

PHILOSOPHY AND REVELATION: FOUR PERSPECTIVES

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In this paper I shall understand divine revelation to refer to speech acts performed by God, all kinds of speech acts, but most typically promises and commands or instructions. In all cases the purpose is the self-manifestation of God to human hearers and the establishment of a right relation between God and human persons and societies. These communications provide ways of understanding self, society, world, and God beyond what merely human reason can provide through its own resources. They presuppose a personal God, capable of both speech and action; for just as we can perform speech acts with our bodies without saying a word, so God can perform speech acts by means of divine acts in human history

I shall consider four moments of philosophical reflection, two by Martin Heidegger and two by Jean-Luc Marion, with an eye to their implication for the idea of divine revelation.

In his earlier writings, those more or less contemporary with *Being and Time*, Heidegger develops what I call his hegemony thesis. In its phenomenological mode, philosophy can and should exercise a hegemony over theology, and thus unaided human reason can and should exercise a dominance over any faith that is derived from and dependent on scriptural revelation (which, by definition, is not the product of merely human reason. Theology, and the religious life it purports to instruct and inform, should turn to philosophy to “correct” its concepts so that they are “purely rational.” This is a variation on the Kantian theme of

religion-within-the-limits-of-reason-alone.

In his later writings Heidegger seeks to overcome metaphysics, which he identifies with onto-theology. Because its medium is abstract, impersonal concepts, it is unfriendly toward any theology which presupposes a God personal enough for the concept of divine revelation to overcome such a metaphysics; but in passing, so to speak, he advises theology not to submit to the hegemonic aspirations of on onto-theological metaphysics. In suggesting that theology retain its own autonomy, he sounds a lot like Kierkegaard or Karl Barth.

We turn to Jean-Luc Marion, a phenomenologist who seeks to develop the phenomenological tradition beyond the work of Husserl and Heidegger. Our interest here is in the distinction he makes between the idol and icon, not once but twice.

In his earlier writings the distinction refers to two different ways of encountering any phenomenon, religious or secular, though the names are drawn from religious discourse. When perception does not open itself to the givenness or otherness of the phenomenon but serves as a mirror of the perceiver we have what Marion calls an idol. Here is an opening to a critique of religion when, although purporting to hear the voice of God in revelation it in fact and to a problematic degree hears its own voice. Here the mirror metaphor morphs into an echo metaphor.

This kind of critique is what Ricoeur calls the hermeneutics of suspicion, naming Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as its masters. But he might well have included the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Kierkegaard, among others. For there are religious as well as secular reasons for wanting to expose religion that is idolatrous in this sense.

The icon replaces the idol just to the degree that the believing soul/community hears a voice genuinely other than its own in what he takes to be divine revelation. At this point Marion draws heavily on Levinas and his analysis of what is involved in genuine alterity, hearing the voice of the human other and the divine Other.

In his later writings Marion treats idol and icon as two different kinds of phenomenon, neither of which is religious. Both are species of what he calls saturated phenomena. In perceiving ordinary phenomena we intend more than is given in intuition. We may be able to see the top and the front of a computer, but not the back and bottom at the same time. In a saturated phenomenon more is given than we intend.

Marion distinguishes four types: the historical event, a work of art, especially a painting, the feeling of our body, as in an ache or itch, and the face of the human other (à la Levinas). The “data” given to us in each case exceeds our ability to describe or express the “object” in any intention. Marion suggests the divine revelation is a fifth type of saturated phenomenon that exhibits aspects of each of the other four.

The most immediate implication of this analysis is to affirm that divine revelation is inherently mysterious, not the sort of thing vulnerable to exhaustive articulation.