CHAPTER 4

The Phenomenon of Revelation: Jean-Luc Marion’s Outline for a Phenomenology of Religion

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It is in the nature of religious experience that something makes itself known, appears, reveals itself to us, and that we then interpret this something that is revealed as the holy.

Now, the idea that something reveals itself to us in our experience is also phenomenology’s definition of the phenomenon in general. This would suggest that there is a kinship between the revelation of the holy and the phenomenon in general, and it seems obvious to ask if revelation can be regarded and described as a phenomenon in a phenomenological sense. On the other hand, if we are to talk about a specifically religious experience, there must be something which distinguishes this revelation from other phenomena, and the question is, then, whether phenomenology can explain what distinguishes the revelation of the holy. On grounds of principle, phenomenology cannot say anything about the holy per se, but yet, perhaps about the holy for me, and that is exactly the revelation: how does the holy reveal itself to me, and how can I receive it in order to actually have a religious experience?

One of the people who have attempted to answer these questions is Jean-Luc Marion (b.1946, professor of philosophy at Sorbonne and the University of Chicago). In the intersection between philosophy and theology, he wants to establish a phenomenology of religion, which can remedy the shortcomings of the philosophy of religion – without becoming theology. The philosophy of religion, in his opinion, necessarily comes up against an insoluble problem: as philosophy on one hand, it must “describe, produce and constitute phenomena”; as a philosophy of religion, on the other hand, it must “render visible what nevertheless could not be objectivized.”1 If the inherent premises of philosophy demand that it objectivizes its object, these premises preclude the religious phenomenon, because according to Marion it is not and cannot be, in an objective sense. That is not to say that this is a sufficient criterion for a religious phenomenon.

Marion distinguishes between philosophy and phenomenology, and it is true that phenomenology works on other premises than philosophy, and in as far as it precisely criticizes the idea of an objective world found in both

philosophy and science, there is reason to expect that it can include the religious experience without removing from it what is characteristic of it. On the other hand, phenomenology directs its criticism against the concept of an objective world in general, and not against the objectivization of the religious phenomenon specifically. It is therefore still an open question how Marion in his phenomenology of religion will distinguish this phenomenon from other phenomena.

Marion thinks he can find the basis for making the religious experience accessible to methodical examination in a combination of Husserl’s and Heidegger’s phenomenology.

Husserl therefore had restored any intuited given inasmuch as intuited to the phenomenon and hence had legitimated the validity of religious lived experience inasmuch as it is given intuitively. In the same way, Heidegger integrates into phenomenality all that shows itself (sich zeigt) only by indication (Anzeige), inasmuch as the ‘showing itself’ is still accomplished ‘from itself’ – and hence he legitimates the possibility of a phenomenology of the unapparent in general. [...] What philosophy of religion tends to close, phenomenology of religion could open. [...] In short, phenomenology would be the method par excellence for the manifestation of the invisible through the phenomena that indicate it – hence also the method for theology.

This role, as a method for elucidating the religious experience, can only be played by phenomenology, it is true, after it has undergone a number of modifications. In the following pages, we will see how Marion imagines that the phenomenological method must be modified to accommodate the religious phenomenon as he defines it.

I especially follow Marion’s argumentation in his seminal article “The Saturated Phenomenon.” The article was published in 1992 in the book Phénoménologie et théologie, together with texts by Marion’s contemporaries,

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2 J.-L. Marion, The Visible and the Revealed, pp. 6–7. Marion expresses his belief in the possibilities of phenomenology, and especially the possibility of overcoming metaphysics, already in 1984 in the preface to the anthology Phénoménologie et métaphysique (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France): “After the demise of metaphysics, whether it was in its completion in Hegel or in the twilight in Nietzsche, philosophy has only been able to proceed authentically in the form of phenomenology” (p. 7).