

## A Conversation with Jean-Luc Marion

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*This conversation with Jean-Luc Marion took place at The Johns Hopkins University Humanities Center in the Spring of 2005. The JCRT editors express their thanks to Hent de Vries for arranging the meeting and to Jean-Luc Marion for generously agreeing to join our conversation.*

Jean-Luc Marion is the John Nuveen Distinguished Professor of the Philosophy of Religion and Theology at The University of Chicago Divinity School and professor of philosophy and director of the Centre d'Etudes Cartésiennes at the University of Paris—Sorbonne (Paris IV). His many translated works include, *God Without Being* (1991), *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology* (1998), *Cartesian Questions: Method and Metaphysics* (1999), *the Idol and Distance* (2001), *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* (2002), *The Crossing of the Visible* (2004), *In Excess: Studies in Saturated Phenomena* (2004), *Descartes' Grey Ontology* (2006), and *The Erotic Phenomenon*, forthcoming from The University of Chicago Press.

Over the past year and a half, the JCRT regularly has devoted space to the issue of “religious theory” after Jacques Derrida. My first questions to Jean-Luc Marion address this issue and the initial subsequent questions turn more toward the future of religious theory generally rather than the intricacies of Jean-Luc Marion’s thought<sup>1</sup>, with the exception of his view of the relationship or contest between philosophy and theology, which seems to follow naturally from his detailed analyses of phenomenology and hermeneutics. As a way to clarify this persistent relationship/contest and the implications of an “after Derrida,” I added the complication of a “postmodern (Lyotardian) aesthetics”<sup>2</sup> to my line of questioning. This was in part to challenge or, at least, clarify the widely accepted notion that Jean-Luc Marion is a “postmodern theologian,” which I believe is a somewhat dubious designation. As the listener will note, Jean-Luc Marion interestingly

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<sup>1</sup> The JCRT interviews function more as conversations and this format allows for an exchange of ideas rather than an explication of the figure’s terminology.

<sup>2</sup> My insertion of Lyotard into the conversation was to provide (provoke) a point of divergence as it related to the idea of representation. Lyotard’s essay “Newman: The Instant” provides an interesting and, I believe, relevant perspective on the notion of temporality and subject-matter, whether in painting, philosophy, or theology. Alas, the connections, if there are any, between Marion’s “excess” and Lyotard’s “differend” await a future consideration.

changes the question of postmodernism into a larger question of phenomenology. The remaining portion of the conversation revolves around the status of the “object” as a “saturated,” “conceivable,” or “silent” thing, which is another way of addressing the significance of metaphysics in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and postmodernism. The end of the conversation coincidentally touches on the “phenomenology of religion” that one sometimes links with Mircea Eliade, another “Catholic theologian.” For Eliade, the “object” returns as “hierophany,” which Marion discusses in the context of the “icon.” This “object” at risk (at risk of being named) provides a point of entry into Marion’s work across theology and philosophy. The “eucharistic hermeneutic” that one associates with Marion has, I believe, interesting connections to Eliade’s dialectic of the sacred and profane and Marion provides an intriguing response to the comparison as a final comment in the conversation.

Jean-Luc Marion’s writings begin with the question of metaphysics, particularly as it relates to Cartesian philosophy. His forthcoming book entitled *Descartes’ Grey Ontology*, his doctoral dissertation, investigates the Aristotelian foundation of Descartes’ science. This use of “greyness” as a philosophical and theological concept allows Marion to re-situate phenomenology beyond Husserl and Heidegger. Marion’s post-Heideggerian phenomenology allows a new consideration of theology—a theology freed from the confines of reason, Being, and morality. In this postmetaphysical theology, “God” is not made visible against a terminal backdrop of Being; instead, Marion sees a “God” in relation to a “greyness” or, more recently, an “excess” placed beyond ontotheology itself. The so-called absolute condition one equates with Being and that simultaneously grounds metaphysics, then, is actually prior to or in excess of ontology and God, in this new formulation, is beyond or “without” Being. *God without Being*, the principal work in which this concept of excess is unfolded, as David Tracy notes in the preface, is a “brilliant” alternative to “correlational” theology in which “a revelation-centered, noncorrelational, postmetaphysical theology” presents “the question of God freed from our usual philosophical reflections on the God of reason (Kant), the God of being (Aquinas) or the God of morality (Nietzsche).”<sup>3</sup> Marion leaves us with a God of revelation or a God of excess, a God that comes to us, not a God we come to or can know “correlationally” through reason.

In the context of religious theory, which includes philosophical, theological, and postmodern theoretical discourses, Jean-Luc Marion’s understanding of and distance from deconstruction represents a significant contribution to furthering the debates surrounding the politics of naming. Jeffrey Robbins, in *Between Faith and*

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Marion (1991) *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*. Trans. Thomas A. Carlson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, xiii-xiv.

*Reason*, notes an exchange between Marion and Derrida during a “Postmodernism and Religion Conference” at Villanova University<sup>4</sup> in which “negative theology” came to be an openly contested term. In response to Derrida’s characterization of “negative theology” as an appeal to “hyperessentiality,”<sup>5</sup> Marion redefines the contours of this “negation” to include a process of “de-nominating” that stands in contrast to naming a “divine essence.”<sup>6</sup> Robbins describes three specific parts to Marion’s challenge to Derrida’s equating the end of negative theology with a quest for “hyperessentiality.” The first is described as a treatment of “negative theology” and “metaphysics of presence” as “problems to be overcome” and not “descriptive concepts to be trusted.”<sup>7</sup> The second posits “negative theology” as a “rival” to deconstruction and the third, most interesting, addresses the issue of whether Christian theology is or is not subject to deconstruction.<sup>8</sup> Robbins writes,

Key to Marion’s answer to this all-important question is that apophysis is a part of a larger strategy “that includes not two but three elements . . . . The game is therefore not played out between two terms, affirmation and negation, but between three, different from and irreducible to each other.” It is for this reason that the term “negative theology” is a problem to be overcome, for “negative theology” is not strictly negative, but neither is it fundamentally affirmative. Such predicative terms simply do not apply. It is not a matter of saying or unsaying, or naming or un-naming. In Marion’s words, “It is solely a matter of de-nominating.” Such denomination does not fix the divine essence, because it “does not name him properly or essentially, but . . . marks his absence, anonymity, and withdrawal.”<sup>9</sup>

Marion, adhering to the precepts of apophatic thinking, steers between philosophy and theology, arriving at an ineluctable and inexpressible “excess” that and “only” that is given to us. So, this de-nominalized “excess” is not only quantitatively additional, like the mathematically sublime, it also is qualitatively abundant, radically beyond register and condition (dynamically sublime).<sup>10</sup> While this at first may seem to resonant with postmodernism and specifically the Lyotardian limits

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<sup>4</sup> See John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds, (1999). *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Robbins (2003) *Between Faith and Reason: Essays on the Ontological Condition*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 118.

<sup>6</sup> Robbins, 121.

<sup>7</sup> Robbins, 119.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Marion (1999) “In The Name: How To Avoid Speaking of Negative Theology” in *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*, John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Robbins, 121.

<sup>10</sup> See Immanuel Kant (1951) “Of The Divisions Of An Investigation Into The Feeling Of The Sublime,” *Critique of Judgement*. New York: Hafner Press, 85.

on representation (point of the Lyotard question), Marion's excess returns, as Richard Kearney makes clear in *The God Who May Be*, as a "mystical eucharistic encounter with the divine."<sup>11</sup> This transcendence that is "too transcendent"<sup>12</sup> complicates or, in a manner of speaking, fails to complicate the commerce between theology and philosophy or the infinite and the finite that historically has presented itself as the impasse in religious and philosophical studies. To be fair to Marion, this "too transcendent," as Richard Kearney and John D. Caputo describe it, could simply be formulated as the expression of the divine in the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, namely the Holy Eucharist. "Take, eat; this is my body," could be nothing more or less than the pure "giving" that overcomes the "idolatry" of metaphysics that is at the center of ontotheology. Nevertheless, by placing God so far beyond the reach of philosophy or the reach of Being, reason, and morality, Marion, with insight and rigor, has invited a certain degree of acceptance or hesitation or rejection of a God that merely or purely comes to us through saturated phenomenon. In this sense, Marion's God without being is, more precisely, a God without condition.

In religious theory *after* Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion's postmetaphysical discourse challenges the ontological foundation of Western philosophy and theology in such a way that his critique of idolatry (metaphysics), as Carl Raschke notes, is "more radical than Heidegger."<sup>13</sup> It is this radicality, this pure rejection of idolatry, however, that John D. Caputo sees as a running of "faith" off the "road of language and history."<sup>14</sup> For this reason, Caputo hesitates in front of this "God without Being" and reinstates a Derridean trace into the conversation. In doing this, Caputo and, to some extent Richard Kearney, places Derrida *after* Marion; that is to say, denominating God does not necessary free God from the work of *différance*—a work of constructing reality, not a work of revealing reality. In this sense of signifying-work, God is not only subject to "difference," God is subject to "deferral." With God delimited by *différance*, the naming of God is not a problem of God's magnitude as much as it is a problem of God's involvement in and with difference and deferral. Again, one could refer back to Marion's understanding of Derridean concepts as problems to be "overcome" not concepts to be "trusted." John D. Caputo places this tension in the following context:

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Kearney (2001) *The God Who May Be*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Kearney, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Carl A. Raschke (2004) *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 50.

<sup>14</sup> John D. Caputo (1997) *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 47.

But if Derrida is so far from feeling threatened by mystical theology that he distrusts any discourse that is not touched by mystical theology, then just what is Derrida saying about God? We have contended that Marion and Derrida are agreed in regarding the “intention” or the “concept” as an “arrow” which is aimed at the heart of God from which God must be “shielded” or kept “safe.” For Marion, who is thinking in terms of the Christian Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius, this is because the arrow of intentionality is too weak and narrow to penetrate or comprehend the infinite givenness of God; it would compromise the infinite incomprehensibility of God who has utterly saturated the intention “God” in a plentitude of givenness. But for Derrida, who is thinking in Jewish and *messianic* terms, not those of Christian Neoplatonism, the arrow takes aim at God and never reaches God precisely because the name of God is the name of what we love and desire, of that for which we pray and weep, something *tout autre* which is not “present,” not only in the narrow sense of conceptual presentation advanced by Marion, but also not *given*. For Marion the signifier “God” is flooded by givenness; for Derrida it is a dry and desert aspiration for I know not what. *Inquietum est cor nostrum*.<sup>15</sup>

This is just one dimension of the difference between Marion’s postmetaphysical phenomenology/theology and Derrida’s deconstruction—the limit of human comprehension and the limitlessness of God (Marion) and the perpetual non-presence (trace) of the wholly other within language and history (Derrida). In each, God is not “there” to us, but, in Marion, God is “there” for us, which makes his, Marion’s, discourse on God an “overcoming,” as he sees it, of Derrida’s deconstruction in which “God” is a linguistic entity within a play signification.<sup>16</sup> To the extent that there is an excess of God, it an excess that is, as Caputo observes, “promised,” hoped for,” and “prayed and wept over.”<sup>17</sup> To follow this line of religious anticipation means to see the name of God as the name of the future: “It is a name of the structure of the future which is not merely a foreseeable future present, but a future beyond the horizon of foreseeability and possibility, an

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<sup>15</sup> John D. Caputo (1999) “Apostles of the Impossible: On God and The Gift in Derrida and Marion” in *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*, John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 198-199.

<sup>16</sup> Hugh Rayment-Pickard presents this succinctly, if not controversial, in his 2003 book *Impossible God: Derrida’s Theology*. Burlington: Ashgate, 148.

“Derrida’s faith in God is structurally restricted to some extent by the anti-metaphysical trajectory of deconstruction. The thinking of the impossible God emerges out of Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence and heads away from metaphysical conceptions of God towards a non-metaphysical theology. The possible forms of the impossible God do not include the existence of God as a ‘real presence’, or an agent able to act in human affairs. The simplest assertion of God’s reality is excluded by the ‘logic’ of his impossibility, indeed the argument for God’s impossibility is a way of protecting God from the restrictions of realist classification.”

<sup>17</sup> Caputo (1999) 199.

impossible future always 'to come'.<sup>18</sup> While Marion is ready to accept the inadequacy of language and history to totally reveal God, even a trace of God, he is not willing to abandon God as the radical excess of cognition. In a theological maneuver, Marion's *In Excess: Studies in Saturated Phenomena* turns to early Church writings (*Fourth Theological Oration* and *Fourth Lateran Council*) to uphold his philosophical conclusion. In this regard, "supplication" supplants "cognition" as a means of experiencing God<sup>19</sup>:

The Name does not name God as an essence; it designates what passes beyond every name. The name designates what one does not name and says that one does not name it. . . . "God as such cannot be spoken. The perfect knowledge of God is so to know him that we are sure we must not be ignorant of Him, yet cannot describe Him." The theologian's job is to silence the Name and in this way let it give us one—while the metaphysician is obsessed with reducing the Name to presence, and so defeating the Name. The dividing line has been established by an inescapable formulation: "between creator and creature no likeness can be recognized which would be greater than the unlikeness that is to be recognized between them."<sup>20</sup>

With "unlikeness" greater than any degree of "likeness," the creator, in its totality, ruptures any capacity for recognition in the creature. The Name, in this instance, cannot come from the philosopher or theologian; the Name, according to Marion, is one that only is given—a Name beyond cognitive reduction and accessible, in a minimal sense, through intuition. Anything other than this, for Marion's postmetaphysical discourse, converts God into an idol, a representation within reason, Being, or morality, which becomes in the end an egregious limitation of God's unlikeness. Marion's "God without Being" and his challenges to the idolatry of Western metaphysics advance the field of religious theory, continuing and changing the great debate between philosophy and theology.

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<sup>18</sup> Caputo (1999) 199.

<sup>19</sup> Robyn Horner (2005) *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-logical Introduction*. Burlington: Ashgate, 142.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted from Horner (2005), 212-213.