

Reflections on “Negative Theology” in the Light of a Recent Venture to Speak of “God Without Being”

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A Maritain gathering which took its theme from the title of Josef Pieper's monograph, *The Silence of Saint Thomas*, seemed a timely occasion to try to take the measure of a book which has only recently appeared in English by Jean-Luc Marion, a French philosopher quite decidedly Catholic: *God Without Being*. Anyone who has made the effort necessary to discover the riches of Aquinas' understanding of *being*, notably in his semantic *tour de force* in uniquely identifying God as the One whose essence is simply to-exist, could only be aggravated by such a title, even if titles are meant to arrest our attention. Yet a quick perusal could put that same person's mind at rest, for in a few pages Marion quickly concludes that the only reasonable way to interpret Aquinas on this elusive subject is to understand what he says about *ens* as Scotus does: "the result of a concept first nested in our apprehension, which remains univocal for 'God' as well as all other beings."¹ (I shall be citing from the French, with English pagination following, since his prose is so evocative that it seemed better to risk my own misunderstandings than to trust the interpretations of a translator.) If that's the way it must be, then better have God without such *being*. And this would hardly be the place to contest Marion's jejune reading of Aquinas—one which he himself abjures in a Preface to the English edition. Yet once arrested, one's attention cannot but help being drawn to other dimensions of his work, even if he has not succeeded in throwing down the gauntlet to those who have endeavored to sound out Aquinas on the uniqueness

¹ 112-20, citation at 120, taken from the "Quadrige" French edition, *Dieu sans l'être* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), while the work was initially published by Fayard in 1982. The English edition was published by The University of Chicago Press in 1991.

of divine being as a singularly opportune way to characterize the all-important "distinction" of God from the world.²

For if that very "distinction" is in question, then we will need all the help we can get to grasp it, for it is only "glimpsed "on the margin of reason," as Sokolowski would have it, indeed "at the intersection of faith and reason" (39). And Jean-Luc Marion is very interested in that intersection, as his other writings, as well as the theological appendices to this work, make abundantly clear. Moreover, his argument is not with Aquinas' *being* anyway; the few pages devoted to Aquinas reduce him to Avicenna, and seem intended to parry any thrusts from a Thomist quarter. The focal polemic is rather with Heidegger's *Sein* and his "ontological difference," which we shall see has little to do with that underscored by Kierkegaard or articulated by Sokolowski's "distinction." For Marion's training had been with a group of French philosophers quite taken with Heidegger, and he has written extensively on Descartes as well. All this emerges quite clearly in his earlier *L'idole et la distance* (Paris: Grasset, 1977). For that work opposes *idol* to *icon* in the interest of formulating the relation of God to the universe, of predication which does duty in this world to that which will be needed if we propose to speak of the One from whom all-that-is derives. It is in this work that he initially takes the measure of Heidegger's "ontological difference (*Sein/seiende*) and of Lévinas' "Other" whose constituent otherness comes to be rendered *differance*.

For it is Marion's contention that these linguistic contortions are in the service of seeking a source that can still be assented to, even without being actively "present." In fact, it is the *absence* of this source which he intends to capture in his own formulation: *la distance*. This source will not be an explanation or a cause, since our understanding of both of these intellectual maneuvers is quite similar: what explains (or causes) can only be shown to do so in virtue of a framework which comprehends both *explanandum* and *explanans*. Yet he will be more patient with pseudo-Dionysius' fascination with *aitia*—a Greek term regularly rendered "cause"—since that writer uses it to gesture towards a fecund origin whose relation to what it originates is not itself categorizable. But since that is precisely the kind of move which Aquinas intends to make by identifying God as *ipsum esse* ("existing itself"), and many concur that he also found pseudo-Dionysius to be a fruitful inspiration for his unique synthesis, it would be best now to examine more closely the quarrel which Marion has with "being."

It seems that *being* periodically comes on hard times. For positivists it was

² Notably Robert Sokolowski in *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982)—a work which appeared the same year as Marion's.

meaningless to speak of “being *qua* being,” for Heidegger the challenge had been to think *being* in contrast to beings, and to do so in a not very implicit polemic against the One whom Jews, Christians, and Muslims designate as creator. For it was the faith-assertion that the universe was freely created by the One God which stimulated medieval philosophers to turn Aristotle’s identification of *two* fundamental questions—what is it?, is it?—into a fruitful strategy for opening his universe to the activity of a creator, and for spawning the question: why is there something rather than nothing? These thinkers were captured by Aristotle’s insistence that there was no way of getting around speaking of a thing’s being, yet understood this claim in the richly analogous manner in which he made it. *Being* is not to be conceived as a floor, a basic stuff, a substratum. Indeed, that temptation has already been dismissed by Aristotle in his treatment of the paradigmatic realization of being, substance, in the *Metaphysics*.

The question of *being* reduplicates and intensifies when one directs it towards the source of what-is, indeed, of all-that-is. For when that question is posed, one may first ask (in imitation of Aristotle’s actual practice): why pose it that way? Yet if we do, then we are constrained to attempt to articulate the relation of that unique source with all-that-is. (So it is that the question reduplicates.) Here is where Josef Pieper’s contention (in the essay inspiring this essay): that creation is the hidden element in the philosophy of Saint Thomas, gives us specific purchase on the inquiry. For it followed, for Aquinas, that “the beginning and end of all things and of reasoning creatures especially”(ST 1.2.Prol) could not itself be one of those being, indeed, could not be “a being”: “it is plain that God does not belong to the genus of substance”(ST 1.3.5.1). Yet what such a One does do, in freely calling forth all-that-is, is to inscribe in those who can recognize their existence for the gift it is, an impulse to return it. (That impulse Marion very much wants to elicit, yet will attempt to do so by the sheer category of *gift*, with no reference at all to what is given.)

To continue with Aquinas for a moment: in individuating this God as *ipsum esse* (“existing itself”), he expressly indicates that such a One does not instantiate a concept of *being* (as chipmunks do chipmunkhood), but that the activity which is existing defies any essential characterization, much as Aristotle’s attempt to lead us to grasp *act* from a series of examples of becoming (*potency*). So if the primary effect of the creator (for Aquinas) is the very existing of things, the primary intent is the “order of the universe,” the *telos* which existing builds into things. So speaking of *good* is not adding anything to discourse about *being*, but rather calling attention to the *telos* inherent in that act of existing which creatures derive from their creator. To speak of “the good,” then, is to call attention to the *eros* of being. Now if all this makes eminent

sense, why should some pious Catholic philosophers contend that "love alone has nothing to do with being;" and that "God loves without being"(195/138)?³ What is going on?

Marion's presumption seems to be that human discourse introduces categories, and that the true God must transcend such categories. As a way of gesturing at this, he introduces his own category—*la distance*—which intends to name the "logical space" correlative to God. It is to this space that the language of praise directs itself, so such linguistic practices must detach themselves from assertion just as loving (though an act) is purportedly "beyond being." Again, the presumption seems to be that *being* is a kind of floor, to call attention to which cannot help but supplant—in our ways of proceeding intellectually—God's own proper manner of acting or of being present. The further presumption is that *all* of our ways of trying to speak of God have been undone by God's revelation in Jesus. Or they ought to be undone if we are to understand that act properly, and hence relate ourselves to the true God. If I have properly identified the operative presumptions, we have here a decisive question of method: are Christians (and other believers) to press the articulation of human speech as far as possible, allowing ourselves to be led by revelation to articulate as best we can the God in whom we believe?⁴ Or are such believers to presume that human discourse is an inherently finite project, which if adopted will inevitably constrict (and so falsify) our attempts to articulate divinity? If the latter, as Jean-Luc Marion apparently believes, then theologians of these faiths will be constrained to limit themselves to thematic elaborations of a revelational story. Put in medieval terms, the question is whether or not *theologia* can be a *scientia*: whether theological inquiry can itself be a way of knowing, or not? Chenu's coy title for his exploration—*Théologie comme science au XIIIème siècle*—underscores the difficulty while resolving it in one direction. Marion takes the opposite tack, or tries to do so.

He makes extensive use of both Heidegger and Lévinas to prose ways of detaching discourse about God from *being*, that is, from ordinary predication schemes, substituting his own category of *distance*. Working through Heidegger's "ontological difference" (*Sein/seiende*) and Lévinas' "Other" and Derrida's *differance*, he finds them all inadequate, so tries to make a case for "la distance"—*not* as a category but as a *name* for matters divine, as "love"

³ 'God' in this passage is rendered with a cross atop it to call attention to the revelation of the true God in the death and resurrection of Jesus; otherwise 'God' is placed between double quotes ("God") to show that he is referring to non-believers' attempts to name (falsely) the One.

⁴ That is the contention of my *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

and "*Verbum*" can be used as names as well, after the manner of pseudo-Dionysius. Indeed, he avers, the best we can do is to name God, better with the names which God gives to us in Scripture. Here he praises pseudo-Dionysius for his focus on names (and on "the Good" rather than on *being*), and critiques Aquinas for having placed a conceptual limit on the use of divine names by interposing his discussion of divine simpleness (ST 1.3-11) before his question treating of "divine names" (ST 1.13). Yet of course questions 3-11 in the *Summa* speak not of attributes, strictly speaking, but rather delineate "formal features" of divinity: rules for using divine names properly so that they will not be thought to be predicated in any ordinary sense of an ordinary subject.⁵

Understood in that way, Aquinas is actually protecting divine names for their use in praising God, and doing so by proposing God as a unique subject of knowledge while at the same time seeing to it that our assertions about God will not turn their subject into an ordinary object. Is not that something which Marion himself wishes to do? Indeed the fruit of such a focus on *being*, concentrated in the act of existing (*esse*), is to allude to an activity constitutive of and present to all things: "the act of existing is the ultimate actuality of everything, and even of every form" (ST 1.4.1.3); indeed, "existence is more intimately and profoundly interior to things than anything else" (ST 1.8.1). We are then led, by the grammar of the matter, to see God's unique being (where essence = to-be) as the source of all-that-is, and so of all perfections, so that all of the given names can be used to praise God and to mean something in doing so. The language of praise cannot be equated to the language of assertion, yet it does (and must) assert! Or better, properly instructed by the metaphysical grammar of the introductory questions (ST 1.3-11), we can use the language of praise to assert truthfully of God what we praise God for.

How can we do that? Here is the dimension which Aquinas left almost entirely implicit and which principally concerns Marion. How can Christians (or by extension, other believers) speak authentically of God?⁶ Can it suffice that they praise rather than predicate? What would that be like? Those who praise God, Aquinas avers in responding to Maimonides (ST 1.13.2), want to speak in such a way as to reveal their understanding, their inner appreciation of the *inadequacy* of such terms to articulate divinity properly. To speak properly, their discourse must incorporate a judgment regarding the manner of predication that is going on here, for it is not a simple apprehension that can warrant our

⁵ See my *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979).

⁶ See my "Ghazali and Aquinas on the Names of God," *Literature and Theology* 3 (1989): 173-80; as well as *Al-Ghazali on the Ninety-Nine Names of God*, trans. David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992).

using such terms of God, but using them properly involves an analogical use of language which *use* incorporates a differentiated judgment on the part of the one praising.

The presence of such a judgment is shown in what is said and what is left unsaid, in the implications drawn or not drawn in the course of, say, a homily or in speaking to someone of the loss of a loved one. Such use of language does assert while it renders praise, displaying at once God's distance from our way of understanding things, as well as God's intimate presence to us. How do we come to make such judgments? How do we learn to subordinate our learned sense of the coherence which belongs to statements to a yet more exigent coherence: that of the one making the statement with the faith-statement one makes? Jean-Luc Marion calls this "the final rigor" and in the concluding supplementary essay of *God without Being* develops its logic with the help of J.L. Austin's performativity of discourse as well as a penetrating reflection on the interchange of subject and predicate in a true statement. He comes in this way to an understanding of the activity of professing one's faith quite similar to that of George Lindbeck (in his *Nature of Doctrine*): that the marauding crusader's cry "God is great!" is a travesty and a falsehood.⁷

Yet the attitude involved in a truthful confession (which in turn renders my uttering it truthful) must itself be appropriate to the realities involved. And if that can only be assured, as Marion insists, by my conversion to a life of *agape* (charity), that life is true because it imitates that of Jesus and thereby reflects a proper relation to the source of all. Yet let us try to articulate, with the help of Aquinas' onto-logical stretching of language, how this free creator relates to creatures. It cannot be by way of simple opposition, as Kathryn Tanner has so carefully ruled out in her *God and the Doctrine of Creation*, for God cannot be thought of as "a being" alongside of the universe which emanates from God.⁸ Indeed the very terms 'emanation' and 'participation,' as Aquinas uses them, can only be metaphors in this case. God "differs differently;" "the distinction" is hardly an ordinary one. While monism is ruled out by that very "distinction," one might be tempted to invoke a form of "non-dualism" (celebrated in Vedanta): *otherness* must be asserted, but in no ordinary way. The revelation of God in Jesus offers an image here: creatures are related to the creator by an extension of God's loving self-expression in the Word. And once that creating Word becomes an invitation to respond wholeheartedly to the free gift of creation—as it does in the giving of the Torah, the Word's becoming human in Jesus, or made Arabic in the Qur'an—then we can properly understand creation for the

⁷ Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987; 64.

⁸ Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988; 45-48.

gift that it is.⁹ And this brings us back to the intent of Jean-Luc Marion, shorn of the polemic and bereft of the need for his non-categorical "category," *distance*,

In a key chapter (in *God Without Being*) entitled "La croisée de l'être/The Crossing of Being," he seeks to do to *being* what he had earlier proposed for 'God': to submit the name 'God' to the dialectic of self-emptying that is the cross of Christ, our paradigm for love (*agape*), and so help us to make the effort to think such a God—beyond Heidegger's "ontological difference" or "the question of being"(73/46-7). Beyond these two, since (as we shall see) Heidegger's "ontological difference" succeeds in occluding the universe as a personal gift, while the Hellenic legacy of *being* obscures the ontological difference which Marion wants and which he tries to capture in the evocative notion of "distance." The sign that the Hellenic legacy does just that is to hear its best proponents (like Thomas Aquinas) endorse Avicenna's insistence that "*ens* is that which first occurs in human intellectual conception"(119/80). For Marion, that means that "*ens* is defined as the first *object* apprehended by the human mind"(120/81) so that, in any event, anyone (Thomists included) who begins with *being* has no choice but to accept it as the univocal floor proposed by Scotus. For proof of that, consider how Aquinas' treatment in the *Summa Theologiae* evacuates his own presentation of the divine names as analogical (ST 1.13) by "grounding it" in God as "*ipsum esse* and thus an [essential] names taken from *ens*"(120/81). The presumption throughout, in fashioning this polemical springboard, is that *being* is (or must be) a univocal concept, so that tying the Christian treatment of God to *being* will inevitably falsify the God revealed in Jesus Christ under the name of *agape* (123/82). A not unfamiliar polemical springboard, be it with some sixteenth-century reformers or with twentieth-century "process theologians;" and if the project is to "liberate God from [that conception of] Being, *tant mieux!*"

His way of doing that can be shown by having recourse to three scriptural texts: Romans 4:17 sq, 1 Cor 1:28 sq, and Luke 15:12-32. His isogesis of these texts will falter somewhat on alternative translations of the original text (which he is careful to reproduce in Greek), but the first focuses on Paul's description of Abraham's faith in a God who "calls forth beings as though non-beings"

⁹ Aquinas puts it nicely in ST 1.32.1.3: "knowledge of the divine persons [i.e., the trinity of God] was necessary for us . . . for the right idea of creation. The fact of saying that God made all things by His Word excludes the error of those who say that God produced things by necessity. When we say that in Him there is a procession of love, we show that God produced creatures not because He needed them, nor because of any extrinsic reason, but on account of the love of His own goodness." See my *Freedom and Creation* . . . 19-22, and Nicholas Lash, *On Believing in One God Three Ways* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) ch. 2.

["who . . . calls into existence what does not yet exist" JB]. What would ordinarily be taken as an allusion to God's creative prowess Marion reads as "everything becoming indifferent in the face of the *differance* which God marks with the world"(130/88). Faith in this call "makes [the difference between being and nonbeing] appear indifferent, yet for all that leaves it intact"(131/88). One might have thought that this difference was utterly crucial to Paul's celebration of Abraham's faith, which cannot be without allusion to the call to sacrifice his own son, God's special gift and bearer of the promise (Gen 22).

The next text is the celebrated opposition between the wisdom of this world and God's wisdom. Here one is directed to the active intervention of God, who "chooses things scorned by the world, even nonbeings, to annul things which are, precisely so that nothing fleshly may glorify itself before God"(132/89). Here Marion opposes *agape* to *eros*, revelation to human inquiry, insisting on the quasi-legal term 'annul' to call attention to how God can "cancel out" what is, thereby turning the "wisdom of the world" into foolishness by determining the being (or nonbeing) of things without recourse to Being, so not only making the difference between life and death (ontic difference) indifferent, but also the "ontological difference" (*Sein/seiende*) (135/91). How so? The decision regarding whether this thing will be or not does not depend on philosophical categories, nor upon Being disseminating itself à la the "ontological difference," but on the *distance* which separates the limit between "the world" (of 1 Corinthians) and the call of God who makes things live. That "distance" is epitomized in the fact that this "world" grounds itself in its own works and pretends to glorify itself before God (Rom 4:29) (138/94). So Marion attempts to make metaphysical hay out of Paul's poignant contrast between what we might name *ego* and *self*: between the world as turned in on itself and thus falsifying its relation to its creator, and that same world opened to become its true self through acknowledging and receiving the saving action of the Word made flesh.

In the the final text, the parable of the two brothers, Marion pursues his intention of moving us "beyond Being" in our attempt to conceive the relation of creatures to a gracious creator, by focussing on the unique use of the word *ousia* in the gospels: "Father, give me my portion of the *substance* that is coming to me." Citing Heidegger's Marbourg lectures for an admittedly tangential sense of 'substance,' he proposes that the word *ousia* is here being used to denote "a possession that it is in one's power to dispose of"(141/96). That would parse the prodigal's conversion as his recognizing (1) that "the substance that was coming to him" really came to him "by a gracious concession"(142/97), and (2) that he had "had to fracture his very sonship to obtain the *ousia* as his possession"(144/98). It was, of course, his Father's receiving him that

restored his sonship by reminding him that all was gift. A brilliant isogenesis, certainly, and indicative of the kind of use to which Marion's theological wit can put the scriptures, yet hardly amounting to a "ploy which, indifferent to the 'ontological difference,' thereby detaches a being from Being and gives it the name of 'gift'." (146/100). For to see the universe as gift may well detach one from the intent of Heidegger's distinction, but it can hardly be proposed as liberating beings from Being—unless, of course, those very terms remain caught in a Heideggerian web of meaning.

The import of these three isogeneses is to arrive at the One who can bestow the world as gift (146-48/100-02), and so liberate God to be God—from the impersonal "ontological difference" of *Sein/seiende* or the pretended conceptualizing of divinity as *ipsum esse*. So the polemic here is again primarily with Heidegger, where the *given* [*es gibt/til y a*] dispensed with any need for a giver, yet also with attempts to conceptualize God as *ousia*, and so falsely overcome the appropriate ontological difference, or otherness, which he names *la distance*. That *difference* is offered to us as "agape in Christ" (154/107), and only when we have so "crossed" 'God' can we "begin again to speak—but this time with joy and jubilation: offering praise" (154-55/107). But could one not also say—in fact, don't we need to if this One is to be the source of all that is?—that the One who *is*, whom no concept can capture, who has no essence except *to-be* and so "does not even belong to the genus of substance [*ousia*]" (ST 1.3.5.1); that such a One alone can give without gaining anything from the gift. Thus *agape*, and the praise that is the return appropriate to such a gift, is displayed in the One who is, and founded on the predication: God is the One who is—that name of names (ST 1.13.11). That name cannot be an idol, any more than *being* can be a concept, so it must be (in Marion's terms) and icon.

In short, the God who is portrayed for us in Robert Sokolowski's *God of Faith and Reason* by means of what he dubs "the distinction," or by the rules of discourse formulated by Kathryn Tanner in her *God and the Doctrine of Creation*, is utterly open to being "crossed" by the cross of Christ, but without thereby severing the connection with a free creator whose intrinsic mode of activity would have to be gift, since such a One could gain nothing from the transaction. Furthermore, so linking one's philosophical theology to that mode of inquiry natural to the human spirit will allow us to explore the intrinsic intelligibility of the ultimate gift of God in revelation. Far from releasing us to recognize that gift, by refusing to name the gift of creation as our very existence we are left hanging as to the meaning of the gift of redemption—left only with the name "gift." That move limits our theological inquiry to a biblical "positivism" which allows us only to thematize the texts of Scripture and prohibits us from exploring their interaction with the fruits of an inquiring reason. Martin D'Arcy, in his

trenchant critique of Anders Nygren showed how disastrous it can be to human transformation to oppose *agape* to *eros*, yet that is in effect what Jean-Luc Marion is inviting us to do.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Mind and Heart of Love* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945), responding to Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (New York: Macmillan, 1939). I am indebted to several interlocutors at the American Maritain Association meeting in Irving, Texas, 5-7 November 1993, for improvements in this attempt at interpretation, notably to Merold Westphal. I can only hope that this final version reflects some of their perspective. Finally (June 1996) Marion's recent "Saint Thomas d'Aquin et l'onto-théo-logie," *Revue Thomiste* 95 (1995) 31-66, addresses the substance of this critique so thoroughly as to render it redundant *as* critique: Aquinas is recovered for who he is!