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PHENOMENOLOGY, HERMENEUTICS AND SCRIPTURE:  
MARION, HENRY, AND FALQUE ON THE PERSON OF  
CHRIST

Scriptural passages make a surprising appearance at many crucial points in the philosophical explications of several contemporary thinkers. All of the current religiously inflected phenomenologists have recourse to it or discuss it as a theme: most prominently Michel Henry in *Paroles du Christ* and Jean-Louis Chrétien in *Under the Gaze of the Bible*, which are both posited as philosophical readings of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> But even when Scripture is not specifically the topic under investigation, examples are often drawn from it in order to illustrate or even prove a point. This is especially true of Jean-Luc Marion who frequently has recourse to biblical passages in order to articulate a phenomenological point: the prodigal son in *God without Being*,<sup>2</sup> the account of the annunciation in his essay on God as the impossible, the calling of St. Matthew in *Being Given*,<sup>3</sup> and the sacrifice of Isaac in *Negative Certainties*.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Emmanuel Falque in his trilogy on the Paschal Triduum often cites Scriptural passages and speaks extensively about the figure of Christ.<sup>5</sup> Yet in most cases there is little justification of this use

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Henry, *Paroles du Christ* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), translated as *Words of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). There are several mistakes in the English translation, which although corrected in the proofs did not make it into the published version. I am therefore using the French original in this essay, abbreviating it as PC. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Sous le regard de la Bible* (Paris: Bayard, 2008), translated by John Marson Dunaway as *Under the Gaze of the Bible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), henceforth cited as GB.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, translated by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), especially 83-102, henceforth cited as GWB.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), henceforth cited as BG.

<sup>4</sup> Marion, *Certitudes négatives* (Paris: Grasset, 2010), 205-211, translated by Stephen E. Lewis as *Negative Certainties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 128-32. An earlier version of this account of sacrifice can be found in *The Reason of the Gift*, translated and edited by Stephen E. Lewis (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 84-89.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Falque, *Le passeur de Gethsémani: Angoisse, souffrance et mort. Lecture existentielle et phénoménologique* (Paris: Cerf, 1999/2004), henceforth cited as PG; *Métamorphose de la finitude: Essai philosophique sur la naissance et la résurrection* (Paris: Cerf, 2004), translated by Georges Hughes as *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), the English translation henceforth cited as MF; *Les noces de l'agneau: Essai philosophique sur le corps et l'eucharistie* (Paris: Cerf, 2011), translated by Georges Hughes as *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eros, the Body, and the Eucharist* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), henceforth cited as WF.

of Scripture in philosophical reflection or even explicit thinking about how such passages are meant to function. This contribution examines three important examples from the work of three different thinkers in order to investigate their use of Scripture more deeply and more consciously. In all three cases the biblical story or figure plays a crucial or even paradigmatic example, the philosophical claims turn on its use in some way.<sup>6</sup> The three examples all center on Christ: Marion's use of the transfiguration on Mount Tabor in his presentation of the saturated phenomenon in *Being Given*, Henry's use of Christ's preaching in the synagogue to Capernaum in the culminating chapter of *Paroles du Christ*, and Emmanuel Falque's analysis of Christ's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane in his *Le passeur de Gethsémane*. In all three cases the biblical examples serve a crucial role in the philosophical claims and thus rely on the stories in important ways. These uses and their import deserve further examination because they are far from straightforward, uncomplicated, or philosophically unproblematic. The final part of the paper employs Ricoeur's more explicitly hermeneutic approach to the Scriptures to raise some critical question about these phenomenological readings in order to urge a more qualified and careful employment of biblical passages in phenomenological investigation, as well as suggesting that such a more explicitly hermeneutic method of handling religious material may help us see a way forward for phenomenology of religion today.

#### I. Jean-Luc Marion: *The Saturated Phenomenon and the Manifestation of Christ*

In Book IV of *Being Given*, Marion articulates in more detail his account of the saturated phenomenon (which differs in important respects from his earlier account in "The Saturated Phenomenon").<sup>7</sup> After outlining the four Kantian modes of phenomenality (quantity, quality, relation, modality) and the four ways in which they are undone or overturned by "saturated" phenomena (impossible to quantify or count, impossible to bear or sustain, without relation or distance, impossible to gaze or aim at) and identifying the particular kinds of saturated phenomena represented by this excess (event, idol, flesh, icon), Marion goes on to speak of what he calls a final possibility, a "maximum point of phenomenality" (BG, 234). This is a second degree of phenomenality, a "doubly" saturated phenomenon, a "paradox of paradoxa," which, unlike the simply saturated phenomena that push experience to the edge of the phenomenal horizon, transcends all horizons and combines all the elements of excess at the same time, namely the phenomenon of revelation. Such a phenomenon brings together the four types of simply saturated

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<sup>6</sup> For ease of comparison I have focused on passages from the Christian Scriptures and ones with less historical precedent. It would be hard to comment responsibly on Marion's use of the sacrifice of Isaac without also investigating at least Kierkegaard's and Derrida's commentary on this passage.

<sup>7</sup> The early essay on the saturated phenomenon can be found in several places; the definitive version is in Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 18-48; henceforth cited as VR.

phenomena by carrying them to a higher level of doubled saturation. Marion asserts that this doubly saturated phenomenon of revelation is still a genuine phenomenon and shows itself within the parameters of phenomenality (i.e., those of extreme givenness) and that it always remains merely a possibility of phenomenology, not a “proof” of the actual occurrence of such an event. Marion insists on this latter point: “If an actual revelation must, can, or could have been given in phenomenal apparition, it could have, can or will be able to do so only by giving itself according to the type of the paradox par excellence... If revelation there must be (and phenomenology has no authority to decide this), then it will assume, assumes, or assumed the figure of paradox of paradoxes, according to an essential law of phenomenality” (BG, 235). Such a phenomenon is the “possibility of impossibility” and hence another variation of the saturated phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> Marion stresses the issue of “possibility” in the strongest terms and claims that this allows him to speak of Christ without venturing into theology: “The manifestation of Christ counts as paradigm of the phenomenon of revelation according to the paradox’s four modes of saturation” while remaining genuinely phenomenological (BG, 236). Christ’s appearance has the character of event as unforeseeable and as pure *fait accompli*, the character of the idol as giving more than the gaze can bear in an excessive visibility that excites terror and bedazzlement, the character of immediacy by annulling all relation and appearing as “absolute,” and the character of icon by appearing as “an irregardable phenomenon” that inverts the gaze and turns the observer into a witness.

In each case, Marion draws on biblical passages to illustrate the excessive nature of the phenomenon of Christ, taking them at face value as describing Christ’s appearance. In all, he provides about 40 biblical references, mostly amounting only to a verse or two, in the space of five pages.<sup>9</sup> Most of them are mere phrases of biblical verses, taken entirely out of their original context. Christ appears out of nowhere, according to John 8:42 and John 17:16, is unforeseeable, according to Mark 13:32 and Matt. 24:36, requires vigilance due to the suddenness, according to Mark 13:33 and Matt. 24:42, and turns all sense of time upside-down (John 1:15 and 8:58). It is in this context that Marion employs, albeit briefly, the account of the transfiguration, which he uses for the second dimension of saturation, that of quality (or the idol). He quotes Mark 9:3, a passage that describes the whiteness and splendor of Christ’s transfigured clothes. He also refers to the voice coming from the cloud, which designates Christ as God’s beloved son, and the reaction of the disciples, who are terrified, fall to the ground, and do not know how to respond. From this he concludes the kind of saturation at stake. Thus, “the unbearable stems from

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<sup>8</sup> After the analysis Marion insists again that all he has done here is to show a phenomenological *possibility* and to articulate the need for describing such a possibility. God’s “transcendence” does not exclude him from phenomenological investigation because it is the possibility and immanence of the phenomenon of revelation that is at stake. (BG, 242-45)

<sup>9</sup> I have changed some of the Scripture references, which were incorrect in the translation (Marion’s references are often off by a verse or two, presumably because he is citing from memory).

nothing less than the pure and simple recognition of Christ as such" and "suspends perception in general, beyond the difference between hearing and sight, because it results from the thorough saturation of the figure of Christ" (BG, 238). Marion moves almost immediately to the resurrection as a culmination of this excess and response of terror or bedazzlement: "since it by definition passes beyond what this world can receive, contain, or embrace, it can let itself be perceived only by terrifying, to the point that this terror sometimes suffices to designate it by denegation" (BG, 238). Both transfiguration and resurrection are employed in order to show how intense levels of saturation and bedazzlement are at work in encounters with the transfigured and risen Christ.

The use of the transfiguration and the other biblical passages here seems qualitatively different from his analysis of Caravaggio's painting of the calling of St. Matthew later in the book or his use of the sacrifice of Isaac in *Negative Certainties*. In those cases, the biblical passages seem to serve primarily as illustrations of what has been established phenomenologically. We can see the invisibility of the call in Caravaggio's portrayal of the scene and we can identify Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac in the story, even if neither of these events took place historically. In contrast, the references to transfiguration and resurrection are more like his (equally problematic) use of the story of the prodigal son in *God without Being*: the biblical passages actually seem to bear the weight of the argument itself. The Pauline passages about non-being as more essential than being or the prodigal son's request of the father's "ousia" actually serve to establish that "being" is not the most important term, they suspend the ontological difference: "biblical revelation offers, in some rare texts, the emergence of a certain indifference of being to Being; being thus makes sport of Being only in outwitting ontological difference" (GWB, 101). The biblical passages allow us to speak from God's point of view and thereby to challenge and suspend the phenomenological assumptions (GWB, 139-158). In a similar way, the account of the transfiguration as a real experience does not merely confirm or illustrate the ways in which the saturated phenomenon supposedly pushes saturation to its limits and transgresses the horizons of quantity, quality, relation, and modality. Rather, it serves as the very source for its description. The concern of this particular section of *Being Given* is to establish the possibility of a phenomenon of revelation as the highest instance of phenomenality and to establish the structures within which such a phenomenon would be given or appear. The fact that Christ is transfigured into a dazzling and overwhelming phenomenon that causes blindness or confusion in the disciples is taken as proof that phenomena of revelation are always saturated in respect to all four categories (quantity, quality, relation, modality). The snippets of biblical verses are adduced precisely to confirm that the phenomenon of Christ gives too much, too intensely, too absolutely and reverses the gaze. The account of the resurrection—without any attempt to distinguish between the conflicting accounts of this event in the four Gospels or to discuss the ways they might function in the context of the passages—is employed in order to confirm that Christ's appearance is bedazzling and overwhelming and to set it up as a paradigm. That all religious phenomena must follow the same structure is simply

assumed. Marion claims explicitly that if a phenomenon of revelation were to appear, if God were to be manifested in some way, such revelation would have to occur according to the parameters of the saturated phenomenon as he has outlined it with these examples of transfiguration and resurrection. Their descriptions of Christ are simply taken at face value. And he suggests repeatedly – although he does not work this out in any detail in this context – that “higher” or more “saturated” phenomena are to serve as patterns for “lower” or “poorer” phenomena (BG, 227).<sup>10</sup> The implication is that the phenomenon of revelation, especially the revelation of Christ, finally serves as the very paradigm for all of phenomenality.

In his more recent work, Marion similarly asserts that the Eucharist is the supremely given gift that serves as the very paradigm for all gifts and hence ultimately for all phenomena.<sup>11</sup> And even when he does not explicitly make these claims himself, they are implied by his account and his methodology, which is deeply marked by the kenotic character of the Christian tradition. The full self-giveness of the phenomenon, the utter self-emptying of the lover on behalf of the beloved, the “abandon” of the devoted – all are phenomenological descriptions of the kenosis at the heart of the Christian tradition. A deep and particular Christian spirituality undergirds Marion’s work as a whole and it is not at all clear that the phenomenological project could stand on its own without it – it would at least lose some of the essential mood or attunement that inspires and permeates his work.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, although Marion strenuously insists that he is only exploring a possibility not proving the historicity of an occurrence, he seems to assume this historicity throughout. The transfiguration of Christ is not treated as possibility – indeed that would make little sense – but the account of its occurrence as depicted in the Scriptures is taken as straight-forward illustration of how a phenomenon of revelation in general appears (even *must* appear). The biblical account is simply taken as description of historical fact or at least as an experience that has really occurred (not, as Marion rightly insists, to “prove” that such an event occurred, but instead – and no less problematically – as paradigm for how religious phenomenality always manifests itself). There is nothing “hypothetical” or “possible” about the description, but it employs the biblical passages as literal description of something that occurred and therefore can serve as guideline for how a phenomenon of revelation (should it occur) ought to appear. There is also no discussion of how the passage might function in its context, why the Gospel writer(s) might have chosen to place it there, what they sought to accomplish with it, and how the

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<sup>10</sup> Anthony Steinbock criticizes this insightfully in his “The Poor Phenomenon: Marion and the Problem of Givenness,” *Words of Life: New Theological Turns in French Phenomenology*, ed. Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 120-31.

<sup>11</sup> For a much fuller explication of this, see the final chapter of my *Degrees of Givenness: On Saturation in Jean-Luc Marion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> I have worked this out more fully in “Marion’s Spirituality of Adoration and Its Implications for a Phenomenology of Religion,” in *Breached Horizons: The Philosophy of Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Antonio Calcagno et al. (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 188-217.

original audience might have heard it (or were intended to hear it).<sup>13</sup> A similar disregard for context and the textual nature of the Scriptures characterizes Michel Henry's account of Christ's words.

## II. Michel Henry: *The Immediacy of Christ's Words in the Discourse in Capernaum*

The final chapter of Henry's *Paroles du Christ* describes Christ's sermons in Nazareth and Capernaum, which causes people to be so angry as to want to kill him.<sup>14</sup> For Henry what Christ says in Capernaum brings together the various aspects of "word" ("Verbe" and "parole") he has outlined throughout the book: the distinction between human words that are distanced from what they seek to convey and take no responsibility for it and divine words of life that are self-manifesting; the difficulty of hearing Christ's words as divine when we are humans who only understand human words; the relationship between Christ's speaking and his being the very Word of God incarnate.<sup>15</sup> Christ is God's word (*Verbe*) who speaks the word of God (*Parole de Dieu*) and in these words (*paroles*) absolute Life is revealed as itself. Henry draws on the biblical texts in order to establish his larger point in *Words of Christ* as a whole: that Christ's words function immediately so that no split intervenes between phenomenon and phenomenality. This is what establishes the "legitimacy" of Christ's words: they are "effective"; they immediately accomplish what they set out to do. We can hear them in our hearts. They are therefore words of life, words that speak directly from God and are entirely self-authenticating. Christ's Word (*Parole du Christ*) is not just a word of life (*une parole de la vie*) in distinction from words of the world (*parole du monde*), but it is the Word itself ("*celle du Verbe... la Parole de la Vie*"), which accomplishes its own "arch-

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<sup>13</sup> In one passage Marion does acknowledge that there are different meanings of Scripture: "Scripture itself traditionally admits four concurrent meanings, something that recent exegesis confirms by according it an unlimited number of different literary genres, each of which in fact offers a new horizon in order to welcome a new aspect of the one and only paradox" (BG, 239). From this he concludes that there is an "infinity of nominative horizons" in naming God (BG, 240). This is a point he has explored in more detail – albeit not in the context of biblical passages – in several places, where he posits an "infinite hermeneutics," especially in regard to the human face and the historical event. See especially chapters two and five of *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*.

<sup>14</sup> The title of the conclusion refers to it only as the sermon in Capernaum, but the earlier incident in Nazareth actually figures more largely in Henry's discussion.

<sup>15</sup> Henry's distinction between these terms is not always entirely clear. Although he employs *verbe* only of Christ as the word of God, he uses *parole* (or *Parole*) for both human and divine speech (when referring to Christ's person as the Word as opposed to the words he speaks – a distinction Henry's project precisely seeks to eliminate – both *Parole* and *Verbe* are generally capitalized). The French term *parole* has the more dynamic sense of the activity of speaking and does not just refer to "word" in the nominal sense. See the brief translator's note to the English translation (the longer introduction laying out some of these issues in more detail was unfortunately removed from the translation after the proofs without my knowledge).

revelation” by engendering life as itself: “Word of Life, self-revelation of Life, Word of Life, Logos of Life [*Parole de Vie, auto-revelation de la Vie, Verbe de Vie, Logos de Vie*]” (PC, 144).

Henry insists that this word need not prove itself but is the very self-revelation of Life as such, an absolute Truth that testifies to itself by being entirely without intermediary. Henry is quite clear that the Scriptures or the human language in which they are expressed or translated are not a matter of mediation. The condition for hearing this word as the Word of Life is one’s own belonging to (and being born into) Life, which allows hearing the word in our hearts and receiving it directly as word of God (PC, 145). To hear the word, Henry says, is “consubstantial with human nature” (PC, 146). The Gospel thus illuminates human nature in unprecedented fashion. The words of the Scriptures—Christ’s words—are not subject to the doubts and problems of human words and the distance that removes Christ’s preaching in first century Galilee from our own time is irrelevant: “Christ’s word, which rang out throughout the villages of the Jewish land, in the synagogues of Nazareth and Capernaum, on the roads of Samaria or under the vaults of the temple in Jerusalem, is the Word of the Word [*la Parole du Verbe*], the Word in which we have been engendered. In it, our life has come to life, each one is revealed to him- or herself as being this Self irreducible to any other—and remaining such forever. This word speaks in us; it speaks to each one of us our very life; we each hear it” (PC, 147). We hear it in our suffering and joy and desire. Our very life bears witness to Christ’s being the Son and Word of God. “We feel and experience life in us as that in which we live, even when we feel and experience that we have not given this life to ourselves” (PC, 149; italicized for emphasis in the original). The entire book has articulated this argument by examining how Christ’s words are fundamentally different from any human words, namely by turning our world upside down and speaking divine words into our human condition, thereby communicating the divine life to us that is at work in him and which we recognize through his words. This account culminates in the biblical story of Christ’s preaching in the synagogues of Nazareth and Capernaum, which serve as conclusion to the book. In Nazareth, Christ reads a passage from Isaiah and claims that it has been fulfilled in him, which leads to a confrontation with the listeners who are appalled by this claim. Henry deduces from this that in hearing Christ’s words we receive the gift of God, which is our very life and bears its fruit in our actions as in the parables of the lamp (that illuminates everything around it) and the seeds (that bear rich fruit when they end up on healthy soil rather than on the path or within thistles). The word of Life regenerates us and enables us to bear its proof or confirmation by our actions (PC, 153). The “phenomenon of religious experience” is indubitable and incontestable because it speaks directly to our hearts and moves them to acts of mercy through a self-forgetting that allows the divine word to act in and through us. Christ himself (via the incarnation) provides the condition for hearing the word by uniting his flesh to ours (PC, 154). This is why Christ says in Capernaum: “I am the bread of life... I am the living bread that has come from heaven: whoever eats this bread will live eternally. The bread that I will give is my flesh given to the world so that it may have life” (PC, 154, citing

John 6:48-51). The words of the Eucharist show this sovereign word of Christ that always effects and accomplishes what it says. It gives us eternal life (PC, 155, referring to John 6:54).

Henry's use of the biblical passages is crucial to his overall point. God's speaking the "Truth" of "Life" directly and without any intermediary is Henry's core phenomenological claim. This is not a minor point, but at the very heart of his discussion. Christ's speech in the synagogue, claiming that the prophecy is fulfilled in him, are cited to show and confirm this central assertion, further supported by the biblical passages that has Christ saying that the "proof" for his words comes in the actions of his followers. Henry cites these and other verses from the Gospels throughout to demonstrate and validate the phenomenological claims about the immediacy of Life. He acknowledges this himself repeatedly, stressing over and over again that Christ's words are unique, that they speak of the phenomenological experience in a way that no other tradition or person does, that Christ communicates the truth directly unlike anyone else, that the Scriptures are utterly unique in their grasp of phenomenological insight, that only Christianity has such words of Life.<sup>16</sup> Christ, Christianity, the Christian Scriptures, the Christian message, Life, God, and Truth, are all consistently conflated as conveniently designating the same thing, namely the immediacy of phenomenological Life. Christ's words, as cited from the biblical text, are taken to be utterly immediate and self-verifying inasmuch as we hear them in our hearts directly and without intermediary. Henry insists forcefully that no mediation, no interpretation, no distance can intervene here and explicitly dismisses the textual character of his sources. The fact that the Scriptures are diverse texts gathered together, written down by particular humans, at least to some extent removed from a direct experience of Jesus and written in a different language, transmitted by Christian communities, translated into multiple languages, and now heard in new contexts that have little continuity with the first-century Jewish communities that presumably were their original authors and audience, is not only taken to be irrelevant but explicitly rejected as false and deceptive. Henry claims that he is not drawing on the biblical language or the biblical text, but only on the living Word (Christ) speaking directly and immediately within them. Paying attention to the history of transmission and the hermeneutic context of the passages would turn them into lies and "words of the world" – they only function precisely because they are not texts but direct divine speech via the divine Word, Christ.<sup>17</sup> Any consideration of hermeneutics would defeat the very point Henry is trying to make because it would introduce mediation and distance.

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<sup>16</sup> I have explored this in more detail in my article "The Truth of Christianity? Michel Henry's Words of Christ," *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 13.1 (2014).

<sup>17</sup> In places he goes so far as to identify biblical scholarship as lying and duplicitous. See the article mentioned in the previous note for a closer examination of this. I have criticized the lack of hermeneutics in Henry more fully in my "Can we hear the voice of God? Michel Henry and the Words of Christ?" in *Words of Life: New Theological Turns in French Phenomenology*, ed. Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 147-157.



Yet, this is deeply problematic. The claim that Christ's words are heard directly in our hearts is simply that, a claim without any further substantiation. Because it is so immediate and cannot be described or interpreted, which would introduce distance and mediation, no phenomenological account of it can be provided. It is entirely singular and cannot be communicated. Henry certainly contends that there is a direct link to the divine life, which flows in all of us, and that we are all united in this life in some manner, but it seems that we simply have to take his word for it, there is really no way to describe or examine it more fully. Henry asserts that its "test" is the efficacy of Christ's words, which makes the blind see, the lame walk, the dumb speak, and radically changes all our relationships. But for this also, we only have the Scriptural accounts and no direct proof or possibility of examination and Henry himself in his account consistently relies precisely on the Gospel texts to make his points. Using what Christ said in Nazareth or Capernaum, we can see that his words are directly at work in us. Yet, what does it mean to see or feel this, to experience Christ's words to be "effective" in us? How can we make the radical turn that enables our salvation and recognition of the divine life that always already flows within us? Henry provides no real answer to these questions.<sup>18</sup> A similar problem emerges in Emmanuel Falque's account of Christ as the paradigm for the human.

### III. Emmanuel Falque: Human Suffering and Christ's Agony in Gethsemane

In general, Falque is considerably more sensitive to his sources as texts and is not anywhere near as dismissive about hermeneutics as Marion and Henry.<sup>19</sup> He has also done extensive work in medieval studies and often draws on Patristic and medieval texts in his phenomenological descriptions.<sup>20</sup> Yet, in the first book of his trilogy on the Paschal Triduum, he repeatedly appeals to Christ's suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane in a way that simply

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<sup>18</sup> Sebbah points out, in highly polemical and somewhat unfair fashion, that Henry's phenomenology is entirely circular and requires already being within it in order to be able to say anything about it. While much of his criticism seems too radical and especially too polemical, this particular critique seems right to me. François-David Sebbah, *Testing the Limits: Derrida, Henry, Levinas, and the Phenomenological Tradition*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> In his *Passer le Rubicon* Falque calls for a new, more explicitly Roman Catholic, kind of hermeneutics that would be a hermeneutics of the body rather than a hermeneutics of the text. This account is not really concerned with how biblical passages ought to be used, but instead argues for a phenomenology based more directly in experience and the "book of the world" rather than passing through language or textuality. *Passer le Rubicon. Philosophie et théologie: Essai sur les frontières* (Paris: Lessius, 2013), translated by Reuben Shank as *Crossing the Rubicon: The Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), especially chapters 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> See especially Falque's early book on St. Bonaventure: *Saint Bonaventure et l'entrée de Dieu en théologie* (Paris: Vrin, 2000) and *Dieu, la chair et l'autre: D'Irénée à Duns Scot* (Paris: PUF, 2008), translated by Chris Hackett as *God, Flesh and the Other* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

assumes it to be a historical event and disregards its textual character. He analyzes Christ's agony in order to articulate an account of suffering and death that would challenge Heidegger's claim that the Christian has no genuine sense of human finitude and does not experience anguish or anxiety in the same fashion because a believer always already trusts in the resurrection and the promise of heaven. Instead, Falque contends, Christ experiences real anguish that is not short-changed by some future hope or promise. Christ shares our agony and finitude fully and to the final extent. This is part of Falque's larger project in which Christ figures as key to examine human life as it is in its full finitude and can become in its phenomenological transformation.<sup>21</sup>

Christ's agony in the garden of Gethsemane is referred to throughout the book and is its central theme. Christ is described as the one who goes before us and serves as example ("passeur" is a guide or ferryman, someone who helps others across a river or impasse). Falque applies Heidegger's analysis of finitude and anxiety or anguish to Christ's experience and argues that Christ experiences the full sense of anguish possible.<sup>22</sup> We often neglect this aspect of the Gethsemane story (PG, 39). Anguish is not connected to sin only, but to finitude and death, both of which Christ shares with us in the fullest sense. Christ also experiences horror and fear in the sight of death (PG, 65). Christ's fear is demonstrated by his request to be spared the cup (PG, 66; cf. Mark 14:36). Christ experiences anguish in the face of his self-annihilation in death and of the horrors of the cross (PG, 68). He experiences both the sadness (*tristesse*) of abandonment and fear (*peur*) of his ordeal (PG, 69). In this way he can become an example for us also. Throughout this discussion Falque makes frequent reference to the biblical text (especially Mark's account) in order to support his analysis. He suggests that it is not physical death that is feared here but rather the unknown beyond death. Christ does not display a Stoic sort of resignation or a heroic assumption of the sacrificial task, ultimately erased in its magnitude by a certainty of the resurrection. Rather, Christ experiences an ordinary death and does so to the fullest (PG, 74). It is a perfectly human death defined by fear and anguish. Yet, at the same time it is also a divine death: Christ opens thereby a new mode of temporality (PG, 76) and a new phenomenological mode.

Throughout his work Falque seeks to begin from the basic condition of the human being, what he calls "l'homme tout court" or "l'homme comme tel" (the human as such). This condition is one of finitude and fleshly existence with all the biological and

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<sup>21</sup> Many of the insights about and critiques of Falque's work were worked out in conversation with Bill Woody. See William C. Woody, "Embracing Finitude: Falque's Phenomenology of the Suffering 'God with Us,'" in *Evil, Fallenness, and Finitude*, eds. Bruce Ellis Benson and B. Keith Putt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 115-33. See also my analysis in "Corporeality, Animality, Bestiality: Emmanuel Falque on Incarnate Flesh," *Analecta Hermeneutica* 4 (2012): 1-16.

<sup>22</sup> Falque is employing the French term *angoisse*, the standard translation into French of Heidegger's term *Angst* (lit. fear), which is usually rendered into English as anxiety. *Angoisse* has a much stronger connotation than anxiety and also means anguish, which is an important element of Falque's analysis here.

chemical/organic elements that implies. We are quite literally flesh and bones and should not deny that reality and the “abyss” of our passions and desires – including the chaos of emotions and inner conflict they often produce in us. None of this is evil or sinful; it is simply human. We must start any analysis with this most basic affirmation of human finitude. And yet, Falque argues that genuine access to this finitude is only through Christ, that Christ shows us what it truly means to be human. Christ is the paradigm for the human being. In him we are all patterned, united to each other, and ultimately assumed into the divine life, which is a genuinely phenomenological life. Thus although Falque affirms finitude and organicity to be the basic human condition, at times he also seems to imply that in order to become genuinely human (and move from animality to true humanity), we must assume a different kind of existence, namely a phenomenological one. He insists most strongly that this is not about some other reality or after-life, but that it is about a fuller, qualitatively different living of *this* life. But if that is so, what does it ultimately mean to be genuinely human? Is it the finite animality that is our most genuine humanity or is it the phenomenologically imbued humanity we receive from Christ when we reject a descent into bestiality and seek to be united with him and to share in the divine life via eucharistic participation? Here Falque not only frequently seems to slide between the two options as genuine definitions of the human, but also appears to require a stance of faith in Christ and make assumptions about how Christ is human and what that means for Christ. He seems to assume as self-evident that we have access to Christ’s experience and that we can simply take the Scriptural accounts at face value for a description of this experience. Yet that seems to disregard their character as *texts* entirely; it is as hermeneutically problematic as Marion’s and Henry’s analysis.

In some ways the three uses of the Scriptures are actually quite different from one another. Henry seems to have developed his phenomenological conclusions first and merely employs the Scriptural texts as evidence or illustration of his prior phenomenological insights. Here the problem lies more in his strong insistence that the Scriptures give us complete and unmediated access to the divine life. Henry is not trying to articulate a phenomenology of religion or to describe religious experience per se, he is instead seeking to explicate his phenomenological account of life and the flesh via using biblical texts that he claims uniquely encapsulate and express absolute phenomenality. Marion, conversely, seems to have come to his theological convictions first and employs phenomenology to articulate these insights or provide philosophical justification for them. While the phenomenology of givenness is certainly not just about phenomena of religion, it does find its highest expression in such phenomena, which are taken as the pinnacle of phenomenality and a central accomplishment of the phenomenology of givenness is precisely to have opened up a new path of access to such phenomena, to make it possible to think them again from within philosophy. The direction and thrust of the argument, then, is diametrically opposed in these two thinkers. Falque, at least in principle, distinguishes more clearly between “philosophical” and “theological” aspects of his

work (often in the titles of sections), but then goes on to meld them even more fully than the other two. Indeed, his whole project is to show the ways in which phenomenology and theology can mutually enlighten and enrich each other—in both directions.<sup>23</sup> Despite these methodological differences, however, all three cite biblical passages with ease, without much context, and with little regard for traditions of interpretation. And all three take the passages to give self-evidently proof of phenomenological experience. Finally, all three imply that it is possible to have direct access to Christ and Christ's experience without the intermediary of the Christian community or any acknowledgment that the source for anything we know about Christ are the *texts* of the Christian Scriptures.

#### IV. Paul Ricoeur: For a Hermeneutically Sensitive Use of the Scriptures in Philosophy

Should any use of the Christian (or Jewish) Scriptures, then, be banned in philosophy? Can reading or examining the Bible or other religious texts give us any sort of philosophical insight? Surely, using a biblical story as an example or illustration in phenomenology is not per se problematic—other cultural sources such as paintings or poetry are used frequently. It becomes a problem only if such use is not self-reflective and does not do the necessary work of contextualizing the example. One cannot simply assume to have direct access to Christ's phenomenological experience.<sup>24</sup> At least some sort of argument has to be made for that. And to employ Christ then as the paradigmatic human who gives us fundamental insight into our own condition requires some further work. It imports far too many theological assumptions that cannot function that self-evidently in philosophy. There is simply too much slippage here. How, then, could a use of Scripture or religious texts more broadly be exercised more responsibly?

Paul Ricoeur is far more careful in articulating the ways philosophy can draw on or make use of biblical texts. He thinks deeply about how faith is expressed in the texts used by a community and what the relation between this faith-expression and the text might be.<sup>25</sup> The biblical texts and the ways in which they are used in worship and preaching do tell us something significant about the faith of the communities who originally

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<sup>23</sup> See especially the opening and closing of *God, the Flesh, and the Other*, a methodology Falque also reiterates in most of his other works.

<sup>24</sup> I am not necessarily arguing that none of these accounts are historical or that none of what is reported in Scripture actually happened. But it is surely not self-evident that everything is historical or that its historical character is necessarily the most important element of the text. In either case some sort of evidence or argument has to be provided before one can treat the accounts as such. If they are not meant to be employed in this way, qualifications making this clear need to be added.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 35-47, henceforth cited as FS. See also the essay "Manifestation and Proclamation" (FS, 48-67).

composed them and of the people who use them today. We can examine expressions of faith by looking at the ways in which such faith is articulated in texts and their employment within religious communities. We can also see what sort of literary world is projected by the texts and what it tells us about how the divine is conceived by them.<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur repeatedly speaks about the ways in which the texts name God without making grand claims about what that actually says about God and by paying careful attention to the diversity and polyphony of the texts, which do not necessarily agree in what they say about God.<sup>27</sup> And he generally keeps these kinds of investigations quite separate from his purely philosophical investigations (except for very brief allusions in some very late texts). Ricoeur is always conscious of and explicit about how a particular claim or example functions and highlights its narrative/textual or poetic character whenever required.<sup>28</sup> His biblical hermeneutics in particular, can give us some useful guidance for how to employ biblical texts philosophically. Particularly important for him is the community of reception of the text. In his introduction to *Thinking Biblically*, he repeatedly stresses this communal dimension in order to distinguish a “hermeneutical” from an “exegetical” analysis, associated with the philosopher and the biblical scholar respectively.<sup>29</sup> This suggests that the philosopher ought to be even *more* attentive to the ways in which biblical texts have been read across the tradition than a theologian or biblical scholar. Jean-Louis Chrétien similarly stresses the importance of responsible reading of the biblical texts by pointing to the context in which we read them and the history of transmission.<sup>30</sup> He calls a solitary reading that

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<sup>26</sup> See his essay “Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991/2007), 89-101.

<sup>27</sup> See especially the essay “Naming God” in *Figuring the Sacred* (217-235).

<sup>28</sup> I have examined some of the differences in the “handling” of the boundary between philosophy and theology in Ricoeur, Marion, and Henry in my “Paul Ricoeur and the Relationship between Philosophy and Religion in Contemporary French Phenomenology,” *Etudes Ricoeuriennes/Ricoeur Studies* 3.2 (2012): 7-23.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Ricoeur and André LaCocque, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), henceforth cited as TB.

<sup>30</sup> “But these diverse letters that come down to me today, performing within me a transfusion of meaning like a transfusion of blood, have not been brought to me by an angel in a superhuman language. Their arrival at my address has required a multitude of secretaries, a multitude of copyists and typographers, a multitude of translators, a multitude of porters and mail carriers who are called Israel and the church. And they arrive in a human, finite, definite, natural language. Those who have the means, the capacities, and the time can learn to read in the original Hebrew and Greek, which is important and precious. But that is not necessary in order for me to understand the message that activates and engages me today in these writings. The Christian Bible presupposes in itself, and not by a decision that would be exterior to it, the integral translatability of the message as a message of salvation, since the words of Jesus, with a few rare exceptions are not transmitted to us in the language in which he pronounced them. The original at the heart of the Christian revelation is for us already a translation, at the same that the New Testament translates, in all the senses of the word, the Old, and this constitutes a kind of immense

fails to take into account the history of transmission “idiotic” (in the Greek sense of purely private and particular). Maybe that is what is ultimately missing most in Marion’s, Henry’s, and (to a lesser extent) in Falque’s accounts: an attentiveness to the hermeneutic circle and the plural horizons of understanding that are always essential, even when one is engaged in a phenomenological analysis. Our experience—even that of reading the Scriptures—is always informed by the (often ecclesial and communal) context in which we read or hear the word and by the history of transmission and translation from which we receive it. Genuine understanding even of the *experience* of Scripture must be attentive to its mimetic character (in the sense of Ricoeur’s three-fold mimesis) and of the “poetic” genre of the biblical language (again, in the sense in which Ricoeur speaks of poetic language as opening a world into which we are invited and which has the potential to transform us in all its plurivocity and multivocality). And, as Ricoeur reminds us, “to enter into this circle is to participate at least by way of imagination and sympathy in the act of adhesion by which the historical community recognizes itself as founded and, if we can put it this way, as comprised, in every sense of the word, in and by this particular *body* of texts” (TB, xvii). Admittedly, Ricoeur’s analysis of religious meaning is strongly Protestant in its almost exclusive emphasis on Scripture and needs to be supplemented by a similar analysis of the sacramental and liturgical dimensions of the Christian identity of ecclesial communities, including the ways in which these liturgical dimensions situate and inform their reading of Scripture. Yet, an extraction of Christ’s “experience” from the biblical text—often from isolated passages—without any deliberate and careful examination of the texts’ meanings within their contexts and a clear articulation of how they are meant to function in their philosophical appropriation risks not only disregarding the complexity of the texts but also of making their phenomenological usefulness questionable.<sup>31</sup> The Scriptures contain rich descriptions of religious experiences and the history of appropriation of biblical texts similarly provides a wealth of accounts of the kinds of religious experiences that can be generated or are informed by reading and hearing the Scriptures in a variety of contexts. These enable us to examine the accounts of such experiences carefully for the insight they give us into the

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appeal of air, of breath, and of grace in the infinite movement of translation in each today. To translate is already to interpret, to interpret is again to translate, and it is thus that the unique and divine melody, on a background of abyssal silence, reaches me only with the harmonics and accompaniment of an immense symphonic orchestra of redactors, translators, commentators, in which it is only up to us to introduce our modest piccolo. To read the Bible today is not to decipher all by oneself a score written by the very hand of the composer; it is to allow to come toward me that immense sonorous ocean made of a thousand voices and a thousand instruments and to have the joy of becoming in it a new wavelet” (GB, 3).

<sup>31</sup> This is quite different, for example, in Kevin Hart’s exploration of the “Phenomenology of the Christ” in *Kingdoms of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 139-58. Although I have hesitations about a project investigating “Christ’s phenomenology” or “Jesus as phenomenologist” (144), Hart is much more careful in situating his analysis vis-à-vis biblical criticism and to articulate clearly how he is using the biblical texts.

ways in which religious experience is manifested and reported. The “report” or description of such experience is itself informative and an essential part of the experience. Paying attention to the genres, modes, and characters of such biblical passages and the textual character of the descriptions of religious experiences enriches our understanding of them instead of impoverishing it or distancing us from it in harmful fashion (as Henry consistently suggests). The word can only have real effects in our lives or affect us deeply if we enter within the circle of hearing and transmission and choose to become a part of it. It is not a saturated phenomenon that smacks us unconscious out of nowhere (as one occasionally has the impression in Marion), but instead is experienced in richer and more “saturating” ways when we are as fully as possible attuned to its modes, contexts, character, and claims. Analyzing the ways in which Christ’s experience is described and reported by the biblical authors gives us important insight into what they took this figure and experience to mean and how they intended for it to affect their communities. Entering the circles of understanding already established by previous communities opens us to hearing them and to learning from their experiences, while not obliterating their horizons of understanding. While a complete fusion of these horizons—in Gadamer’s sense of *Horizontverschmelzung*—may be neither possible nor desirable, phenomenological descriptions of religious experience are enriched and enlivened by responsible hermeneutic employment of the biblical texts that does not disassociate them from their contexts or eliminate their textual character.<sup>32</sup>

#### V. Conclusion

How might this help us reassess or speak more fully of the question of religion today? Do Marion, Henry, and Falque have anything to say about this issue or must we simply reject their accounts? In closing I will point very briefly to some possible avenues for exploring the role of religion in the contemporary situation.

Certainly, all three thinkers take themselves to be confronting contemporary problems. Michel Henry’s analysis in *I am the Truth* culminates in a forceful condemnation of the contemporary culture of death promulgated by technology and Christ as the “Living One” is posited as the answer of Life to the secular world’s culture of death. His earlier text *Barbarism* works out more fully how contemporary tele-techno-science is in the process of eliminating art, culture, religion, ethics, and intellectual life more generally and although he does not yet posit Christianity as the

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<sup>32</sup> For one example of such more responsible hermeneutic use, see Richard Kearney’s analysis of religious texts in his *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) and many other places in his work. For an even more explicitly phenomenological analysis of religious texts and the experiences they report, one which is attentive to their textual character and context while eschewing hermeneutic terminology, see Anthony J. Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

solution in this work, he already calls for a new phenomenology of life and the flesh. Similarly, Marion often speaks of his phenomenology of givenness and love as a response to contemporary nihilism and as a way of answering the question of vanity. A new form of Christianity that champions love and the saturated phenomenon is able to confront our nihilistic culture and to give us hope for “the humanity of humans, the naturalness of nature, the justice of the polis, and the truth of knowledge” (VR, 150). Falque also explicitly posits his trilogy as starting from the common contemporary condition of the human as such, from our shared humanity and finitude. Christ opens up a new phenomenological way of being that is an answer to the condition of finitude he shares with us and thereby addresses the meaninglessness of our existence, our anguish in the face of death, and the chaos of our passions and desires. All three thinkers take themselves to be addressing the contemporary situation and to respond to it, in particular to its nihilistic impulses.

Yet, their response would be strengthened if their use of religion or faith as a response to contemporary questions were more explicitly self-reflective about the ways in which religion actually functions in the contemporary world and is expressed by religious people today. A hermeneutically inflected phenomenology indeed seems particularly well suited for confronting the realities of religion today on multiple levels and possibly also for articulating a new approach to philosophy of religion, namely a methodology for depicting and explicating religious experience in its widest sense. It can do so via careful description of how religious communities actually function, of how they are informed by religious sources (often in very complex ways), and of how these sources shape the practices in which they engage together or individually. A hermeneutic phenomenology of religious texts, of individual and communal prayer, of varieties of liturgical rites and practices, of the ways in which meaningful bonds are shaped and maintained by religious communities, may well give us a far more accurate description of how religion actually functions than philosophy of religion has traditionally been able to do in its almost exclusive focus on analysis of the divine. It might also be able to rid itself of some of its Christian bias by paying closer attention to how other religious traditions and groups function. Such phenomenological descriptions must be attentive both to the ways in which religious practices continue to be exercised in more traditional forms and are still deeply meaningful to the believers who participate in them and to the ways in which religion becomes a tool for radically new practices and ways of configuring meaning. This approach must include accounts of how religion has today often moved into the merely private sphere and is practiced more as an individual form of spirituality. Conversely, it must be able to provide accounts of how religion becomes politicized in fundamentalist communities and can serve as an impetus or even justification for prejudice and violence on a global scale. Instead of ignoring such expressions of religion, phenomenology and hermeneutics provide unique tools for describing how religious conviction and adherence function in these contexts, provide particular forms of meaning, and inspire or compel specific sorts of actions. And the phenomenologies outlined by Marion, Henry,



Falque and others may well harbor rich resources here, although they themselves have not taken them in this direction. The saturated phenomenon, for example, may well provide an eminently convincing account of radicalized forms of religion, a description of how a phenomenon is experienced as overwhelming, bedazzling, blinding, and requiring absolute adherence and unquestioned loyalty—devotion that is completely “given over” to the phenomenon. The immediacy of the divine word that requires no interpretation and speaks directly to the heart may well be an accurate description of how God’s word is “heard” in many fundamentalist communities and help us understand why such immediacy calls forth such passionate commitment. Yet, as philosophical description of what religion does and how it shapes believers and functions in the world, the careful hermeneutic methodology advocated and employed by Ricoeur is necessary. Hermeneutics enables us describe experiences and the ways in which they are interpreted by and taken to be normative by religious individuals or communities, it can help depict how specific texts and practices function as meaning-giving within religious frameworks, how traditions become newly appropriated and changed in the process, how religious symbols and narratives—in their varied and plural expressions—function and continue to be re-appropriated in new ways across many types of religious adherence. All these are essential for a deep and nuanced understanding of how religion functions today on personal, social, cultural, and political levels.