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THE IMPORTANCE OF MYSTERY FOR THE LIFE OF FAITH

Merold Westphal

That the life of Christian faith needs to understand itself as dwelling in the realm of mystery, of that which exceeds and overwhelms any language and concepts with which we seek to understand it, is suggested at three sites in continental philosophy of religion: Heidegger's critique of onto-theology, Marcel's distinction between problems and mysteries, and Marion's distinction between idol and icon, along with his account of the saturated phenomenon. All three see the category of mystery as much wider than its religious usage but as crucial for a proper understanding and practice of Christian faith.

A Way that can be followed is not a constant Way
A name that can be named is not a constant name.
Nameless, it is the beginning of Heaven and earth;
Named, it is the mother of the myriad creatures.
And so,

Always eliminate desires in order to observe its mysteries;
Always have desires in order to observe its manifestations.

— *The Daodejing* of Laozi¹

We are often told these days that the barriers between "analytic" and "continental" philosophy have been breached and that neither world has the form of a windowless monad. This is good news, and there is a lot of truth in it. But there remain differences, not only in the questions asked but also in the methods and vocabularies and bibliographies employed in addressing them. In this regard the philosophy of religion is no exception. The flourishing continental philosophy of religion industry, sometimes called "the religious turn in continental philosophy" or "the theological turn in phenomenology," is a different world from the more widespread world of mainstream philosophy of religion.

But not absolutely different. There is ongoing interest in the question of mystery on both sides of the levee that separates the waters of the deep from the dry land (however much they are beginning to leak).² The theme of mystery in its theological significance has come front and center on the continental scene in at least three scenes, each of which can be read against the background of Rudolf Otto's definition of the holy as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the "Wholly Other" that is at once fascinating and frightening.

In addition to this dialectic of attraction and repulsion, there is the dialectic of the rational and the supra-rational. The Wholly Other is not wholly Wholly Other. It is rational insofar as it is amenable to conceptual attribution and linguistic predication. But it is supra-rational, and thus mysterious, in that it exceeds, even explodes the understanding born by attribution and predication. "The truly 'mysterious' object is *beyond our apprehension and comprehension*, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently 'wholly other', whose kind and character are *incommensurable* with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb."³

Our first scene is Heidegger's critique of onto-theology in association with his critique of modern technology. Drawing on Aristotle's metaphysics, he notes that the attempt to think being qua being (ontology) ends up needing a Highest Being, the Unmoved Mover (theology) to complete it: thus metaphysics becomes onto-theology.⁴ So we can define onto-theology as the claim that there is Highest Being that is the key to the meaning of the whole of being. I say "that" instead of "who" because, while many different actors have played the role of Highest Being, as Heidegger notes, they are typically impersonal.⁵

If we ask at this point what Heidegger finds problematic about onto-theology, we get a one word answer: *Seinsvergessenheit*. When philosophy gives itself over to thinking the Highest Being, it forgets its highest task, which is to think being as such. This turns out to be a very weak objection, as I have argued elsewhere.⁶ But we need not linger on it, since it deals only with an partial and preliminary account of onto-theology. We get to the heart of the matter when we see that Heidegger is most deeply concerned not with the "what" of onto-theology" but with its "how." Thus he completes his definition with the notion that onto-theology occurs when "the deity can come into philosophy only insofar as philosophy, of its own accord and by its own nature, requires and determines that and how the deity enters into it" (ID 55–56). In other words, metaphysics becomes onto-theology when it requires that our God-talk submit to philosophy's rules and serve its project.

This project, as Heidegger understands it, can be identified in terms of its end, its means, and its results. Its goal is to make the whole of being wholly intelligible and transparent to human understanding. Metaphysics is allowed a theological dimension (some Highest Being) just to the degree that the latter successfully serves this goal. The means employed are abstract and impersonal metaphysical categories, such as *causa sui*, *causa prima*, and *ultima ratio*, in conjunction with the principle of sufficient reason.⁷ Heidegger calls this "calculative" and "representational" thinking, which, like the thinking of modern technology, seeks to have its "object" at its disposal.⁸ The result, following from the intention, is the loss of mystery in relation to the whole of being, including, of course, the Highest Being.⁹ "Thus where everything that presences exhibits itself in the light of a cause-effect coherence, even God can, for representational thinking, lose all that is exalted and holy, the mysteriousness of his distance . . . God

can sink to the level of a cause. . . . He then becomes, even in theology, the god of the philosophers"¹⁰

Here Heidegger sounds like Pascal and he evokes a tradition that includes Tertullian, Luther, Kierkegaard, and Karl Barth. He insists that his critique is not motivated by "any kind of atheism" (ID 55) and that it "is absolutely not in any way an attack against what is Christian."¹¹ Although he does not write as a Christian, he argues that the Christian theologian should embrace his critique of the arrogance of thinking we can have God at our conceptual disposal, since such a "god" is religiously useless. "Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god [of onto-theological philosophy]. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god." Thus the critique of onto-theology may bring us "closer to the divine God" (ID 72). Onto-theology

is due to the manner in which beings as beings have revealed themselves from early on. It was this unconcealedness of beings that first provided the possibility for Christian theology to take possession of Greek philosophy—whether for better or for worse may be decided by the theologians on the basis of their experience of what is Christian, in pondering what is written in the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians. . . . "Has not God let the wisdom of this world become foolishness?" (I Corinthians 1:20). The σοφία τοῦ κόσμου [wisdom of the world], however, is that which, according to 1:22, the Ἕλληνες ζητοῦσιν, the Greeks seek . . . Will Christian theology one day resolve to take seriously the word of the apostle and thus also the conception of philosophy as foolishness?" (WM/1949 288)

Heidegger is a kind of Kantian for whom God both is and is not a special case. For Kant, both the things that appear to the senses, giving rise to phenomenal knowledge, and the properly metaphysical realities that do not so appear, namely God, freedom, and immortality, are unavailable to human understanding as they are in themselves. Whatever "knowledge" we may have of them, its justification is not that of truth in the classical sense of *adequatio rei et intellectus*. But God, freedom, and immortality are a special case because of their importance for practical reason, both as religion and as morality.

Similarly, for Heidegger, the emergence of all beings into unconcealment has an inseparable flip side of concealment. This means that the whole of being is shrouded with an aura of mystery that properly evokes awe and wonder,¹² which are ever threatened both by onto-theologically constituted metaphysics and by technologically constituted modern science. Yet God is a special case, at least for those who profess Christian faith. For if the revealed God is not simultaneously the hidden God, the life of faith is itself threatened.¹³ God escapes unemployment only by playing the servant role to philosophy's human, all too human project of conceptual mastery.¹⁴ Heidegger might have noted that this is not what the Servant Songs of Isaiah are about, nor what Jesus had in mind when he said that he came "to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

As indicated above, Heidegger is concerned about the danger to the practices of faith: prayer, sacrifice, music, and even dance. He agrees with the psalmist, or at least he expects the Christian to agree with the psalmist, who writes

I shall never want to define You, O God,
For I cannot worship what I comprehend.¹⁵

The sacred is indeed the *mysterium*, that which remains concealed even in its unconcealment (Ex. 33); to deprive it of this character is to secularize it, to transform the religious life into a pale simulacrum.

But Heidegger also understands the issue epistemologically. The apostle writes that “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). Onto-theology can be understood as the arrogant, even monstrous demand that faith be converted into sight by the powers of human reason (see OO 12).¹⁶ “Man becomes the relational center of that which is as such . . . man contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives the measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is.”¹⁷ Spinoza and Hegel let the cat out of the bag when they respectively describe the task and accomplishment of speculative philosophy as seeing the world “*sub specie aeternitatis*” and as “absolute knowing.” The gap between human knowledge and divine knowledge is erased. It is to protect against this world historical hubris that the word of the cross (ὁ λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ) must remain foolishness “to those who are perishing” and, conversely, the wisdom of the world, after which the Greeks seek and which Heidegger calls onto-theology, must remain foolishness in the eyes of faith vis-à-vis the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:18–25). A faith that meekly conforms to the demands of philosophy in its onto-theological mode (mood) is a salt that has lost its taste and will be, all too deservedly, “thrown out and trampled under foot” (Matt. 5:13).

Some will get nervous at the idea, however biblical, of deliberately giving up on adequation and absolute knowing. Are we not opening ourselves to the ravages of relativism? The problem with the vehement insistence, “There is absolute truth,” is that it is all but invariably followed by the claim, “and I and those who agree with me are its incarnation.” One reply to this is calmly to observe that within a theistic framework, and a fortiori within a Christian framework, we *are* relative and only God is absolute. To acknowledge that God doesn’t fit without remainder into our metaphysical matrices is to acknowledge that in our finitude and in our fallenness our understanding is always *relative* to factors that make it both possible and necessary for the prophet to write:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord;
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa. 55:8–9)¹⁸

There is another reply to the understandable anxiety over relativism and the arrogance into which it so readily reverts that is worth mentioning.

Some years ago Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. gave an address at Brown University, a commencement address if I remember correctly. It came in the midst of culture wars in which great concern was being voiced about the perils of relativism. He made what he took to be a fairly non-controversial historical observation, namely that the perpetrators of the great atrocities of the twentieth century were not relativists but absolutists, people and parties who took themselves to be the sites of absolute knowing, to be the possessors and embodiment of an absolute truth. At the time I thought the point well taken. Several years later I met Schlesinger at a reception and brought the subject up. He told me that he had received so much grief over the comments that he no longer felt free to say what he then said, though he didn't doubt its correctness. Like the emperor's really serious wardrobe malfunction, there seem to be some facts that simply must not be stated.

Since that time the term 'fundamentalism' has, for better or worse, come to signify the attitude of those who take themselves to be possessors of a truth so absolute that their project becomes the end which justifies virtually any means. These means are often violent, both literally and rhetorically.¹⁹ Heidegger's critique of metaphysical/theological absolutism is a protest, and perhaps an antidote to those fundamentalisms, whether Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, or secular that arrogate to themselves first the power to define the truth and then the right to destroy those perceived to be its enemies. Christian philosophers do well to be careful, perhaps with a little help from Heidegger, lest in their zeal for absolute truth they give epistemic aid and comfort to those whose violence stems from confusing themselves with God.

Another site at which the theme of divine mystery emerges is Gabriel Marcel's distinction between mystery and problem. As with Heidegger, the analysis has theological ramifications; but just as for Heidegger the whole of being emerges but partially out of a cloud of unknowing, so for Marcel the mysteries of faith are far from being the only ones. He lists such standard metaphysical issues as life, especially birth and death, evil, the relation of body to soul, sensation, freedom, and truth as properly belonging to the category of mystery. An utterly fundamental mode of mystery is presence in its non-spatial sense, and Marcel itemizes various modes of presence: faith, hope, love, fidelity, creativity, availability, family, a sleeping child, hospitality. If we would understand love in the mode of faith in the absolute Thou, "that which is expressed in the *Fiat voluntas tua* of the Lord's Prayer,"²⁰ we will need to see how both the intentional act and the intentional object of the believer as such belong together with all these other modes of mystery.²¹

The "data of Christianity" may inspire thought to distinguish mystery from problem, but the analysis is phenomenological and not theological, that is, it does not presuppose faith. Nor does it prove the truth of faith, though "it enables those who have attained it to perceive the *possibility* of a revelation in a way which is not open to those who have never ventured beyond the frontiers of the realm of the problematical and who have therefore never reached the point from which the mystery of being can be seen and recognized."²² While the mystery of God as the Absolute

Thou is always just inches below the surface, it only rarely emerges into explicit view.

So what is a mystery, and how is it distinguished from a problem? A problem is what can be solved, at least in principle; thus it is inherently temporary. Something is missing, typically a cause. When that is found, whether theoretically or practically, the problem is no longer a problem. Science and technology are the paradigmatic realms of problem solving. Problems occur in the kind of subject-object relation that Buber calls I-it relations. On the objective side are data, calculation, probability, abstract concepts, and objective validity. On the subjective side are, in part desire and fear, and in part the impersonal detachment of the spectator or on-looker seeking to master whatever is feared or desired. Marcel writes,

The world of the problematical is the world of fear and desire, which are inseparable; at the same time . . . it is the kingdom of technics of whatever sort. Every technique serves, or can be made to serve, some desire or some fear; conversely, every desire as every fear tends to invent its appropriate technique. From this standpoint, despair consists in the recognition of the ultimate inefficacy of all technics, joined to the inability or the refusal to change over to a new ground—a ground where all technics are seen to be incompatible with the fundamental nature of being, which itself escapes our grasp. (PE 30)

By contrast, Marcel defines a mystery as “a problem which encroaches upon its own data (PE 19).²³ The meaning of this is not immediately apparent, but may become a bit clearer in the light of two further descriptions. A mystery is “based on a datum which is not transparent to reflection” and which becomes “an antinomy as soon as discursive thought tries to reduce or problematize it” (CF 23). Further, a mystery is “a problem which encroaches on its own immanent conditions of possibility” (CF 69). In other words, both subject and object are different from what they are in the world of problems. On the object side, encroachment means that the data themselves are problematic, not transparent but ambiguous and potentially antinomic. On the subject side, encroachment means that the “immanent conditions of possibility,” which we recognize as Kantian language for the transcendental ego, is equally problematic. Neither the intentional act nor the intentional object is available to clear and distinct intuition. Things are a bit muddy, opaque, elusive. We don’t know precisely with whom or with what we have to do, nor even who we ourselves are, and this condition is not temporary.

This leads us to ask who or what is doing this encroaching, and in what does this transgressing of the good fences that make good neighbors in the realm of the problematic consist. The answer seems to be participation, involvement, belonging, a relation of subject to object in which the neat, clean distinction between them gets compromised. Thus what I encounter as mystery is not outside or before me as much as in me, though this distinction itself tends to break down (PE 20, 22). The “object” is at once “too close up to us and too far away to be found in the strictly limited zone of objective knowledge” (HV 69).²⁴ The intentional act “by which we incline ourselves towards a presence is essentially different from that through

which we grasp at an object . . . presence as such lies . . . beyond the grasp of any possible *comprehension*." To illustrate what he means, Marcel immediately writes, "A rose in a poem can be something that is present to us in this way, but not, in most cases, a rose in a seedsman's catalogue."²⁵

Marcel warns against identifying this incomprehensibility with unknowability as if it were a problem that cannot be solved, lying outside the wall that constitutes the limit to our knowledge. It is to be conceived as something positive rather than negative, as a mode of presence (MB 261). Thus "mystery is not, as it is for the agnostic, construed as a lacuna in our knowledge, as a void to be filled, but rather as a certain plenitude" that resists "false certainties" and transcends our "*Trieb zum Wissen*" (CF 152).

On the object side, we find a plenitude of presence that overwhelms our conceptual nets and tempts the positivist and the onto-theologian in us to resist by saying, Whatever my net doesn't catch, isn't a fish."²⁶ On the subject side, there is participation, what leads Marcel to write, "the more I actually participate in being, the less I am capable of knowing or of saying in what it is that I participate" (CF 56). We can take this both intensively and extensively in relation, say, to marriage and parenting. The more deeply I commit myself to such relations, and, since depth often takes time, the longer I commit myself to such relations, the clearer it becomes that I cannot say adequately what marriage or parenting is. Here it is abundantly clear that I cannot reduce myself or my family to "the vital and the social functions" (PE 10) that are obviously and inevitably involved. The plenitude of presence of which Marcel speaks is the square peg that doesn't fit into the round hole of comprehension. At the very least Marcel's distinction raises the question whether it is the proper task of the Christian thinker to "solve" the "problem" of evil or the "problem" of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. What if these are mysteries rather than problems?

What, then, are the advantages of embedding the life of faith within the category of mystery, of being ever mindful of the incomprehensibility of God, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Eucharist, and so forth in the discursive practices (language games) that shape and express our relation to these *mysteries* of faith? Marcel's analysis suggests two answers.

First, if we avoid the category mistake of reducing the mysterious to the problematic, we will so far forth remain open to the possibility of revelation, of hearing a voice not our own that is truly divine. This is not to say that one cannot speak of revelation or have a "high view" of Scripture within the categorical world of the problem. That may well be a pretty good definition of fundamentalism. But if we already have God in a box, enclosed within our conceptual scheme, hearing is finished, and the problems are all solved, the questions all answered, or at least that is the goal that is thought to be all but achieved. If, on the other hand, we understand that God and God's works of creation and redemption always overflow our understanding of them, we just may remain open to ever new and renewed hearing of the Voice that comes to us in revelation.²⁷

A second reason to avoid world-slippage, the sliding of the life of faith from the world of mystery to the world of problems is that we avoid guaranteeing that our understanding of that life will be misunderstanding. The world of problems, on Marcel's analysis, is above all the world of

"technics", the world of manipulation and mastery. When the life of faith slides into this world, one of two things happens. It either turns into magic or it secularizes itself. That is, it either retains the notion of the supernatural and seeks (like the onto-theologian) to employ it in the service of some human project, getting something desired or avoiding something feared by knowing how to manipulate the sacred power; or it gradually, perhaps imperceptibly, reduces the supernatural to the natural, the sacred to the secular, the uncanny to the familiar.

I have put these two advantages negatively in terms of avoiding category mistakes and world-slippage. Just as Heidegger warns against the danger of the world of modern technology,²⁸ whose parent or grandparent onto-theology is, so Marcel warns against the danger of reducing mysteries to problems. This does not mean that thinking the life of faith in terms of mystery makes no contribution to playing the language game of faith better. It only means that the first step along the path to spiritual growth is to be as sure as one can that one is playing the right game and not some other. One can't get better at shooting free throws while playing hockey.

After writing that "the more I actually participate in being, the less I am capable of knowing or of saying in what it is that I participate" Marcel immediately links this thought to "the essential meaning of negative theology" — the attempt to think "that central affirmation which becomes so much a part of the one who utters it that he eventually becomes incapable of uttering it" (CF 56–57). This provides a nice segue to the next site at which mystery is thematized in continental philosophy of religion, the phenomenology of Jean-Luc Marion in its relation to the apophatic tradition in Christian theology.

Given the negative character of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida finds it necessary to distance his project from negative theology.²⁹ In contrast to Pseudo-Dionysius, he notes that his wholesale negations do not 1) presuppose a hyperessential deity 2) with whom mystical, silent union can be sought and 3) who can be addressed (as Trinity!) in prayer and encomium.³⁰ It is not Derrida's negation of negative theology, however, that is of immediate interest here or even the renewed philosophical interest in apophaticism that has come in its wake.³¹ It is more specifically Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of religion, which, in response to Derrida, he wishes to associate closely with Christian apophaticism. An important part of that response is a litany of Christian theologians who, like Philo the Jew, belong to the apophatic tradition by *affirming* the incomprehensibility of God: Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Chrysostom, John of Damascus, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, "even" Thomas Aquinas, and, of course, Pseudo-Dionysius.³²

It should be noted, though it is obvious, that these theologians are not simply silent about the divine mysteries. They have a lot to say about God, including, of course, the *affirmation* of God's incomprehensibility.³³ This is something, it is claimed, that we can know about God. Pseudo-Dionysius, for example, writes a short treatise, *The Mystical Theology*, on how we cannot speak about God, and a much longer treatise, *The Divine Names*, on

how we can and should speak about God. In the edition I use, they are seven and eighty-five pages, respectively.³⁴ Moreover, the longer treatise is followed by two others, *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, that are also significantly longer than *The Mystical Theology* and talk freely about God. As is well known, Aquinas insists that we cannot in this life see the essence of God, that even when in rapture or the life to come we do see God's essence we cannot comprehend what we see, and that "by the revelation of grace in this life we do not know of God *what He is*, and thus are united to Him as to one unknown."³⁵ But he has more than a little to say about God in his *Summas*, and not just negatively.

We are reminded of the lines from the epigraph to this essay that say of the *Dao*

Nameless, it is the beginning of Heaven and earth;

Named, it is the mother of the myriad creatures.

And so,

Always eliminate desires in order to observe its *mysteries*;

Always have desires in order to observe its *manifestations*.

(Emphasis added)

Like Taoist thought, Christian apophaticism involves a dialectic between the Nameless and the Named, between mysteries and manifestations, or, as Heidegger would put it, between concealment and unconcealment. We discover that we cannot speak, and then that we can and must. We speak, and then discover that what we speak of has at once escaped us and overwhelmed us, rendering our speech inherently inadequate to its intended "object." The tension between these discoveries is not (to be) resolved.

We find this dialectical tension in Luther. He distinguishes the majesty of "the naked God," "the absolute God," "God as He is in Himself" from the God clothed in "His Word and promises." The latter, of course, is the revealed God, but in the clothing of the Word and promises, God is "veiled in the sort of mask or face that is suited to us."³⁶ Luther insists on the "distinction between God preached and God hidden, that is, between the Word of God and God himself." There are "secrets of God's majesty, which it is impossible to penetrate because he dwells in light inaccessible, as Paul testifies [I Tim. 6:16]. Let [human temerity] occupy itself instead with God incarnate," the clothed God and not the hidden majesty.³⁷ This "instead" should not be taken to mean that we pay attention to the revealed, clothed God and ignore the hidden, naked God. There is only one God, and Luther, who has been reading his Heidegger and Marcel, reminds the believer that this God remains concealed even in the midst of gracious unconcealment. Revelation is not the solving of a problem but the presence of a mystery.

What Marcel calls a mystery, Marion calls a saturated phenomenon.³⁸ In two important ways, these analyses mirror each other. First, the phenomena in question are positive presences, quite literally overwhelmingly so (which is why they exceed our grasp). Their incomprehensibility is not due to lack or lacuna; rather, more is given to our potential cognition (intuition, experience, observation) than our concepts can contain or our language express. Kant's contrast between the rational idea and the aesthetic

idea is helpful. The former can never become knowledge because “no adequate intuition can ever be given” (for God, freedom, and immortality, or God, soul, and world). The latter cannot become knowledge

but for an opposite reason: “because it is an intuition (of the imagination) for which no adequate [*adäquat*] concept can be found” . . . it is no longer a matter of the nonadequation of the (lacking) intuition that leaves a (given) concept empty; it is a matter, conversely, of a failure of the (lacking) concept that leaves the (overabundantly given) intuition blind. . . . Kant stresses this unambiguously: in the case of the aesthetic idea, the “representation of the imagination furnishes much to think [*viel zu denken veranlasst*], but to which no determinate thought, or concept, can be adequate [*adäquat sein kann*].” The excess of intuition over any concept also prohibits “that any language ever reach it completely and render it intelligible” . . . the intuitive overabundance is no longer exposed within rules, whatever they may be, but overwhelms them; intuition is no longer exposed within the concept, but saturates it and renders it overexposed—invisible, not by lack of light, but by excess of light.³⁹

A second mirroring is that the analyses are phenomenological, not theological, and this in three ways:

1) A saturated phenomenon is a phenomenon. In other words, the “objects” we are talking about are given to our experience. They appear, can be observed, can be described as a certain type of phenomenon. Marcel’s notion of secondary reflection (concrete or existential philosophy) corresponds to his emphasis on data and the givenness of that which he describes as mystery.

2) While the category (mystery or saturated phenomenon) includes religiously significant phenomena, which Marion will call epiphany or revelation,⁴⁰ as with Marcel these are by no means the only instances. Marion distinguishes four non-theological types of saturated phenomena: the event (such as the battle of Waterloo), the idol (a curious name for the visual arts, especially the painting), the flesh (the presence of the self as body to itself) and the icon (the gaze of the Other, in the Levinasian sense, the face).⁴¹

3) The inclusion of religiously significant phenomena along with other types is not a sneaking of theological claims into philosophical discourse under phenomenological disguise, as Dominique Janicaud has alleged.⁴² For, as Marion insists, the analysis is about the *possibility* of a certain kind of experience, not a claim about its validity or about the actuality of its intentional object. This is a task for the theologian or other believers.⁴³ Here

the phenomenon of revelation remains a mere possibility. I am going to describe it without presupposing its actuality. . . . If revelation there must be (and phenomenology has no authority to decide this), then it will assume, assumes, or [has] assumed the figure of paradox of paradoxes, according to an essential law of phenomenality. In this sense . . . revelation remains a variation of saturation.” (BG 234–35)⁴⁴

Marion can fully agree with Marcel that while Christian faith may stimulate reflection on this type of phenomenon, such reflection neither presupposes Christian faith nor proves its validity. It at most opens a space of possibility for a mode of experience, a type of phenomenon that we might otherwise overlook or, in the religious case, dogmatically exclude *a priori*.⁴⁵

But the believing soul might well ask, What's in it for me? What is the advantage for the life of faith of thinking the mysteries of faith in terms of incomprehensibility and of thinking this incomprehensibility as overflowing presence and not just as elusive absence? We see Marion's answer most clearly if we turn to his second major phenomenological theme: the distinction between the idol and the icon. Here 'idol' does not signify the "verbal icon" of the literary work of art nor, in Marion's other usage, the visible icon of the plastic arts, especially the painting, but the physical representation of a deity used in such religious activities as prayer and sacrifice. We're talking here about the golden calf (Ex. 32) and other gods of silver and gold against which the biblical writers protest (Ps. 115). Marion is no iconoclast; he has no interest in labeling all visible representations of deity inherently idolatrous. So he distinguishes the idol from the icon, neither physically in terms of sensible representation nor theologically in terms of the names of the gods represented and the practices attached thereto, but in terms of the mode of intentionality. A statue, a picture, a talisman functions as an idol if the gaze that intends it is satisfied or filled in the mere act of looking, if it stops, rests, or freezes in its gazing. It does not "transpierce" its intentional object. In other words, the object itself *is* the sacred power, and there is no need for the gaze to intend anything invisible beyond it whose mediator or sacrament it is. It is the real presence of the divine because it is all there is of the divine.⁴⁶

Idolatry in this sense may well be quite rare; much that is so labeled by biblical writers and others may well be understood in a more incarnational way, such that the visible is a locus or bearer or mediator of a sacred reality that exceeds its localized, visible presence. I suppose the test would be whether the god in question would be considered dead when the wooden statue that bore his name was destroyed in a temple fire or, like the Philistine god Dagon, lost his head and his hands in a fall.⁴⁷

By contrast with the idol, the icon is a visible that is understood, as a kind of metaphysical John the Baptist, to point beyond itself to the invisible that exceeds it. But it is not merely a sign that in its presence points to something absent. It is rather "saturated little by little with the invisible. The invisible seems [becomes phenomenon], it appears in a semblance. . . . In this sense, the formula that Saint Paul applies to Christ, *eikōn tou theou tou aoratou*, icon of the invisible God (Gal. 1:15), must serve as our norm. . . . Hence this implies that, even presented by the icon, the invisible always remains invisible" (GWB 17). And yet, we must also say in a dialectical tone of voice, that it becomes visible. In the icon the invisible becomes present.

Already Marion's distinction between idol and icon maps nicely onto his account of revelation as epiphany, in which the sensible becomes the bearer, indeed the overflowing, overwhelming presence of the

supersensible.⁴⁸ But, as if with reference to Heidegger's critique of onto-theology, he argues that there is conceptual as well as physical idolatry (GWB 16–24). The former occurs when our conceptual scheme or language stops or freezes our thought. Just as the physical idol simply is the divine, because it contains all there is of the sacred, so conceptual idolatry occurs when we assume that our concepts and our language are adequate to God, that God fits into our conceptual cookie cutters without remainder, that God's presence is contained within the levees of our language without overflowing them. In this case as in the previous case, the idolater "remains in possession of the idol, its solitary master" (GWB 24).

By contrast, the conceptual icon represents the sacred in the awareness of the inadequation of our thought and language to their intended referent. We are neither possessor nor master. It is not the content that is at issue. One and the same statement can be idolatrous or iconic depending on the mode in which it is intended. At issue once again is the "how" rather than the "what."

This is but the briefest sketch of a phenomenology that revolves around the distinction between idol and icon and the notion of the saturated phenomenon, which may be thought as another name for icon. But enough has been said to answer the question of the believing soul: what's in it for me? Why should I understand my faith in this way? The answer is quite simple: to avoid idolatry. The god whose representations, whether physical or conceptual, are not iconic, is an idol in the strictest sense. It is a god created by and made in the image of the artisans and thinkers who fashion them. That is why Marion describes the idol as the mirror image of the idolater (GWB 11–15, 20–22).

We have looked at three accounts of the use or advantage for the life of faith of understanding itself in terms of mystery. We might summarize as follows:

For Heidegger it is to keep the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob from becoming the god of the philosophers and thereby religiously otiose.

For Marcel it is to avoid the world slippage in which the religious life either dissolves into secularism or degenerates into magic.

For Marion it is to avoid idolatry.

While these three warnings are not exactly synonymous, I hope it is clear that they bleed into and reinforce one another, that they form a kind of Hebrew parallelism, saying more or less the same thing differently. It might be a useful exercise to try to think how each is a commentary on the other two.

Some may be disturbed by the recurring notion that thinking God as mystery means that our God-talk never passes the adequation test. What then about truth? This is the point at which I think we need to read Aquinas's doctrine of analogy and Gadamer's theory of interpretation simultaneously and through Kantian glasses. But rather than try to spell that out, I offer a crude but, I hope, illuminating parable. My three year old grandson has found a quarter and is sucking on it. I tell him he shouldn't do that, and, of course, he asks Why? Quite apart from the limits of my own knowledge of viruses and bacteria, I know that he is not in a position to understand the truth of the matter. So I say, "Well, its sort of like this.

There are little tiny bugs on coins, so small you can't see them. But if they get inside you they can make you really sick. Do you remember how awful you felt last time you were sick?"

Now strictly speaking, this is not true. It does not pass the adequation test. There are no tiny six-legged critters on the coin. But for a three year old, it may well be the best "truth" available, the closest approximation. It is surely better than telling him that if he sucks on coins his favorite trains will get broken. At this point in my fable, I'm reminded of one of my teachers, who used to say that the Bible is the "divinely revealed misinformation about God."⁴⁹ The purpose of this "misinformation" is not to mislead but to give the best understanding of which we are capable and to guide our behavior for our own good. The point is not that we can't apply our words or our concepts to the mysteries of faith but rather that they will always fall short of adequately expressing a reality that overflows and overwhelms them.

I have spoken positively of the importance of mystery for the life of faith. But there is another side to it, and one might speak of the use and abuse of mystery for religious thought. Unfortunately, it seems that Foucault is right when he says "that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad."⁵⁰ So I turn to the prophet Feuerbach, who warns us about a religiously dangerous way of proposing that God is unknowable:

On the ground that God is unknowable, man excuses himself to what is yet remaining of his religious conscience for his forgetfulness of God, his absorption in the world: he denies God practically by his conduct,—the world has possession of all his thoughts and inclinations,—but he does not deny him theoretically, he does not attack his existence; he lets that rest. But this existence *does not affect or incommode him*; it is a merely negative existence, an *existence without existence* . . . a state of being which, as to its effects, is not distinguishable from non-being. . . . The alleged religious horror of limiting God by positive predicates is only the irreligious wish to know nothing more of God, to banish God from the mind.⁵¹

To use the incomprehensibility of God as an excuse to abandon the hard work involved in seeking the best ways to speak about God or as a filter to eliminate anything that might "incommode" us is to continue in another mode the project of staying in charge that motivates the slippage from pious thought to onto-theology, from mystery to problems, and from icon to idol. Unlike many of my friends in this Society, I find Derridean deconstruction to be an illuminating mode of Kantian critique. But when he tries to incorporate his "religion without religion" into his overall project, it seems to me that with the help of his "generalized apophatics" he becomes an instance of what Feuerbach is talking about.⁵² The flight from content and commitment leaves us, I fear, with very thin soup indeed, perhaps having a "form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Tim. 3:5).⁵³ No doubt there are other instances.

But I want to conclude with a final reference to the upside of mystery. Faith has been defined by someone as "giving all I know of myself to all I know of God." Beyond the anti-Platonic reminder that faith involves the whole person and is not simply a defective mode of cognition, what I like about this account is the suggestion that as a believer I am not transparent to myself, that God is not the only mystery in this relation. Judith Butler has recently reflected on the ethical significance of the self's unsurpassable opaqueness to itself.⁵⁴ A thorough examination of the religious benefits of understanding that we do not fully understand ourselves, that just as only God knows who God is, so only God knows who I am (Psalm 139), would be a great service to those for whom thought is faith seeking understanding. But that is a task for another time, another place, and no doubt another thinker.

For the present I invoke Anne Lamott, whose two favorite prayers are

"Help me, help me, help me" and
 "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

In the very closing lines of *Traveling Mercies* she writes, "I can't help but say again what I said on the beach that day, in a whisper this time and without even being exactly sure to whom I'm saying it: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."⁵⁵

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NOTES

1. The opening lines, as translated in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), p. 163.

2. This paper was delivered at the Midwest Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers on "Christianity and Mystery" held at Notre Dame in April of 2006.

3. *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford, 1958), p. 28. Emphasis added. Thus '*mysterium*' is more closely linked to '*tremendum*' than to '*fascinans*'. In discussing Otto in class I once found myself saying, without having planned to, "If it isn't scary, it isn't God." Perhaps the hasty assurances that biblical references to "the fear of the Lord" signify merely respect are more products of wishful thinking than of insight.

4. *Introduction to "What is Metaphysics?"* (1949) in *Pathmarks*, ed William McNeill (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 287–88. Cf. *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 58–61, 69. Henceforth WM/1949 and ID, respectively.

5. Thus the tradition of onto-theology extends from Anaximander to Nietzsche, for whom the Boundless or Infinite and the Will to Power, respectively, play the role of Highest Being. Spinoza's *Deus sive natura* and Hegel's *Gott oder Geist* are other examples. See note 9 below.

6. See "Aquinas and Onto-Theology" in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (2006), pp. 173–91.. Here I argue that Aquinas is not an onto-theologian in even this restricted sense since, following, as it were,

Heidegger's dictum that being is always the being of some being, he tries to think being in terms of the difference between the being of the Creator and that of creatures.

7. There are, of course, other categories and other principles that can be taken to be at the core of what calls itself "Reason", and Heidegger's account can easily be generalized.

8. See the title essay in my *Overcoming Onto-theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), pp. 11–12. Henceforth OO. This essay and the one cited in note 6 provide an introductory overview of Heidegger on onto-theology.

9. See *Postscript to "What is Metaphysics?"* (1943), in *Pathmarks*, pp. 234–38 and *Letter on "Humanism,"* in *Pathmarks*, pp. 243, 249, 255. On the project of eliminating mystery in the onto-theologies of Spinoza and Hegel, see my *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), chaps. 2 and 3.

10. *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 26. Henceforth QT

11. "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'" in QT 63–64. Too many careless readers, paying attention only to the partial and preliminary definition, talk as if one needs only to say "onto-theology" in a solemn tone of voice to eliminate any form of theism from the field of serious discussion.

12. Hence the later Heidegger's turn to poetry after giving up on Christianity in both its Catholic and Protestant forms.

13. I speak deliberately of the life of faith rather than just of faith in order to avoid reducing the question to the epistemological dimensions, which have their rightful place. Whereas for Plato *pistis* is either a failed attempt at knowledge or an inferior mode thereof, for biblical thought faith is more than its cognitive dimension. It is, among other things, trust in the promises of God and obedience to the commands of God. The life of faith is a life of prayer in its five modes: confession, praise, thanksgiving, petition, and intercession.

14. Or, perhaps, a similar role in the state's project of economic/military mastery.

15. In Leslie F. Brandt's free paraphrase: *Psalms/Now* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973), p. 175. The psalm in this case is 109, but the paraphrase does not proceed verse by verse.

16. If by fideism is meant the resistance to this demand, the acknowledgment that "we walk by faith, not by sight" and can never fully transform the former into the lighter, then it seems to me that every Christian should be a fideist. If the role of the Holy Spirit in leading to faith as a gift is recognized, it will be clear that we are not talking about an arbitrary human decision to believe, to trust, and to obey.

17. "The Age of the World Picture" in QT 128, 134.

18. Our knowledge can be said to be doubly relative. It is relative in comparison to the divine knowledge, which alone deserves to be called absolute; and, at least in such crucial domains as politics, ethics, and religion, it can be seen to be relative to the historically contingent and conceptually particular cultural worlds from which it emerges in a relation of mutual legitimation.

19. We might remember the crusades, the wars of religion, the inquisitions in which so much blood was shed, but also the rhetorical violence of those creedal statements that ended with an Anathema (to hell with you—God damn you) addressed to anyone who dared to disagree on any point.

20. *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 136. Henceforth CF.

21. The similarity does not entail the absence of difference. "I would reply that there is no question of confusing those mysteries which are enveloped

in human experience as such with those mysteries which are revealed, such as the Incarnation or Redemption, and to which no effort of thought bearing on experience can enable us to attain" *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. Manya Harari (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 45. Henceforth PE.

22. PE 44–46. Emphasis added. Cf. CF 79–80, 134–36.

23. Cf. *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 69. Henceforth HV.

24. Perhaps no clearer or more dramatic instance of the dialectic of in me/ before me and of too close/too far is to be found than that which Augustine presents in his *Confessions*, in which he can find the radically transcendent God only by turning inward.

25. *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. I, *Reflection & Mystery*, trans. G. S. Fraser (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1960), p. 256. Henceforth MB.

26. My teacher, John Smith, was fond of this description of the positivist, though it fits the onto-theologian and fundamentalist as well. I do not know its source.

27. Perhaps this is at least part of the meaning of *epectasis* as developed by Gregory of Nyssa and later by Gregory Palamas. See *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, trans. Herbert Musurillo, S. J. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), especially pp. 46–71 and my discussion in *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, pp. 109–110.

28. Especially in QT.

29. Though John D. Caputo has illuminatingly called deconstruction a "generalized apophatics." See *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 28, 32, 55. The main texts of Derrida are: "Différance" in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward & Toby Foshay (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992); and "Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)" in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

30. See especially "How to Avoid Speaking."

31. In addition to *Derrida and Negative Theology*, see *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, ed. Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

32. "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology'" in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 34–35. On the relation of the last two mentioned, see Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005). On the apophaticism of Augustine and Aquinas in relation to Pseudo-Dionysius, see chapters 4 and 5 of *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*.

33. I emphasize the affirmative character of apophaticism to remind us of Marcel's insistence that mystery is not so much a lacuna as something positive, a presence in which we participate without capturing it in the creel of our categorical scheme.

34. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

35. *Summa Theologiae*, I, 12, 13, Reply Obj. 1.

36. *Commentary on Psalm 51 in Luther's Works*, Vol. 12, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), pp. 312–312. For a related theme in Calvin, see Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity" in *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984).

37. *The Bondage of the Will*, in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 33, ed. ed. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), pp. 140, 145. In these later texts it is

especially the will of God that remains hidden. Thus "it is not permissible for men to pry into the will of the Divine Majesty" (p. 147). It is precisely as personal that God is incomprehensible.

38. The key texts are: "The Saturated Phenomenon" in Dominique Janicaud, et al., *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); and *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002). Henceforth SP, BG, and IE, respectively. An important essay on Pseudo-Dionysius is found in *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001). In a key link to Heidegger, the saturated phenomenon does not obey the principle of sufficient reason. See SP 178–81.

39. SP 195–97. The internal quotations from Kant are from *Critique of Judgment*, ¶¶ 57 and 49 respectively, Academy edition, V, 342 and 314.

40. Thus an example would be the transfiguration of Jesus. I discuss and defend this instance in "Transfiguration as Saturated Phenomenon" in *Between Description and Interpretation: The Hermeneutic Turn in Phenomenology*, ed. Andrzej Wierciński (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2005), pp. 501–12. An earlier and briefer version of this essay appeared in *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture*, www.philosophyandscripture.org, Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2003, no pages.

41. A brief presentation of these four is found in BG 228–33, while chapters 2–5 of IE are given over to more extended development. Revelation is given as a fifth type, with elements of each of the other four (BG 234–41).

42. He raises this objection against Marion and others in *The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology*, included in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn."*

43. Marion often writes as a (Catholic) theologian. But given this distinction, it is easy to differentiate his theological from his phenomenological claims.

44. Cf. BG 242. In both BG and IE Marion uses the Kierkegaardian language of paradox when speaking about the saturated phenomenon. Marcel, it will be recalled, uses the Kantian language of antinomy.

45. A close reading will reveal that this latter is precisely what Janicaud does. See note 42.

46. *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 7–15. Henceforth GWB.

47. 1 Sam. 5. Apparently the Philistines did not think this to be the end of Dagon.

48. It would be easy to apply this analysis for Karl Barth's presentation of the Word of God in its threefold sense: the revealed, that is incarnate Word; the written Word, that is the Bible; and the preached Word. In each case, by the gracious agency of the Holy Spirit, an empirical reality becomes the presence of the very voice of God, which, like the peace of God, "surpasses all understanding" (Phil 4:7).

49. He was neither a Thomist nor a Kantian and most likely was thinking along Calvinist lines. See the Battles essay mentioned in note 36.

50. "On the Genealogy of Ethics," in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 231.

51. *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), pp. 14–15. Emphasis added.

52. The phrase "religion without religion" echoes Feuerbach's "existence without existence."

53. For a clear (and sympathetic) account of Derrida's "religion without religion," see Caputo's *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* as per note 29 above.

54. See *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
55. (New York: Random House, 2000), pp. 82 and 272.