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SPIRITUAL EXERCISES IN A SECULAR AGE:
PROSPECTS FOR A THEOLOGICAL REDUCTION

I. Theological Reduction(s)

Phenomenology, as a particular idiom or style of philosophical reflection, is one not wholly free of theological supposition. Perhaps the learned consensus in the academy today is that philosophical discourse, without first abandoning its judicious commitment to rigor and principled reason, never may have meaningful and fruitful interchange with theology. In many contemporary French currents of phenomenology that flow through to the wider discourse of philosophy of religion there have been strong theological inclinations at play for some time now, whose collective force is able to keep at bay those impulses that might otherwise reconfigure the relationship between philosophy and theology into an antithetical imperative. The inner constitution of philosophy and theology, as recent voices have articulated it, has been strengthened by a spirituality that advances the creature's desire for God under the form of a particular philosophical articulation, the phenomenological reduction, which is a contested category because it is often frustrated by the transcendental idealism from which it appears to proceed. The reduction, preceded by the suspension of the natural attitude (called the epoché), grants to Husserl's philosophical project a larger design, a rigorous conceptual cultivation of the living structure of the ego to which Husserl thought phenomenology should aspire.¹

The phenomenological reduction, on first glance, seems to offer nothing more than a technique for opening the path to the self-subsistence of a pure ego, who would in no measure be altered by the world; this is the philosophical calculus between ego and world on which the Husserlian logic of transcendental idealism trades. But, so stated, the reduction already is exceedingly more than technique or analysis, more than a meticulous apprehension of the field of transcendental logic. It is a lived event that, as we shall see, begins from an encounter with the world and ends in an ever more concrete, more properly attuned encounter with the world that might come to define the basic correlation between ego and world. This is an existential encounter with "something more," a transcendence that draws the ego outside itself. But might it also be said of the reduction that, once modified, it may involve a Logos who is manifest as a divine transcendence that refuses to enter within the parameters of the constituting gaze of the transcendental subject. On this reading, can a spirituality can

¹ For a concise and clear outline, rooted in Husserl's texts, of the distinction between the epoché (suspension of the natural attitude) and the reduction (the bracketing off the world accompanied by a move inward), see Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 46-50.

arise that provides occasion for the reflective philosopher to grasp securely the mystical union between the created order and God? Admittedly, an affirmative answer would be sustained by faith.

One may rightly wonder, if it is not entering into its twilight, how commerce between philosophy and theology could be concretely thematized in terms appropriate to phenomenology. Michel Henry, Jean-Yves Lacoste, Emmanuel Falque and Jean-Luc Marion, to mention only the most celebrated of recent figures, have all worked under the pretense that the reduction is able to be modified, no doubt in a manner to which Husserl himself would be adverse, from a theological vantage.

Stimulated by what these French thinkers perceive to be post-metaphysical techniques born in the formative stages of the phenomenological tradition, they not only attempt to modify the phenomenological reduction from a theological point of view, they also seek to deduce from it a richly mystical “spiritual exercise.” As a performative *askēsis* rooted in the spiritual conviction that the world belongs originally to atheism,² the theological reduction consists of a counter-movement, an existential shift away from the world toward God: a radical flight from the world that is the perfect expression of an eternally accomplished event of union, whose concrete form is transcendence within immanence, and thereupon an encounter with God preserved by and elevated in the Spirit. Flight intends to heighten the experience of transcendence, in which the horizon of eternity opens vertically out onto the invisible presence of God in Christ “who is not of the world” because he has “overcome the world” (John 17:16 and 16:33 respectively). Explication of such a spiritual exercise is consequent upon the discourse of phenomenology. This may mean, on the one hand, that these French figures challenge the common tendency among phenomenology’s critics to relegate the reduction to the philosophical wasteland of the representational subject who determines the world in its totality fully within itself—a reading that imposes on Husserl, in particular, a facile Heideggerian misinterpretation; and, on the other, they highlight theological possibilities latent in Husserl’s thematization of the world thereby claiming Husserlian phenomenology as a propaedeutic for theological discourse. And the latter is most definitely a result of an aspiration to understand more exactly, to disclose and express more properly, the essentially theological horizon of the world. But how is the contemporary world to be understood? And how is the reduction to be viewed as a properly theological resource to respond to such a world? These are the two focal questions that shall guide the following pages. A brief consideration, to begin with, of a cluster of recent French “theological reductions” is in order, inasmuch as they give the reduction its peculiar theological shape.

² Jean-Yves Lacoste is an exemplar on this score; after Heidegger, he says, “The disturbing hypothesis of a humanity satisfied with existing ‘without God in the world’ must therefore be taken seriously. Atheism is neither simply nor in the first place a theoretical problem: it is first what is a priori to existence.” See *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, trans. Mark Raferty Skehan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 105.

The most radical of Husserl's theological heirs is Henry, on account of his work prompting a complete withdrawal from the world; because his theological retrieval of and critical confrontation with Husserl is at once philosophically formidable and theologically inventive, readers shall continue to profit from Henry's theological turn. Unlike Husserl's analysis of the correlation between transcendental ego and the world, Henry does not see such a relationship as a meaningful site of transcendental inquiry. In order to discover the truly transcendental root of the ego, one must attend strictly to the inner life of the ego itself, and in the process, commit oneself to an absolute duality between the ego and the world insofar as no level of correlation may obtain between them. Such "duplicity" between the ego and the world opens up an impassable abyss between the fullness of interiority and the desolation of exteriority. Henry's variety of the ego, cast in an utterly dualistic light, is prepared to deprive itself of its outward course into the world because it is already in sure and radical possession of an inner essence that appears to itself: a site where no aspect of the self appears outside of its own intimate haven, which is a spiritual achievement to be understood in terms of mystical inwardness. Conforming to a sharp juxtaposition between God and world (considered not without warrant by Henry to be a hallmark of the gospel of John), this "theological reduction" constitutes a manifestly unyielding event of exile. Those who enter deeply into its logic are compelled to flee from the "nihilism of the world" without return, a continual journey toward that pure self-revelation of divine life to which only the invisible depth of the soul can attest.³ I have developed a critical trajectory that proceeds from his work elsewhere and find his concept of exile, as a rule, entirely provocative, if not also utterly imbalanced inasmuch as the world is rejected on the basis of its "culture of barbarism."⁴ The world, as Henry formulates it, (1) valorises visible objects at the expense of subjective life, (2) celebrates a scientific progress that makes everything in its sight a quantifiable thing, part of the furniture of the world to be manipulated by technology, and finally, (3) elevates the particular spiritual vacuum occasioned by late modernity to the status of a normative phenomenological experience, whose configuration contains within it a nihilistic logic, an instrumental rationality whose barbaric calculus effects a mastery over the inner content of the soul (which each of us must possess to be truly living).⁵ While there may be much merit to such an uncompromising critique of the modern world, it is for all these reasons, and more, that a strong Gnostic flight from the world finds a restatement in Henry.

³ All of this is laid out in his magnificent studies of truth and of incarnation, in *I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emmanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002) and *Incarnation: une philosophe de la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), respectively.

⁴ See my, "The Night of Living Flesh: Sainthood in Michel Henry," in *Postmodern Saints of France: Refiguring the "Holy" in Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. Colby Dickinson (London: Continuum, 2013), 217-30. Also see my *The Contemplative Self after Michel Henry: A Phenomenological Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2015).

⁵ Michel Henry, *Barbarism*, trans. Scott Davidson (London: Continuum, 2012), chapter 3, "Science Alone: Technology."

Jean-Yves Lacoste's work, too, entails an inclination toward escapism, but his "liturgical reduction" enjoys a kind of dialectical quality (between inner self and outer world) reminiscent of the spirituality of St. John of the Cross; Lacoste's form of spirituality enacts a purgative exit from the world that, in turn, precipitates a prayerful return back to its secular order.⁶ But the world is (symbolically) placed between brackets nonetheless by Lacoste, and such a theological reduction equally appeals to a style of Johannine dualism: for Lacoste, the mystic removes the "veil" of the secular world so that he can see God's eschatological horizon more clearly, even though such an arduous spiritual task is often boring and fatiguing—like a midnight vigil. Hence it is the prioritization of the image of "vigil" that permits a Gnostic-like pathos to come immediately into play here. The vigil invokes the darkened seclusion of the cloister, the quietude of the midnight hour, the singular intention of offering oneself up to the divine, of bearing one's cross, of being passively embraced within the movement that affords no opportunity for action: the abnegation of the world set forth by the inoperativity of the vigil is more than symbolic, for it discloses the radical possibility of protest against the world in the name of the Cross, as an expression of *coram Deo*, a solitary spirituality in which the "I" is compelled to be "nothing but its opening to God."⁷ Hence the experiential practice of liturgy "can open up a space where neither world nor earth is interposed between man and God."⁸

Because Lacoste carries out the reduction, principally in his earlier writings, under an Heideggerian cast, it is no surprise that he thinks complete withdrawal to be neither attainable nor desirable. It is not infrequent that one encounters brief, but insistent, admissions such as "liturgy does not annul what it brackets: the world is all that is available to us within it."⁹ A critical perspective on the world so stated preserves within its economy a mystical sensibility that obligates one to take up the cross, to seize the occasion of acting like a "fool for Christ," but such a perspective does not stipulate that one occupy a posture in flight from the world in order to reach mystical union or some otherworldly religious experience; presumably this is because, for Lacoste, it is only imaginable for spiritual practice to instruct its participants to dwell not in a realm isolable from, but right at the edge of, the darkened margins of the ever expanding "atheism" of being-in-the-world. Lacoste's reduction manages to treat the "question of

⁶ In his most recent monograph, Lacoste appears less concerned to appropriate the vocabulary of "reduction," and perhaps, begins to rectify his "escapist" tendencies. He talks, in chapter 7 of that volume, of the sacramental node [*noeud*] between inner life and the outer world, which cultivates a spirituality that oscillates between peace and disquietude. Although he still speaks of the world as an event of danger in chapter 8, and although he continues to employ the category of reduction or "putting between parentheses," the category of reduction is less central. See Lacoste, *Être en danger* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2011), on page 293, for example, he considers the benefits "putting between parentheses" a particular form of life in an attempt to secure a life of peace *coram Deo*. For the concept of the node between self and world, see *ibid.*, 305ff.

⁷ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 163.

⁸ *Ibid.* 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

man” as a moment of hermeneutical violence. The declension of desert spirituality reorders the ego away from the world into which it is thrown, in which it finds its original facticity to have opened up entirely absent of God. Because atheism is original, “only a certain violence enables man to exist before God.”¹⁰ With an appeal back to the early medieval tradition, Lacoste’s reduction functions as a type of “humiliating” spiritual exercise. It serves the purpose of contextual theology whereby the modern west shapes the spiritual life. If atheism is the context, then it follows that a metaphorical suppression of one’s desire to dwell in the world defines Lacoste’s theological reduction, which is, it must be added, a less severe form of detachment than Henry’s paradigm would require.

Falque’s phenomenological reading of scripture counts as a creative (if highly compressed) synthesis of philosophical reflection and performative comportment to the Christian scriptures, attending especially to its Christological locus. The reduction, cast in this textual light, yields something like a *lectio divina* or meditative spiritual exercise. The reduction reveals that it is one particularly fertile species of what has already been understood by theological discourse as the act of scriptural contemplation, the privilege of beholding the face of God in the Word of Christ—through “listening” to and imitating thereby the literal words of scripture. This is why Falque thinks the reduction embodies not so much a philosophical exercise but a spiritual exercise. More specifically, this suggests a mode of reading the gospel narratives in a way that may offer a reprieve from the world. The confrontational episode of Mary and Martha, for example, can be read off in terms of distinct, if contrasting, “attitudes” taken up in regard to the world. At once a gloss on Husserl’s focus on the ego’s “attitude” (*epoché*) and an exegetical practice of contemplation that “reduces” the world, Falque’s theological reduction is motivated by a faith always responsive to the text.¹¹ For Falque, then, Mary simply removes herself from the daily considerations of the world and beholds Christ *face à face*, while Martha remains baffled by this gesture, precisely because her attitude conceals within it an unreflective “absorption” in the world. Suggestive as this may be, Falque’s interest in orienting the gospel narrative toward the terminology of “inside” and “outside” the world succumbs to the transcendental logic of Husserl, and the latter’s persistent desire to secure for the phenomenological attitude an experience of “eidetic purity,” which is a wish to glimpse once and for all a universal ground untainted by structures of the world-horizon.

Jean-Luc Marion abides by a principle of his own making, “so much reduction, so much givenness,” which he later names the “erotic reduction.” This particularly affective inflection of the reduction does not intend to read scripture (although it does, the Road to Emmaus of Luke 24) but tradition; working through the discourse of the reduction in Husserl, the “erotic reduction” finds its fullest expression in the vast network of writings associated with St. Augustine. It is Marion’s reduction that I find the most

¹⁰ Ibid., 105.

¹¹ Emmanuel Falque, *Dieu, la chair et le’autre: D’Irénée à Duns Scot* (Paris: PUF, 2008), 149.

compelling primarily because it enlists in meticulous fashion the Augustinian contemplative grammar of *confessio*. But it frames Augustine, unapologetically one might advise, entirely under the restrictive aspect of the erotic reduction, under whose provenance the *confessio* is truncated, even while it is adroitly illustrated. The most balanced of “theological reductions,” in that it does not wholly bid the world adieu, Marion’s reduction nevertheless does not address the spiritual utility of the world. Marion, in other words, advances a set of spiritual exercises that embraces a radical bipolarity, from which utter passivity of the soul before God is set over against the metaphysical construct of the self-constituting (Cartesian) ego.¹² Hence Marion does not so much resent the world as offer an incomplete picture of the world, one that does not sufficiently attend to how the soul belongs to the world naturally. The creature, as we shall outline presently, is ultimately a being whose spiritual quest occurs within the element of contingency, fragility, conflict and difficulty precisely because its faith is “confessed” in the world. Augustine, and so many of the early church Fathers, situate the soul’s desire to see God *in* the world. With Augustine in mind, it is therefore acceptable for the contemporary believer to approach the “secular” world with a sense of dynamic openness, accomplished only in the degree to which it yields to its place in the world.

From the spirit of the age emanates a “secular mood.” A dramatic shift in the metaphysics of the cosmos has occurred with advent of modernity, one which the present study shall acknowledge. But it is to be admitted up front that this world is a habitat in which I am to delight and under whose light I am to contemplate God, which is a “shift in attitude” from the natural attitude but is not one of radical refusal of the world, despite pleas to the opposite offered up by Henry, Lacoste, Falque and Marion – all of whom, to varying degrees, consider the world a foreign land wherein a spirituality can emerge only once it is understood that a radical reduction is the truest form of recourse in the face of a secular age.

To temper the “theological reductions” articulated above is, for myself, to see the world in altogether different light than such a theological reduction would allow: that the world is the grammar by which the believer or religionist (however conceived) speaks to God. But its secular order invariably presents a challenge to the believer, admittedly. The modern world makes it impossible for a believer of any sort to conceal within his soul an unreflective, taken-for-granted faith, as was so often the case for many a layperson of ages past. The world, after the Enlightenment, is a place of uncertainty and radical pluralism, an experience of “danger” for the believer, which the French cadre above make exceedingly lucid; but against the forms of theological reduction outlined above, I will argue that the world itself serves the purpose of purgation. The modest thesis of the present essay is that a purposeful movement into the world, a deep and abiding residence in the world, is what constitutes the very motion of a

¹² Marion, *In the Self's Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, trans. Jeffrey Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), in addition to chapter 1, see also §9, “The appearance of a *cogito*,” where an anti-Cartesian discourse on the ego, from an Augustinian perspective, is given by Marion.

late modern spiritual exercise—not a “bracketing off” the world. The antiseptic nature of Christendom, its “official religion,” as Kierkegaard noted in the mid nineteenth-century,¹³ frequently denied the soul real faith in favour of taken-for-granted complacency, whereas the ensigns of the secular order of late modernity greet the soul with the full force of a stark choice: reflective faith that is to be constantly justified or a variety of secular humanism.

After Nietzsche, Christendom has been inverted. No longer may a taken-for-granted faith subsist, for as Peter Berger says, the “heretical imperative” of late modernity constitutes a choice to be made for or against religion from a particularly secular vantage. Either I choose to single myself out as “spiritual,” or I remain, typically by default and without justification, a secular humanist or something not clearly identifiable¹⁴ To be religious after Nietzsche is to be heretical; religiosity itself is a form of eccentricity, for all that one needs to do to give up religion is simply walk into the world and immerse oneself in the emporium of choices, life styles and the multiplicity of preferences that is modernity; the precarious construction of religious plurality, most of all, forces individuals to identify with a religious tradition in an explicitly self-conscious manner.¹⁵ Whether it is experience or tradition, faith or community, every form of spiritual exercise is to take place in the world, as tempting as it is to say that the theological attitude belongs to a process of “bracketing off” or of forbidding the world as “secular.” To that world we now turn before a constructive (and very critical) analysis of Marion’s Augustinian reduction is undertaken.¹⁶

II. A Secular World

The type of piety typically associated with Christian spirituality belongs to the pathos of the ancient world; Christians (and no less for Jews and Muslims and even Plato) sought to raise the theological order of the “heavens and the earth” above scientific suspicion, whereupon a discourse of “classical cosmology” was obliged to define the inmost expression of the early spirit of western culture. Formed thoroughly by theological presuppositions, the discourse of the ancient model of the world invests the stars, the skies and the earth with boundless divine wisdom and depth, inscribing the divine within its every content, at each and every ontological level, so that they “participate equally in the good, and that nothing that exists is excluded from

¹³ See Kierkegaard, *Attack upon ‘Christendom’: 1854-55*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944).

¹⁴ Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (London: Collins, 1980), 26-31.

¹⁵ See Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, especially chapter two, “Religion: Experience, Tradition, Reflection.”

¹⁶ I note here the related attempt by Paul Ricoeur to rethink faith after atheism, for atheism too may purge faith of its idols and complacency, granting to faith an authentically worldly hue. See Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, Faith,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 436-63. I thank Michael Staudigl for this reference.

the higher nature.”¹⁷ Augustine once offered a portraiture of the meaningful harmony between city of God and the city of earth in rich gospel imagery, one that obtains in spite of the series of interruptions and discords that result from the sinful order of a fallen humanity and an enfeebled creation: the skies are the holy apostles of God from whose mouth flows forth the words of truth, raining down on humanity so that the harvest of the church may be plentiful.¹⁸

The inner logic of the particularly capacious theological horizon (the patristic and medieval horizons) to which this cosmology makes appeal is bound up irrefutably with the logic of creation. Sacred and secular intertwine in the world. Together they contribute to the good of the world. As Remi Brague observes, the world long possessed a wisdom cultivated by the early Christian church, illustrated by the motion of the soul toward the skies, known simply as “contemplation.” The soul beholds the sky, an upward ascent that enables the soul to descend upon the prospect of being carried beyond sky itself. For many in the ancient world, the contemplative gaze looks beyond the limit of the visible theatre of the skies to that light that illumines them from a higher point of transcendence. Hence the Creator displaces the limits of the visible to the measure that the heavens summon the reflection of the glory of He who is invisible, which in turn, summons the soul’s contemplative delight to partake in the motion of the skies themselves—and so to pass from glory to glory with a face unveiled (2 Cor. 3.18). In this, it can be understood that for many in the west, “the study of the skies does not lead directly to imitation of the skies, but to knowledge of their Creator.”¹⁹ But such an antique order of contemplation has been eclipsed by a new cosmology. Captivated by the the desire for conquest, the need to neutralize the cosmos of its moral and theological purchase and the impulse to eliminate the fruitful tension so often felt between the edifice of the world below and the infinite celestial heavens above, the modern world tells its own narrative. Modernity breaks in upon Europe not as a gradual gravitation toward liberality and civility, but as a radical shift from Christendom to a “secular age.” This world is at once neutral and hostile precisely because what opens out most properly within its horizon appears to many as the sheer force of horizontality; as Brague aptly notes, the world looks like a “seamless garment” in which all modes of transcendence come under the levelling force of a new cosmology.²⁰

The world occupied now by the west, the spirit of the contemporary age, celebrates autonomy, self-assertion and the

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great catechism*, in *Dogmatic Treatises, etc.*, trans. Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1893), 480.

¹⁸ Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms, 1-32*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000), 32, 3, 5, 409.

¹⁹ Remi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World: the Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 172.

²⁰ Brague writes, “For us, the universe is a totality, a seamless garment. We no longer have the right to differentiate between levels of the world that would have more or less value.” See Brague, *The Wisdom of the World*, 197.

cold “indifference” of nature. The disclosure of the world involves, too, the will for dominance (*libido dominandi*) that so often plagues the human spirit, at least while beset with the task of venturing forth in the fragile order of the city of earth. Heidegger observed, with a philosophical prescience characteristic of his later work, that a peculiar kind of metaphysics of the world is manifest in the modern age, even though language pertaining to the world may continue to unfold today in ways not entirely foreseen by him. Insisting that a metaphysics of the world must ground every age and, in so doing, gives to that age its identifiable ethos, Heidegger characterizes the modern world (as a distinct age from the medieval or patristic and ancient worlds) as a new “framework” (*Gestell*). The modern world so understood submits to an instrumental logic, a pernicious logic of disenchantment consummated by technology. Here the world is laid bare by the autonomous, technological subject. Hence the world has “become a picture,” so says Heidegger, and in the age of the world picture the subject, the *subjectum* “becomes that being upon which all that is, is grounded as regards the manner of its being and its truth.”²¹ As a “picture” at the disposal of the self-positing subject, the world is conquered by the subject, which is, without delay, the very event that yields forth a world that bears witness to what he calls the “loss of the gods.”²² Such a depiction of the world resonates with a picture of the world to which Charles Taylor has given the expression, “immanent frame.”²³ The immanent world brings forth a world whose design has shrunk to a single end and thereby betrays a horizon where divine grace is less evident and less essential. Such an anthropocentric vision of the world is cast under a form of immanence detached from a transcendent personal divine Creator; presumably such a withdrawal behind the veil of the immanent frame marks the modern age to the extent that the world can open up no further than the enframed limits of its own internal human drama—to extent that exclusive humanism, as a principal spiritual outlook among others, lay at the heart of modern disenchantment.

Taylor’s sprawling work *A Secular Age* elucidates the metanarrative of the age in which we live. Tracing the shifting religious and cultural dynamics of the “optics of the world,” he launches his study by asking a seemingly simple, but pregnant, question: what has changed between the year 1500, when unbelief was virtually impossible, and 2000, when the religious outlook becomes now just option among many, and an “exclusive humanism” is now the default option among many demographics?²⁴ While the literature is immense on this topic and it is not the purpose of the present study to review it, a consideration of the more salient features of some of Taylor’s book shall prove to be of some benefit here; if the “theological reduction” (i.e., spiritual exercises) is to have meaning at all, it

²¹ See Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, 115-54. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 28.

²² Heidegger says that “a fifth phenomenon of the modern age is a loss of the gods.” See Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” 116.

²³ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), chapter 15.

²⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 374-75.

remains integral to the following pages that important aspects of the narrative of the secular west be told.

Marcel Gauchet speaks of the “disenchantment of the world” that began with divine otherness as it evolved into a distinct doctrine of a personal God-man (consummated in the controversies about the person of Christ in the fourth and fifth centuries), which in turn, gave way to medieval nominalism. The world, finally, became entirely disenchanted with the advent of the post-Cartesian autonomous ego.²⁵ Brague labels the intuition that lay behind the mechanization of the Cartesian world the “neutralization of the cosmos,” from which emerged a new cosmography that most properly depicted the horizon in which we live. We no longer describe our horizon in terms of world or cosmos but in terms “universe” and the sterile calculus of the Copernican scientific logic.²⁶ Without prescinding from the enriching details found in so many recent studies such as these, Taylor’s work, however, offers an invaluable analysis in scope and narrative power. Even while drawing on Gauchet in particular, of the many important theses Taylor advances in *A Secular Age*, the disenchantment of the world remains paramount. This is not least because it makes palpable the theological ramifications of a world fashioned by the subduing grip of an anthropocentric impulse. This shift puts into effect the seemingly inviolable change in perspective that grew up over the course of the early modern period, a cosmic imaginary that began with Galileo, Copernicus, Descartes and Newton, only to become intensified with Kant and post-Kantian atheism (Nietzsche especially). Taylor observes that the impersonal order of the anthropocentric shift is likely impossible to reverse, it is the “*idées force*” of the modern age, or “the ratchet at the end of the anthropocentric shift,” that compels one to continue forward into the far country that is the secular age.²⁷ Civility and social order took root in modernity, following various “reform” movements after Luther and Calvin, and over time, the secularization of the west intended not necessarily to eliminate Christian faith and practice but to marginalize it, and most especially, to occlude the “higher times” to which the porous self is oriented when it looks to God.²⁸ As Vincent Descombes writes, it is not that modernity formulates the world in terms of pure “secularism” or “atheism” but in terms of “autonomy,” whose design from its Cartesian beginning was to allow the ego to transcend tradition and authority, and with that, to gain a meaningful sense of practical autonomy: “The modern subject is defined by autonomy but it is not independent in all regards: it is certainly independent with respect to what is presented as a foreign power, but it is subordinate to a rational law (moral). One is thus excluded here from the ‘radical alterity’ of a divine legislator, since he engenders a situation of heteronomy.”²⁹ This complex fabric of the secular

²⁵ Marcel Gauchet, *The disenchantment of the world. A political history of religion*, trans. Oscar Burge, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

²⁶ Brague, *The Wisdom of the World*, 94.

²⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 289-90.

²⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 195.

²⁹ Vincent Descombes, *Le complément de sujet: Enquête sur le fait d’agir de soi-même* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p.334. (translation mine).

age, its autonomy, its desire for mastery and its marginalization of religion remains the challenge the modern world poses to the theologian.

But it is a constructive challenge. Modernity and its accompanying secular sensibility is preferable to Christendom. Kierkegaard complained often enough in the 1850s, Christendom, as fraudulent and hypocritical as it was, consisted of a sociological state of affairs taken for granted, namely, that “we are all Christians”³⁰ in which there were “immense battalions of Christians, nations, kingdoms, lands, a whole world of Christians.”³¹ This is no longer the case, for the secularization theory holds true, at least empirically. So much modernization, so much secularization.³² Hence the twentieth-century has dramatically altered the spiritual landscape of the west. It is appropriate, then, that Taylor singles out the prophetic observations of Nietzsche as a means of revisiting this changing spiritual landscape. In the death of God that he announces, the cosmological imagery is strikingly manifest. The madman, in the *Gay Science*, declares that the earth has been unchained from the sun, the sea has been drunk up and we are straying through an “infinite nothing” (floating aimlessly in outer-space). Taking the shape of a series of pointed questions, Nietzsche’s proclamation asks: “Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down?”³³ Life today is more Nietzschean than not, for the secular west has been released of Christendom.

Nietzsche is also quick to bemoan the fact that the madman’s proclamation in the marketplace “came too early” and that the shadow of God is long, it has set over the west for at least a few more centuries.³⁴ A fully “de-deified” world is yet to come, and for this Nietzsche intends to communicate that the candid inquiry into whether existence has any meaning at all will not quite be heard with the full depth it requires. This Nietzschean insight is perhaps what Taylor seeks to articulate, with conceptual and analytical balance. We really and truly inhabit a secular age. But we do not inhabit a “purely” secular age. Faith remains viable and legitimate. Certainly the intransigent forms of faith survive in much of Europe and America, but the world grows secular at a rate Nietzsche perhaps would not have imagined and his questions continue to ring true: how is articulable faith meaningful in a post-Christendom, secular age?

This is the question the strikes at the heart of the theological reduction. To return to Taylor, he states it thus: “Everyone can see that there have been declines in practice and declared belief in many countries, particularly in recent decades; that God is not

³⁰ Kierkegaard, *Attack upon ‘Christendom,’* 107.

³¹ Kierkegaard, *Attack upon ‘Christendom,’* 35.

³² Steve Bruce makes a strong case for this in empirical-sociological terms, see Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), §125.

³⁴ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, §357.

present in public space as in past centuries, and so on for a host of other changes. But how to understand and interpret these changes may not be evident.”³⁵ A principal task, then, is a theological one, namely, to understand, confront, expose and interpret the possible forms of spirituality that may appear in the secular world.

III. Augustinian Reduction: A Spiritual Exercise

The field of response to the “secular world” may be delimited from various vantages; one particularly fertile perspective that might best serve the question of the saint’s relation to the secular world is no doubt the Augustinian “suspension” of the authority the world may exercise of our being. This has been outlined with some theoretical sophistication recently by Jean-Luc Marion. Marion has noted on many an occasion that the task of phenomenology after Husserl is to explicate theological lines of inquiry which presume to “enlarge the theatre” of appearing or phenomenality, so that the ego is to be freed from being entirely bound up with the strict intentional logic of objective verification (between intention and sense-date or intuition of objects) originally set out by Husserlian phenomenology.³⁶ Is Marion attentive to Husserl’s concept of reduction? Does it merely reduce all that comes under its light to an object?

The reception of Husserl’s reduction should be understood as precisely as possible. It opens up a discourse of pragmatics that unveils a space in which the very motion of the inner life of the ego operates, which is where the practical and performative movements to which it is ordered are clearly seen. The reason Marion therefore thinks the Augustinian *confessio* effects its own reduction is that Husserl thematizes the reduction as a conceptual tool that is able to open up the ego’s full range of human expressions, instincts and impulses, some quite literally as old as humanity. Think of a wood-worker who is carving a bench, his “vocational time” (as Husserl calls it) is a unique time inasmuch as it puts aside all else in the world without eliminating the world. The academic engrossed in a book proceeds according to an essential “attitude” that puts out of play all other interests and world involvements, and yet, does not in the process eliminate the world. The pragmatics of the ego when predicated of the reduction simply point to the inexorable dialectic between ego and world, that the ego is never free of ontic determination, of undergoing an existential burden of having a lifeworld that is only properly “living” because it unfolds within the narrative of the changing horizon of the world itself. But the reduction, one could plausibly argue, enables the ego to dwell in the world with

³⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 426.

³⁶ In the avant-propos of a recent book, Marion indicates that each of his phenomenological works have sought out an “*élargissement du théâtre de la phénoménalité*.” This presumably does not mean Marion aspires to collapse the distinct between philosophy and theology (he keeps them strictly separate), but that aims to enlarge what is possible as an experienceable phenomenon. See Marion, *Certitudes négatives* (Paris: Éditions Grasset and Fasquelle, 2010), avant-propos.

a “theological attitude.”³⁷ In *Ideas I*, Husserl suggests that putting into play the reduction is like undergoing a conversion or a suffering of a difficult trial.³⁸ In the *Crisis of European sciences* he formulates the reduction explicitly in theological terms (arguably), for it is a “complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion, which then, however, over and above this, bears within itself the significance of the greatest existential transformation which is assigned as a task to humankind as such.”³⁹ Does this statement not adopt a theological pathos? The unique inflection of the ego’s gaze within the reduction is transformative and laborious, religious in the sense that it requires an absolute question to be asked: whence the origin and meaning of the world? The reduction therefore constitutes, even for Husserl, an all-consuming suspension of the vision I naturally have of the way things are for me in their spatiotemporal givenness. This radical change in perspective, as Husserl envisages it, takes place in the element of freedom. Even if it may suspend the natural attitude, by force of the reflective freedom of the ego itself, its subjective power knows no final flight, and so it comes back to the world – with a transformed attitude. Such a distinct transcendental attitude is a perpetual venturing into the world, sustained as an ever more radical personal transformation, as a new habit or lifeworld. It is a way of life initiated and sustained by the life of the ego itself, its capacity, its freedom, its power and privilege to transpose “philosophical” attitude whose aim takes up the world over against the naive attitude that is “absorbed” in the world.

It is well-known in *Ideas I* (§49) that Husserl discusses the hypothetical “annihilation” of the world. The reduction, perhaps, may annihilate the world, which would in no way affect or alter the being of the ego. His point here, however, is not that the world can be in fact annihilated, of course, nor that the reduction is able to bring the world to the brink of *nihil* but that the world is a correlate of consciousness, dependent on consciousness for its being. The world is a being for consciousness: “Strictly speaking, we have not lost anything but rather have gained the whole of absolute being (which is the pure ego) which, rightly understood, contains within itself, ‘constitutes’ within itself, all worldly transcendencies.”⁴⁰ The world is bracketed off from the ego so far that the truth of transcendental idealism may achieve its fullest expression, viz., that the world is a correlate for, and constituted by, the lived experience of consciousness. The world is a subjective achievement, not a frail phenomenal appearance vulnerable to dissolution upon being bracketed off. Henceforth it is to be understood that the world is never annihilated but

³⁷ See for example, Emmanuel Housset, *Husserl et l’idée de Dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 2010) and James G. Hart, *Who One Is, Book 2* (The Hague: Springer, 2009), the final two chapters especially.

³⁸ See note in Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten (Dordrecht: Springer, 1983), §62.

³⁹ Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 137.

⁴⁰ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 113.

becomes “in a quite peculiar sense, a *phenomenon*.”⁴¹ My aim in making this point clear is to prompt a more thorough consideration of whether the theological reductions, while not interested in annihilating the world, may want take flight from the world *as if* it could finally have no real meaning for the ego, perhaps so they may enable their readers to escape secularism, technology or even theocratic fundamentalism.

Marion’s book, *Au lieu de soi: l’approche de Saint Augustin* (2008), is a significant achievement, both philosophically and theologically. It boasts an abundance of phenomenological descriptions of the life of faith. Much of the overall analysis is rooted in the first half of the book, where Marion develops the thematic of reduction in light of the double of movement of *confessio* (confessing sins and praising God). Finding its phenomenological articulation in the *Confessions*, the “erotic” reduction reaches its final theological expression in that text.

What is at stake in Marion’s theological reduction is the very “place of the self.” The reduction is therefore the means through which I can receive myself in my proper place, a site where I arrive at the moment of rest before God. My place is not in the world — there it finds nothing but turbulence. Such a view of the world, as a place of temptation and violence, of disbelief and the labour of sin, has everything wrong: the world must be overcome, for the true economy of salvation is to be understood only properly as a single path of progress the soul may take towards full participation in God, so that this inward union is the sole order of disclosure towards which salvation is oriented. Marion surely follows Augustine (though this is dubious) in describing the world as a place of temptation wherein my desires can become distorted and my proper place hidden. The *confessio* or the reduction trades on a primal utterance, a pre-worldly revelation of my true form in Christ, my natural place. And however depraved by sin it is, this word consists of a turn of the heart wholly to the love of God. As a structure of experience itself, then, the *confessio* does not permit base impulses within soul to go unrestrained insofar as it provides the occasion for methodical spiritual practice to take hold of the soul, in order to submit intractable obstacles such as greed, pride and hate to the purification of the reduction. Sin and perverse appetites will remain a problem, but not so long as one finds oneself given to oneself in every instance by God’s grace;⁴² recognition of this truth involves not descent, but ascent. The spiritual practice of confession concerns therefore the proper place for the practice of charity, an underlying structure that supports one’s entire being, found neither inside me nor in the world, but “in” Christ, whose Word assumes rule over the soul so that it is raised up to share in fullness of his Trinitarian life.

⁴¹ Husserl, *Crisis*, 152.

⁴² Marion writes, “Now, I who no longer have a place for myself (the *quaestio*), I who no longer give place to myself (*memoria*), I who do not know from where the place of my desire comes to me, I hear it named everywhere, provided that I no longer listen to myself but to heaven and earth *inasmuch as created*.” Marion, *In the Self’s Place*, 241; also see the discussion of grace on pages 285ff.

But no matter the duration of the interval of reduction, the spiritual exercise, according to Marion, discovers that the soul enters into Christ only once it discovers that it must endure the deprivation of self. Here one must allow God to grant grace where it is needed to enable one to discern not just particular existential states of mind but the very scope of selfhood itself—one of poverty, abnegation, of utter detachment not just from objects and idols but equally from myself. I am, so to speak, a creature before God who is naturally “locked” outside or dislocated from myself (“*enfermé hors de lui-même.*”).⁴³ I come to appreciate in this state both the fact that I am neither a self-positing subject nor a collection of noetic powers capable of moving toward God. According to Marion, I do not achieve myself, *ever*, on the strength of any kind, species, or essence; I am therefore delivered from every anthropological paradigm.⁴⁴ The most definitive reality of selfhood, in all rigour, Marion insists, is that it is not within my conceptual and existential reach to say “me,”⁴⁵ for I am not a self-subsisting essence (Marion continually petitions his readers not to associate the place of the self with an “essence,” and so for him, as for Heidegger, existence precedes essence). Because Marion privileges existence over essence, he contends that I always stand outside myself and am vulnerable to influence, open to possibilities. My place could be the world or it could be before God. The road to my properly theological place is opened up by the theological reduction—the hermeneutic of the *confessio*.

The theological reduction put into play by the *confessio* is a speaking *to* God and not a speaking *about* God. This is a critical point for Marion given that the reduction arranges its speech act specifically as a practice, not a theoretical reflection about God or a mere technique of observation of God, as if I were an academic discussing the attributes of God; the *confessio* is rather the means by which I can enter habitually into a new attitude, moving from the way of the natural attitude to the way of love, i.e., the theological attitude that beholds God in love. I love God before I know him and I take the risk of loving God without first securing for myself that God loves me in kind; no reciprocity is here achievable, at least not the kind outlined in advance. The theological reduction is a conversion (to harken back to Husserl and Henry) in that it brackets both my natural attitude of thinking that the world is my place and also the metaphysical attitude that seeks theoretical or logical proof about God, as if I could freeze God within a concept or set of attributes. To speak *about* God, Marion says, is strictly a contradiction in terms—for there is no referent when I talk *about* God. By bracketing first the finitude associated with atheism and then metaphysical talk *about* God, the *confessio* leads straight to the experience of faith lived in love, a posture that beckons the presence of God—only to realize that it is God who first loved me; the *confessio*-as-reduction therefore

⁴³ For the French, see Marion, *Au lieu de soi: L’approche de Saint Augustin* (Paris: PUF, 2008), 107.

⁴⁴ Marion, *In the Self’s Place*, 259.

⁴⁵ Marion writes, “I am therefore paradoxically the one who in thinking knows that he is not (belonging to) himself, does not know his essence and can never say (himself), rigorously, *myself* [ne connaît pas son essence et ne peut jamais (se) dire, en toute rigueur, *moi*].” Marion, *In the Self’s Place*, p.63; *Au lieu de soi*, 100.

embodies a disposition of love and grace, the cultivation of a state of mind in which I am given over to God by receiving God through praise and confession that is only properly a movement of response to a God who first loved me. And so, the theological reduction here is a speaking *to* God who has seized me in love and not a metaphysical language *about* God.⁴⁶

To this end Marion reminds us that St. Augustine's *Confessions* is essentially a look at one man's conversation and struggle with God (or like Anselm's *Proslogion* centuries later), a spiritual exercise that commences with a journey to God by speaking and praying to God – and not a philosophical or theological apology aimed at proving the existence of God as a first cause or rational principle. Augustine addresses God in and through his life story, a narrative tack adopted so as to decry explicitly the philosophical alternative, whereby logical predication of, and cognitive certainty about, the name of God is the privileged grammar of inquiry. The thirteen books of the *Confessions* do not address any other audience other than God and fellow Christians (Augustine refers several times throughout to “his readers”). Rather, as if praying together with his readers, the *Confessions* serves the liturgical order of a sprawling prayer; its very movement originates in a word addressed directly to God. In and through the *confessio*, both admitting faults and praising God's glory, I find my place before God, and to use language familiar to Marion's earlier work, I am in that place given over to God as gifted (*l'adonné*), a screen through which God is manifest in the Son's saturating love, effected by the Spirit, opening me up to a place outside myself, in a irrefutable exteriority where I find myself in loving God and neighbour. I do not therefore discover my place in myself or at the margins of the world but in my confession to God with fellow Christians.⁴⁷

This theological reduction, Marion contends, is subject to a double description: on the one hand, my place escapes me and can never be seized once and for all (explicit Heideggerian overtones). On the other hand, it is intimate to me as a place where communion with God materializes (Henryian overtones). If I am what I love, and my weight is my love (and Marion quotes this overused Augustinian lyric), then I discover my proper place in the continual movement toward God, always in a collective chorus with others who also confess their love for God.⁴⁸ My place is not grasped or held within myself. The *confessio* as the theological reduction induces a performative word, a reduction that I must maintain as a habitual spirituality. To be embraced within my very being, the reduction makes explicit the affliction I must undergo: I am required at every moment to place the natural attitudes of secularism and metaphysics between brackets, which prompts a decisive break with the modern world, so that the world truly as it is (as creation) can be seen from the place of *confessio*.

⁴⁶ Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 18ff.

⁴⁷ See the visual model of the triangular relation between myself, the other ego and God; Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 43; also see 236.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 270.

But the theological reduction as *confessio* also prompts a second movement: the bracketing of the temporality of the world. Here a step toward the eternal is taken that aligns Marion's position with Henry's radical flight from the world. Marion shall characterize the reduction as leading back to the pure "givenness" or "donation" of God's word to me, so that the *confessio* is nothing more than a re-gifting or re-saying of what was originally said to me in and through the Word spoken at creation, "in the beginning was the Word and through him all things were made" so says John in the famous prologue (John 1.3). I am not the one who dictates the content of the *confessio* since God's self-disclosure elicited the *confessio* in the first instance in the scriptures, "the place for the *confessio* of God is determined by and in God, to such an extent that creation consists only in the opening of the place of *confessio*."⁴⁹ Marion will look to Augustine's famous discourse on memory only to insist that the words I say to God were given to me in advance by the Word who is the origin of every word, spoken or thought. Marion states it this way, "God precedes my living word, which repeats it, but my word only becomes living by resaying what was original said by the living word of God. Praise is thus accomplished as a word of repetition, which responds in re-saying that which was first heard, in a word, as "la parole de response" (the word of one who responds)."⁵⁰ God, in other words, always has the first word, one said prior to and at the origin of the temporal world itself.

The Word of God is thus the "immemorial," in whom I find my place. To speak to God, in the site of the *confessio*, is to bracket the world, to advance upward, which in turn, constitutes a leap backward to that eternal verbal structure, the immemorial Word from whose mouth the world issued forth. The theological reduction yields to a call, making me the one whose response is a repetition of that first Word, for God always speaks first and from eternity. Herein lies Marion's debt to Henry's theological reduction. The *confessio* seeks after the living present in which the Word dwells, prior to the world's opening. And yet Marion shall never say, as Henry declares in constant refrain, that I am the living present in my essence. Recall that for Marion I subsist exterior to myself, set on a course of seeking that which is beyond me, inasmuch as I wish to find my proper place there. But to do that, I must nevertheless look away from the world, flee from its temptations and seek with my neighbour the love of God in an endless motion, whose direction is at once outward and upward, transported by *confessio*: and so in "turning to God designates first of all the exodus from the *ubi* toward an *illic* – which means, of course, that I am only because I arrive in him by praise."⁵¹

IV. Restlessness in a Secular Age

The historical analysis of the secular age may take a variety of forms, as we have seen above. But even if the secular age is pluriform it is also, in some sense, a legitimately distinct epoch, in which the world for the first time is "immanent," becoming thereby a plane ordered to itself. How may one, then, retrieve

⁴⁹ Ibid., 252.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 45.

⁵¹ Ibid., 242.

Augustine for today if he cannot be put into dialogue with post-Cartesian modernity without the conceptual violence of anachronism befalling him? Robert Markus' brilliant study of Augustine, *Saeculum*, has shown that the language of secular and sacred or the lexicon of pagan history set over against biblical salvation history is a thoroughly Augustinian distinction even if the expression "secular history" does not form part of his vocabulary.⁵² True, there are many lines of cultural resonance between antique orders of social thought and post-Cartesian modernity (modernity is not an age all its own without relation to previous epochs). The west was born of Romulus's defeat of Remus, and so from bloodshed the city of earth has continued up through Nietzsche and contemporary incarnations of secular thought, all of which promote self-assertion and disenchantment of theological patterns of comportment toward the world. Whereas, for the city of God, original peace underlies its very beginning and end, two temporal poles which are held together within the eternal Godhead, for the kingdom of heaven is already perfect and is yet to come, which provides a stark alternative to the original violence of the secular age. This kind of dualism, which can be singled out from Augustine's narrative in the *City of God*, may prompt a kind of escapism from the world, one characteristic of Henry, Lacoste, Falque, Marion and others (and one could say this of the kind of counter-ontology of the church that John Milbank advances).⁵³ But a strict dualism, ontological or otherwise, is not so obvious. It may be that for Augustine there is only one world, one "place" in whose horizon we all live. This vision of the world informs my understanding of what kind of spiritual exercises I envisage over against the above "theological reductions."

To return once more to Markus, the worldly style of thinking on display in Augustine is not dialectical, as if peace always must pass through violence. Augustine's proposal betrays rather a single theological vision of creation that embraces within its vast narrative both sacred and secular in one economy of redemption. Markus comments, "The difference is thus not a difference between what is God's work and what is man's. Augustine had no doubt that all history was in a sense God's doing and, conversely, that the redemptive history told in the Bible is in fact carried out through human agency."⁵⁴ There are distinctions to be made between created order and God, and even "narrative" distinctions between secular and sacred, but there is no final and marked caesura between the city of God and the city of earth, as if one theological topos were isolable and thus posed as an utterly novel alternative to the secular topos.

A spiritual exercise that does not descend into an unpalatable dualism, so far that it is not escapist, is one that enters fully into the horizon of the world. The world, in fact, is *the* spiritual exercise

⁵² Robert A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 9.

⁵³ See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1993), chapter 12, "The Other City: Theology as a Social Science."

⁵⁴ Markus, *Saeculum*, 16.

itself.⁵⁵ In this way I invert the course of action in Henry, Lacoste, Falque and Marion (less so with Marion). The world serves as a site of purgation and purification; I labour in the world, which in turn, means I do not bracket it or refuse it. The horizontal plane welcomes and challenges my deepest convictions, so it is the case that it ought to be incorporated within the economy of the spiritual life as a trial of joy to be undergone with patience. Augustine argues that, though they are distinct, the two cities are always intertwined and mutually engaged (the two cities “are implicated and mixed with one another in this world.”⁵⁶); this means that the world cannot be completely contrasted with the church, no matter how secular the former appears. But the contrast does not dissolve, and so for Augustine, the world’s devices stray beyond the boundaries of the law of the city of God in their quest for domination, opening up a place of trial and hostility. A contemporary Augustinian spirituality can insist upon the double capacity of the self, to live in both cities at once, so that a principal place of the self is the secular world. The place of the church and the place of the secular world, the one of rest the other of trial, whose intermixture constitutes the single place of the self, where the saint who yields to the spiritual exercise of contemplative purification does so only properly in the secular world. Contemplation, then, does not detach from the world but enacts a vision of the world itself from within its horizon.

The task of the reduction adequately conceived is to live in the world in a manner that sees it as “heaven and earth,” as creation, which might serve the saint well as a form of spiritual action in the face of the profanations of the world. Spiritual refinement is achieved by a mandate to suffer and endure prayerfully the petitions of the secular order, which implores one to see the world as an “immanent frame,” but immanence does not mandate that one abandon the hermeneutic of creation. If we are to reformulate the “theological reduction” in a way that avoids escapism, then it must entail a “leading back” to the visible stage of the secular order in recognition that it is God’s creation—that is, as one Augustinian understood it, reflects the fact that the “the positive valuation of the secular realm and its independence from religion is deeply root in the Christian tradition, especially as formulated by Augustine of Hippo.”⁵⁷ Marion shows us that Augustine constantly reminds his readers to look upon the world with the eyes of faith, in order to behold it as a creation with an integrity of its own. A spiritual exercise, based on Augustine’s *confessio*, recognizes that creation was originally created as a “secular order.” The world itself does not embody a semi-divine force.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Some have argued that Michel Henry may after all view the world as a site of purgation and spiritual trial. See, for example, Michael Staudigl, “From the ‘Metaphysics of the Individual’ to the Critique of Society: On the Practical Significance of Michel Henry’s Phenomenology of Life,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 45/3 (2012): 339-61.

⁵⁶ Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), X, 32, 448.

⁵⁷ Robert Markus, “Political Order as Response to the Church’s Mission,” *Political Theology* 9 no.3 (2008): 321.

⁵⁸ For more on this “disenchantment of the world” by way of the logic of creation, see the classic statement in Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*:

This means, moreover, the world is independent of God, but the secularization of the world, realized in the event of creation, does not of necessity require one to condemn the world's place in the economy of God's relation to the creature. The world, in reflecting its Creator, is thereby good. God, even in the *Confessions*, is active in every single moment of time, as in every part of space.⁵⁹ As a principal vehicle of grace, the world is not neutral but imposes pressure upon the soul, which can offer the soul a series of purgative moments.

The church unfolds not in opposition to, but within, the world. While rest is the soul's nourishment received in the breaking of bread within the walls of the church, the soul must return from whence it came. The outward motion that constitutes the key feature of the spiritual exercise compels one to enter into the world fully. What perhaps is absent from Marion's valuable and rich study on the "place of the self" is a more sustained understanding of how the later books of the *City of God* affect Augustine's conception of spiritual perception. It might be plausibly argued that the few passages on creation and temporality drawn out of books XI-XIV by Marion do not attest to the full range of Augustine's understanding of the shape of spiritual life, its pilgrimage through the (secular) world. Book XIX, of course, is arguably the beginning of western political theology, of a spirituality of public life. But it is not just that book that opens up a particularly "worldly" path of spiritual illumination and purification. Book XVIII remains, too, a critical turning point in Augustine's vast narrative, for here a recapitulation of the previous seventeen books occurs along with the appearance of additional layers of analysis that depicts the unimpeachable intertwining of the two cities; it is recognized that "just as both cities began together, so throughout the history of the human race have they undergone the vicissitudes of time together."⁶⁰ Due attention, finally, Augustine confesses in book XVIII, must be paid to the city of earth, to the place of the "world." It can be shown in such an analysis not just where the two cities meet on many occasions but how also the world might serve the church, and it might reasonably be asked how the "secular age" plays a constructive role in the unfolding of the spiritual exercises.⁶¹

The western world, ultimately, its secular or post-Christendom context, is what one concedes to each and every moment, whether one is religious or not. As Taylor noted, the immanent frame is the "ratchet" at the end of the anthropocentric shift, an inescapable order of reality. And so, from an Augustinian perspective, we

Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective (New York: Macmillan Company, 1965), 35ff.

⁵⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), 7, 15, 21.

⁶⁰ Augustine, *City of God*, XIX, 1, 909.

⁶¹ See Robert Markus' brilliant book on Christianity and the Secular for a fruitful thesis, although he rarely invokes book XVIII of the *City of God* as I do here. Nonetheless, my position would affirm, in large part, Markus' critique theocracy from an Augustinian vantage. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2006).

might say that the world is the “site of *confessio*” whose passage promises purification, whether bodily or spiritual. Recounting the historical narrative, as it has been received, of the Greek cities, of the many Israeli Judges and Kings, of the Assyrian rulers and the founding of Rome, leading on up to the time of Christ, Augustine turns in book XVIII finally to offer a theological remark on the pragmatic nature of the interrelation between the two cities. Yes, each city contains within its respective walls a unique set of goals, each of which gives to its citizens a different faith, hope and love. But there is a fruitful contrast to be had here, whereupon it could be said that, precisely in their difference, the world purifies the city of God. Augustine writes: “Indeed, all the enemies of the Church, however blinded by error or depraved by malice, train the Church in patience if they are given the power of inflicting bodily harm; whereas, if they oppose her only by their wicked beliefs, they train her in wisdom. Moreover, they train her in benevolence, or even beneficence, so that she may show love even to her enemies...”⁶² Spiritual exercises in a secular age call those who seek God to consider turbulence, violence, “secularism” and opposition a source of strength, one that belongs to the process of refining the church as it passes through this world.

There is, as Kierkegaard once noted, no “playing” with one’s religious identity.⁶³ Authentic faith, perhaps one consciously adopted, engages in the interplay between rest and restlessness in a secular world, in which seeking after God, in this state of disequilibrium (Marion)⁶⁴ becomes a choice to be made at every interval, in recognition that “God alone gives rest, because he alone has it, And he alone has it because he alone is it.”⁶⁵ Every moment of pilgrimage takes place in this interplay between secular and sacred, where the former purifies the latter; while Henry, Lacoste, Falque and Marion may invite a contemplative pathos that yields to the eternal rest whose heights are outside the world, the spiritual exercise I propose here, an Augustinian reduction, if I can risk such a label, urges transformation through action and purification *in and through* the secular horizon.

⁶² Augustine, *City of God*, XVIII, 51, 898.

⁶³ Kierkegaard, *Attack upon ‘Christendom’*, 8.

⁶⁴ Marion, *In the Self’s Place*, 229.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 262.