TOWARD A NEW PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY BASED ON INTERSUBJECTIVITY

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[Editor's note: Contrary to the view of two prominent French Roman Catholic philosophers and theologians, Jean-Luc Marion and Louis-Marie Chauvet, the author argues for the continued validity of metaphysics as a logical foundation for systematic theology today, provided that one rethinks metaphysics in the light of a new logic of intersubjectivity.]

THE CRITIQUE OF classical metaphysics initiated by Martin Heidegger earlier in this century and then carried forward by a variety of other contemporary philosophers, such as Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Richard Rorty, has been greeted with enthusiasm by "liberals" who are trying to rid themselves of what they see as the adverse effects of "totalizing" thought in Western philosophy, and with suspicion or even hostility by "conservatives" who fear a loss of objectivity if metaphysical ways of thinking are simply abandoned. Still a third group of philosophers has been working at a "reconstruction" of metaphysics along lines more amenable to habits of thought already operative in the natural and social sciences. David Griffin, for example, is the editor of a series in "constructive postmodern thought" published by the State University of New York Press, to which he himself has contributed.[1] With this third group I align myself because, while I am sympathetic to the "deconstructive" critique of classical metaphysics by Heidegger, Derrida, and others, I am profoundly uneasy at the prospect of constructing a contemporary theological worldview without an underlying philosophical scheme to give it a stronger claim to objectivity and academic respectability.

Moreover, I likewise concur with Griffin, Cobb, and others who have published in the SUNY series mentioned above, that resources for a

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[1] See David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World: Essays in Postmodern Theology* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989); David Ray Griffin, John B. Cobb, Jr., Marcus P. Ford, Pete A. Y. Gunter, Peter Ochs, *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy: Peirce, James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Hartshorne* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993).

"reconstructive" metaphysics are available in the North American philosophical tradition. In the present article, accordingly, I will indicate how the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, albeit with some modest changes,[2] can be used to set forth a "reconstructive" philosophical theology based on intersubjectivity that in my judgment meets the challenge of Heidegger, Derrida, Levinas, and others with respect to the "totalizing" character of classical metaphysics. That is, a theoretical scheme grounded in universal intersubjectivity should be open and incomplete since its ultimate components are by definition interrelated subjects of experience in process of development rather than fixed objects of thought within an a priori causal scheme (as in classical metaphysics). Universality or metaphysical generality should, moreover, still be present in this new philosophical theology based on intersubjectivity, but with the qualification that objectivity is grounded in habit or repetition of pattern among subjects of experience rather than in fixed essences within a pregiven causal scheme.

To provide a counterpoint for my reflections in this article, I will review the work of two prominent French Roman Catholic philosopher-theologians, namely, Jean-Luc Marion and Louis-Marie Chauvet, who have drawn up their own highly imaginative response to the work of Heidegger, Derrida, and others. Yet, while their response is a deliberately nonmetaphysical approach to Roman Catholic belief and practice, my suggestion here will be that, on the contrary, their "symbolic" approach to theology could itself be incorporated into a philosophical scheme based on the premise of universal intersubjectivity. Thus in my view there is no need for Marion and Chauvet to abandon metaphysical modes of thought altogether but only to revise them properly. To be specific, in reviewing the work of Marion, I will focus on what I regard as the apophatic character of both human and divine subjectivity, that is, the inability of a subject of experience fully to be described in objective terms. Thus subjectivity, whether human or divine, is always "transcendent" of whatever is said about it. Then, in taking note of the work of Chauvet, I will indicate how subjects of experience in their dynamic interrelation nevertheless create objective patterns or structures of intelligibility which constitute an enduring social order within

[2] For readers unfamiliar with my position within the community of scholars dedicated to the process-relational metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead, perhaps the best brief summary is to be found in "Panentheism from a Process Perspective," *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God,* ed. Joseph A. Bracken, S.J., and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki (New York: Continuum, 1997) 95–113. There I indicate how I differ from most orthodox Whiteheadians (1) in advocating a specifically trinitarian understanding of God and the God-world relationship so as to preserve the traditional transcendence of God to the world of creation, and (2) in advocating, by way of philosophical justification for this trinitarian conception of God within a process-relational framework, a new understanding of the Whiteheadian category of society as an objective unity over and above its intersubjective components, i.e. actual occasions in dynamic interrelation. The net effect of these changes, of course, is to place myself midway between the basic presuppositions of classical Thomistic metaphysics and those of neo-classical Whiteheadian metaphysics.

which they continue to address one another. In this way, two of the principal features of this new philosophical theology of intersubjectivity will be introduced through review of the work of Marion and Chauvet.

MARION'S *GOD WITHOUT BEING*

As he states in the preface to the English edition of *God Without Being,* Marion in no way denies the existence of God. "God is, exists, and that is the least of things. At issue here is not the possibility of God's attaining Being, but, quite the opposite, the possibility of Being's attaining to God."[3] With this laconic statement, Marion declares his independence from the approach to theology dominant among Roman Catholics since the time of Thomas Aquinas. That is, he refuses to think of the God–world relation in terms of a rational a priori scheme in which God as the Supreme Being is the transcendent first Cause of all creatures as finite beings. That scheme, he believes, subjects the God of biblical revelation to the logical requirements of a humanly constructed cosmology with Being as its principal concept and with the four Aristotelian causes (material, formal, efficient, and final) as its basic principles of explanation. Rather, one should begin with revelation, namely, the biblical statement that "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and proceed from there to an understanding of God's relation to the world, above all to human beings. What becomes clear, then, is "the absolute freedom of God with regard to all determinations, including, first of all, the basic condition that renders all other conditions possible and even necessary—for us, humans—the fact of Being."[4] We human beings must first be before we can act and eventually love. But "God loves before being, He only is as He embodies himself—in order to love more closely that which and those who, themselves, have first to be."[5]

My question to Marion, however, is whether he has thought deeply enough about the nature of subjectivity, both divine and human. Perhaps not only God as the divine subject of being or existence but likewise all finite subjects of being only exist insofar as they objectify or embody themselves. They must, in other words, give objective expression or actuality to their underlying potentiality as subjects of existence in order simply to be. Admittedly, this runs counter to the common-sense axiom in Scholastic metaphysics, *agere sequitur esse.* But perhaps this is the key point in dealing with the nature of subjectivity which Marion only realized with respect to God, namely, that *esse sequitur agere.* Contrary to common sense, subjectivity or potentiality is ontologically prior to objectivity or actuality. Alfred North Whitehead's understanding of "actual entities," for example, is grounded in this insight. For Whitehead, actual entities are the end-result of their

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[3] Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being,* trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991) xix–xx.
[4] Ibid.   [5] Ibid.

individual processes of becoming.[6] Once their process of becoming is completed, they are finished actualities ("superjects," in Whitehead's terms) but they thereby cease to be active subjects of experience. Their potentiality is used up in becoming this or that actuality; a new potentiality, a new subject of experience, has to come into being as successor to the antecedent actual entity if the "society" of which the two actual entities are members is to continue in existence.

Later in this article I will go into more detail on this point and indicate how God's creative act does not so much confer being or actuality on the creature as it confers potentiality and direction for the creature's own self-constitution. For the moment, all that I wish to make clear from these remarks of Marion in the Preface to God Without Being is that his polemic against metaphysical modes of thought may be misplaced. In my judgment, he is eminently correct in calling attention to the deficiencies of classical metaphysics in subordinating the biblical understanding of God to the philosophical categories of Aristotelian/Thomistic metaphysics. But the response to that critique, as I see it, is not to abandon metaphysical modes of thought altogether but to set forth a new metaphysics in which God and creatures can be understood as subjects of experience in dynamic interrelation rather than as inert objects of thought within an a priori causal scheme.

In what follows, therefore, I will cite passages out of Marion's God Without Being and indicate how God's enigmatic presence and absence to human beings in the works of creation can be readily explained in terms of a philosophy of intersubjectivity in which by definition the subject always "transcends" its objective manifestations and thus is never fully available to the gaze or scrutiny of another subject (divine or human). Marion, for example, makes a careful distinction between idol and icon. His argument, in brief, is that the classical identification of God with Being has become an idol which impedes our human communication with God; it is no longer an icon which facilitates that communication. As he notes, "the icon and the idol are not at all determined as beings against other beings, since the same beings (statues, names, etc.) can pass from one rank to the other. The icon and the idol determine two manners of being for beings, not two classes of beings."[7] In other words, an idol ultimately substitutes in the eyes of the beholder for the reality that it signifies; an icon, on the other hand, is transparent to that same reality.

Put in other terms, within the divine-human exchange the idol refers back to the human being in his or her vain search for an adequate understanding of the divine Other. As Marion remarks, "the idol consigns the divine to the measure of a human gaze."[8] The icon, on the other hand, refers principally to the divine subjectivity in its quest for

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[6] See the section on philosophical theology and universal intersubjectivity below.
[7] Marion, God Without Being 8.   [8] Ibid. 14.

communication with the human subject through some sensible me-
dium. "Whereas the idol results from the gaze that aims at it, the icon
summons sight in letting the visible [the icon] be saturated little by
little with the invisible [God as the divine subjectivity]."[9] God as "the
unenvisageable" becomes partially manifest in a sensible object that
radiates divinity to the believer much as the face of the human other
imperfectly manifests the subjectivity of that person to one behold-
ing it.[10]

Here I would maintain that not just divine subjectivity but in prin-
ciple all subjectivity is necessarily impervious to what Marion refers to
as the "gaze." Hence, when Marion says that "the icon is defined by an
origin without original: an origin itself infinite, which pours itself out
or gives itself throughout the infinite depth of the icon,"[11] this can also
be said with qualifications about human beings in their intersubjective
encounters, even about animals and other living creatures insofar as
they manifest a form of subjectivity. Naturally, the divine subjectivity
is more difficult to discern since it is presumably more complex and
certainly more variegated in its self-expression than the subjectivity of
a human being or some other living creature. But in principle every
subjectivity, however lowly, is "infinite" in that it cannot be fully ob-
jectified even in the eyes of an all-seeing God. Otherwise, it would
cease to be a subject of experience and become instead simply an object
of thought, even for God.

Marion seems to recognize this distinction between subjectivity and
its objective expression in human concepts when he notes that "it is not
a question of using a concept to determine an essence but of using it to
determine an intention—that of the invisible advancing into the visible
and inscribing itself therein by the very reference it imposes from this
visible to the invisible."[12] Marion is contrasting here the language of
objectivity and subjectivity. Used objectively, a concept delimits an
essence or fixed object of thought. Used intersubjectively, a concept
mediates an intentional presence, the presence of the Other to the self.
No fixed object of thought "advances" from the invisible to visibility.
But a subject of experience is constantly "advancing" from the depths
of subjectivity into the clear light of objectivity (even for itself), thence
to "retreat" into subjectivity before "advancing" one more time into still
another form of self-expression.

In subsequent chapters of *God Without Being,* Marion distinguishes
between "God" and "G⊠d." "God" is for Marion a legitimate understand-
ing of God for a given historical epoch but one that has become an idol
insofar as it is mistakenly identified as the full reality of God. "It
['God'] clearly exposes what *Dasein,* at the moment of a particular
epoch, experiences of the divine and approves as the definition of its
'God.' Only such an experience of the divine is not founded so much in

[9] Ibid. 17.   [10] Ibid. 17–20.
[11] Ibid. 20.   [12] Ibid. 23.

God as in man."[13] As an example of this procedure, Marion singles out the implicit equation of God with moral goodness. "Of all the attributes which the understanding assigns to God, that which in religion, and especially the Christian religion, has the preeminence, is moral perfection. But God as a morally perfect being is nothing else than the realized idea, the fulfilled law of morality. . . . The moral God requires man to be as he himself is."[14] There is, of course, nothing wrong with attributing moral perfection to God, provided that one does not thereby confuse the divine subjectivity with one of its objective manifestations or characteristics. When this identification is made, however, inevitably someone like Friedrich Nietzsche will arise to denounce that particular ideal of moral goodness and by implication to proclaim the "death of God." Paradoxically, as Marion points out, critics like Nietzsche perform a service for the religious community in that, by exposing a given concept of God as an idol, they indirectly clear the way for a new self-manifestation of the divine in still another form.[15] Quoting Heidegger, Marion notes that "god-less thinking" is in this sense more open to the full reality of God than so-called "ontotheologic" or classical metaphysics is prepared to admit.[16]

"God," on the other hand, represents God beyond the reference to any objective predicate or determination, even the most fundamental predicate of all, the predicate of Being. For, as Marion comments, "[t]he thought that thinks Being as such cannot and must not apprehend anything but beings, which offer the path, or rather the field of a meditation, of Being. Any access to something like 'God,' precisely because of the aim of Being as such, will have to determine him in advance as a being."[17] For one thinking in the context of Being, God inevitably is conceived as a being among other beings and thus as something less than the full reality of God. But how is one to understand the reality of God vis-à-vis creatures except as a being, albeit a transcendent being? Marion's answer is to refer to the pages of the Christian Bible and to describe God as Love: "God can give himself to be thought without idolatry only starting from himself alone: to give himself to be thought as love, hence as gift; to give himself to be thought as a thought of the gift."[18]

Much as I agree with Marion that God is most aptly described as self-giving love in line with the Gospel of John, I suggest that there is a fundamental ambiguity here which dulls the sharpness of his insight. For love is, after all, an activity. But an activity does not exist on its own; it is always the activity of a subject of experience. Hence, as I see it, behind the affirmation of God as transcendent Love and Gift is the reality of God as the ontological source of that love and gift, namely, God as the transcendent Subject of experience who manifests

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[13] Ibid. 30.   [14] Ibid. 31.
[15] Ibid. 32.   [16] Ibid. 35.
[17] Ibid. 43.   [18] Ibid. 49.

Godself in and through the gift of perfect love to creatures. But, be it noted, this is not to ascribe to God still another objective perfection like that of Being. Subjectivity by definition is not an objective perfection but the ontological source of objective perfections like Being and Goodness or Love. In itself, it is more a potentiality than an actuality. And yet it is not a pure potentiality, the logical equivalent of nothingness. Rather it is a dispositional potentiality, one which is antecedently structured by its own past free decisions to manifest itself in this way rather than that way. Thus God as Love can be trusted to behave consistently toward human beings in a loving way because this is the way that God has revealed Godself over the centuries, as becomes evident through the prayerful reading of the Bible.

Does this demand of the believer an act of faith, a trust in the enduring goodness of God? To be sure, it does. But our confidence in the goodness of another human being also demands an implicit act of faith, a trust in the other's fidelity. No more than with the subjectivity of God can we read the subjectivity of another human being and be absolutely certain that the other will continue to act toward us as he or she has acted in the past. This is the nature of intersubjective relationships which removes them from the certitudes of the logical order and gives them an existential quality which can be unnerving at times but in the end is the source of their deep attraction for us. As Marion notes in his chapter on the reversal of vanity, for one locked within the scheme of his own logical abstractions, life is secure but ultimately very boring.[19]

Further evidence that Marion's approach to the God-world relationship can be suitably reinterpreted in terms of a metaphysics of intersubjectivity is provided by the following citations from *God Without Being*. In his analysis first of Heidegger's proposed ontological difference between Being and beings and then of Aquinas's preference of Being over Goodness as the principal predicate applicable to God, Marion seeks a third position in which Being is neither denied of God (Heidegger) nor affirmed of God (Aquinas): "God gives Being to beings only because he precedes not only these beings, but also the gift that he delivers to them—to be. In this way the precedence of Being over beings itself refers to the precedence of the gift over Being, hence finally of the one who delivers the gift over Being."[20] In talking about the one who delivers the gift of Being to all finite beings, Marion seems implicitly to have in mind a divine subjectivity who is or has Being without being controlled by it. He quotes Denys the Areopagite to the same

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[19] Ibid. 115–19. Marion, to be sure, sees boredom arising from the neglect of the ontological difference between Being and beings. But I would see this as akin to a basic disinterest in intersubjective exchange. One no longer sees the Other, whether divine or human, as a challenge to one's own self-appointed goals and values. Hence, one remains locked within one's own narrow world without the urge to transcend it.

[20] Ibid. 75.

effect: " 'Being returns to him, but he does not return to Being; Being is found in him, but he is not found in Being; he maintains Being, but Being does not maintain him.' "[21] Marion then concludes: "The first praise, the name of goodness, therefore does *not* offer any 'most proper name' [like Being in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas] and decidedly abolishes every conceptual idol of 'God' in favor of the luminous darkness where God manifests (and not masks) himself, in short, where he gives himself to be envisaged by us."[22] As I see it, the "luminous darkness" to which Marion refers here could readily be the divine subjectivity: namely, as noted above, that ontological reality within God that is intermediate between pure possibility and full actuality. As the "dispositional potentiality" within God for the progressive self-manifestations of God, it is necessarily both present and absent in each of those same self-revelations. So understood, it can be understood as a "luminous darkness" within God.

Finally, at the end of the chapter on "The Crossing of Being," Marion distinguishes between two types of giving in the context of Being. There is, on the one hand, the giving implicit in the German *es gibt* and the French *il y a* in which there is no implicit reference to the giver of the gift. Attention is focused simply on the constancy of the giving of being or existence as pure fact.[23] On the other hand, there is a giving within the context of Being that "must be understood by reference to the giver. . . The gift gives the giver to be seen, in repeating the giving backward."[24] Here a distance opens up between the gift of being and the giver of the gift. God is seen as the author of the gift of being. But, for that same reason, God "does not have to be, nor therefore to receive the name of a being, whatever it may be."[25] What is important is that one acknowledge the divine Giver in the gift of being and return the love implicit therein. "To return the gift, to play redundantly the unthinkable donation, this is not said, but done. Love is not spoken, in the end, it is made."[26] Yet, as I see it, such a proposed exchange of love between God and the human being implicitly sets up an ontological context of intersubjectivity where both God and the human being are understood as dynamically interrelated subjects of experience rather than as logically related objects of thought within an abstract causal scheme (as in classical metaphysics).

To sum up, then, Marion's revision of the God-world relationship in the light of the critique of classical metaphysics by Heidegger, Derrida, and others lends itself rather easily, in my judgment, to reinterpretation in terms of a new metaphysics of intersubjectivity. Marion himself would presumably be more concerned to emphasize the strictly apophatic character of all theology or talk about God and thus to entertain

[21] Ibid.; also 216 n. 55.

[22] Ibid. 76.

[23] Ibid. 103.

[24] Ibid. 104.

[25] Ibid. 105.

[26] Ibid. 107.

suspicions about metaphysical modes of thought.[27] But, in my view, a metaphysics of intersubjectivity presupposes, as noted above, that every subject of experience ultimately "transcends" all its objective manifestations. Hence, there is an apophatic character to the notion of subjectivity wherever encountered, whether in God, human beings, or any other subject of experience (e.g. Whitehead's "actual entities"). Hence, one can respect this apophatic character of talk about God and simply broaden it to encompass every subject of experience, thus setting up one of the first principles of a philosophical theology based on intersubjectivity. In the next section, I will use the thought of Louis-Marie Chauvet to set forth still another principle of this new philosophical theology, namely, the reality of the "space" between subjects of experience as an objectively constituted "symbolic order."

THE SYMBOLIC ORDER IN LOUIS-MARIE CHAUVET

Much like Marion in the preface to *God Without Being,* Chauvet makes clear in the introduction to *Symbol and Sacrament* that he takes quite seriously the critique of classical metaphysics by Heidegger, Derrida, and others and will attempt accordingly to sketch a non-metaphysical approach to Christian sacraments. That is, instead of analyzing Christian sacraments as instrumental causes of grace in line with the causal scheme of Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics, he will attempt a new foundational understanding of sacraments in terms of symbol and ritual.[28] The first four chapters of his book, accordingly, are focused on a critique of the classical metaphysics undergirding the treatise on sacraments in the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, and it is to this part of the book that we will primarily devote our attention.

Chauvet begins by asking a question: Why did Aquinas and others in the classical tradition deal with sacraments in causal terms, namely, as instrumental causes of divine grace? He answers: "The Scholastics were *unable to think otherwise;* they were prevented from doing so by the ontotheological presuppositions that structured their entire cul-

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[27] See, e.g., Jean-Luc Marion, "Saint Thomas d'Aquin et l'onto-théo-logie," *Revue Thomiste* 95 (1995) 31–66, in which he offers a series of arguments to the effect that Thomas Aquinas should be classified with Pseudo-Dionysius as part of the apophatic tradition within Christian theology rather than in the tradition of ontotheology. The latter movement in Marion's opinion actually began with Aquinas's successors (e.g. Giles of Rome, Duns Scotus, and Suarez). In addition, in personal conversation with Marion on one occasion, it became clear to me that he entertains a deep suspicion of any and all forms of metaphysical thinking as "totalizing" forms of thought that ultimately reduce the human representation of God to that of an idol (as opposed to an icon). In any event, as he sees it, one cannot proceed from an implicit awareness of the gift of Being in human experience to an explicit conceptual understanding of the Giver of that gift.

[28] Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence,* trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J., and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1995) 1–4.

ture."[29] That is, the classical metaphysical tradition beginning with Plato consistently gave priority to Being over Becoming. As a result, processes were understood teleologically, in terms of a limit in which the process would end and a state of being would ensue. Even relationships between persons, as Plato makes clear in the *Philebus* (according to Chauvet),[30] should not be treated as ongoing processes that by definition are never fully complete. Rather they should be analyzed teleologically as finished products or achievements of the causal activities of the persons vis-à-vis one another.

In classical terms, for example, through loving another human being I cause that person to become my beloved. But this effectively ignores the possibility that the beloved may refuse my advances and thus terminate the relationship. Thus I cannot directly cause the other to be truly my beloved, that is, to love me even as I love him or her. It was presumably this awareness of the tentative and necessarily unfinished character of human interpersonal relationships which prevented Aquinas and other Scholastics from employing this analogy for the relationship of God to the human being in terms of grace and sacraments. An omnipotent God should not be dependent upon the response of a human being to achieve what God wants with respect to that person. Likewise, the presupposition of divine immutability would argue against a scheme for the understanding of grace and sacraments in terms of an ongoing exchange between God and the individual human being.

Thus, even though Aquinas altered his understanding of the sacraments from causal remedies for sin in the *Commentary on the Sentences* to sacred signs that sanctify human beings in the *Summa theologiae*,[31] in the end he still had to say that sacraments effect what they signify, that is, that they are instrumental causes of grace. He could not, in other words, make use of the notion of sacraments as symbols that mediate or facilitate an exchange between persons, and that in effect create a common world in which God and human beings can relate to one another on an interpersonal basis. Part of his difficulty, as Chauvet likewise points out,[32] was the strictly instrumentalist approach to language that Aquinas inherited from Aristotle: words are signs of ideas, and ideas are likenesses of things.[33] Words, in effect, are the instruments of self-disclosure for intelligent beings as they share with one another objective knowledge of an already existing world. Lost, accordingly, is the appreciation of words or gestures as symbols of a world still in the making, an intersubjective world of shared meanings and values which is more hinted at than fully expressed in any given word or gesture.

To get a better sense of this implicit world of intersubjective mean-

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[29] Ibid. 8.
[31] Ibid. 11–21.
[33] *ST* 1, q. 13, a. 1, resp.

[30] Ibid. 22–26.
[32] Ibid. 29–36.

ings and values, Chauvet turns to a series of 20th-century philosophers, beginning with Martin Heidegger. " 'A word is not simply a handle, a tool for giving a name to something that is already there and represented; it is not merely a means for showing what presents itself by itself. On the contrary, *it is the word which bestows the coming-into-presence,* that is, being—that in which something can make its appearance as an entity.' "[34] Chauvet comments: "it is only in language—itself the voice of Being—that humans come into being. It is only within this matrix, that of a universe always-already spoken into a 'world' before they arrive, that each subject comes to be."[35] Elsewhere he refers to this reality constituted by language as a "symbolic order": "It is in the symbolic order that subjects 'build' themselves; but they do this only by building the world, something that is possible for them insofar as they have inherited from birth a world already culturally inhabited and socially arranged—in short, a world already spoken."[36] He then concludes: "Humans do not preexist language; they are formed in its womb. They do not possess it like an 'attribute,' even if of the utmost importance; they are possessed by it. Thus, language does not arise to translate after the fact a human experience that preceded it; it is *constitutive* of any truly *human* experience, that is to say, significant experience."[37]

Turning then to Jacques Derrida's celebrated maxim, "There has never been anything but writing," Chauvet comments: "Obviously, this proposition escapes absurdity only if the concept of 'writing' designates not just the convenient tool that humans invented at a certain point in their history, but a component of all language."[38] Language for Chauvet "is a radical given that *precedes* each person and is *law* for each person, as it is for the group as a whole. This law is an institution, a convention so profoundly cultural that the marking off of sounds into phonemes is as diversified as the different linguistic groups. However, it has this unusual characteristic, that no one person ever sat down one day and decided to be its creator."[39] Thus the "writing" to which Derrida makes reference is not writing in the popular sense but an "arch-writing" present in the structure of language itself to which human beings both in speaking and in writing have to conform if they are to make sense to their fellow human beings. It is the "trace" of the law invisibly at work in the cultural world of a given set of human beings

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[34] Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 56; the citation is from the French translation of *Unterwegs zur Sprache, Acheminement vers la parole* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 212: "Le mot n'est pas seulement une simple prise, un simple instrument pour donner un nom à quelque chose qui est là, déjà representé: il n'est pas seulement un moyen pour exhiber ce qui se présente tout seul. Tout au contraire, *c'est le mot qui accorde la venue-en-présence,* c'est-à-dire l'être—en quoi quelque chose peut faire son apparition comme étant."

[35] Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 57.

[36] Ibid. 86.

[37] Ibid. 87.

[38] Ibid. 142.

[39] Ibid. 141.

to give them their identity as a group and to distinguish them from other groups operating under a different cultural and linguistic law.

If the materiality of language, its rootedness in a given culture with preset institutions and laws, offers a clue to the "symbolic order" spoken of above, even more so does the human body. Like language, the body is not simply an instrument for the person to express himself or herself. Rather, it is *"the primordial place of every symbolic joining of the 'inside' and the 'outside'."*[40] What transpires inside, namely, thought, cannot be divorced from what happens outside in and through the body. Citing Merleau-Ponty, Chauvet comments that thought is " 'in no way interior' because 'it does not exist outside of the world and outside of words,' because, like the painting of an artist, 'language is not the illustration of a thought already formed, but the taking possession of this thought itself.' "[41] He concludes that "in short, it is the body which speaks, this body—my body—that is 'made of the same flesh as the world'."[42]

What Chauvet is trying to address here is the corporeality of "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger's *in-der-Welt-sein*). Each individual human being is simultaneously a "triple body" of culture, tradition, and nature. "[E]ach person's own body is structured by the system of values or symbolic network of the group to which each person belongs and which makes up his or her *social and cultural body*."[43] At the same time, each person's body is a "living memory" of the historic tradition in which the individual and the group stand and to which they contribute here and now. Finally, each human body "is in permanent dialogue with the *universe*" in that it participates "in the alternations of day and night, the cycle of the seasons, and in the fundamental oppositions of earth-sky, water-fire, mountains-abysses, light-shadow, and so forth."[44] Thus the living body is " 'the arch-symbol of the whole symbolic order.' For it is in it that the within and the without, myself and others, nature and culture, need and request, desire and word are joined together."[45]

If we now reflect upon these passages from Chauvet's *Symbol and Sacrament* and ask what their underlying thrust and direction seem to be, what emerges is in my judgment an incipient philosophy of intersubjectivity. Admittedly, Chauvet shares with Marion the same deeply rooted suspicion that metaphysics in any guise is necessarily ontotheological, a form of "totalizing" thinking which substitutes a set of logical

[40] Ibid. 147.

[41] Ibid. 146, reference is to M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945) 213, 446.

[42] Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 146; reference is to M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible: Notes de travail* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 302.

[43] Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 150.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid. 151, reference is to D. Dubarle, "Pratique du symbole et connaissance de Dieu," *Le mythe et le symbole* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977) 243.

abstractions for the richness and diversity of the empirically real. Hence, he prefers to talk about the realm of the symbolic or the "symbolic order" as the proper starting-point for a foundational theology of sacramentality. Yet, as I see it, the "symbolic order" as described above needs to be incorporated into a broader scheme of universal intersubjectivity in which objectivity in terms of the symbolic order comes into being in and through the dynamic interrelation of subjects of experience. The symbolic order, in other words, is the product of innumerable subjects of experience, past and present, responding to one another in such a way as to create relatively fixed patterns or structures of existence and activity through space and over time.

It is curious that Chauvet who, in my judgment, so accurately points out the "foundational way of thinking" characteristic of classical metaphysics, namely, thinking in terms of hierarchically ordered schemes of causes and effects, does not recognize that his own symbolic approach to sacraments, and by implication to the whole of Christian theology, is likewise characterized by a "foundational way of thinking."[46] As I see it, his own foundational way of thinking presupposes subjects of experience, both human and divine, in dynamic interrelation in and through the medium of the body and of language. God, for example, in Chauvet's scheme "embodies" God's self in the person of the disfigured Man on the Cross and thus disabuses human beings of their preconceived ideas of God according to human standards of perfection.[47] He refers to this new approach to the reality of God in and through reflection on the symbol of the crucified Jesus as a "me-ontology" that stands in opposition to ontotheology or classical metaphysics.[48] But what is the theoretical basis for that distinction? Chauvet explains that me-ontology "springs from another epistemology: the symbolic epistemology of the *Other,* and not the metaphysical one of the most real *Being.*"[49] Then two pages later he notes, "Otherness is the symbolic place where all communication can take place, because

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[46] According to Chauvet, classical metaphysics "allows itself to be ruled by a logic of 'foundations,' which requires a 'foundational being' " (*Symbol and Sacrament* 27). Hence, a "foundational way of thinking" is for him invariably a form of ontotheology, namely, the belief that God is the necessary Ground or First Cause of finite beings. But a much simpler explanation of the term "foundational way of thinking" is to assert that one is consciously working with a paradigm or model for the interpretation of a range of phenomena so as to render one's statements about the reality in question more consistent. Moreover, the model or paradigm does not have to be seen as a "foundation-being" or metaphysical *Grund,* if one respects Ian Barbour's *caveat* about the use of models in both religion and science: models "are to be taken seriously but not literally; they are neither literal pictures nor useful fictions but limited and inadequate ways of imagining what is not observable. They make tentative ontological claims that there are entities in the world somewhat like those postulated in the models" (*Religion in an Age of Science* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990] 43).

[47] Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 492–99.

[48] Ibid. 499–502.   [49] Ibid. 500.

the other is a subject, and not an object."[50] As I see it, all this would be greatly simplified if Chauvet made clear from the start that his "symbolic epistemology of the Other" was grounded in the notion of intersubjectivity, that is, subjects of experience in dynamic interrelation via word and gesture or some other sensible medium.

PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY AND UNIVERSAL INTERSUBJECTIVITY

In these final paragraphs I will set forth reasons why I believe that the process-relational metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead, albeit with some key modifications, is well suited to provide the paradigm or "foundational way of thinking" needed for developing further the reflections of Marion and Chauvet on the relations between God and human beings, indeed, on the relations between God and creation at large. The most obvious reason, of course, is that for Whitehead "the final real things of which the world is made up" are actual entities, momentary subjects of experience.[51] Consequently, everything in this world, God included, is either itself a subject of experience or made up of subjects of experience in dynamic interrelation. Even inanimate things, therefore, are grounded in intersubjectivity in that their ultimate components are dynamically interrelated subjects of experience.

Admittedly, these momentary subjects of experience succeed one another so rapidly (even within human consciousness) that what one perceives are not the subjects themselves but the objective consequences of their dynamic interrelation. Tables and chairs, for example, give the appearance of being enduring material objects; but from a Whiteheadian perspective their materiality is a byproduct of innumerable momentary subjects of experience in dynamic interrelation. Patterns of interaction are thereby perpetuated which are perceived on the macroscopic level as material objects with a definite shape, mass, color, etc. Even within human consciousness the sense of being an enduring self is, in terms of Whitehead's scheme, the perpetuation of an unconscious pattern for the individual's organization of sense data from moment to moment.

This hypothesis, to be sure, runs counter to common sense; but contemporary natural science is in many respects likewise counterintuitive, likewise in opposition to the dictates of common sense. At the same time, the value of this hypothesis for the theories of Marion and Chauvet is that it offers a theoretical explanation for their repeated references to the phenomenon of simultaneous "presence" and "absence" within human life: the presence and absence of God to human beings in their efforts to locate a sense of the divine in their lives; the

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[50] Ibid. 503.
[51] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology,* corrected edition, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978) 18.

presence and absence of human beings to one another on the level of interpersonal communication; finally, the presence and absence of meaning in the rituals and gestures within the symbolic order referred to above. Whiteheadian actual entities or actual occasions, as they are sometimes called, are by definition a combination of subjectivity and objectivity.[52] Each actual occasion is first a subject of experience constituting itself out of the data of its past world in total privacy; even God cannot know what is transpiring within this instant of pure subjectivity. But, immediately thereafter, that same actual occasion becomes a "superject." This is its moment of pure objectivity when it makes the pattern or structure of its self-constitution available to all relevant later actual occasions.

Thus objectivity in any shape or form available to human beings and other sentient creatures is always suffused with subjectivity. Nothing is simply an object of perception or conception since it bears the imprint or the "trace" of its antecedent subjectivity, its antecedent process of self-constitution. Hence, what Marion refers to as the simultaneous presence and absence of God in religious symbols is part of a larger picture in which subjectivity and objectivity are intermingled within everything that exists. Everything that exists is naturally an icon, a living symbol, directly of the created subjectivity or finite actual occasion that produced it. But it is also for those able to perceive it an implicit icon of the subjectivity of God at work in the world through what Whitehead calls divine "initial aims," the subjective response of God to what has just taken place in the world through creaturely "decisions" and the divine offer of new possibilities of self-constitution to the next generation of actual occasions.[53]

Similarly, Chauvet's reflections on "overcoming metaphysics" in the context of Heidegger's appeal to the "event of Being" make eminent good sense if one thinks of objectivity, not as something over against human subjectivity that serves as independent criterion of its truth and validity, but rather as itself the byproduct of sustained intersubjectivity, that is, human and nonhuman subjects of experience in ongoing dynamic interrelation. The symbolic order specifically referred to by Chauvet is then only part of the successive "layers of social order" which exist within a Whiteheadian universe in virtue of the dynamic interrelation of innumerable sets of actual occasions. I quote from a pertinent passage in *Process and Reality:*

Every society [of actual entities] must be considered with its background of a wider environment of actual entities, which also contribute their objectifications to which the members of the society must conform. . . . Thus we arrive at the principle that every society [of actual entities] requires a social background, of which it is itself a part. In reference to any given society the world

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[52] Ibid. 22–29.   [53] Ibid. 244.

of actual entities is to be conceived as forming a background in layers of social order, the defining characteristics becoming wider and more general as we widen the background.[54]

This is not to deny, of course, that Whitehead's own notion of a society as a "layer of social order" for successive generations of actual occasions remains somewhat vague and amorphous. Customarily, a Whiteheadian society is defined as a set of actual entities where "there is a common element of form illustrated in the definiteness of each of its included actual entities."[55] But this definition of a society begs the question of its deeper reality or nature. Is it basically nothing more than an aggregate of actual entities with similar characteristics or is it in itself a new kind of reality? Is it in fact an enduring environment or structured field of activity for successive generations of actual entities so that they retain from one generation to the next the same defining characteristic or "common element of form"?

In a series of books and articles over the past ten years,[56] I have urged upon disciples of Whitehead that Whiteheadian societies should be understood as ongoing structured fields of activity for their constituent actual occasions. The actual occasions by their dynamic interrelation, of course, give structure and order to the fields. But, when one set of actual occasions ceases to exist, it is the field which remains to provide the context or environment for the next set of actual occasions. In terms of the above-cited passage from *Process and Reality,* it is these structured fields of activity more than the actual entities within them at any given moment which constitute the layers of social order spoken of by Whitehead. Moreover, given this field approach to the notion of society, it is easy to follow Whitehead in his proposal that successively broader sets of actual occasions are "layered" in such a way as to exert influence, both outward and inward, on one another. Fields by definition interpenetrate so that the actual entities coming into existence within these fields can be affected by many different layers of social order.

My point here with these remarks, however, is not to engage in fine points of Whiteheadian scholarship, but only to make clear how Whitehead's philosophy can unexpectedly be of help to individuals like Marion and Chauvet who are trying to rethink the scholastic tradition of metaphysics in line with the critique posed by contemporary philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. My contention from the beginning has been that, even though Marion and Chauvet are clearly indisposed toward metaphysical schemes of any kind, they and their sympathizers should nevertheless look carefully at the meta-

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[54] Ibid. 90.   [55] Ibid. 34.

[56] See, e.g., Joseph A. Bracken, *Society and Spirit: A Trinitarian Cosmology* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated Universities, 1991); and *The Divine Matrix: Creativity as Link between East and West* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 52–69.

physical scheme of Whitehead in which universal intersubjectivity is a presupposition and in which objective patterns of behavior, layers of social order, emerge as a result of the dynamic interrelationship of these same subjects of experience through space and over time.

For this new approach to philosophical theology does not seem to share the limitations of classical metaphysics with respect to ontotheology and totalizing forms of thought. Not only is the transcendence of God respected in this scheme, but likewise the transcendence of every finite subject of experience to its objective manifestations. Similarly, while classical metaphysics may be said to have implicitly succumbed to totalizing modes of thought through its presupposition of an all-encompassing causal scheme in which even God is included, a philosophical theology based on universal intersubjectivity is by definition open and incomplete. As noted above, there are no universal forms or essences that predetermine the relationship of entities to one another within a given causal scheme. Rather, universality and objectivity are achieved through the repetition of pattern and structure in the ongoing relationships of subjects of experience with one another. Evolution of pattern or structure, therefore, is always possible, given the dynamic character of intersubjective relationships, even as order or consistency of behavior is maintained from moment to moment.

Admittedly, there are still other features of this new philosophy and theology of universal intersubjectivity which need to be worked out. Likewise, the application of this theoretical scheme to other academic disciplines beyond philosophy and theology, such as the natural and social sciences has yet to be properly tested. My point has been simply to make clear that there is, so to speak, a "third way" available to Christian theologians in attempting a theoretical justification of Christian belief and practice. One is not limited to choosing between a classical metaphysical approach with its alleged liabilities in terms of ontotheology and totalizing forms of thought and a nonmetaphysical, purely symbolic approach to Christian belief and practice, which lacks a conceptual paradigm or "foundational way of thinking" to give coherence and balance to its otherwise highly imaginative and original proposals. One can aim, as in the days of Aquinas, at a metaphysical grounding to one's religious beliefs in terms of a theoretical scheme with explanatory power in many other areas of human life than simply theology. But, just as in the days of the great scholastic minds of the 13th century, this is a monumental task which will not be accomplished in a short time and quite possibly not by any single individual.

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