ONTOTHEOLOGY TO EXCESS: IMAGINING GOD WITHOUT BEING

ANTHONY J. GODZIEBA

Villanova University

ONE WAY TO read contemporary philosophy of religion and philosophical theology is to view it as a series of attempts to determine how God became a problem in the West. Such arguments tend to proceed historically or genealogically. Each of them also characteristically claims (ironic in our current antifoundational setting) that it alone has the real diagnosis of the problem, the ultimate foundational argument and definitive explanation which outflanks all the others.

I would like to suggest a reading of the history of God in the West from the point of view of Christian philosophical theology, which needs more nuance than I can supply here, but which is plausible and could serve as my own attempt at a definitive explanation. This reading starts with the Hebrew Scriptures, in the narratives of those ancient theophanies which became classic reference points not only for Judaism but also for the early Jesus-movement and its later reception as Christianity. Preeminent among these narratives is the revelation of God to Moses in the burning-bush episode in Exodus, which climaxes in the revelation of the divine name YHWH (Exod 3:14–15). In this name whose translation still confounds the commentators, there is conveyed the classical dialectical character of God: transcendent yet immanent, mysterious yet available, absent yet present, whose true character will only be revealed in God's actions on behalf of Israel. The struggle to maintain this dialectical view is carried into early Christian literature and into the medieval schools and syntheses. This is so even though the link which the ancient and medieval God-arguments establish between biblical faith (which sees God as self-evidently present in action within human experience) and Greek metaphysical speculation (which assumes a situation where God/gods have become questionable and need to be re-established through rational criteria) creates an almost unbearable tension.[1]

The dialectical view of God begins to break down with the late medieval Nominalists' insistence upon God's omnipotence and transcendent freedom. These qualities put God beyond the reach of any sort of metaphysical speculation, which for the Nominalists would function only to cut God down to fit our intellectual limitations.[2] Here, while

---

[1] See Richard Schaeffler, *Religionsphilosophie,* Handbuch Philosophie (Freiburg/ Munich: Karl Alber, 1983) 49–52.

[2] See Frederick C. Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961)

the Nominalists intend to protect God's prerogatives through an emphasis on transcendence, the resulting overemphasis makes God extrinsic to human experience, unreachable, "an absolutist deity who acts in an arbitrary manner" and "who does not liberate human freedom but oppresses it."[3] The history of modernity and modern philosophy reflects the progressive simultaneous canonization and rejection of this extrinsic God. For an example, one might look to the successes of renaissance science which rip off the "sacred canopy" of the ancient and medieval world and demonstrate clearly how superfluous is the appeal to God to explain natural events. Or one might turn to the God-arguments of Descartes and Kant which confirm God's role as an ancillary factor supporting human autonomy. The various strategies within modern philosophy and theology (such as Deism, the romantic deification of nature, Schleiermacher's appeal to feeling) which attempt to deal with the progressive marginalization of God into an extrinsic object ultimately fail, as the received success of the 19th-century criticism of religion shows. But who is the God who is a projection and an alienation? Who is the God who is dead? On this reading of the history of the God problem, it is the God bequeathed to the 19th century, the extrinsic God; and Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche are simply confirming a movement which began with Ockham. They are clearing the decks, as it were, of those images which have become wasted and ineffective.[4]

There is current a different reading of this history which identifies it as being ontotheological through and through, irredeemable, unable to pay off on its promises to speak about reality or God. In contemporary academic discussions about God and religious experience, "ontotheology" has become somewhat like a talisman that one can whip out during philosophical debates. Its magical powers not only clinch the argument in one's own favor, foreclosing any appeal, but also result in the complete annihilation of the other party—thus, part of a coercive argument which (to paraphrase Robert Nozick) is "so powerful [it] set[s] up reverberations in the brain; if the person refuses to accept the

---

129–31, and Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Anthropology and the Question of God," in his *The Idea of God and Human Freedom,* trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) 80–98, at 82–83.

[3] Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ,* trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 17. Something of a counter reaction to this extrinsicism and the "loss" of religious experience can be seen in those movements of late medieval mysticism which spoke of the affective experience of God (e.g. "Brautmystik") or in late medieval devotions which emphasized the humanity of Christ, focusing especially on his passion. See e.g., Richard Kieckhefer, "Major Currents in Late Medieval Devotion," in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation,* ed. Jill Raitt, et al., World Spirituality 17 (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 75–108.

[4] See Paul Ricoeur's account of the "masters of suspicion" in "The Critique of Religion," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur,* ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon, 1978) 213–22.

conclusion, he *dies.*"[5] "Ontotheology" has developed into a code word which supposedly explains and secures a whole host of claims: the death of God, of value, and of absolute truth, along with the consequent end of Christianity as any kind of legitimate reading of reality. What interests me here is the use of such argumentation in the discussion of the religious status of God in postmodern philosophy of religion, specifically as a means of asserting the death of God in a supposedly self-evident way and claiming that any appeal away from this conclusion is a cowardly and self-defeating retreat into a metaphysics of presence.

Any attempt at carrying on a discussion about the religious status of God in postmodern philosophy of religion must somehow reckon with Martin Heidegger's critique of ontotheology and its effect of questioning all contemporary conceptions of God to the point of instability. Heidegger's critique of the identification of God with Being, an identification which literally "goes without saying" for centuries, is the crucial step in the attempt to overcome metaphysics, and also influences continental philosophy's critique of foundations. Thus it can be seen as one of the major catalysts for the postmodern suspicion of the metaphysical metanarratives of modernity.

But do Heidegger's insight into the ontological difference and his destruction of ontotheology necessarily issue in the sorts of analyses which claim the deconstruction of "God" as a transcendental referent?[6] While such analyses claim rightful descent from Heidegger's *Differenz* by way of Derrida's *différance* and Nietzsche's madman, some recent representatives of continental philosophy of religion and philosophical theology have presented another reaction to the end of ontotheology. They assert that it is indeed possible to speak of God meaningfully after taking the Heideggerian critique seriously. For hints as to the character and claims of such a positive retrieval of God-talk I would propose Jean-Luc Marion's *God without Being* and Walter Kasper's *The God of Jesus Christ*. Both take Heidegger's critique of ontotheology as their horizon and wind up with a surprisingly similar conclusion: that one must push beyond metaphysical conceptualities and the language of being in order to discover that the most appropriate name for God is Love.[7] For Marion this "agapic" naming of God "belongs

---

[5] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1981) 4 (Nozick's emphasis). See also Jeffrey Stout, "A Lexicon of Postmodern Philosophy," *Religious Studies Review* 13 (1987) 18–22, at 20.

[6] E.g., as in Mark C. Taylor's *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984).

[7] Of course Marion and Kasper do not constitute the only reactions from within recent Catholic philosophical theology to the vicissitudes of the metaphysical tradition, to Heidegger, and to the end of ontotheology. For some other (and in places quite different) arguments, see W. Norris Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God: A Neo-Thomist Perspective*, ed. William E. Ray (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest University, 1979); Ghislain Lafont, *God, Time, and Being*, trans. Leonard Maluf (Petersham, Mass.: Saint

neither to pre-, nor to post-, nor to modernity," but discloses the ulti-
mate horizon of all thought.[8] For Kasper, the recognition that "the
meaning of being is . . . self-communicating love"[9] transposes the hu-
man experience of God into the language of personal freedom and
relationality and provides a way to speak of God which escapes the
bankruptcy of theist metaphysics and "the heresy of Christian the-
ism."[10]

In the remainder of this paper, then, let me perform three moves:
first, a brief discussion of Heidegger's identification of metaphysics as
ontotheology and its impact on the religious status of God; then, a more
detailed discussion of both Marion's and Kasper's reactions to
Heidegger's critique; finally, some suggestions as to how an alterna-
tive view of God might be constituted within a postmodern context.

<div align="center">HEIDEGGER'S CRITIQUE OF ONTOTHEOLOGY</div>

I won't belabor my analysis of those familiar passages in which
Heidegger identifies Western philosophy as metaphysics and calls for
its overcoming. According to him, philosophy's intrinsic metaphysical
identity reveals itself in the obsessive search for the unifying
"ground," or *archē,* which makes beings possible, the place "from
which" the beings of our experience derive and "upon which" they are
grounded. Such a "grounding" reality has been conceived and named
differently in different historical epochs, but no matter how the ground
has been conceived, no matter what style metaphysical thinking has
taken, "what characterizes metaphysical thinking which grounds the
ground for beings is the fact that metaphysical thinking departs from
what is present in its presence, and thus represents it in terms of its
ground as something grounded."[11] Right here is Heidegger's indict-

---

Bede, 1992); Johannes B. Lotz, *Martin Heidegger und Thomas von Aquin: Mensch-Zeit-
Sein* (Pfullingen: Günther Neske, 1975); idem, *Vom Sein zum Heiligen: Metaphysiches
Denken nach Heidegger* (Frankfurt am Main: Josef Knecht, 1990). See especially
William J. Hill, *Search for the Absent God: Tradition and Modernity in Religious Un-
derstanding,* ed. Mary Catherine Hilkert (New York: Crossroad, 1992), who, while re-
maining faithful to the metaphysical tradition, argues a position close to that of Marion
and Kasper.

[8] Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte,* trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chi-
cago: University of Chicago, 1991) xxii. For an earlier version of his argument, see *L'
Idole et la distance* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1977). See also Marion's response to earlier
criticisms, "Quelques objections à quelques réponses," in *Heidegger et la question de
Dieu,* ed. Richard Kearney and Joseph Stephen O'Leary (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1980)
304–09.

[9] Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* 156.

[10] Ibid. 285. Elsewhere Kasper characterizes a Christian philosophical theism as "an
inherently untenable position" which "has already been undermined by the Enlighten-
ment and atheism" (315).

[11] Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in his *On

ment of metaphysics: it ignores the phenomenality of beings, their sheer givenness as modes of presencing, and persits in formatting reality along the lines of dualistic oppositions (ground/grounded, source of presence/what is present). By doing so, metaphysics—which claims to talk about everything, the whole—misses what Heidegger calls in a number of places the "ontological difference," *the very condition which makes such differentiation possible.* There is indeed a distinction between Being (the process of presencing, of allowing individual beings to come into the open, be present) and beings (which are present and take their stand within our field of attention). There is a distinction between Being (*Sein* as *Anwesen*) and beings (*Seienden*)—and in this very sentence there are *three* elements to think about: Being, beings, and the differentiating process which simultaneously connects them and holds them apart, dif-fers them (hence the "difference").

And here precisely is where metaphysics goes wrong: it thinks only two elements, only of Being and beings. It considers beings as grounded in Being, Being as somehow graspable by the intellect on analogy to beings, as made transparently clear by being represented as *something*—as *arché*, foundation, whatever. And then metaphysics goes further: it exhibits the propensity to think this ground, this ultimate stable unifying principle as the "highest being," as the divine ground. Here is where metaphysics becomes "ontotheologic." "When metaphysics thinks of beings with respect to the ground that is common to all beings as such, then it is logic as onto-logic. When metaphysics thinks of beings as such as a whole, that is, with respect to the highest being which accounts for everything, then it is logic as theologic."[12] God enters philosophy having been identified with Being, by functioning as the generative Ground of the perduring of beings, as that which is different from and which unifies what is grounded. But notice that this God is therefore inscribed within a metaphysical schema which is "bigger" than God, a schema which is all-encompassing, which employs God as part of dualistic formatting of experience. God is thus in the grip of that *Differenz,* the differentiating process which is always already there ahead of the God who is distinct from beings. This, as Heidegger so eloquently puts it, is "the god of philosophy. Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god . . . can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god."[13]

In the current reception of Heidegger's argument, the overcoming of metaphysics as ontotheology has been read through Nietzsche's lens

---

Time and Being, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) 55–73, at 56.

[12] Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference,* trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) 70–71.

[13] Ibid. 72.

and applied to Christianity and to the Christian God in order to proclaim their demise.[14] In this reading, Heidegger's critique of ontotheology successfully articulates Nietzsche's suspicious analysis of truths and values, an analysis which supposedly undermines every claim to a transtemporal world, every assumption of metaphysical realities with which God has been identified in Western tradition and which the Christian God represents as the highest instance.[15] Because the Christian God has been so closely identified with being, the end of metaphysics and ontotheology equals the end of God, with no hope of redemption or replacement—because there is no other possible way to affirm God. And so Heidegger, despite his desire for a "divine God" who can be approached by means of "god-less thinking," will not have his desire fulfilled. Nietzsche has seen to that. Or so the argument goes.

THE COUNTER-ARGUMENTS OF MARION AND KASPER

Jean-Luc Marion begins from a more explicitly phenomenological position which dialogues with Nietzsche, Heidegger, and poststructuralism, while Walter Kasper argues from a position influenced by Schelling and Hegel which attempts among other things to retrieve both a natural and a trinitarian theology. But both take Heidegger's rejection of the metaphysical/ontotheological tradition seriously, and each attempts to retrieve and redeem the Christian experience of God by liberating God from Being and attempting what Heidegger has ruled out: a resituating of God as transcendental horizon, or as *archē*.

Marion's Iconic God

Let me put Marion's issue forward in his own words: "Does Being relate, more than anything, to God? Does God have anything to gain by being? Can Being . . . even accommodate any (thing of) God?"[16]

According to Marion, not even Heidegger can provide the answer,

---

[14] For the identification of Christianity with metaphysics, with the consequent end of both through the critique of ontotheology, see an argument such as that in Robert S. Gall, *Beyond Theism and Atheism: Heidegger's Significance for Religious Thinking*, Studies in Philosophy and Religion 11 (Dordrecht/Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987) esp. chap. 2.

[15] This is the crux of the madman's announcement of the death of God in *The Gay Science* no. 125, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 93–102, at 95 (reference is to the reprint edition). See Heidegger's comment on this passage: "the terms 'God' and 'Christian God' in Nietzsche's thinking are used to designate the suprasensory world in general. God is the name for the realm of Ideas and ideals. . . . The pronouncement 'God is dead' means: The suprasensory world is without effective power. It bestows no life. Metaphysics, i.e., for Nietzsche, Western philosophy understood as Platonism, is at an end" ("The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt [New York: Harper and Row, 1977] 53–112, at 61).

[16] *God without Being* 2 (Marion's parentheses).

since his hoped-for "divine God" to be announced by the poets is still conceived within the grip of "the truth of Being." Marion presents a series of texts which make clear that Heidegger's anticipated "new thinking" about God is simply the repetition of the old thinking of ontotheology.[17] Heidegger has imposed conditions within which it is possible for God to be encountered: not only the condition of Being ("In the beginning and in principle, there advenes neither God, nor a god, nor the *logos,* but the advent itself—Being, with an anteriority all the less shared in that it decides all the rest"), but also the condition of human subjectivity ("the absolute phenomenological anteriority of *Dasein*") which is first posited in *Being and Time* and, according to Marion, is never revoked, despite Heidegger's disclaimers.[18]

Marion attempts to escape the bind of Being by providing yet another reading of the history of the God-problem, one which sees this history constituted from the interplay of the "idolatrous" and "iconic" ways of signaling God's presence. An *idol* is the result of human projection, the exhaustion of the aspirations and expectations of human subjectivity and the freezing of them into an image which does no more than reflect back these expectations to the viewer. "The idol thus acts as a mirror, not as a portrait: a mirror that reflects the gaze's image, or more exactly, the image of its aim and of the scope of that aim."[19] Since this concept finds its starting point from within human subjectivity, it is destined to exhaust the capacities of its limited raw material and to repeat its limitations. The idol, by providing a visible stop to the "gaze" of subjectivity, acts as a barrier which "admits no beyond": subjectivity, considered as a kind of sight, marks off as "thinkable" only that which can be encompassed and repeated within the visual metaphor.[20] For Marion, modernity's arguments both for and against God proceed in this idolatrous manner and thus silence God. Theistic metaphysics controls God by generating the conditioning idol-concept, and atheism simply substitutes another idol-concept during its critique.

But the idol is neither the only way to think nor the only way to think God. With a phenomenology of the *icon* Marion argues that there is an experience "which does not result from a vision but provokes one."[21] There is thinking which is not simply the mirror of human experience but which shatters the controlling and generating mechanisms of subjectivity and presents a new possibility to be thought. The icon gives access to the divine by rendering the invisible visible, and finds its perfect counterpart in the face which presents to us the visage of infinite and unconstrainable depth, "which gazes at our gazes in

[17] Ibid. 38–42, 66–70.
[19] Ibid. 12.
[21] Ibid. 17.

[18] Ibid. 40–43.
[20] Ibid. 13.

order to summon them to its depth."[22] What Marion articulates here is a logic at work in reality which differs from that discerned by being-oriented subjectivity. Iconic thought is a response to an address from an origin beyond subjectivity, "an origin without original" which out-strips the limits of subjectivity.[23] Such thought is aware of reality based on "donation, abandon, pardon," on an excess which grants and clears space and allows beings to be, independent of Being.

Thus iconic thought outwits ontotheology and the ontological differ-ence by thinking the very condition or horizon which gives rise to the ontological difference: gift, giftedness, graciousness. The difference be-tween Being and beings is not simply there, not simply a neutral presentation, but is a gift, the graceful unfolding of space and distance and difference. *"The gift delivers Being/being* . . . in that it liberates being from Being or, put another way, Being/being from ontological difference, in rendering being free from Being, in distorting being out of its subjection to Being."[24] And since the gift can be understood only as accomplished by the giver, who is on the other side of the distance, "doubtless we will name it G⨯d, but in crossing G⨯d with the cross that reveals him only in the disappearance of his death and resurrection."[25]

Such a crossing of "God" represents subjectivity's attempt to respond to a dilemma: how to do justice to "the intimate gap between the giver and the gift," to the distance that does not permit the giver to be identified with the gift but which nonetheless allows "the giver [to be] read on the gift."[26] In other words, how is one to name the divine presence which is beyond all names, or refer to the transcendent giver without freezing that reference into an idolatrous representation? Thus the appropriateness of the metaphor of personal relation and above all of the face as personal invitation to a depth beyond the reach of subjectivity. No wonder the early Church resorted to the icon as the permissible depiction of the divine and revered it as a window into heaven, since it preserves the personal invitation to eternal life with God along with the divine revelation's dialectical play of presence/absence. Iconic thought, in its openness to the giver in the gift, over-comes (comes over, reaches over and beyond) metaphysics to rejoin the biblical experience of God: all revelatory events are a revealing conceal-ing of the divine giver, whether they happen on Sinai or on Golgotha.

While the idol is characterized by the constraining control of subjec-

[22] Ibid. 19. Here Marion echoes the phenomenology of the face from Emmanuel Lev-inas's *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority,* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1969) 187–219.

[23] *God without Being* 20.   [24] Ibid. 100–1.

[25] Ibid. 105. The "x" through "God" is Marion's convention, modelled after a Heideg-gerian strategy. In *The Question of Being* (trans. William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde [New Haven: College and University, 1958]), Heidegger crosses out *Sein* as one graphic means of discussing being beyond metaphysics.

[26] *God without Being* 104.

tivity which makes being the condition of the thinkable and measures the divine to the range of being, the icon is characterized by excess, the unmeasured access to the infinite which provokes thought and to which thought's image responds. Thus not only is modernity's thinking about God idolatrous, but so is Heidegger's. To attempt to think God "beyond" the ontological difference and "beyond" metaphysics is still to allow the ontological difference to determine the character of the thinkable.

For examples of such iconic thought of God which "outwits" Being by getting beyond the game ordained by being-language and which is open to "the difference that is indifferent to the ontological difference,"[27] Marion turns to Scripture. For instance, there is the First Letter to the Corinthians 1:26–29, where Paul writes of God's choice of the foolish to be wise, the weak to be strong—in short, of God's call to non-beings (in an ancient economic and political context) to annul the difference and become full beings. There are texts like the First Letter of John 4:8, "Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love." There is the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, where the quality of this divine love is iconically demonstrated in a comparison to a contentious family relationship brought to a successful outcome by an unexpected and unrequitable overflow of love and care.

Kasper's Relational God

Walter Kasper's reaction to ontotheology forms part of his wider-ranging project. He wishes to make the case for the Christian belief in God in the face of the contemporary eclipse of God occasioned by modernity, and especially by modernity's emphasis on autonomous human subjectivity. Kasper's response takes shape through a rehabilitation of natural theology and the formulation of a theology of the Trinity.

Within this context his reaction to metaphysics is at once less straightforward and less polemical than Marion's. In describing faith's contemporary context he grants its postmetaphysical character and recognizes the modern turn to subjectivity and historicity as a major source of this character. More specifically, he notes that modern and contemporary philosophy have put into question the relationship between being and God that classical metaphysics posited, and he underscores the crucial roles that both Nietzsche and Heidegger have played in that critique.[28] In this context, faith and theology have been forced to rethink their fundamental presuppositions and to raise the most fundamental question concerning the relation between God and being, "that is, whether we must ask the question of God within the

---

[27] Ibid. 84–85.   [28] *The God of Jesus Christ* 46.

horizon of the question of being, or the question of being within the horizon of the question of God."[29]

But the contemporary critique of metaphysics does not elicit from Kasper a parallel critique, but rather a general defense. In a recent essay, he has insisted that "the regaining of the metaphysical dimension" is "one of the most important tasks of contemporary theology."[30] Talk about God, "the reality that includes and determines everything," demands a metaphysics, that mode of thinking "which enquires not about individual beings or realms of being but about being as such and as a whole."[31] Metaphysics seeks "the final, all-determining and cohering foundations, wisdom about the oneness and wholeness of reality," and Kasper believes that without such thinking and its attendant language, discourse about God becomes an impossible task and theology itself is thereby plunged into a crisis situation.[32]

However, Kasper is careful to delineate the metaphysics that he seeks. It must be a thinking which "keeps open the question about the meaning of the whole," which is open to the overarching horizon of mystery that grounds the transcending character of human experience, and which rigorously avoids absolutizing the finite.[33] He thereby distances himself from any God-arguments based on an essentialist or "substance" metaphysics, or from any sort of thinking which objectifies the transcendent, all-determining horizon of experience and represents it in terms more appropriate to finite beings.[34] This is an indication that Kasper has taken seriously Heidegger's criticism of the objectifying and calculative tendencies of metaphysics. And this argument supplies the basis for Kasper's evaluation of the various attempts within modern philosophy to prove God's existence. The traditional ontotheological arguments simply lead to and end with the atheism represented by Nietzsche. "In the final analysis it is impossible to prove God's existence from some authority external to him; he must show himself."[35]

This is why Anselm is one of Kasper's heroes. In the ontological

---

[29] Ibid. 64.

[30] "Postmodern Dogmatics: Toward a Renewed Discussion of Foundations in North America," trans. D. T. Asselin and Michael Waldstein, *International Catholic Review: Communio* 17 (1990) 181–91, at 189.

[31] *The God of Jesus Christ* 15.

[32] "Introduction" to *Theology and Church,* trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 1–16, at 10; for his comments concerning "the true and deepest crisis of present theology" without metaphysics, see ibid. 3.

[33] *The God of Jesus Christ* 15; for the arguments regarding mystery as the overarching horizon and the finite as non-absolute, see ibid. 84–85 and 114 respectively.

[34] Ibid. 100. See also his stronger statement: "Without a transcendent ground and point of reference, statements of faith are finally only subjective projections or social and ecclesial ideologies" ("Postmodern Dogmatics" 189).

[35] *The God of Jesus Christ* 109.

argument (the argument "to which all the other arguments boil down"!),[36] in that lowest-common-denominator description of God as "that than which nothing greater can be thought," Anselm demonstrates the dynamic openness of finite human subjectivity to the infinite, without attempting to define or constrain that infinite to fit a certain determination. As Kasper puts it, "In the end thinking necessarily transcends itself, inasmuch as it thinks something which it is essentially incapable of thinking out any further, because the infinite cannot be captured in any finite concept. God, therefore, can be known only through God; he can be known only when he himself allows himself to be known."[37] This is Kasper's first step in retrieving God from the atheist critique: he establishes the openness of human experience to the infinite by means of the transcendental move, and uses a natural theology like Anselm's to describe human rationality as fundamentally the "pre-apprehension of irreducible mystery"[38] which manifests itself at the limits of finite human experience.

Kasper's second step is to articulate the character of this overarching absolute. With the shift entailed by modern philosophy's critique of classical metaphysics, an opportunity arises to speak of God while avoiding the aporias noted by Kant and Fichte. The clue to the character of the all-encompassing horizon lies in modern philosophy's insistence that freedom, not substance, is the true overarching category. "Not observable fact but free activity is the reality that alone brings the self-disclosure of the world. Being, therefore, is act, accomplishment, happening, event. Not self-contained being but existence, or freedom that goes out of itself and fulfills itself in action, is now the starting point and horizon of thought."[39] That the finite human person is intentionally geared to this infinite horizon is clear from the taste of everyday experience: it is shot through with incompleteness, with suffering, and with the "melancholy of fulfillment" which arises when finite values and persons do not pay off with the infinite returns we seek. Such experiences provoke a protest in the name of the "unconditioned" fulfillment we intend but which is unavailable within the realm of human action.[40] This definitive fulfillment can be encountered only in "a person who is infinite not only in its intentional claims on reality but in its real being; that is only if it encounters an absolute person."[41] For Kasper, only the metaphor of personal relationship and the recognition of the infinite horizon as the horizon of perfect freedom

---

[36] Ibid.   [37] Ibid. 113.
[38] Ibid. 114.   [39] Ibid. 153.
[40] Cf. also Kasper's *An Introduction to Christian Faith,* trans. V. Green (New York: Paulist, 1980) 28–35, especially the claim (framed in terms of critical theory's analysis of modernity) that the history of suffering generates "the strongest objections to belief in God" (29–30).
[41] *The God of Jesus Christ* 154.

can account for the infinite which gives itself to human beings and to the world as horizon and as future fulfillment.

Here is where Kasper's argument converges with Marion's. Reality manifests a logic that being-language (oriented to objectification and manipulability) misses: a relation to an all-encompassing mystery which grasps us before we grasp it conceptually, which offers the fulfillment that human activity, fueled by hope of transformation, intends. The only proper language for the overarching mystery is the personal, which necessarily implies relationality to an other. Christian experience fills in this outline with reflections based on benevolent experiences with this absolute. "Seen in the horizon of the person, the meaning of being is love. . . . To call God a person is to say that God is the subsistent being which is freedom in love. Thus the definition of God's essence brings us back to the biblical statement: 'God is love' (1 John 4:8, 16)."[42] The "grammar" of the contemporary view of God is determined beforehand by "an understanding of reality in which person and relation have priority,"[43] and by the awareness of a logic of reality which is lost to ontotheology but can be revealed within a metaphor of personal relationships grounded in experience. "The free turning of God to the world and to us grounds all intra-worldly substantiality. The meaning of being is therefore to be found not in substance that exists in itself, but in self-communicating love."[44] This is an experience of the all-encompassing that fits into no ontotheological system, but can only be experienced through personal relationships affording finite glimpses of this infinite.

THE STATUS OF GOD IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

Is the type of claim advanced by Marion and Kasper on behalf of God's presence even plausible in a postmodern situation identified with emptiness, rupture, schizophrenia, the end of metanarratives, and the death of God?[45] Their arguments already seem to be part of a

[42] Ibid. 155.   [43] Ibid. 310.

[44] Ibid. 156. This redefinition of "being" marks a farewell to any of the usual understandings of "metaphysics," even if Kasper desires to retain the term. "By defining God, the all-determining reality, in personal terms, *being as a whole* is personally defined. This means a revolution in the understanding of being. . . . To put it in more concrete terms: *love is the all-determining reality* and the meaning of being. . . . So wherever there is love, we already find, here and now, the ultimate meaning of all reality" (*Theology and Church* 29–30, Kasper's emphases).

[45] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Literature 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984) xxiv; Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture,* ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983) 111–25. As Mark Taylor puts it: "Postmodernism opens with the sense of *irrevocable* loss and *incurable* fault. This wound is inflicted by the overwhelming awareness of death—a death that 'begins' with the death of God and 'ends' with the death of our selves" (*Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* 6, Taylor's emphases).

high modernity which has been deconstructed by end-of-ontotheology arguments which claim that the only appropriate language for God in the postmodern context is *no, not, never*. But determining the status of God within the postmodern condition implies the specification of the character of that condition itself. I won't indulge here in that interminable redefining of "postmodernism" which seems to accompany every discussion of it, but will simply name my assumptions.

I consider as paradigmatic of the dominant philosophical ideology of postmodernism a view of truth and understanding such as that argued by John Caputo in his distinction between the "cold" hermeneutics of Jacques Derrida and the notion of understanding proposed by Hans-Georg Gadamer (presumably a "warm" hermeneutics). "Cold" hermeneutics offers "the trembling and the tremor, the lack of grounds," comfortlessness, the "cold truth" that there is no truth and that there is only "the flux." In a post-Nietzschean, antifoundational world, this clearly has been preferable to the "warm" hermeneutics of Gadamer which argues for meaning, for "deep truths" underlying shifting traditions, for the comfort of truth despite the shifts of history.[46] But what makes this dualistic cut in reality the only possible explanation of the choices available in the contemporary context? More to our point, why is the choice for the trembling and emptiness of the post-Nietzschean abyss—which includes the choice against ontotheology—always portrayed as the heroic and preferable choice over against the option for meaning? Why the assumption that meaning = unity = stasis = violence, while dissemination = difference = freedom? The equivalences, the choices, and the preference are less evident than one might assume.

This is why I would turn to the more sociological arguments which place postmodernism in closer proximity to its modern "other." These arguments, two of which I summarize here, provide finer distinctions and a more interesting analysis in order to determine why such choices have been advanced and why the postmodern context looks the way it does.

First, I am convinced by arguments such as Zygmunt Bauman's, which claim that the discourse of postmodernism is the revenge of the anxious intellectuals against a modernity that they no longer control and whose implications have made their elite services (such as articulating principles and defining criteria for successful social interaction) irrelevant.[47] In the light of such a claim, I would argue that

---

[46] John D. Caputo, "Heidegger and Derrida: Cold Hermeneutics," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 17 (1986) 252–74; *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1987) 187–206; "Gadamer's Closet Essentialism: A Derridean Critique," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York, 1989) 258–64.

[47] Zygmunt Bauman, "Is There a Postmodern Sociology?" *Theory Culture and Society*

during this *trahison des clercs*, revenge for the loss of status is carried out by way of evacuation: "modernity," "Enlightenment," "ontotheology," "metaphysics" all now stand accused of having provided unifying metanarratives which are empty, or which were meaningless all along as functions of false consciousness, or which functioned as violent repressions of otherness in the name of a false unity. What is clear is that the revenge against modernity is carried out in a fully modern way. On the one hand it is an extension of the *Cartesian* method. The demarcation of extremes, the all-or-nothing argumentation which claims that since there is no full presence there is no presence at all, is a discourse on method which is strongly reminiscent of what Richard Bernstein has so insightfully termed "Cartesian anxiety."[48] On the other hand, as Christopher Norris has shown, whatever may act within postmodern critique to unravel the unifying metanarrative (*différance*, the sublime) functions as a Kantian transcendental condition for the possibility of any discourse.[49]

Second, I would point to the interesting parallels which Bryan Turner has noted between counterreformation and baroque culture on the one hand and postmodernism on the other. He views both of these poles as part of the history of "a much longer set of oppositional movements" which have "challenged the uni-dimensional notion of rationality in modernity, the emphasis on reason rather than emotions, the concept of a grand narrative, and a teleological view of history."[50] The postmodern critique is already prefigured in the Catholic Counter-Reformation's resistance to modernity, especially as manifested in Calvinistic Protestantism, by means of aestheticization. In place of modernity's individuality, rationalism, and asceticism, Turner notes that the baroque offered "a mass culture of emotionality" and a challenge to any sort of rationalized natural order by means of an aesthetics which prized illusion, fantasy, sensuality, and the manipulation of perspective in order to bridge the chasm between the viewer and the desired transcendence.[51] In counterreformation religious art in particular, the

---

5 (1988) 217–37, esp. 218–19. See also Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford/New York: Blackwell, 1989) chap. 1.

[48] Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983) 16–20.

[49] Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1987) 94–95. See also idem, *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals, and the Gulf War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1992) and Rudolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1986).

[50] Bryan S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, 2d ed. (London/Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1991) xvi-xx, at xviii. See also Turner's introduction to Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London/Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1994) 1–36, esp. 3–20, where he also acknowledges the impetus given to his argument by Max Weber's analysis of modernity.

[51] *Religion and Social Theory* xvii. Cf. also Turner's observation, "The Baroque imagination, rather like postmodernism, represents a direct challenge to the whole idea of

perceived boundary between the finite secular and the infinite sacred is burst by a visual performance of transcendent grace flooding the viewer's space and is accomplished by a deliberate emphasis on super-abundant materiality, on an erotic excess of bodiliness. "By bringing the sensual to the forefront of effects in order to break down the space between art-object and subject-spectator, the baroque transformed the human body into rippling, creamy, palpable flesh. . . . Baroque ceilings drip with pink, abundant flesh."[52]

Although differing in intent from the Counter-Reformation, post-modernism can, along with baroque culture, be situated within a tra-dition of opposition to modernity, a tradition which constructs its re-sistance by means of alternative discourses and practices which desta-bilize the unifying metanarrative of Western reason. But I would argue that its place within this tradition is paradoxical, since the re-sistance is carried out by means of a thoroughly modern rational method, the Cartesian either/or: either there is absolute certainty or there is no certainty. The failure of Descartes' "clear and distinct ideas" in the light of the 19th-century emphasis on false consciousness (Marx and Nietzsche) vitiated the results, but not the method; and postmodernism's all-or-nothing gambit (either unity or difference, but not unity-in-difference; either transcendence or immanence, but not transcendence-in-immanence) reflects Descartes' legacy.

How does such an analysis of the condition of postmodernity affect the discussion of ontotheology? The fact that the baroque aestheticiza-tion of life was encouraged by fundamentally Catholic sources with an investment in incarnation and sacramentality is an important clue, especially in the light of Turner's observation that "Calvinistic Prot-estantism . . . generated and preserved many of the essential features of what we mean by the notion of modernity."[53] When one recalls the contrast drawn by Paul Tillich between the "Catholic substance" and the "Protestant principle," between the claim that finitude can embody divinity and the protest against any identification of divinity with finite mediations,[54] it is easy to understand the 17th- and 18th-century

---

progress as the march of reason, the existence of linear time and the value of positivistic science as the beacon of history" ("From Postindustrial Society to Postmodern Politics: The Political Sociology of Daniel Bell," in *Contemporary Political Culture: Politics in a Postmodern Age*, Sage Modern Politics Series 23, ed. John R. Gibbins [London/Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1989] 199–217, at 213).

[52] Bryan S. Turner, "Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body," in *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, ed. Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth, and Bryan S. Turner (London/Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1991) 1–35, at 29. See also the analysis of the connection between the Catholic doctrine of grace and Southern German Catholic church architecture in Karsten Harries, *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983).

[53] *Religion and Social Theory* xvii.

[54] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 3: *Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963) 243–45. Tillich claimed that they must be

struggles over modernity as a contest between worldviews, one which admits the possibility that the finite and immanent mediates the transcendent, the other which denies such mediation in the interest of the purity of the transcendent. The postmodern continuation of this struggle with modernity denies mediation by denying there is any transcendent presence to be mediated. Thus those contemporary critics of ontotheology who admit only *no, not, never* when discussing God as a transcendental referent instantiate the "Protestant principle" in its most extreme, evacuative, "cold" hermeneutical form, presuming *Differenz/différance*/differentiation as the transcendental horizon (the Kantian element) and marking the distance between immanence and transcendence as infinite and hence unbridgeable (the Cartesian element). This stems partly from modern rationality's propensity for objectification, partly from Nietzsche's inheritance of the extrinsic God, and partly from Heidegger's own quietism on the topic of the divine, which resulted from his struggle with his Catholic roots and his early turn to Luther and Kierkegaard for assistance in articulating a phenomenology of religious experience.[55]

But as the history of opposition to modernity reveals, the situation is never a simple either/or proposition. Between the choices of the rationalizing tendency of modernity and ontotheology on the one hand and the *no, not, never* of dogmatic postmodern philosophy of religion on the other lies the possibility of a postmodern third choice which refuses to say "never" but which will never say "always," which denies both the absolute fit of the conceptual and its pure evacuation. The choice of Marion and Kasper—a "Catholic" principle if you will[56]—takes Heidegger's overcoming of metaphysics and ontotheology seriously and refuses to link God with being. But this choice argues for the recognition of God as transcendental horizon (and thus for the *goal* of ground/grounded ontotheological thinking) by pushing ontotheology to the breaking point.

The transcendental horizon is still there, even within postmodernism. It is that which makes the religious worldview the most realistic of all because it reminds us that human experience has limits and

held in a balanced relationship (ibid. 6), but his own thought was not successful in maintaining that balance. See also the comments of Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 5–8.

[55] For Heidegger's troubled relationship to Catholicism, see Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life*, trans. Allan Blunden (London: HarperCollins, 1993); for his early lectures on the philosophy of religion, see Thomas J. Sheehan, "Heidegger's 'Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion,' 1920–21," *The Personalist* 60 (1979) 312–24, and Michael E. Zimmerman, *Eclipse of the Self: The Development of Heidegger's Concept of Authenticity* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University, 1981) 1–42.

[56] Or, in David Tracy's classic formulation, the "analogical imagination" (*The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* [New York: Crossroad, 1981] 405–56).

achieves only degrees of perfection, never any totality.[57] The transcendental move from the side of immanent rationality encounters the all-encompassing transcendent mystery as love/grace/donation which exhausts whatever conceptual apparatus immanence may bring to bear. Marion and Kasper thus argue for ontotheology taken to excess, all the way to incomprehensible affective overload, following the spirit if not the letter of Anselm: not as any sort of a move *from* ontotheology *to* excess, but rather compelling the ground/grounded distinction to the point where the sheer making of the distinction is revealed to rationality as being out of the control of reason. It exists only in love and pure gift, as a relation which benevolently grants space for human activity which always intends "otherwise" than its present situation and which ultimately intends the quality and character of this love: pure positivity. Neither the objectifications of modernity nor the evacuations of dogmatic postmodernism can register this saturation, this ontotheology without "onto-", thus justifying Marion's claim that God as Love "belongs neither to pre-, nor to post-, nor to modernity," but discloses the ultimate horizon of all thought.

The convergence of Marion and Kasper on the point of God who is known as Love registers another effect, available neither to ontotheology nor dogmatic postmodern philosophy of religion. Ontotheology when taken to affective excess demands mediating performance and thus an ethics. Love can only be known in loving and being loved. The human experience of this all-encompassing Love is fully dependent upon performance, upon its (always partial) material articulation most fundamentally in the realm of personal relationships, relationships which manifest care and concern for the other, which are life-enhancing rather than life-denying. This is postmodernism's counterpart to baroque aesthetics: now it is personal relationships—dripping with flesh, saturated with the complexities of care, outstripping rational systematization—which are the mediations of grace. In other words, ontotheology to excess points toward transformative praxis. What happens when the reality which breaks through all the idolatries, which "makes itself known" to subjectivity, and which shatters the absolutizations of the finite can only be perceived on the level of personal relationships? We must then say that relationships are revelatory because of their participation in the overarching "gift" of difference, that relationships are the primary mode of the revelation of the divine.

---

[57] As Leszek Kolakowski observes: "To distinguish between the sacred and the profane is already to deny total autonomy to the profane order and to admit that there are limits to the degree of perfection it can attain. Since the profane is defined in opposition to the sacred, its imperfection must be intrinsic and in some measure incurable. . . . Religion is man's way of accepting life as an inevitable defeat" ("The Revenge of the Sacred in Secular Culture," *Modernity on Endless Trial* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990] 63–74, at 72, 73).

This third choice—the break with the metaphysics of ontotheology but not with its project—has the consequence of at least calling into question all those receptions of Heidegger's destruction of ontotheology which claim the absolute death of "God" as transcendent referent, and the absolute death of Christianity, religious experience, religion, etc. The retrieval of the idea of God from metaphysical theism prevents the obituaries from being generated out of the very ontotheology which has been surpassed—in Marion's terms, this would be the substitution of one idolatry for another. It is not far-fetched to claim that it is the philosophy of religion as traditionally understood which dies here, rather than God. Traditional philosophy of religion has had no sense of the affective, no sense that the personal and praxical could ever be the conditioned mediations of the unconditioned, and no sense that God could be otherwise than as static, perduring Ground. Marion and Kasper each argue for an articulation of God which has none of the necessity and essentiality which both ontotheology and dogmatic post-modern philosophy of religion have demanded of the idea of God. God without Being but in Love is the most uncontrollable God, the most uncomfortable God, but also the most divine God.

INTERNATIONAL NEWMAN CONFERENCE
ORIEL COLLEGE, OXFORD, UK
6-12 August 1995

NEWMAN AND CONVERSION

Featuring

Louis Bouyer, Avery Dulles, Sheridan Gilley, Ian Ker, John Macquarrie, Richard John Neuhaus, Aidan Nichols

and

Cardinal William Baum, President Francesco Cossiga

For further details apply to:
Michael Barber, SJ., Campion Hall
Oxford, UK, OX1 1QS