

ANTHONY L. MACRI
John Carroll School

THE PHILOSOPHY OF TRUTH IN CHRISTIANITY

A review of Michel Henry, *I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.

PHENOMENOLOGICALLY SENSITIVE and devoted to the truth claimed by Christian revelation, Michel Henry's *I Am the Truth* walks a path along the lines of previous works by noted postmodern thinkers like Robert P. Scharlemann and Jean-Luc Marion. Henry's focus is decidedly Christocentric, and from this approach he develops a philosophy of creation that is deeply incarnational, with a tone of radical immanence. For Henry, the truth of Christianity is that the world we live in is, in fact, untrue: the Christian way is the truth, the way of the world is false. In a way, Henry's book sets up a critique of the metaphysics of presence all over again, going against the western mentality to totalize the world into processes of reason, and realigning allegiance with the faith of the believing Christian.

Constantly returning to the Gospels (particularly the Johannine writings) for material, Henry takes the self-declarative statements of Christ—especially “I am the way, the truth, and the life”—and proposes that they are themselves a philosophy of selfhood that is the pre-original blueprint for each individual human being. For Henry, Christ's selfhood is the archetype, the original and paramount, without which there would be no other. This idea, while without a doubt part of the Christian belief structure, belies a very important part of Henry's thinking. His work is definitively high Christology. Both his use of the Johannine texts (often to the neglect of the narrative of the synoptic gospels) and his insistence on rarely using the name Jesus (instead opting almost everywhere for “Christ”) display Henry's affinity for the power of the triumphant Christ. In a theological world that has been, at least more recently, more on the side of a low and ascending Christology, Henry's work reverses course and re-examines the person of Christ from a different angle.

As a work, *I Am the Truth* has the larger problem of an overly complex and demanding style and vocabulary. Because Henry is so critical of the tradition and of the excesses of rationality, his language has a tendency to become more

privatized and difficult to read. Henry identifies and equates way, truth, and life in a manner this reviewer has never seen, allowing each to breathe through and resonate with the other, not as separate modes for the "I" of Christ's existence, but as the final and declarative self-revelation all Christians are required to believe. In this way, it has similar points of inquiry with Scharlemann's *The Reason of Following*. Scharlemann sets off on a path of a fully postmodern Kierkegaard, rationalizing the "leap of faith," and though Henry is not so bold in this regard, his project is no less complicated, asking the reader to ignore rationality and recognize the power of the authority with which Christ teaches. Henry's book is also deeply involved in the mission of keeping God transcendent from the creation, and at points make statements that God "is not" so that one cannot confuse God with the world. In this way, his work approaches that of Marion's in *God Without Being*.

There is, to this reader's eyes, no book in recent memory that deals so long and thoughtfully with the notion of life on a philosophical level. Henry argues that for too long, philosophers and theologians have equated life with a concept of being or the manifestation of existence. For Henry, however, life becomes that in which we are not only always-already engaged, but also both the origin and the goal of who we are. If Christ, who is the primary "I" is also the way, truth, and life, then our objective is to achieve the "I" that Christ models. In the end, this idea does not seem so startling, and it is Henry himself who reminds us of this, claiming that everything he is writing is there in the text of the Gospels. However, we have lost our way in the world, and he hopes to remind us that it is toward Christ that we are all directed. Henry's book is complicated and difficult. However, once one is immersed in the language and grasps, even for just a moment, the *telos* toward which the reader is directed, one can understand and appreciate the painstaking details that Henry continually repeats, and can enjoy the prophetic voice contained within.

ANTHONY L. MACRI earned his M.A. in Systematic Theology at Fordham University in May of this year. He teaches philosophy, ethics, theology, and religion at John Carroll School in Maryland.

©2003 Anthony L. Macri. All rights reserved.
Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory 4.3 (August 2003)