my *Habilitationsschrift* (a qualification especially prevalent in German speaking academia, a kind of mash-up between a second doctorate and a tenure review), which was written in, and assessed by, a Philosophy department that would be critical of such theological engagement. In future works the question "from where do you theologize?" will be answered more clearly, yet I remain confident that this omission does not take away from the book's potential merits.

Stylistically regarded, the book sometimes takes unexpected detours through various disciplines, inadvertently taking up the style of the thinker I am discussing. For example, in the chapter on Henry one might note a blatant disregard for a methodological explanation of transitions from philosophy to theology (mirroring Henry's approach in *C'est moi la vérité*). Yet at other times, the book takes up a slightly more analytic tone: In the chapter dealing with the question of "evidence" and Janicaud's critiques, I seek a possibility of grounding religious experience beyond both fideism and epistemological oversight (worries I genuinely hold for contemporary phenomenology of religion). Such a balancing act that takes seriously the various positions on how philosophy and theology relate, helped motivate the writing of the book, even though at times the pendulum appeared to swing too far in one direction. It thus is entirely understandable that Schrijvers would worry that the conception of an "inconspicuous evidence" may have overemphasized apophaticism, mystery, or invisibility.

To at least briefly respond to Schrijvers' interpretations of some specific chapters: As for the chapter on Chrétien, it originally sought to locate a kind of "faith beneath/before faith", a religion before religion that is more implicit than explicit, since it is on the level of "explicit faith" that we tend to base our discussions. Yet accompanying this quest for a faith before faith comes the question of how we can ever have the agency to *change* such faith; to be more faithful to some things, and less faithful to others. Concerning the chapter on Lacoste, it indeed unfortunately was written before I could access his work on "the phenomenality of God" and his *Recherches sur la parole*. Lacoste's work has been

essential and formative in the development of the idea of the *Inconspicuous God* (even though we differ on certain fundamental interpretations of Heidegger, such as his “atheism”).

From a slightly different angle, the chapter on Nancy sought to use his work to build and construct *the means* by which such a God could be worshipped or adored. It may have been a bit naïve to think such work could be employed for my own theological purposes. Yet, the intent was not to shoehorn Nancy into a Christian framework, but to think *with* Nancy *through* some problems that the usual suspects of the theological turn are yet to consider in a substantive way. For example, Nancy’s depiction of how Western cultures still are “in the nervation of Christianity” seemed to offer a wide open door to imaging the implicit, marginal, and inconspicuous aspects of religious experience. One difficulty this application of Nancy (as Schrijvers’ critique legitimately raises) inadvertently introduced is on the level of seeking an “infinite finitude:” even if one refers to Christ as the – inconspicuous – human face of God, one still is not immune to the critiques of ontotheology. I never wished to promote the idea that Nancy’s work is inherently Christian, any more than I sought to argue that Heidegger’s phenomenology of the inconspicuous is unequivocally Christian, or that Being is synonymous with God. However, I sought a constructive development of Heidegger and Nancy’s work in these regards (an application one still might contend on different grounds, it seems), presuming that especially Heidegger’s work – even on ontotheology – should not be over-interpreted to hold a necessary *prescription* of an uncompromising or unconditional agnosticism. Thus, I do not find Heidegger’s idea of inconspicuousness incompatible with, or antithetical to, the development of a Christology, even if it places us in relation with some veritable tensions.

Finally, it certainly is true that the developed concept of inconspicuousness, *despite its potential for other religious tendencies and traditions*, was focused almost solely on its application to Christianity. For reasons mentioned in the book, it makes good sense to consider how the Jesus Christ of the New Testament presents truth *often* in an “inconspicuous” way, and that, more phenomenologically regarded, *the way* of a thing’s manifestation is part and parcel of the thing itself. By first presuming that A) despite its fragility, the Christian narrative presents particular, accessible truths, and B) there is overall value to more constructive or “theopoetic” approaches such as this one, I argue that “inconspicuousness” is one helpful way to imagine God. Of course, anyone who has read the New Testament immediately will note a great emphasis upon spectacle-like miracles. Thus “inconspicuousness” was never meant to act as a master signifier that always contradicts any potential value of spectacles, or even challenges theologically “orthodox” interpretations for that matter.

Rather, it is used as a corrective to a prominent ideology at work within our present cultural moment: a moment in which a “spectacle” obsessed, media driven social imaginary reigns due to an overreliance upon not just visibility, but also invisibility. A recognition of social imaginaries such as this one should call us to reconsider the responsibility we have to demonstrate the role our theologies have played in their development, and to give description of our entanglement in certain disavowed “theologemes.”