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IV. THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

PHENOMENOLOGY AND APOPHATIC THEOLOGY: THE RECEPTION OF ST DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE IN JEAN-LUC MARION'S THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT. This text analyses the reception of St Dionysius the Areopagite's apophaticism in Jean-Luc Marion's thought. After a dispute with Jacques Derrida, who claimed that negative theology returns to affirmations after having passed through negations, Marion reads Dionysius' apophaticism in the same way the Tradition of the Church did. Hence, he asserts that apophaticism is a third way, beyond affirmations and negations. As Marion's apology evolves, Dionysius' influences on his thought appear in concepts such as "God without being," distance, and saturated phenomenon.

Furthermore, this study argues the role of the human being in apophatic theology. Because of his radical phenomenology of donation, Marion reverses intentionality in counter-intentionality, experience in counter-experience, and subject in *adonné*. From this point on, the subject/*l'adonné* seems to have no determinative role for apophatic gnoseology, although Church Tradition always affirmed the importance of faith and virtues for spiritual ascent. The solution proposed in this text makes a distinction between Kant's transcendental and the conditions of possibility gained by hermeneutics, ascetics, liturgy, and divine grace. *L'adonné* has no previous Kantian conditions of possibility; however, it can create some conditions of possibility from previous saturated phenomena. These "conditions" do not jeopardize the excess of the saturation.

Keywords: St. Dionysius the Areopagite, Jean-Luc Marion, Christian apophaticism, saturated phenomenon, subject, hermeneutics

Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology and theology are influenced decisively by St Dionysius the Areopagite's thought, to which Marion has a "fundamental

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attraction."[1] On the one hand, Marion comments on the work of Dionysius, remaining in agreement with Orthodox hermeneutics; on the other hand, he quotes him for apologetical purposes in contemporary philosophical contexts. The Dionysian influence is visible in many themes tackled by the French phenomenologist: the visible and the invisible, the concept of "distance," the "hymnic" discourse[2], the notions of icon and idol, the reflection of God's glory in the immanent world, the esthetics of theology with its concordance between the beauty of the world and the beauty of God, the logic and the language of the gift, the divine incomprehensibility, the relationship between the divine Giver and the receivers[3], the saturated phenomenon, and "God without being."[4]

Trying to propose a postmetaphysical thought, and thus, an answer to Heidegger's accusation that the Western tradition of metaphysics is, in fact, a form of onto-theology, Marion uses the apophatic theology of Dionysius to various extents.[5] He prefers Dionysius to Thomas Aquinas[6] and uses Dionysius "rhetorically and polemically" to argue that the names of "cause" and "Being" cannot be attributed to God without a paradoxical distance;[7] he uses Dionysius against Heidegger, as we have mentioned, providing an answer to Heidegger's critique of metaphysics; he defends Dionysius against Derrida's attack regarding apophatic theology; in other words, Marion resorts to Dionysius whenever he is dealing with the onto-theological tradition of Western metaphysics, using him as an authoritative argument for *theo*-logy against theo-*logy* and to defend a God that is beyond Being or "without Being."[8]

In the following pages, we will focus on Marion's understanding of the apophatic theology of Dionysius as it results from Marion's debate with Jacques Derrida. We will also try to show that Marion's hermeneutics remains loyal to the

[1] Tamsin Jones, *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion: Apparent Darkness*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), 98.

[2] Acording some scholars, the "hymnic" discourse is not influenced by Dionysius, but by Gregory of Nyssa. See ibid., 14, 36.

[3] Ibid., 99.

[4] I have written about some of these topics in two previous texts. See Nicolae Turcan, "Postmetaphysical Philosophy and Apophatic Theology. From Jean-Luc Marion to the Paradoxical Status of Thought in Vladimir Lossky's Theology," *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Theologia Orthodoxa* 58, no. 2 (2013); "Sf. Dionisie Areopagitul în contextul filosofiei postmetafizice," *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Theologia Orthodoxa* LV (2010).

[5] See Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Reading Jean-Luc Marion. Exceeding Metaphysics*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 3-5 sqq.

[6] Vezi Robyn Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: a theo-logical introduction* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Co, 2005), 10. Marion was criticised by Tony Kelly and others for not understanding that being is a non-reductive concept in St Thomas thought (apud ibid., 98). Marion has corrected his attitude towards St Thomas in a new text. See Jean-Luc Marion, "Saint Thomas d'Aquin et l'onto-théologie," *Revue thomiste*, no. 1 (1995).

[7] Jones, *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion*, 29.

[8] Jean-Luc Marion, *Dieu sans l'être*, 2ème éd. ed. (Paris: Quadrige/Presse Universitaire de France, 1991), 10-11.

Orthodox understanding of apophaticism. Interpreted as a saturated phenomenon, apophaticism becomes problematic for the passivity of the subject in Marion's radical phenomenology. This is why we will also try to answer the following question: is there a gifted (*adonné*), or does the metaphysical subject remain active, undermining Marion's intentions? Our answer will be that, in the case of apophatic experience, there is a paradoxical situation—the subject and the gifted are present together without a decrease in saturation.

Marion, a Reader of Dionysius' Apophatic Theology. An Answer to Jacques Derrida

Derrida claimed that, by continuing to affirm something about God through negations, negative theology remains the prisoner of the "metaphysics of presence," so it could be deconstructed. Marion split this accusation into four objections: (1) negative theology is a form of Christian philosophy, a form of Greek onto-theology; (2) negative theology acts within the horizon of Being; (3) negative theology ultimately restores a quasi-affirmation, returning to the affirmations it denied initially, thus, its approach became hyperbolic, but still predicative; (4) albeit Marion answers this objection with the argument that mystical theology exceeds affirmative and negative predication to reach a form of non-predicative discourse, namely prayer (*hymnein*), the fourth objection insists that, in this case, there is a disguised predication, because "one always praises with the title… or insofar as… thus by naming."[9] For Derrida, this is the opposite of simple prayer (*euchē)*.[10] The violence of these objections raises the following question: In the spirit of Revelation, is Christian theology free from the metaphysical conditions of possibility and from the metaphysics of presence—or does it comply with deconstruction?[11]

Objection 3. Marion will reject these objections in the following order: 3, 4, 2, and 1. For the third objection, which claims that negative theology expresses only two ways, the affirmative and the negative one, Marion interprets that—without isolating the theology of affirmations from the one of negations—St Dionysius proposes a third way, which is beyond both of them. Even if affirmations and negations do not contradict each other, as Dionysius claims[12], the third way goes beyond both. In Marion's view, Thomas Aquinas and

[9] *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 134.

[10] All these objections can be found in ibid., 133-34.

[11] Ibid., 134.

[12] „τὰς ἀποφάσεις ἀντικειμένας εἶναι ταῖς καταφάσεσιν". S. Dionisii Areopagitae, "De mystica theologia," in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne, I, 2, 540 b.

Nicolas of Cusa also observed this tripartition.[13] We can state, therefore, that this attitude is shared by the theological tradition of the first Christian millennium.[14]

It is well known that, for Dionysius, cataphatic and apophatic theology are interconnected through the language of the Bible and of philosophy. The Dionysian hermeneutics of the Scripture reveal that Dionysius' God is the same as the God of the Revelation.[15]

It is important to say that the third way overcomes the binary logic of metaphysics; it overcomes both affirmations and negations, not only the true, but also the false, transgressing the values of truth of the metaphysical logic and refusing to dissimulate the affirmation underneath a negation. For Marion, Dionysius places affirmations and negations in an "unambiguous hierarchy," wherein, firstly, negation is superior to affirmation and, secondly, negation itself is transgressed and submits itself to the final spiritual ascent.[16] Marion observes how the Dionysian negations in *Mystical Theology*[17] do not conceal any superior restored affirmation. After the negations, Dionysius proposes a knowledge "with no idea"[18], in which apophasis is not of an intellectual essence anymore.[19]

More than that, God's name, which seems to remain after negations in the Dionysian text, *aitia*—translated by Marion as "The Requested" [*Requisit*[20]]—is not a proper name anymore, because it escapes the predicative function of the language and becomes a simple "de-nomination" whose role is strictly pragmatic. The ambiguity of the French verb "to name" (*dénommer*) implies both affirmation and negation, thus affirming negatively. Therefore, the de-nomination is not a nomination, as it does not give names, nor does it say someone's name as if it were his proper name; it only indicates, pragmatically, in order to call someone, and, in the case of God, to worship Him and to pray to Him.[21]

Marion also warns that *aitia* is not a simple demotion to affirmation after the most radical negations have been told. Here, we find exactly the de-nomination that overcomes affirmation:

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[13] Marion, *In Excess*, 136.

[14] Cf. Claudio Moreschini, *Istoria filosofiei patristice*, trans. Alexandra Cheşcu, Mihai-Silviu Chirilă, and Doina Cernica (Iaşi: Polirom, 2009), 683. The tripartition is also common to orthodox neopatristic theology, e.g. Vladimir Lossky, Dumitru Stăniloae, Christos Yannaras, Andrew Louth and others.

[15] See Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), xxii-xxiii.

[16] Marion, *In Excess*, 137-38.

[17] See Dionisii Areopagitae, "De mystica theologia," V, 572 a-b.

[18] Jean-Luc Marion, *Idolul şi distanţa*, ed. Daniela Pălăşan, trans. Tinca Prunea-Bretonnet, control ştiinţific de Cristian Ciocan ed. (Bucureşti: Humanitas, 2007), 213.

[19] See also Dan Chiţoiu, *Repere în filosofia bizantină* (Iaşi: Ed. Fundaţiei Axis, 2003), 101.

[20] See Marion, *Idolul şi distanţa*, 228-31. This translation based on a scholium of St Maximus the Confessor is criticized by some exegetes and is regarded as abnormal. See Jones, *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion*, 22, 79-80, 99-100.

[21] Marion, *In Excess*, 139.

> The αίτία in no way names God; it de-nominates by suggesting the strictly pragmatic function of language—namely, to refer names and their speaker to the unattainable yet inescapable interlocutor beyond every name and every denegation of names. With αίτία, speech does not say any more than it denies—it acts by transporting itself in the direction of the One whom it de-nominates.[22]

Consequently, there is no suspect return to the affirmation after the negations, as Derrida claimed:

> Denys always thinks negation exactly as he thinks affirmation—as one of the two value truths can have, one of the two forms of predication that it is precisely a matter of transgressing completely, as the discourse of metaphysics. With the third way, not only is it no longer a matter of saying (or denying) something about something, it is also no longer a matter of saying or unsaying, but of referring to the One who is no longer touched by nomination, a matter no longer of saying the referent, but of pragmatically referring the speaker to the inaccessible Referent. It is solely a matter of de-nominating.[23]

Thus, the third objection is denied and apophatic theology proves to be different from "negative theology," a phrase that Marion had intended to overcome at the beginning of his text, alongside with that of "metaphysics of presence."[24]

Objection 4. The fourth objection stated that hymnic discourse (*hymnein*) should also be suspected as a predicative discourse, because it actually names, while a simple prayer (*euchē)* needs neither affirm nor negate the name. Marion provides his answer in two steps, according to the two parts of the objection. First, he argues that the proper name does not designate the essence even for people, let alone for the divine. God's name "does not name God properly or essentially, nor does it name Him in presence," but "it marks God's absence, anonymity, and withdrawal."[25] Second, Marion holds that prayer cannot be made without a name, even if this name is an improper one, because prayer, hymnic discourse, and sacrifices must be addressed to someone. The marks of comparison used to name God (as, inasmuch as) show that His name is improper and only the reference to Him is significant in this case. Hence "prayer definitively marks the transgression of the predicative, nominative, and therefore metaphysical sense of language."[26] Consequently, the fourth objection is denied because the apophatic language is not a predicative, but a pragmatic one.[27]

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[22] Ibid., 140.
[23] Ibid., 142.
[24] Ibid., 128-30.
[25] Ibid., 143.
[26] Ibid., 145.
[27] See also Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: a theo-logical introduction*.

Objection 2. The second objection claims that mystical theology remains within the horizon of being, and thus it is reduced to onto-theology and metaphysics. Marion does not consider that the call of being, when speaking of God, is automatically onto-theology. The conditions for this *failure* should be: the existence of a concept of being, univocally applied both to God and creation; the necessity that both creation and the Creator be founded either on principles or on causes. Whenever these conditions are not met and the being remains inconceivable, there is no onto-theology.[28]

Furthermore, for Dionysius, the proper name of God is neither the name of being, nor the name of beings, because the being (*to on*) is constantly overcome by the good (*to agathon*). The good is superior to the being and to the One (so high for Neoplatonists), but even goodness cannot designate the One who is beyond all things. The third way cannot predicate anything about being or about goodness, because it overcomes them. If it did predicate something, it would become self-contradictory.[29] Not even good can name God properly, for

> With praise, it is no doubt no longer a matter of saying but of hearing, since according to the conventional etymology that Denys takes from Plato, bountiful beauty bids—καλλὸς καλλεῖ [*kallos kalei*].

Objection 1. The first objection claims that negative theology is a form of Christian philosophy, which is marked by the Greek onto-theology. To deny this, Marion resorts to knowing by unknowing, whereof both Dionysius and a long-standing theological tradition speak.

> It is not much to say that God remains God even if one is ignorant of God's essence, concept, and presence—God remains God *only on condition* that this ignorance be established and admitted definitively. Every thing in the world gains by being known—but God, who is not of the world, gains by not being known conceptually. The idolatry of the concept is the same as that of the gaze: imagining oneself to have attained and to be capable of maintaining God under our gaze, like a thing of the world. And the Revelation of God consists first of all in cleaning the slate of this illusion and its blasphemy.[30]

Besides, the insistence on God's unknowability is found in all patristic tradition and Marion uses this argument citing Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Philo (the Jew), Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, John of Damascus, Augustine, Bernard, and Thomas Aquinas anthologically. Indeed, he affirms that it is the heretics who want to reduce God to the level of Greek onto-theology, not the theologians of the Church: Acacius who

[28] Marion, *In Excess*, 145.
[29] Ibid., 147.
[30] Ibid., 150.

claims that divine essence is unbegotten, or Eunomius who believes the name of God expresses the essence itself.[31] So,

> De-nomination, therefore, does not end up in a 'metaphysics of presence' that does not call itself as such. Rather, it ends up as a *pragmatic theology of absence*—where the name is given as having no name, as not giving the essence, and as having nothing but this absence to make manifest.[32]

Finally, Marion argues that the Greek Fathers sought precisely to free the concepts of Christian theology from the horizon of Greek metaphysics. Marion claims that there is "No ground, no essence, no presence," thus rejecting Derrida's first objection.[33]

The conclusions to Derrida's objections cohere around this "pragmatic theology of absence," whereby one understands

> not the nonpresence of God but the fact that the name that God is given, the name that gives God, which is given as God (each of these going hand-in-hand, without being confused), serves *to shield God from presence*—weakness designating God at least as well as strength—and to give God precisely as making an exception to it.[34]

In other words, instead of accepting that we are those who give God His name, we must understand that it is us who receive our names, according to the sacrament of Baptism, when "far from our attributing to God a name that is intelligible to us, we enter *into* God's unpronounceable Name, with the additional result that we receive our own." In what concerns mystical theology, it "no longer has its as goal to find a name for God but rather to make us receive our own from the unsayable Name." Here, we can notice a passage from the theoretical function of language to the pragmatic function that we can see, for example, in liturgical service.[35]

In this way, the concept of "absence" of apophatic theology is opposed to the Derridean metaphysics of presence. Marion's hermeneutics on St Dionysius the Areopagite proves that apophatic theology is not onto-theology, does not act in the metaphysical horizon of being, is a third way, beyond affirmations and negations, and praise is not a disguised predication, but has a pragmatic function wherein calling and listening are implied. In fact "The Name—it has to be dwelt in without saying it, but by letting it say, name, and call us. The Name is not said by us; it is the Name that calls us. And nothing terrifies us more than this call…"[36] The answer of man should follow a different way than the words of predication.

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[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 155.
[33] Ibid., 156.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., 157.
[36] Ibid., 162.

The Saturated Phenomenon and The Hermeneutical Problem of the Gifted (*l'Adonné*)

The refutation of Derrida's argument ends with the call of the saturated phenomenon—a good descriptor of apophatic theology.[37] This is a key concept in Marion's phenomenology. It delineates a phenomenon, which overcomes the limits imposed by mathematical clarity (Descartes), by *a priori* categories of intellect (Kant), and by the constraints of Husserl's phenomenology.[38] Husserl speaks about phenomenon as appearing and what appears, namely, signification and fulfillment, intention and intuition, *noesis* and *noema*. Marion analyzes this duality and finds three possibilities: (1) an adequation between concept and intuition; (2) a situation where the concept exceeds the intuition; (3) the saturated phenomenon, namely, the intuition exceeds the concept.[39] This excessive phenomenon can describe religious phenomena (for example, *theophanies*)[40] and the third way of the apophatic theology.[41] Such a phenomenon is no longer described convincingly by Kantian categories, for it overcomes quantity, quality, relation, and it transgresses modality; its donation has a distinctive form of visibility; it shows itself dazzlingly. Here, the discourse addresses the invisibility and this is an influence of Dionysius the Areopagite on Marion's thought.[42]

At this point, the problem concerns the hermeneutics of the receiver of the saturated phenomenon and, by extension, of *askesis*. There are a lot of questions: If Marion claims that the subject has no role in the constitution of the saturated phenomenon, because this is dazzling, how can one make the difference between divine and non-divine saturation, between excess and limits?[43] What is the role of hermeneutics in this extreme point of saturation?[44] In case the subject refuses saturation, does not the passive gifted (*l'adonné*) revert to the modern subject, active and with a hermeneutical horizon?[45] In other words, does not Marion become obscure[46] when he is in such a paradox (if he accepts the 'I' as a sole condition of

[37] Ibid., 158-62.
[38] See *Vizibilul şi revelatul: teologie, metafizică şi fenomenologie*, trans. Maria Cornelia Ică jr (Sibiu: Deisis, 2007), 38-39, 171-220. See also John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, "Introduction: Apology for the Impossible: Religion and Postmodernism," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington - Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 7.
[39] See Marion, *In Excess*, 159.
[40] See *Vizibilul şi revelatul*, 87.
[41] *In Excess*, 159.
[42] See *Vizibilul şi revelatul*, 114.
[43] See Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 33.
[44] See *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophies (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 15.
[45] Jones, *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion*, 114, 16.
[46] This is the term used by ibid., 135.

possibility for phenomenological reduction, the reduction itself dismisses all conditions of possibility)?[47]

More critics formulated these objections in various forms.[48] Marion claims that *l'adonné* comes after the modern subject; this is a passive receiver with no conditions of possibility, mainly no modern transcendentalism. This vision led to a very important question: Does the saturated phenomenon imply the existence of a type of hermeneutics or does the gifted (*l'adonné*) reject every type of hermeneutics?[49] Marion answers these questions by claiming that there is indeed a derivative hermeneutics after the receiving of a saturated phenomenon, but this is an infinite one.[50] This discussion is very relevant for theology because a paradox remains: on the one hand, if the saturated phenomenon has no hermeneutical and ascetic conditions of possibility, the apophatic theology becomes nihilism or a sort of mystical experience that is not a Christian one and this was not the intention of Dionysius; on the other hand, if faith is a condition of possibility for apophaticism, the saturated phenomenon really has conditions of possibility. Therefore, Marion's *l'adonné* is deficient in ascetics and ethics.

The solution we propose here for all these problems is a theological one. First, we have to make a distinction between a Kantian transcendentalism and any other historical, hermeneutical, and ascetic conditions of possibility. Marion rejects any *a priori* for the saturated phenomenon, so the intuition of the phenomenon will exceed the concept of the mind. But Christian *askesis* and Church Tradition are *a posteriori* conditions, a kind of gained "transcendentalism." These conditions can be both saturated phenomena (see paradoxical dogmata, icons, conversions etc.) and hermeneutics for the saturated phenomena. If we add to them the *askesis*, liturgy, morality, and so on, we can see that the saturation remains a magnificent one.

We can conclude that Marion understands Dionysius' apophaticism in the same way Eastern Church Tradition does. The difference is indicated by the role that the preparation of *l'adonné* has in receiving the gift. Ultimately, if one accepts the active role of the subject, one is no longer a modern subject, but a liturgical person: he knows he does not deserve the gift of apophatic encounter, although he tries to become worthy of it; he knows that everything he has is a gift, so he has nothing by himself; he is aware that he knows God only by unknowing; he knows that his conditions of possibility are nothing, even he tries hardly to meet them; he knows that every saturated phenomenon is a gift of divine grace. Consequently, Marion's *l'adonné* can be paradoxically understood as being gifted and having an active role as well: on the one hand, no modern *a priori* jeopardizes it; however,

[47] This is the Kevin Hart's argument. See ibid., 134).

[48] For example, Jean Grondin, Jean Greisch, Kevin Hart, Richard Kearney, Joeri Schrijvers and Tamsin Jones.

[49] Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers*, 15.

[50] See Jean-Luc Marion, *Givenness & Hermeneutics*, trans. Jean Pierre Lafouge (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2013); Jones, *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion*, 117.

man has received the "conditions of possibility" through God's grace, also received sometimes as saturated phenomena. The apophatic richness is so vast that it cannot be diminished by any *active* receiver, whose activity—compared to the amplitude of donation—remains absolutely insignificant.

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