

The Phenomenological Challenge of Jean-Luc Marion's Gift Theology

Alex Y. Tiempo
Cebu Normal University, Philippines
rokgel@yahoo.com

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Abstract - *The tendency in most prayers is to preempt an answer coming from God. Yet such predetermination often results to a short-sighted vision of God's action. The mysterious dimension in this case is subsumed by man's finite gaze of the divine. Man often "thinks" that what he asks for in prayer elicits an answer from God, in which case the latter has a "duty" to respond to the former. Thus, if man's wish is not granted, he tends to doubt the existence of the divine.*

To counteract such tendency, this paper presents phenomenology as a possible explanation. First, it will analyze the problem through the Husserlian method of bracketing one's biases or preconceived notions of God. The notion of intentionality is given as a probable cause of the usual tendency in prayers where man often "intends" according to how he perceives the divine. Next, it will apply Jean-Luc Marion's reverse intentionality which considers that God initiates the dialog. Man's role is simply to respond to such a call.

This paper concludes that prayer or any acts attributed to God should be interpreted within the context of Marion's reverse intentionality. The one thing that man needs to avoid is the tendency toward predetermination – that is, toward the thinking that man predetermines God's answer. Intentionality could be a helpful guide in the phenomenological interpretation, but it is limited only to the act of bracketing previously held notions of God. It is precisely the difficulty in seeing the invisible that one needs, at most, a possible phenomenon that allows for the divine to reveal as a gift.

Keywords: *phenomenology, Jean-Luc Marion, reverse intentionality, gift theology*

INTRODUCTION

It is often the case that when one utters a prayer, he or she already has a specific intention in mind – a particular request to the One who is called upon to bestow some special favor. In other words, when an individual makes a prayer, there is already a pre-determined goal in mind, something which the person hopes to acquire by invoking the name of the benevolent giver on high. Such is the banality of the action that in many occasions the thing being asked borders on self-centered desires to the utter neglect of other persons' needs. For instance, a businessman would pray for the approval of a proposed project that intends to develop a subdivision in a mountain barangay. Yet his preoccupation and, indeed, consciousness of his private interest could run counter to the over-all well-being of other individuals who might be affected by such project. Some trees, for instance, have to be cut in order to clear the way for the construction of houses and other facilities. The result could be disastrous to both the environment and

to humans: the absence of trees would mean less protection from greenhouse gases which could contribute to the worsening weather condition characterized by an increased depletion of the ozone layer[1] or to constant flooding in the low-lying areas. Mindful of such negative consequences or not, the businessman would, nevertheless, continue to pray until his wish shall have been granted.

The ordinary follower of Christ cannot be put to blame for such a "prayerful attitude". After all, it has always been like that since the beginning – thanks to the zealous efforts of catechists and priests who have always taught their flock to rely on the following passage from sacred scriptures: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you[2]." For most Christians, these words are quite consoling especially to one who has been searching desperately for solutions to his or her problems. And so it only comes as no surprise that even criminals and corrupt government officials would likewise pray for some ways to get out of

trouble or in order not to get caught by the authorities trying to run after them. In a rather awkward manner, it even sounds funny when two competing teams in, say, a basketball match would each offer a mass intended to secure a victory. One wonders which team would God favor, for even in the act of praying itself there is already a sort of competition.

While humans are not in a position to read and know what is in God's mind – due, of course, to the biblical passage which says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways[3].” – a big challenge now appears as to whether the originary position of man's prayer should start from man's initiative or from God's. And since praying implies the act of calling, so the more proper question to ask would be: Does God call us first or is it we who call him first? In either case, a response is needed. If God initiates the call, then the expected response comes from man. But if the starting point of the call is man, then God's response is likewise expected. Admittedly, this is a difficult question to answer, particularly since the nature of God is beyond man's comprehension as theodicy teaches us. Thus, as Aquinas[4] puts it, anything we say about God is only by way of analogy.

Husserlian Phenomenology

This researcher would attempt to enter into the discourse by analyzing the issue according to two points: predetermination and intentionality. In the first case, the problem is considered as a theological one in that it concerns man's relationship to God through the act of prayer. The relationship is a predetermined one since it is perceived to originate from man who opens up a dialogue with God and predetermines the latter's response. This is grounded on the assumption that the dialogue is not an ordinary one where one can talk to someone in a face-to-face manner. Rather, it is a dialogue where one of the interlocutors – that is, man – does not see the face of the one he is talking to, a case of invisibility. It is precisely in such invisibility where the tendency for predetermination occurs, considering that man is now open to his own conception about God and His nature or to doubt whether He really exists. Specifically in difficult times where no “answer” has been given to a prayer, man maximizes this doubt and develops an attitude of indifference toward religious activities. Some would even go to the extent of denying God's existence altogether.

On the other hand, the problem can be analyzed as a philosophical one – that is, if we consider it from a phenomenological point of view using the concept of intentionality. Edmund Husserl was the first to use such concept in his now-famous method called phenomenological *epoche*, which emphasized bracketing as a way to suspend one's preconceived notions on the phenomenon experienced and describe such experience in its purest form or essential characteristics[5]. He wanted to establish a method that would trace one's knowledge of things by “going back to the things themselves” as an aid to one's consciousness of their presence both as mental states and as objects existing outside the mind[5]. Thus, for Husserl, every time a person thinks, he or she is always conscious of something. There is a focus – that is, an intention – in one's thoughts.

A close affinity exists between thinking and praying, for when one prays, he or she is at the same time thinking. It would be quite unthinkable to pray without using the mind since the prayer must, first and foremost, be directed to someone whom one considers to be the dispenser of what is being asked for. For instance, it would be entirely preposterous to just sit or kneel down inside a church and simply follow what the other people are doing without knowing in the first place the reasons why such actions are done or why the person has to be present in the celebration. Two things become the immediate focus of the mind in the act of praying: the one being invoked and the object of one's invocation. In both instances, there is a subject that does the thinking and this subject is free to express such act. Thus, it can well be said that every time a person prays, he is conscious of some intention – say, a petition, an offering, an act of adoration, etc. – and that there is no external coercion that prompts him or her to do it. In fact, it is just commonplace to hear someone say “Let us offer this mass for the following intentions...” or “Let us pray for the soul of...” to indicate some focus. Prayer, so far understood, is a conscious and voluntary act of the subject.

While there is nothing wrong with having an intention in mind in the act of praying, yet such arrangement can lead to self-centered aims. In anticipating the thing being asked for, there seems to be a “pre-determined wish” that the person wants to be granted – that is, man seems to have already decided what is good for him and that the only thing that is lacking is the “approval” from the heavens. Such tendency can be rather dangerous for it will

allow an attitude of dictating God to bestow whatever man wants from Him. In such a situation, man's role becomes that of a "giver" of a command and God that of a willing servant who obeys his master whatever the latter tells him to do. It is the inverse of what Nietzsche calls "slave morality" where man experiences guilt and suffering as a result of one's unquestioning adherence to God's laws[6].

Marion's Reverse Intentionality and Givenness

In order to avoid the tendencies mentioned above, a more enlightened phenomenology could be considered, particularly one coming from the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion whose idea of God as a non-metaphysical being challenged all previously-held views found in traditional theology. Marion is wary of what has been termed onto-theology by others before him like Nietzsche and Heidegger who each gave their own polemic against popular religiosity. Conscious of the limitations, not to mention pretensions, that became apparent in traditional God-talk, he would therefore set his sights on advancing the ideas initiated by his predecessors, especially Husserl's idea of intentionality, by suggesting a notion of God that is free from any preconceived claims. Toward this end, Marion waxes Shakespearean notes when he starts his most famous book:

"To be or not to be – that is indeed the first and indispensable question for everything and everyone, and for man in particular. But with respect to Being, does God have to behave like Hamlet? Under the title *God Without Being*, I am attempting to bring out the absolute freedom of God with regard to all determinations, including, first of all, the basic condition that renders all other conditions possible and even necessary – for us, humans – the fact of Being[7]."

It becomes obvious what Marion aims in his own brand of theology – a phenomenological bracketing of any and all determinations concerning the nature of God. The term "being" seems to be an overused word, or so Marion thinks, particularly when it is applied to Christian theology. Terms like supreme being, highest being, *ipsumesse*, uncaused cause, and the like are expressions that are not found in Marion's vocabulary for they imply a going back to the same God-talk where man determines what needs to be said about the divine. What is foremost in the

mind of Marion is the idea of "givenness" which does not allow for any a priori judgments about God and his being: "As I entered phenomenology, I was persuaded that this thought could become what it is not yet fully, namely, precisely nonmetaphysical, only by being radically reformulated as a phenomenology of givenness, broadened to include all that is given, considered as such and without a priori conditions[8]."

A theological revolution in the light of phenomenological reflection is therefore in the offing or, perhaps, has already started to make its presence felt among academic circles and is set to challenge hardcore Catholicism that is used to follow *ex cathedra* traditional church teachings. What was once a road that was less travelled has now become for Marion and his followers an escape route from all pre-figured descriptions of the divine phenomenon. As one writer notes: "Marion's account of the subject falls under the heading of inverse intentionality, and there are hints that vision is *aufgehoben*[9]in the voice. The seer is first of all the one seen, but above all the one addressed, called forth into response-able being[10]." This indeed is the reverse of what has been taught all along by traditional theologians whose focus is to search for God instead of God searching for man.

The temptation to speak of God as a preconceived phenomenon can lead to a kind of fixation which has its adherents in modern-day soothsayers whose preoccupation, it seems, is to paint descriptions of God in the form of such terms as "God's wrath" or "act of God". The usage of such terms smacks of mayhem especially, for instance, when one talks about natural calamities as being caused by divine power. In the recent Yolanda tragedy, for instance, it is only ordinary to hear some people, especially the elders, say that such event manifests God's anger over man's iniquities.¹ Whether it is something cultural or not is beyond the scope of this study. Perhaps, the more important thing to consider is the realization that such tendency exists, at least in the Philippine setting. Now, the common perception about natural calamities as caused by God is something that needs a phenomenological interpretation. A question can therefore be asked: Is it really God who causes such things to happen? This researcher thinks the question can be properly addressed by clarifying notions that are prejudicial to the proper understanding about God.

By all indications, the use of the terms “God’s wrath” or “act of God” presupposes a negativity that can only be interpreted to mean an act of punishment imposed upon someone who has done something wrong. The Old Testament reflects this attitude in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah where God is portrayed as having a vengeful attitude toward those who have transgressed Him[11]. Yet such thinking is likewise tantamount to one-directionality for it fixes the gaze of the gazer on the gazed – that is, on the giver of the punishment. Here, punishment is understood as the phenomenon under which trajectory man once again determines how God should act within a given horizon – practically, the experience of being blown by the wind both literally and figuratively, of being pushed to the limits of one’s existence are all indications of a displeased God. The experience of the punishment is Kierkegaard’s own fear and trembling which does not need any justification[12]. In other words, the punishment simply happens because that’s the way God wants it to be.

Nevertheless, there is a possibility that natural calamities like typhoons and floods could be caused by man’s own doing. There is scientific evidence, for instance, to support the claim that climate change, which is caused by man’s abusive activities to the environment, was responsible for the occurrence of the recent typhoon[13]. The destruction of high-rise buildings during a strong earthquake could be triggered by sub-standard materials used in the construction. If anything, such instances only point to the fact that man could be faulted for the negative things that are happening around him. Instead of calling natural calamities entirely as an “act of God” or as signs of “God’s wrath”, it would be more precise, albeit in a limited manner, to consider them as products of man’s own actions.

A better way, perhaps, of looking at the actions of God is to speak of it in terms of what Jean-Luc Marion calls the phenomenon of givenness, where God is considered as a gift whose very act of giving is beyond man’s understanding of it. “All that which gives *itself* does not show *itself* necessarily – givenness is not always phenomenized”[14]. What is crucial to this teaching is the act of giving which may not actually bestow the thing being asked for. In ordinary human relations, a person cannot demand that he be given a gift. One cannot say “Give me this ring or give me that book as your birthday gift” – it

would be tantamount to a demand which therefore loses the essence of a gift as freely given. In the same token, it is not for man to determine what God should give as a blessing which emanates from the abundance of His benevolence or the kind of punishment that He should render as a matter of recompense for the damage done. Anything for that matter may not necessarily fall either as a blessing or as a punishment for everything depends on the giver of such phenomena. Phenomenological interpretation, in the final analysis, belongs to the finite mind. “Any phenomenon is possible that matches the finitude of the power of knowing and its requirements[15].” Therefore, that which is infinite cannot be subsumed by the finite – the former is simply greater than or incomprehensible to the latter.

A “Being-less God”

An indispensable tool in the interpretation of God’s nature is the book *God Without Being* (1982) by Jean Luc Marion. In this book Marion asks several questions which open up several possibilities for a possible God-talk, such as: “When God offers himself to be contemplated and gives himself to be prayed to, is he concerned primarily with Being? When he appears as and in Jesus Christ, who dies and rises from the dead, is he concerned primarily with Being? No doubt, God can and must in the end also be; but does his relation to Being defines all other beings[7]?” Obviously, what was at the back of Marion’s mind in asking the preceding questions was Heidegger’s *Dasein* which for the German philosopher defines authentic existence. The very notion of being as existence implies that God must “be” before any discussion about his nature could begin.

Though Marion recognizes Heidegger’s contribution in criticizing traditional metaphysics as an onto-theology - that is, in explaining the nature of God in terms of the idea “being” – nevertheless, Marion thinks that Heidegger falls into the same tendency. For Marion, Being should not always be the basis in discussing all other beings, especially when one talks about God. Thus Marion continues: “To be or not to be – that is indeed the first and indispensable question for everything and everyone, and for man in particular. But with respect to Being, does God have to behave like Hamlet? Under the title *God Without Being*, I am attempting to bring out the absolute freedom of God with regard to all determinations, including, first of all, the basic condition that renders

all other conditions possible and even necessary – for us, humans – the fact of Being”[7] In doing so, Marion launches his campaign against metaphysics which has often conceived of God as the highest being, the *ipsumesse*, uncaused cause, the highest intelligence, and so on. Definitely, Marion is tired of the same God-talk which tends to limit God according to human constructions of Him, a common tendency that is found not only among Christian theologians but also among atheists.

In advancing his notion of a being-less God, Marion makes a distinction between the terms *idol* and *icon* where the former is confined to a gaze directed toward the divine and which gazes back as in a mirror to the gazer while the latter is the gaze that transcends the gazer into the true experience of the divine.[7]The idol represents man’s preconceived notions of God where man pre-determines what and how God should be perceived while the icon implies the idea that God calls us first and therefore our answer or response to such call is more important than our thinking of Him. For Marion then, God speaks to us through the icon and not through the idol. Unfortunately, or so Marion’s phenomenology suggests, metaphysics has destroyed such ideal relationship between God and man.

CONCLUSION

It is along Marion’s reverse intentionality that prayer or any acts attributed to God should be interpreted. What man needs to avoid is the tendency toward predetermination. Intentionality could be a helpful guide in the phenomenological interpretation, but it should serve only as a starting point to a deeper intentionality which emphasizes a dialogue where God first makes a call and then man is expected to respond. Precisely, the difficulty in seeing the invisible implies, at most, a possible phenomenon and that is, perhaps, the farthest man’s mind could go.

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