

GOD WITHOUT BEING: HORS-TEXTE, by Jean-Luc Marion
(translated by Thomas A. Carlson), *University of Chicago Press, 1991.*
Pp.xxv + 258.

This book is an intellectual odyssey, and all would-be travellers are advised to be familiar with Heidegger's thinking before embarking. There are patches of clear, untroubled water—when Marion gives us a reading of parables or an etching by Dürer—but, on the whole, the journey is a relentless foray into sophisticated, abstract thinking.

What Marion is attempting to do is devastatingly simple, to show how the God who gives himself as agape thus marks his divergence from Being" (p.83). But since everything that can be said about God returns us to the realm of the ontic/ontological division and since silence is not an option "because it does not explain itself, [and so] exposes itself to an infinite equivocation of meaning" (p.54), there is a problem. It has always been theology's problem. Marion's odyssey then is an attempt to outwit the many-headed Hydra of Being and steer a perilous course between silence and idolatrous chatter (Heidegger's *Gerede*).

Marion begins by outlining the phenomenological difference between the idol and the icon. It is a distinction he has been meditating upon for the last fifteen years. *L'Idol et la Distance* (a book now demanding to be translated) first appeared in 1977. What Marion is attempting is to think God outside of metaphysics which inevitably creates idols of God. But just as inevitable is that we can only think God through figuring Him, hence we have to think Him "under the figure of the unthinkable" (p.46). The God of philosophy is distinguished from the crossed out God with which theology has to do. It is revelation that allows us to think such a God beyond Being. Theology "concerns only the relation of faith to the event of faith" (p.65). Marion presents readings of important 'biblical revelation[s]' to support his argument. There is Romans 4.17 and the God "who calls the non—beings as beings". This text portrays a God indifferent to the fundamental ontic difference between what is and what is not. 1 Corinthians 1.28 supports this. Paul outwits Being by establishing "a certain distortion of being (p.91). The ontological difference belongs to a world which stands distinct from God. This can be seen also in Luke 15.12–3, where one discovers the only use in the New Testament of the philosophical term *ousia*. Biblical revelation provides insight into the unspeakable and Marion develops this insight in terms of the gift "The gift delivers Being/beings" (p.105). The gift puts ontological difference into play, but the giver is beyond the play. And this gift is best expressed and understood as charity or the love of the giver. The giving offers the only accessible trace of He who gives" (p.105) and agape "find[s] itself granted the power to cross Being" (p 109). From the human perspective, the "gaze of boredom" (p 119) goes beyond idols to fall short of the icon. It reduces all beings to vanity. This game Marion attributes to the work of the Spirit and examines with reference to Qoheleth's and Dürer's representations of melancholy. This melancholia

is seen as the opposite of charity which views the world as good. Both poles are recognised as necessary.

Having then located a Logos beyond logoi, a Word beyond words, theology must allow this Logos to be said within its own discourse. For this reason the Eucharist becomes the perfect expression of the theological hermeneutic which goes beyond words to the Word. The final two chapters, which comprise the section 'Hors-texte', is a theological analysis of the Eucharist as the logic of charity and how that logic is performed within the believer's confession of faith. 'In refusing to perform and to predicate according to the model of mastery, he who confesses that 'Jesus [is] Lord' *nevertheless already* performs an act of love, *nevertheless already* correctly predicates of the Word that he can love (p.197).

It is possibly presumptuous at this point to say whether Marion's *theological argument* for a God without Being succeeds. This book will need considerably more digesting by theologians before a judgement can be made about its success. I am not sure Marion reads Heidegger's understanding of Being correctly. He seems to treat Being as a reified notion (an idol), whereas Being for Heidegger cannot be a *grund*, a foundation to be overcome. Marion reads Heidegger, it would seem to me, in the light of Levinas (who has considerably influenced his thinking) rather than Lacoue-Labarthe. But that would still not undermine the validity of Marion's argument *on the ground of faith*. Whatever Marion's success, the importance of the attempt is not in doubt. This book is a landmark in postmodern theology and it places Marion on the theological map for the English-speaking world. Furthermore, it calls for a re-examination by postmodern theology of the *analogia fidei* tradition. More pressingly significant is the fact that we have waited almost ten years for this translation. In the meantime, last year, Marion published his *La Croisée du visible (La Différence, 1991)* which develops his phenomenology of perception and portrays the considerable debt he thinking owes to H. Urs von Balthasar. One hopes we do not have to wait another ten years before this too is made more widely available.

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