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HOW TO DO THINGS WITH WORDS (OF GOD):  
MICHEL HENRY'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION

If we had to state the essence of Michel Henry's work in a single sentence, would we have the audacity to reduce it to the claim that Christianity takes the form of the collection of untruths that have been said about Christ?<sup>1</sup> This is of course an enormous provocation, but it may be a way of interpreting Henry's understanding of the Christian system. Let us begin with a programmatic affirmation of Henry because it will guide us:

It was later on, while reading the texts of the New Testament, that I discovered with some emotion that the propositions these texts dealt with were the same as those to which the internal development of my philosophy had led me - namely 1.) the definition of the Absolute (God) as Life, 2.) the affirmation that the process of life as coming in itself and as an evidence of self necessarily generates in itself an Ipseity in which it experiences itself and thus is revealed to itself - which is its Verb, in such a way that this Verb does not surface at the end of the process but belongs to it as a constituent of its achievement and is thus contemporary to it. 'In the beginning was the Verb.' 3.) that what we call man, that is to say the transcendental Self living in each of us, can only be understood from the immanent process of life, never from the world. For me, the 'theological turn' of contemporary phenomenology is neither a 'deviation' nor a distortion of phenomenology but rather its achievement.<sup>2</sup>

For Henry, Christianity has to be understood as a phenomenological space that allows, in the context of research into new forms of subjectivity, an "archeology of the flesh" since, as he says, "it is interesting to observe that the key words of phenomenology are in many ways those of religion and thus theology."<sup>3</sup> As a result, this historical religion's system provides him with renewed philosophical research on the concepts of "flesh", "subject" and "life," with a heavy epistemological consequence: the conceptual field of philosophy is forced to open up to other formulations than those of the "canonical corpus that

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<sup>1</sup> A part of this contribution is from a lecture given in Glasgow and has been published under the title "The Search for a New Anthropological Paradigm: Michel Henry's reflections on Incarnation," in *Embodiment: Phenomenological, Religious and Deconstructive Views on Living and Dying*, ed. R. Fotiade, D. Jasper, and O. Salazar-Ferrer (London and New York, Routledge, 2014), 9-20.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Henry, *Entretiens* (Arles, Sulliver, 2005), 154.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Henry, "Incarnation," in *Phénoménologie de la vie. Vol 1. De la phénoménologie*. Vol. 1 (Paris, P.U.F., 2003), 165.

is reputedly philosophical and closed off once and for all."<sup>4</sup> Henry's main goal is to question the "how" of the revelation in its absolute immanence and its modes of manifestation and giving, so that "pure appearance," "pure manifestation" and "pure revelation" are terms shared by the work of theology and phenomenology to such an extent that "in a different language," through these transferable concepts, the starting points of these two disciplines are shared objects. And although we cannot further develop this point, he holds that all theology must henceforth be phenomenological. Of course, it is clear that Henry overstepped a boundary of philosophical speech to explore another speech in its own rationality, starting with a corpus considered to be like any other and using only the efforts of phenomenological reason to understand it.

This means that Henry's relationship to religion is neither dogmatic nor sacred, and is not even certain to be theological. But whatever it may be, Henry does not want to "reduce" Christianity to a philosophy, because Christianity is first and foremost understood as a religion, where the main issue at play is the internal link of the union between the individual and the absolute, an essentially affective link that compels actions and practices that actualize this relationship enough to produce a religious ethics. This is because, for philosophy, the specific knowledge of religion expresses and opens up the singular relationship that each living being maintains with Life, since, he thinks, "living one's life as something one receives necessarily implies feeling an infinite respect for oneself. This is already a religion."<sup>5</sup> So, we then see how he brings about a connection between subjectivity, truth, and ipseity, because all truth is then consequently brought onto the level of individual understanding and is felt. This means, therefore, that Henry is more trying to imagine the "making of truth" required by the connection with the "*religio*" rather than truth in the ethical or dogmatic sense, because this "making" essentially allows one to push away and neutralize the dual structure of mundane worldly matters.

As a result, for Henry, Christianity is not monotheistic "in the ordinary sense of the term" because, beyond the affirmation of one God, he states that if this God were life, then the monotheistic affirmation concerns all the more the link between life and the living. This position leads him to make the following affirmation: "Christ is not, at first, the medium between man and God. Christ is foremost the medium between each me and itself, this relationship to the self that allows each self to be a me. This relationship is not an abstract one that is reducible to a formal conceptualization." And this statement begets the following consequence: "Access to each one is only possible through Christ. [...] reaching this me means taking the path of this previous coming in it, of which it is the result."<sup>6</sup> Reading this extract we can understand why, on the one hand, there is a Christologization and

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Henry, "Eux en moi: une phénoménologie," in *Phénoménologie de la vie. Vol. I. De la phénoménologie* (Paris, P.U.F., 2003), 208.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Henry, *Entretiens* (Arles, Sulliver, 2005), 108-109.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Henry, « Le berger et ses brebis », in *Phénoménologie de la vie. Tome IV. Sur l'éthique et la religion* (Paris, P.U.F., 2004), 167.

Christification of life's realities and, on the other hand, there is an understanding of Christ as the original Foundation.

It must also be noted that, for Henry, Christianity provides a non-Greek truth, as it is not satisfied with an "objective and material conception of the body," for which it instead substitutes "the conception of the body which is generated in life and which is a living body." In this way, the relationship that Henry is trying to establish with the "religio" speech carries with it consequences both on an anthropological level and, more fundamentally, relating to the very definition of man, in a transcendental perspective. So Henry sees Christianity as a religious system, having a non-Greek structure, which places the individual at its heart, not, however, as a "variation, as an ideation based on a Platonic model or as some specimen of an Idea, but [as] someone who belongs to life and without whom life could not be life."<sup>7</sup> I will not delve into the Henryan system and the way in which he distances himself from the traditional phenomenological project, one which Henry calls "historical." Let it suffice to state that the equation of "appearance → coming into the light of a world" makes every manifestation ek-static and distracts from the original self, this inner space where life becomes manifest.

This philosophical positioning, which favors a "making seen," has to a large extent led Western philosophy – and Greek philosophy in particular – to an "ontological monism," one that calls for a universal ontology exclusively focused on one sole form of appearance under the apparent modality of exteriority (the main categories being the world, the gaze, distance, ek-stasy, and transcendence). However, Henry responds to this monism with a theory of "phenomenological duplicity," which radically opposes "world" and "life," to raise the forgetfulness of life's phenomenality, and thus bring forward the radical immanence of the living being, which cannot be reduced to its life in the world. Yet it is certainly in Christianity's corpus that Henry, through the opposition of "world" and "life," found a strong illustration and justification of this phenomenological dualism. To respect the finesse of his analysis, let me draw your attention to a sizable quotation:

It is quite remarkable that it is a question of Christ's coming into the world, a coming-into-the-world that signifies in Greek thought a coming-into-the-light, that the worldly concept of light is struck out - this light of the world being reversed and absorbed into its contrary: darkness. [...] The light of the world, which now designate darkness, is contrasted with the 'true light,' which is Christ in his own revelation. A series of crucial implications follows, which it is impossible to misunderstand or obscure. [...] The ground of this series of implications – the equivalence light/truth/world – wavers when, in verse 9 of the prologue, John declares: 'The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.' That this light comes into the world presupposes that the light does not belong to it. Or

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<sup>7</sup> *Fonds d'archives Michel Henry*, University of Louvain, Folio 23534.

else how, belonging to this world, being illuminated in the ekstasis of its 'outside' and being produced at the same time as the latter [...] John shatters any possible equivalence between light and world at a single stroke when he contrasts the light of the world with a true light, a light that at once thrusts the world's light into the shadows and reduces it to darkness. [...] Because the true light is alien to the world's, in fact it is not able to be recognized there, and, more to the point, *it cannot be recognized*. Therefore, this light that is incapable of showing itself in the world's light overrules the world and its own kind of light, turning it into its opposite, darkness. [...] This sudden transformation of the world's light into Darkness when Life is revealed in the Word is described very concisely in verses 4 and 5 of the prologue: 'In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.' This sudden dislocation of the power of worldly light to illuminate, its being changed into darkness when the true light appears, whose essence is Christ's revelation as the self-revelation of absolute Life, is something of which Christ himself speaks: 'I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.' John 12 :46.<sup>8</sup>

This illustration of the religious connection allows Henry to envision the community which cannot therefore be anything but religious "in essence," and to push away all the processes of posturing and hypocrisy that characterize worldly relations; but this illustration also allows him to explain how a living being experiences its "transcendental birth" in the form of an affective intensification of what they have lived. This is indeed because the attachment to the visible ek-static worldliness of the world, the distancing of the pathos from the experience of the subjective body's potentialities, or still the excessive attention paid to the empirical contingencies of the world's objects, all of these private attitudes carry with them a distancing from the world, a forgetfulness of its invisibility. Yet these "pure" experiences of affectivity, like artistic, ethical, or religious experiences, allow this affective revivification and an intensification of the internal nature of subjectivity. As such, this ethics of the "second birth" allows the restoration of the connection between life and each living being, on the level of action instead of those of knowledge or thought, which do not give access to the true life.

At this point I can say that it is obvious that Henry is also looking for an "unexpected and buried" truth, capable of offering something to consider that differs from common truth, or the theoretical truth inherent to scientific discourse. Therefore, the truth of Christianity is a "phenomenologically pure truth," which is not related to that which is revealed, but rather the "fact" and "way" of revealing, that is to say the "pure manifestation" and therefore radical phenomenality, because no force or power is

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003), 86-87.

held to be behind that manifestation. As a result, although, according to Henry, the phenomenological duality of appearing must not be confused with a dualism – which would reduce his philosophy to a vulgar psychologism – there is nonetheless a duality which occurs in the domain of ethics.

Concerning the definition of Life, we can consequently say that Life is a site of power and therefore of praxis, which is of the utmost importance, if we also take into account that Henry sees Christianity as a force, therefore as an action rather than a thought, as salvation does not occur in a way that leaves Christianity a form of Gnosticism. It is thus striking to see how Henry approaches the question of soteriology, notably as informed by Romans 8:19, so that for him it is a uniquely ethical concern, which would entail immense repercussions:

All of creation anxiously awaits this revelation of the Sons of God. It is in this that all creation hangs on man and waits for its salvation from him, such as man is Son and his salvation comes to him through the revelation of his condition, and therefore that of the world in him, inasmuch as the world itself has its essence in sensibility, i.e. life. CF Kandinsky.<sup>9</sup>

Henry affirms also that “Life is the founder of being. The living being is not an entity [*étant*] but what makes the entity exist. God is not one who is, but the living being and it is only as living being and because He is such that we can say that He is”<sup>10</sup> and, secondly, that “we do not know how far life penetrates into nature nor even if there is a nature independent from life.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, for Henry, we must not forget that the world is constituted by praxis, which is the expression of the living sensibility of the subject, who cannot be reduced by a perceptual objectivism, which would only be, to be precise, a view of creation that left out generation. It is in this sense that he rejects, on the one hand, the assimilation of his project into that of gnosticism, and, on the other hand, insists on drawing a strong parallel between it and praxis understood as the world’s reality (in the sense of a “*Lebenswelt*”) which, of course, takes its reality from life.

And of course, it is thus through the notions of “Life” and “filiation” that Henry would be able to assert a principle of radical and fundamental leveling (*égalisation, Nivellierung*), in the sense of an originary, of living beings. It is in this sense that Henry places the ordeal and experience of filiation at the centre of revelation, emphasizing the aspect of absolute immediation that may be lived by one who undergoes such a pure experience of affectivity. As Henry likes to recall:

[I]f you wanted to question the Gospel about the salvation of your soul, then you would not merely, as in Kierkegaard’s ironic remark, have to await the publication of the very last book on the question, you would still have to put everything else aside

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<sup>9</sup> *Fonds d’archives Michel Henry*, University of Louvain, Folio 23718.

<sup>10</sup> *Fonds d’archives Michel Henry*, University of Louvain, Folio 23682.

<sup>11</sup> *Fonds d’archives Michel Henry*, University of Louvain, Folio 23681.

and throw yourself into study, which death would surely interrupt before you could obtain from so many realms of knowledge and exegesis even the first word in an answer to the single question that matters.<sup>12</sup>

The truth of Christianity, therefore, turns on an essential question – but one that is absolutely not reducible to a quest for historical truth – that is to say the question of Christ’s divinity. Yet Henry’s Christ is egocentric, he says “I” and He says an “I” whose absoluteness in terms of predicability is the truth, the way and the life, to such an extent that this predicability carries within himself an ontology, an epistemology and an anthropology. Henry, who never stopped wanting to put subjectivity back at the heart of contemporary ontology, therefore thinks that Christ is not the guardian of a morality or a doctrine, or even a teacher of wisdom or the revealer of a path. This Christ of Henry is a knowledge and a power, so that the kingdom is not a word but a force. However, this force is not like the organic or corporal force, but like that which causes one to move from death to life, an “inconceivable Act,” around which the whole Christian corpus is organized.<sup>13</sup>

In this philosophy, the resurrection of Christ is the central act, which allows us to qualify certain criticisms claiming that Henry supposedly never considered the tragic aspects of Christ’s life. As a result, we can understand that Henry’s relationship to scripture – as the site of revelation and inspiration – is of a radical complexity, because it is phenomenologically radicalized:

If we are talking here of religion, of faith, of theology, we do not do so as religious believers or theologians drawing on the Scripture, but, rather by questioning the truth of the Scripture, instead of basing our thoughts on it. It is called into question and only accepted once it is phenomenologically acceptable. The analysis Word/Scripture = Word of God, for that matter, is firstly a question to which we must reply negatively.<sup>14</sup>

In this way, Henry vehemently discredits a certain relationship with language, since this essential and specific connection between God – who is essence – and Christ – who is the witness to this life and to the life within Him – mean that the saying and the speaking are not so much a question of scripture here, all the more so as he carries out an epistemological operation of hyperbolic and methodological doubt upon them (Christ could be crazy, have delusions of grandeur, or be a self-deceiving mystic caught up in a web of delirium). As a result, Henry completely underestimates the question of the content and *forma* of the Scriptures, as this would make them only a “*logos*,” a kind of almost psychologising reductionism, whereas the Scriptures are to be read as the saying of life, which implies that this is a project which goes against the Greek one! Henry states:

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth*. 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Fonds d’archives Michel Henry*, University of Louvain, Folio 23569.

It is not the corpus of New Testament texts that can offer us access to the Truth, to that absolute Truth of which the corpus speaks. On the contrary, it is Truth and Truth alone that can offer us access to itself and by the same token to that corpus, allowing us to understand the text in which the Truth is deposited and recognise it there.<sup>15</sup>

I recognize that Henry's hyper-transcendentalism also means that he does not set out to look at Christianity as a historical truth, something he does not deny but whose study he leaves to the so-called "historical" sciences, including the sciences of language. According to him, to take this direction would be to regionalize Christianity, to reduce it to an intentional phenomenology, and, of course, to indefinitely postpone the act of faith in life, as he likes to recall by bringing up Kierkegaard. Henry thus distances himself from the general ideas of Biblical hermeneutics – those of Ricœur, for example, who considers the Bible as a "poem" – by using, in contrast, a concept which they do not take into account in this instance, that of the "word of Christ."

I recognize that this conception of life also includes serious consequences for the understanding of the life of living beings and very particularly of the origin of the relationship between the two. Reflecting on Matthew 23:9, he notes:

The impossibility for a living individual, for any man whomsoever to be Father immediately emerges in the following statement: Father in a correct and radical sense means giving life. However, any individual is a living being and is in life, far from being able to give it or being able to give it to himself: as one of the living he depends upon life and only life engenders, none of the living are able to do so. If God is said to be living, it is in a completely different sense, as capable of giving himself life and of giving it, and from giving to being its essence as absolute life.<sup>16</sup>

Naturally, the effect this has obviously leads to an implacable consequence:

The relationship of Filiation is not reversible, unlike human paternity: here each son of a father becomes the father of a son, whereas Jesus comes from David, against chronology. And chronology rules as with biological organisms, one before the other. In transcendental life, Life/living being, this order is broken, reversed. Mark 12: 35 – 37. Negation of biological paternity.<sup>17</sup>

We can therefore see how far Henry's deixis is marked by an overpowering tragedy. And we can see how far reflecting on generation allows Henry to strongly equate the invisible life of God and the invisible essence of man's soul. And this is what

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<sup>15</sup> Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Fonds d'archives Michel Henry*, University of Louvain, Folio 23697.

<sup>17</sup> *Fonds d'archives Michel Henry*, University of Louvain, Folio 23699.

allows Henry to reuse all the language of the image and of creation for the benefit of the transcendental language of filiation. He thus writes explicitly: "'God created man.' Without being heretical, strictly speaking, such a proposition is frankly discordant. It is totally foreign to Christianity (...) If we imagine that man is a bundle of nerves or neuronal we can allow it, but if God = Life and if man is Son, then all creation is out of the question."<sup>18</sup>

And of course, in the same way, filiation cannot be understood analogically, even if he recognizes that this would make the facts and the understanding of Christianity easier. He writes:

Equally the analogy of God and all human fathers collapses, any analogy therefore in Freud's sense; to assume that it would have some empirical psychological significance, in regard to man's metaphysical condition as Son of the Father (God) as human Father (who makes love with the mother), is pure absurdity.<sup>19</sup>

In a concomitant note, he adds even more forcefully:

The idea of Father God as unreal projection of human paternity is one of Freudianism's major stupidities, as Oedipus is the flagrant expression of the naturalism and vulgar objectivism of modern 'thought.'<sup>20</sup>

Henry, therefore, really is a thinker of the transcendental ego and filiation is for him singularly an operation of transcendental reduction, wherein each concept, and above all that of that of image, must be "empty of all phenomenological, ecstatic or worldly signification."<sup>21</sup>

As a conclusion, it is clear that Henry performed a radically subjective reading of Christianity, narrowing it to the "*persona Christi*," to which Henry directs every living being in order to allow them to experience this person through their own subjectivity. And we know how far Henry pushes the idea when he affirms that all flesh that is touched is none other than that of Christ, in a kind of immanence of excess or surplus, it is hard to know what to call it, just as it is hard to know if we should be speaking of immanentism here. Whatever the case may be, Henry is fascinated by this Christianity. With this understanding of Christianity as a "lifestyle," it seems that Henry insists on the importance of the forms of life and the intensification and growth processes that the religious connection can give to the constitution of emotional subjectivity, one that cannot be reduced to that of an empirical individual subjected to the world's laws. And in fact, Michel Henry, with this work on the "religious experience," insofar as it is a radical experience of human freedom, has given a radically immanent understanding of Christianity's internal

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<sup>18</sup> *Fonds d'archives Michel Henry*, University of Louvain, Folio 23780.

<sup>19</sup> *Fonds d'archives Michel Henry*, University of Louvain, Folio 23794.

<sup>20</sup> *Fonds d'archives Michel Henry*, University of Louvain, Folio 23799.

<sup>21</sup> *Fonds d'archives Michel Henry*, University of Louvain, Folio 23824.



objects, all the while favoring the aspect of generation over that of creation, and thus as well that of the *regeneratio* intended to correct the transcendental illusions of the ego. We can also understand why in a "preliminary note" to *Words of Christ* Henry notes: "In the end, just as Christ cannot be reduced to a man, neither can man be reduced to a man."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Fonds d'archives Michel Henry*, University of Louvain, Folio 27651.