

## Jean-Luc Marion's Philosophy of the Gift and Postmodern Culture

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### Abstract

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The author suggests that Jean-Luc Marion's concepts may create a common space for Christian witness in postmodern culture. Marion returns to the pre-modernist Christian heritage in order to actualize the claims of theological critics presented by modern philosophy for autonomy and to make it possible for theology to act as the mediation among all spheres of postmodernist culture (ontology, ethics, aesthetics, arts, politics, economics) in the context of Christian witness. The differences between Marion and Levinas are briefly discussed, as is the difference between an idol and icon, before the author concludes with a discussion of eucharistic hermeneutics.



### *Marion and Radical Orthodoxy*

The present report is an outline of the philosophy and theology of the gift of contemporary French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion (born 1946). Together with Radical Orthodoxy (henceforth: RO), Marion's concepts probably create a common space for Christian witness in the situation of postmodern culture. In the same way as RO, Marion returns to the pre-modernist Christian heritage in order to actualize the claims of theological critics presented by modern philosophy

for autonomy and to make it possible for theology to act as the mediation among all spheres of postmodernist culture (ontology, ethics, aesthetics, arts, politics, economics) in the context of Christian witness.

Agreeing to act as a postmodernist critic of modernist metaphysical determinations of God, Marion emphasizes the anachronism of the offered project, which would also be approved by representatives of RO:

My project does not remain “postmodern” from the beginning to the end – “postmodernism” leaves it the moment I address grace, *agape*, revealed, actually, in Christ and through Christ, as some kind of anachronism: grace does not belong either to pre-, or post-, or even simply “modern.” More likely it rejects all historical and temporal limits and weighs upon any cogitative (rational) situation.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Marion and Postmodernist Culture***

Marion proceeds from God’s love and grace to find the Christian answer to the religious quest of postmodernist culture. What is it? Postmodernist culture risks becoming an infinitely versatile “country of the deaf, rapidly atomizing and losing traces of a public character” (Z. Bauman, R. Sennet) unless it answers the question about communication with a friend, who, beyond all false generalities and unities (oneness), brings authenticity back to unique existences. The horizon of this question is without a doubt theological, since often theological practices of differentiation should be considered in the context of communication with God as absolutely different.

Marion’s theological project could be presented as opposing the ethics of difference of Emmanuel Levinas, which also imagines itself outside ontology. (See, e.g., Levinas’s magnum opus *Otherwise than Being*.) For Levinas, radical ethical asymmetry lies at the basis of my communication with the different. The philosophy of Marion is a labor of recogni-

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), xxii.

tion and grateful acceptance of God as a loving Other in the context of which it becomes possible to realize the radical ethical maxim of Levinas regarding another person. Levinas's follower, B. Valdenfels, formulated the problem of communicating with the different or the other in the following way: "We invent what we respond, but not what we respond to, and what makes our speech and our actions significant." The recognition of the non-invented gift is the focus of the theological and philosophical thought of Marion.

***Post-metaphysical Theology: an Icon and an Idol***

Marion starts building his metaphysical theology with the distinction of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the God of philosophers, namely metaphysics. He creates this almost Pascal-like distinction by the introduction of two phenomenological notions that express two ways of visualization or representation of the divine – "an icon" and "an idol." In the "idol," the invisible divine becomes visible, submitting to the preliminary intentional framework of the constructing subjective consciousness. The human look (glance) is reflected by the invisible mirror of human thinking which suppresses the difference and mystery of the divine. Hence, instead of the visualization of the divine, we receive conceptual idols of metaphysics. Marion, as an historian of western metaphysics, is trying to show that beginning with Plato and Plotinus and finishing with Descartes and Leibnitz, the reduction of the divine to ontological concepts was being accomplished. This was coincident with the theory of subjectivity, which autonomously sets out the conceptual frameworks of such a reduction. The post-metaphysical theology of Marion begins with criticism – overcoming both classical "onto-theology" and modernistic theories of human subjectivity related to it, from Descartes to Nietzsche and Heidegger. In this endeavor, Marion follows Levinas in his struggle with metaphysical idolatry, but later he deviates significantly from Levinas's theory, offering instead a Christian phenomenology of the iconic visualization of the divine.