Phenomenological Models of Divine Communication

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Abbreviations

BG	Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*
"Dialogue"	Richard Kearney, Jean-Luc Marion, and John P. Manoussakiss, "A Dialogue with Jean-Luc Marion"
GR	Jean-Luc Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*
IE	Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess*
PS	Jean-Luc Marion, "Le Phénomène Saturé"
RB	Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful"
SP	Jean-Luc Marion, "The Saturated Phenomenon"
TM	Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*
Varieties	William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*
WGTB	T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Explaining the American Evangelical Relationship with God*

All Bible quotations taken from the NRSV.

Introduction

It is common to open a work on the topic of religious experience by discussing the breadth and complexity of the subject. This is no surprise: neither the words "religious" nor "experience" can be easily defined, and there is a vast amount of literature on the topic, from disciplines including philosophy, theology, sociology, psychology, neuroscience, and history. However, with at least 600 million people worldwide who, as Pentecostal or charismatic Christians of some kind, give considerable weight to religious experience as part of their religious identity (and that is when we limit our view to Christianity),[1] the imperative to conduct theological research in this area should not be avoided. This paper discusses a particular kind of religious experience which I call divine communication. While an extended definition of this term will be provided below, it will suffice to say for now that this refers to private experiences which, along with an affective character, contain some definite, linguistic, articulable content.

Outline of Thesis

The thesis I am advancing in this study can be broken into three sections.

i) There is an important distinction between revelation and divine communication. While revelation can be understood as God's primary communication to the world through Christ – and all subsequent revelatory experiences can be regarded as participating in Christ's revelatory action – divine communication experiences do not participate in the initial revelation experience in the same way, but are particular, historically concrete events.[2]

ii) A full understanding of divine communication requires a hermeneutics that takes into account the human being in its concrete, historical situation. Whereas revelation is true for all people at all times, the content and impact of divine communication is at least to some degree shaped by the receiver as well as by God.

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[1] Allan Heaton Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[2] Of course, there will be a relationship between revelation and divine communication, and I will explore this issue at various points throughout my thesis.

iii) The most useful model of divine communication is mediality, which shifts the emphasis away from the receiver as either active or passive, and onto the process within which the receiver is located, and by which a truth or command is communicated. On this model, the influence of the receiver's own perspective, prejudices and traditions can be recognised, without submitting to a monopoly of the human subject.

This thesis will be developed across three chapters. Chapter One offers a much fuller definition of divine communication, relying on multiple accounts of religious experience to delineate the scope of the enquiry and offering comparisons with other kinds of religious experience to highlight the distinctiveness of divine communication. This chapter will also serve as an extended introduction, offering a justification of my method of critiquing philosophical theories of divine communication according to written accounts, and reviewing some of the more salient literature in the broader field of religious experience. Chapter Two offers an in-depth engagement with my first key source, Jean-Luc Marion, with particular focus on the notions of saturated phenomena, and the inverted subject. As well as critically engaging with Marion's arguments on their own terms, I will evaluate them against the written accounts of divine communication provided. This discussion will celebrate the explanatory power offered by the notion of saturation, but will identify Marion's reluctance to engage in hermeneutics as a critical weakness in his ability to adequately describe divine communication. Chapter Three will pick up the theme of hermeneutics by engaging with Hans-Georg Gadamer. I will make particular use of Philippe Eberhard's presentation of mediality as the key concept for understanding Gadamer's thought. Interaction between Gadamer's hermeneutics and written accounts of divine communication will illuminate the importance of *Horizontverschmelzung* as a key concept in understanding divine revelation, and I will conclude by returning to Eberhard's discussion of mediality, arguing that a medial understanding of divine communication which emphasises the location of the human within a dynamic process of dialogical relationship is the most promising approach to the phenomenon.

Religious Experience and Divine Communication

As Robert Sharf notes, religious experience is an incredibly broad concept which 'encompasses a vast array of feelings, moods perceptions, dispositions, and states of consciousness.'[3] For some, religious experience is a very broad term, encompassing the whole life of a believer (or even the totality of human experience).[4] For others, it is a highly specific term, encompassing specific states of mystical perception.[5] In order to produce a manageable thesis which can come to some conclusions, the scope of religious experience discussed herein will need to be limited. An initial definition of the terms of my enquiry can be put thus: How can we understand Christian experiences of divine communication, where divine communication is taken to mean an experience which, along with a certain affective quality, contains meaningful, linguistic, articulable content communicated from God to the believer? Before justifying the importance of research into this specific kind of religious experience, we will consider some examples to help establish the extent of our topic. Our examples are taken predominantly from three sources: William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, T. M. Luhrmann's *When God Talks Back*, and the book of Acts. The justification for my use of these sources will be given below.

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[3] Robert H. Sharf, "Experience", in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 95.

[4] Karl Rahner is an obvious example: 'the true grace of the actual experience of transcendence toward the immediacy of God is present not only when and where it is explicitly regarded as grace or (still less) when it is understood as a particular intermittent effect of God, although in reality it is always and everywhere sustained in the mode of an offer by God's self-communication.' Karl Rahner, "Experience of Transcendence from the Standpoint of Catholic Dogmatics", in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XVIII, trans. Edward Quinn (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984), 182–83. See also Karl Rahner, "Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology", in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XVII, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 90–99; and Karl Rahner, "Experience of the Holy Spirit", in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XVIII, 189–210. Also relevant is Mark Wynn's argument regarding the effect of religious conversion on the way the sensual world appears. Rowan Williams offers a pneumatological corrective to a view of the Spirit as primarily the originator of charismatic experience. For Williams, the Spirit is the gift that transforms the whole of Christian life. Mark Wynn, *Renewing the Senses: A Study of the Philosophy and Theology of the Spiritual Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Rowan Williams, "Word and Spirit", in *On Christian Theology* (Malden: Blackwell, 2000), 107–27.

[5] See, for example, *Varieties*; William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); and various examples of religious experience in Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

The experiences we are interested in contain both an affective and a communicative element. They can roughly be defined as private psychological phenomena (an intentionally broad term, intended simply to exclude communicative experiences that result from, for example, the reading of scripture or hearing of a sermon) which occur to individuals. These experiences occur on a continuum (from "I felt X and then I knew that…" to "I heard God say…"), but exclude affective experiences which cannot produce articulable knowledge (for example, the recognition of a presence, certain religious feelings, etc.). Some examples follow.

A) Suddenly there seemed to be a something sweeping into me and inflating my entire being – such a sensation as I had never experienced before. When this experience came, I seemed to be conducted around a large, capacious, well-lighted room. As I walked with my invisible conductor and looked around, a clear thought was coined in my mind. 'They are not here, they are gone.' As soon as the thought was definitely formed in my mind, though no word was spoken, the Holy Spirit impressed me that I was surveying my own soul. Then, for the first time in all my life, did I know that I was cleansed from all sin, and filled with the fullness of God.[6]

B) [I] told God about it […] suddenly the darkness of the night seemed lit up – I felt, realised, knew, that God heard and answered my prayer. Deep happiness came over me.[7]

C) A voice came over me. I did not hear it with my ears, but more as a dream or sort of double think. It said 'Louisa, lay down smoking.'[8]

D) I had not only the feeling part of religion, but I could hear the small, still voice within me. When I took up the pipe to smoke it would be

[6] Varieties, 278.
[7] Ibid., fn. 1.
[8] *Varieties*, 296, fn. 2

released within, ‘It is an idol, a lust; worship the Lord with clean lips.’ So I felt it was not right to smoke.[9]

E) Immediately the word of the Lord came to me, that I must go thither. […] Then was I commanded by the Lord to pull off my shoes… the word of the Lord was like a fire in me. So I put off my shoes and left them with the shepherds; and the poor shepherds trembled, and were astonished… as soon as I was got within the city, the word of the Lord came to me again, saying: Cry, ‘Wo to the bloody city of Lichfield!’ So I went up and down the streets, crying with a loud voice, Wo to the bloody city of Lichfield![10]

F) The very instant I heard my Father’s cry calling unto me, my heart bounded in recognition. I ran, I stretched forth my arms, I cried aloud ‘Here, here I am, my Father.’ Oh happy child, what should I do? ‘Love me,’ answered my God. ‘I do, I do,’ I cried passionately. ‘Come unto me,’ called my Father. ‘I will,’ my heart panted.[11]

G) After this distinct revelation has stood for some little time before my mind, the question seemed to be put, ‘Will you accept it now, to-day?’ I replied, ‘Yes; I will accept it to-day, or I will die in the attempt!’[12]

H) Then what was to me an audible voice said: ‘Are you willing to give up everything to the Lord?’ and question after question kept coming up, to all of which I said: ‘Yes, Lord; yes, Lord!’ until this came: ‘Why do you not accept it now? and I said: ‘I do, Lord.’

I) Then I started to realise that I expected to hear back from God, that I had faith that he would say something to me. A small, still voice sounds vague – but it’s a good description. Kind of like the

[9] *Varieties*, 319.
[10] *Varieties*, 10.
[11] *Varieties*, 79–80.
[12] *Varieties*, 229, fn. 2.

impression words make on a page. It's easy to confuse it with things I'm thinking in my head. But I began to realise that God answers questions you were asking him later on, when you'd be having a conversation with someone and they'd say something, and you'd feel a kind of click in your heart, like that's the answer. […] Sometimes I can feel in it my heart, or spirit, like there's this part of me that feels completed.[13]

J) [Reporting on one of Luhrmann's subjects.] On good days, when she was praying for someone and it was going "well", she was able to speak out loud to her prayer subject the words God gave her for that person…[14]

K) I was downtown on Mission Avenue. I was tired and hungry and late, and I decided to head home. But I really felt like God was saying to me, "You need to walk like a block north and a block over." I was kind of irritated. Why do I need to? I mean, there's no store there, I'm really tired, like I really want to go, but I felt that tugging on my heart so I just went.[15]

L) Could it be that God wanted me to give up food for a while and pray? I opened the door to the idea. "God do you want me to go on a fast?" Immediately the answer rushed into my brain. *Yes, and I want you to withdraw from people for seven days. Starting when you arrive.* […] "Is that really you?" The only answer I got was another quiet voice saying, *The Dawsons are going to ask you to stay with them. Say yes.*[16]

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[13] WGTB, 69.
[14] WGTB, 81.
[15] WGTB, 252.
[16] Loren Cunningham, *Is That Really You God?* (Seattle: YWAM, 1984), 86; quoted in WGTB, 256–57.

M) Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (Acts 8:26)

N) Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” (Acts 9:3-6)

O) Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” (Acts 9:10-16)

P) About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter said, “By no means,

> Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. […] While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." (Acts 10:9-16, 19-20)

Q) While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." (Acts 13:2)

R) One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people." (Acts 18:9-10)

There are various degrees of affectivity in each of these cases, but all of them contain the linguistic communication of some new truth or instruction that the subject could articulate. In some cases, subjects seem to report an audible voice (H, N, P; K clarifies later in the passage that she experienced an externally audible voice). In many others, while God's voice is not audible, the content of the communication is clear and distinct, enough for the subjects to put God's words in quotation marks. This ranges from subtler experiences of a 'still, small voice' (D, I), to stronger senses of God's voice (E, F, J, M, O, Q, R).[17] At the other end of the spectrum, there are vaguer, dreamier senses of God's speech (B, C). Even in these cases, however, the content of the revelation remains clear: specific words can be reported, even quoted. Between these two ends of the spectrum are reports of thoughts that are experienced as being placed in the mind by God (A, L). Although these subjects couch the report in terms of what 'seemed' or was 'felt' to be given, they can still clearly articulate the content of the message (G, K).

[17] Many of these could also be interpreted as externally audible voices, though the reports are unclear.

A comparison with experiences which fall outside the scope of this enquiry will bring further clarity to the intended object of study. First, the above examples are distinct from experiences of a less definite sense of coming to see some inarticulable truth, for example:

> S) [Saint Ignatius] saw in a distinct manner the plan of divine wisdom in the creation of the world.[18]

> T) I can give no account to myself of the truth of which I had acquired a knowledge and faith. All I can say is that in an instant the bandage had fallen from my eyes…[19]

Although something is communicated in these accounts, neither are able to give linguistic articulation to this. Though S reports seeing 'in a distinct manner', it is notable that the metaphor is sight, rather than hearing – the knowledge received is not something that can be articulated through language. Although T claims to acquire knowledge, he insists that 'no account' can be given, indicating the failure of language.[20]

Our examples of divine communication can also be contrasted with examples of religious experience construed as some way of engaging with or understanding the world:

> U) …we must be in absolutely constant relation or mental touch… with that essence of life… which we call God.[21]

Or deeply affective mystical states:

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[18] *Varieties*, 447.
[19] *Varieties*, 249.
[20] Of course, language does play some role in these experiences, since the subjects use language to describe them. However, there is marked difference between these and the earlier examples, which are able to describe the knowledge obtained in clear linguistic terms. Even example B, which would be closest to S and T, can state what it is she came to know – 'that God heard and answered my prayer' – as opposed to S, which describes what *kind* of knowledge was received – 'the plan of divine wisdom' – but does not state in propositional terms what the knowledge was.
[21] *Varieties*, 117.

V) [St Teresa] neither sees, hears, nor understands, so long as she is united with God.[22]

W) I was driving home from grocery shopping in the car, and I stopped at a light, and suddenly for no reason that I could come up with, I was weeping, and I felt a massive and awesome sense of the presence of God in the car with me. It just came, and I had absolutely no control over it… I remember thinking that I was so in love with Jesus at that moment that no one else on the planet could come close. After about twenty minutes of real intensity, the feeling subsided somewhat... I drove home not really ever able to fully express what happened without sounding like I'd taken something illegal.[23]

Both of these undoubtedly involve processes of knowledge and communication, but are distinct from our examples because they do not contain communication from God that can be articulated in language. We must keep in mind Mark Wynn's contention that emotional and affective experiences can bring about understanding, and be wary of divorcing affective and cognitive religious experiences too severely.[24] Clearly, experiences of divine communication also involve the emotional salience embedded in the experience, which perhaps contributes to the understanding itself. Nevertheless, it is still legitimate to limit our enquiry to those cases of religious experience where the communication can be articulated by the subject in terms of *God said "x"*.

What is it specifically about experiences of divine communication that is worthy of research? First, the phenomenon of divine communication is common across different periods of Christian history. A sceptic might question the historicity of this view: as Sharf notes, the category of experience seems to

[22] *Varieties*, 446.
[23] WGTB, 127.
[24] Mark Wynn, *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding: Integrating Perception, Conception and Feeling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

be a modern, Western invention.[25] Equally, in a review of Luhrmann's *When God Talks Back*, Caleb Maskell criticises Luhrmann for presenting a false consensus in American evangelicalism.[26] The American (and global) evangelical experience is diverse, so we should be wary of taking Luhrmann's observations from two churches as typical.[27] This echoes those critics of William James who accuse him of overemphasising private, personal experience to the detriment of communal and sacramental religious life.[28] We should not deny the force of these criticisms and must remain alive to the fact that the experiences considered in this thesis do not tell the whole story of the Christian life. However, recognising the breadth of Christian experience does not mitigate the fact that, for some (perhaps many) Christians, experiences of divine communication *are* an important part of their religious life. It is informative that, alongside her own observations, Luhrmann refers to popular evangelical literature that encourages believers to engage with and hear from God, indicating that this experience has some level of ubiquity – among modern Western Christians, at least.[29] Given this, the opportunity to bring some conceptual clarity to reported experiences of divine communication should be welcomed. Further, even if we take an extreme version of Sharf's position and allow that religious experience is an entirely modern Western concept, the significance of such experiences to many people in the modern world remains a salient point of research. Although the sceptic may contend that my choice of sources is arbitrary, the sheer number and variety of accounts from modern, pre-modern, and Biblical sources mitigates this criticism by revealing the persistence of divine communication experience across several historical and cultural boundaries. For the Christian theologian, the inclusion

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[25] Sharf, "Experience", 98.

[26] Caleb J. D. Maskell, "Coffee With Jesus: An Anthropologist at the Vineyard", review of *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* by T. M. Luhrmann, *Books & Culture*, 2012, http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2012/julaug/coffeewithjesus.html/.

[27] Henri Gooren also criticises Luhrmann for making generalised statements about evangelicals. Henri Gooren, "Is It the Spirit Moving, Or Is It Just That Burrito from Lunch?", review of *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* by T. M. Luhrmann, *Pastoral Psychology* 63, no. 2 (2014): 199, doi: 10.1007/s11089-013-0524-x.

[28] For example, Charles Taylor and Nicholas Lash; see below.

[29] Luhrmann refers to books such as Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*, which has sold over 25 million copies. WGTB, 14.

of New Testament accounts indicates continuity between modern reports and Biblical witness.

Second, divine communication experiences demand research because of their normativity for religious believers. Religious experiences regularly inform the belief and behaviour of their subjects and can stand as key events in the lives of individuals. A useful parallel might be offered with Biblical hermeneutics. For many Christians (and certainly most Protestants), the Bible is in some sense normative. Scholars engage in Biblical hermeneutics in order to understand how people apply the Bible practically and doxastically to their lives, and to offer suggestions regarding appropriate application. Since religious experiences can possess a similar normative force, it follows that it is valid to attempt to develop a hermeneutics of religious experience. There are obvious differences between Biblical hermeneutics and a hermeneutics of religious experience. Biblical hermeneutics operates with a commonly accessible written source material, and a relatively stable canon. By contrast, despite extensive literature on the topic, religious experiences remain essentially private affairs. Nevertheless, the significant practical and doxastic influence of religious experiences indicates that it is worth offering some reflections on the hermeneutic process. Relating the above to our specific examples of divine communication experiences, we can see that they often directly influence action (C, D, E, G, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q), alter beliefs (A, B, F, I, N, P, R), and bring about a change in an individual's worldview and life trajectory (F, G, H, N). From the perspective of Christian theology, if people are already making practical and doxastic decisions on the basis of divine communication, it suggests the need for theological reflection. The secular inquirer will note the growing influence of experience-based religion on social society and politics (e.g., the influence of evangelicalism in American politics). While my paper cannot hope to fully explain this phenomenon, it can offer a useful insight into a certain kind of experience that has motivational force for these groups.

Scope of this Paper

Even if we limit religious experience to what I define as divine communication, we are left with a substantial topic for research. For this

reason, the scope of my thesis will be limited to a) philosophical accounts of divine communication, and b) evaluations of those accounts based on written records of divine communication.

a) I will consider the philosophical resources provided by phenomenology, and engage extensively with the work of Jean-Luc Marion and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Phenomenology has the unique advantage of being able to bracket questions of authenticity or orthodoxy (which may emerge from more physio-psychological or theological approaches) and sidestep debates around reductionism, leaving the phenomenon of divine communication as it occurs to the subject in full view. Phenomenology can provide a means of integration between religious experiences and more common human experience and, by engaging with accounts of the former, can explore some of the limits of philosophical categories of experience. This can perhaps provide some resources that might illuminate a continuity between linguistic and non-linguistic experience, and so offer a corrective to a certain linguistic bias in philosophy. Divine communication is particularly well placed as an object of this enquiry, since it sits on the boundary between articulable and non-articulable experience.

b) I will evaluate philosophical theories using written accounts of divine communication. Although reports and memories are an imperfect guide to subjective experience (illustrated by phenomena such as false memories), a reported or remembered experience still has a degree of reality for the subject. Memories and interpretations are bound up with experiences themselves, which operate as if veracious within the subject's motivational psychology. My approach can ground theories of divine communication in the actual experience of religious believers without reducing experience to interpretation or vice versa. It might be responded that theological truth is given through revelation alone and that human experience is an inappropriate measure of revealed truth.[30] There is an important insight here, and any theological conclusions I reach, particularly regarding the content of revelation, will be tentative at best. However, while this is not the place to enter into the debate

[30] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromily and T. F. Torrance, first paperback edition, vol. I, part 1, trans. G. W. Bromily, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 114-17.

around the position of experience in theological practice, we may insist that there is value for theology in studying the human experience of religion, apart from more speculative considerations. My approach will offer insight into the relationship between theory and practice and offer a lens through which the human pole of the divine-human relationship (which we call religion) can be understood. It would be helpful to regard my approach as a negative method which draws out the limitations of Marion's and Gadamer's approaches. Hence the methodology I will pursue is to critically examine the thought of Marion and Gadamer in turn, before evaluating their ideas in light of our examples.

It is finally worth noting that I hope, through this paper, to be able to integrate philosophical and theological accounts of experience. For the Christian philosopher, there is value in being able to relate religious experience to wider conceptions of human experience. Without some relationship between these two kinds of experience, we encounter the problem of extrinsicism: if religious experience is so different to common human experience, why should it have any meaningful import on my life? Of course, we should expect to eventually encounter the mystery of God, and our philosophical categories are bound to fail in the face of the divine; it is my suggestion that – with regard to divine communication at least – a philosophical approach can take us much further than first appears.

Literature Review

William James and the Common Core

While not the first to discuss reports of religious experience and its explanations,[31] William James's 1902 *The Varieties of Religious Experience* marks a critical moment in the academic discourse regarding religious experience. Primarily a psychologist, James offers a naturalistic interpretation of religious experience which is nevertheless open to the existence of a "more".[32] There is a certain explanatory ambivalence in James's approach to the "more". In an initial formulation, he explains it in terms of the '*hither* side

[31] As demonstrated at length in Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*.
[32] *Varieties*, 557.

of the subconscious continuation of conscious life',[33] thereby engaging in contemporary psychological discussions of the subconscious.[34] However, James is taken by the 'over-beliefs' of various mystical traditions and, while hesitant to endorse any particular tradition, recognises the possibility of a single spiritual reality that underpins religious experience.[35] This ambivalence reflects James's pragmatist philosophy: 'God is real since he produces real effects'.[36] Such a formulation leaves open the question of the ontological status of God. James's pragmatism resists the derivation of any particular theological belief from religious experience, yet James is sympathetic to the 'very considerable over-belief' of spirituality.[37] James thus occupies a significant position in the tradition that identifies a common core to all mystical and religious experience. Although the idea of a basic mystical experience which is subsequently coloured through culturally informed interpretation is now somewhat outdated, it has been influential in the history of religious studies.

Despite offering an insightful and far-reaching study of religious experience, there are weaknesses in James's account that are worth noting. As Charles Taylor argues, James operates with a strong sense of individualism, according to which institutions, sacraments, and communal life are relegated to the periphery of religion.[38] James himself defends this approach, arguing that there is a 'great partition' between individual and institutional religion, and clearly prefers the individual side, a 'relation which goes direct from heart to heart, from soul to soul, between man and his maker'.[39] Hence James defines religion as 'the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine'.[40] The problem here is not the decision to select the individual over the institution as the object of study, but rather the uncritical acceptance of such a dualism. James presents a view of religion proper as concerned with

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[33] *Varieties*, 556–57 (original emphasis).
[34] Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 291–95.
[35] *Varieties*, 557–59.
[36] *Varieties*, 561.
[37] *Varieties*, 562.
[38] Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 23–26.
[39] *Varieties*, 34–35.
[40] Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 36.

the individual feeling of the human, with institutions and doctrines as an unnecessary, even deadening, abstraction. The notion that collective life might be intrinsic to religion is lost to James. In Taylor's words, '[w]hat doesn't figure here is the way one might call the religious connection, the link between the believer and the divine (or whatever), may be essentially mediated by corporate, ecclesial life'.[41] This is problematic, especially since many of the accounts James uses as evidence come from believers who do experience their religion as part of a corporate experience.

In a similar vein to Taylor, Nicholas Lash criticises James's dichotomy of personal and public experience. As well as making a similar argument to Taylor regarding to the inseparability of religious ritual and personal experience,[42] Lash locates the personal experiences of religious "geniuses" within a broader public experience:

> Without the traditions, the cultural and linguistic institutions, of the people of Israel, Jesus could not have had his "personal" experience of the mystery he called Father, in the way that he had it, nor could Paul have had *his* "personal" experience of the mystery of Christ.[43]

Although we will later question the dominance of language and culture in the formation of religious experiences, Lash is surely correct that there is an interaction between the private and public experiences of religion, and that James's attempt to understand the former while ignoring the latter is misguided. Lash also challenges a dualism in the *Varieties* between feeling and theory. James privileges feeling over theory, since it is only the former that can access the true core of religion. Lash argues that this distinction has its root in the dualism previously discussed between public and private religion, and presents James as submissive to the Cartesian ego.[44] James's radical empiricism implies that fundamental knowledge of something is only possible through feeling; Lash argues that this limits the kinds of objects available for

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[41] Ibid., 23.
[42] Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986), 54.
[43] Ibid., 57 (original emphasis).
[44] Ibid., 60–64.

human experience.[45] The upshot is that, on Lash's view, James's public-private dichotomy of feeling, coupled with his interest in the religious "genius", 'leaves the vast majority of mankind as far from God's presence as ever'.[46] We may want to soften Lash's conclusion slightly. James's interest in the religious "genius" can overshadow a greater ubiquity of mystical experience than might be apparent from an initial reading of the *Varieties*. The work itself contains a vast quantity of accounts of religious experience and, while the religious "genius" features prominently, there are many accounts of the experiences of common people. As various studies indicate,[47] religious experience is not the preserve of the "genius" and is not uncommon among the "ordinary" lay population. Lash's concern that James's approach will limit communion with the divine to a select few seems to go too far. However, Lash's more general concerns about the nature of God and the kind of divine contact possible are sound. Since religious experience is a matter of feeling, which is contrasted with theory, mystical experience is 'quite literally a matter of provision of a sixth sense'.[48] This raises both epistemological and ontological questions. Epistemologically, it limits knowledge of God to what can be experienced through feeling. Ontologically, for God to be known, he must be accessible to creaturely sensation, and so falls on the side of creature, rather than Creator. This is compounded by James's pragmatism, which grants reality only to that which produces real effects. Hence the only reality granted to God is the kind which locates him within a natural causal network.

Robert Sharf takes issue with the concept of experience in religious studies. In an essay criticising the concept of experience in the thought of James and other perennialists, Sharf questions the status of the originary event purported in religious experience and argues that it is a mistake to approach religious experience as if there is something behind the representation of the event.[49] For Sharf, there is 'no way to tease apart the representation of a religious experience from the experience itself', and he concludes that 'the term

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[45] Ibid., 64–70.
[46] Ibid., 73.
[47] In particular, Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions,* and WGTB indicate a ubiquity of religious experience across time and culture.
[48] Lash, *Easter in Ordinary*, 76.
[49] Sharf, "Experience".

experience cannot make ostensible a *something that exists in the world*'.[50] This directly challenges James and any others who would seek to identify a common core of religious experience that offers access to truth, which Sharf regards as no more than a chimera. Sharf stops short of denying subjective experience entirely and recognises the epistemological certainty that religious experience can offer one who undergoes such an experience. However, this certainty comes at the cost of the possibility of discursive meaning; if there is to be religious studies, its object must be something that is available to the public world of discourse. Sharf rules out experience as such an object.[51]

Explaining Experience

The above discussion illustrates one particular version of the perennialist position, where some common core is recognised across various religious experiences. As Taves notes, many perennialists (though not all – and James occupies an ambiguous position on this point) resist the explanation of religious experience on nonreligious terms, regarding such approaches as reductionist.[52] An important voice in the debate surrounding reductionism is that of Wayne Proudfoot. In his 1985 work *Religious Experience*, Proudfoot distinguishes between 'descriptive reduction', which describes a subject's experience in terms foreign to the subject, and 'explanatory reduction', which offers an explanation of an experience that the subject might not accept. [53] The former should be avoided, since the phenomenological description of the experience falls under the jurisdiction of the subject; to describe it in nonreligious terms misidentifies the experience. The latter is acceptable, since explanations are in the public realm of discourse. While the subject's own explanation ought to be taken seriously, it should be evaluated alongside competing explanations (from, for example, economics, sociology, psychology, and the like). Proudfoot's distinction is a useful one: If I say that "I had an experience of Jesus", then that is the experience I had, regardless of

[50] Ibid., 113 (original emphasis).
[51] Ibid., 113–14.
[52] Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 3–5.
[53] Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1985), 196–97. This distinction is drawn from Roderick Chisholm's more general distinction between epistemic and comparative uses of the term 'appears'. Ibid., 170.

the truth of my religious conviction or the witness of anyone else. However, if I say that "my experience was caused by the action of the Holy Spirit", I offer my explanation into public discourse and should expect others to offer alternative explanations. An expert in sociology, psychology or neuroscience, for example, may be better placed to offer an explanation of my experience than I am. Of course, there is not complete parity between common sense experience (the realm of Chisholm's distinction) and an experience deemed to be religious. Unlike other experiences, a religious experience often claims explanatory power for a spiritual or religious agent; this kind of agent is not open to the same kind of epistemic verification as a common sense experience, so there will remain an element of doubt. Nevertheless, Proudfoot's work goes a long way to show that religious experience is not a special category of experience immune to explanations from other disciplines. We may criticise Proudfoot on one point. For Proudfoot, a religious experience is determined by 'the concepts and beliefs under which the subject identifies his or her experience' and so a good explanation will 'explain why the subject employs those particular beliefs and concepts'.[54] Hence, 'it seems more likely that the supposedly natural and spontaneous experiences are derived from beliefs and practices' and (in Christian settings) 'reflect the concept of God as Creator and Governor derived from the Hebrew Bible and the traditions it formed.'[55] Although language and concepts undoubtedly play a formative role in some experiences, Proudfoot places too much explanatory weight on this linguistic and conceptual determinism. A review of more recent scholarship will develop this point.

Current scholarship on religious experience increasingly seeks to incorporate religion and religious experience into a wider complex of anthropological understanding. A deeper insight into the complexity of the human being has challenged any account of religious experience which relies on linguistic determinacy or a *sui generis* model of religion. Jason Blum argues against a fundamentally linguistic or cognitive view of consciousness. Using findings in neuroscience and psychology, Blum presses against the principality of

[54] Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 223.
[55] Ibid., 224–25.

language, in favour of a constitutively emotional and affective consciousness.[56] These findings suggest that 'basic affective states of consciousness may occur with little or no involvement of the neocortex [the area of the brain associated with cognitive function]', which Blum takes as evidence for the claim that 'nondiscursive dimensions of experience cannot be assumed to be ultimately conceptual in nature'.[57] Strikingly, research into "tip-of-the-tongue" phenomena, where a word or name cannot be remembered and feels just out of reach, indicates the possibility of experiences which are meaningful but non-linguistic. The capacity of the human brain to have an ineffable mystical experience which is still meaningful would thus militate against Proudfoot's entirely linguistic-conceptual explanation of religious experience.

Donovan Schaefer's *Religious Affects* adopts a comparable approach to religion, using the resources of affect theory as a corrective to what he regards as fallacious approaches to religion based on rationality or language.[58] This opens the way to understanding religion as it operates in the affectively engaged animal human, situating the religious instinct deeper in the evolutionary history of humanity and blurring the boundary between human and nonhuman animal religion. This process makes it 'clear that the reduction of religion to belief, ideology, or a discursive illusion obscures the multitude of subterranean ways that religion flows through our bodies.'[59] Although we will be concerned with experiences that exhibit an element of linguisticality, Schaefer's insights into the affectivity of religion will provide a check against any linguistic bias in my thesis.

In *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, Ann Taves argues for a reframing of religious experience as 'experiences deemed religious'.[60] Taves resists a *sui generis* approach to religious experience in favour of an ascriptive model. This militates against the view that religious experiences have an inherent and

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[56] Jason N. Blum, "The Science of Consciousness and Mystical Experience: An Argument for Radical Empiricism", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 1 (March 2014): 150–73, doi: 10.1093/jaarel/lft073.
[57] Ibid., 160.
[58] Donovan Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2015).
[59] Ibid., 209.
[60] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 14.

incomparable religious or mystical quality about them,[61] instead discussing the process by which certain experiences are ascribed specialness by an individual or community.[62] Accordingly, Taves presents a much more complex relationship between experiences deemed religious and various psychological approaches. In particular, there is a complex interplay between the deeper, inchoate aspects of psychological processing and the higher, more linguistically and conceptually shaped processes.[63] The capacity for influence to run in both directions ('top-down' and 'bottom-up') can help account for the variegation in accounts of religious experience; on these grounds, Taves argues for the abandonment of 'the constructivist axiom that beliefs and attitudes are always formative of, rather than consequent to, experience in any very strong sense'.[64]

Experience as Evidence

A final approach to religious experience comes from analytic approaches to the philosophy of religion. Richard Swinburne and William Alston use religious experience as evidence or justification for belief in God. Swinburne dedicates a chapter to religious experience in his book, *The Existence of God*.[65] He uses his principles of credulity and testimony to argue that cases of religious experience offer good evidence in favour of God's existence. Briefly put, the principle of credulity states that, 'if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that *x* is present, then probably *x* is present';[66] the principle of testimony states that '[o]ther things being equal, we think that what others tells us that they perceived, probably happened.'[67] Together, these two principles lead to the conclusion that, if I have an experience of God, then God is probably present, and that if someone tells me that they have had an experience of God, then they probably did. Swinburne develops these two principles over the course of the chapter to add qualifications and respond to criticisms, and concludes that

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[61] See, for example, *Varieties*; Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950).
[62] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 17–22.
[63] Ibid., 56–87.
[64] Ibid., 93.
[65] Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 244–76.
[66] Ibid., 254.
[67] Ibid., 271.

neither religious experiences nor testimonies of such experiences fall foul of any limiting factors to the two principles.[68] Alston's *Perceiving God* adopts the slightly more modest approach of attempting to establish the epistemic justification for belief in God on the basis of religious experience. Alston is clear that his is not an argument for God's existence; rather, he argues that, for the subject of a religious experience, religious belief is justified.[69] Alston differentiates himself from Swinburne by developing a theory of epistemic justification based on socially embedded practice. Christian mystical experience can form epistemically justifiable beliefs because 'it is a socially established doxastic practice that is not demonstrably unreliable or otherwise disqualified for rational acceptance.'[70] This has two advantages over Swinburne. First, by seeking to establish epistemic justification rather than proof for God's existence, Alston sets himself a more modest goal: establishing that a belief is not irrational is a simpler task than demonstrating its veracity. Second, by grounding epistemic justification in socially established doxastic practices, Alston offers a stronger rationale for accepting the belief-forming processes involved in mystical perception than Swinburne's appeal to the *prima facie* reasonableness of his two principles.

There is no need to pursue Swinburne's or Alston's arguments fully here, save to engage with one criticism of both. Swinburne would limit the principle of credulity if one could show that 'the apparent perception was made under conditions or by a subject found in the past to be unreliable.'[71] A perception made after having taken LSD, for example, would not be afforded the principle of credulity, since LSD is known to cause unreliable sense perceptions. The problem for Swinburne is that, if it can be shown that human experience in general has been shown in the past to be unreliable when it comes to the attribution of agency, then any religious experience that involves an external anomalous agentive spirit or being ought to be cast into doubt. When Taves notes that some theorists observe 'the widespread cross-cultural tendency to

[68] Swinburne ultimately concludes that the reliability of a religious experience depends on the background probably of God's existence. There is nothing intrinsic to religious experiences that would discount them as reliable sources of evidence. Ibid., 274.
[69] Alston, *Perceiving God*, 1–3.
[70] Ibid., 194–95.
[71] Ibid., 260.

postulate the existence of anomalous… agents', she draws attention to theories which would indicate that humans are not so reliable subjects when it comes to agency perception as Swinburne supposes. Indeed, some theorists argue that humans have 'a basic tendency to overattribute agency, particularly in situations of ambiguity.' It makes intuitive sense that humans with such a tendency would have an evolutionary advantage that would protect them from predation.[72] This would undermine the application of the principle of credulity to reports of religious experience. A similar move can be made against Alston, who insists that forming beliefs on the basis of mystical experience is practically rational only if 'it is not discredited by being shown to be unreliable or deficient in some other way that will cancel its prima facie rationality'.[73] A human tendency to overattribute agency threatens to operate as this demonstration of unreliability. While we have not engaged with Swinburne or Alston at sufficient length to consider either of their arguments refuted, the preceding discussion indicates the challenges involved in making metaphysical or epistemological claims based on religious experience.

[72] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 43–44.
[73] Ibid., 194.

Marion

The preceding chapter indicates that there are a class of religious experiences, which I am calling divine communication, in which the communication of some articulable content is a constitutive part of the experience. With due consideration to the limitation of linguistic-conceptual explanations of religious experience, there remains a class of experiences for which both affectivity and linguisticality remain key features. As we progress with this discussion, we will hold the standard of the combined importance of affect and language in these experiences. As suggested above, phenomenology suggests itself as an appropriate methodology, since it is uniquely able to sidestep the debate around reductionism and allow the phenomena of experience to present themselves as they are. Jean-Luc Marion's notion of 'saturated phenomena' offers just such a model, and it is for this reason that he is our first point of depth engagement. We will consider first Marion's description of saturated phenomena, followed by the inverted subject.

Saturated Phenomena

Adequation and Excess

The most obvious entry point for Marion's thought to our discussion of religious experience is saturated phenomena. In his essay, 'The Saturated Phenomenon',[74] Marion's stated intention is to give an account of the possibility of a 'religious phenomenon' that neither objectivises it (and thereby strips its religious significance), nor maintains the phenomenon's religious character at the expense of rendering it impossible to describe objectively.[75] He addresses this question with reference to the conditions for the possibility of something appearing to us, developed by Kant and Husserl.

Although Marion regards Husserl's 'principle of all principles'[76] as a necessary corrective to Kant, whose metaphysical system limits the phenomenon's possibility of appearing according to subjective conditions of experience, he criticises the principle for imposing its own limitations through the

[74] SP, 176–216.
[75] SP, 176.
[76] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosphy: First Book*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), §24.

conditioning of the horizon and reduction to the I. This conditioning limits in advance the kind of phenomena which may appear, to the detriment of religious phenomena.[77] Marion's intention is to open up the possibility of an intuition that is not restricted by the conditions of experience, thus making room for religious phenomena.

> Can we not envisage a type of phenomenon that would reverse the condition of a horizon (by surpassing it, instead of being inscribed within it) and that would reverse the reduction (by leading the *I* back to itself, instead of being reduced to the *I*)?[78]

Marion exploits his reading of Husserl, according to which phenomena manifest a dualism between the intention of the thought and the intuition of the appearing phenomenon. [79] Husserl uses the concept 'adequation' to describe the 'highest manifestation' of a phenomenon which occurs when intuition and intention are equal – when the concept of the object intended perfectly matches the intuition given.[80] This is an ideal for phenomena which is rarely actually achieved: '[i]ntention (almost) always (partially) lacks intuition'. For example, the intended concept of a cube includes it having six sides, yet it is rare (if not impossible) for all six to be simultaneously presented to the intuition. Indeed, as Marion points out, the only cases where intuition can live up to intention concern objects which require very limited (or no) intuition to appear, such as objects of formal logic or mathematics.[81] Marion's contention is that the privilege granted to these kinds of phenomena is misplaced. Whereas previous philosophers regarded this achievement of adequation as a model by which to judge other (inferior) phenomena, Marion argues that the adequation achieved in this circumstance is negative, the result of the 'poverty of their *donation*'.[82] Marion regards the limiting of intuition to mere adequation with intention as a 'strange modesty' on the part of Husserl,[83] and suggests the possibility that

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[77] SP, 182–183.
[78] SP, 184.
[79] SP, 185.
[80] SP, 186.
[81] SP, 188.
[82] SP, 189 (original emphasis).
[83] BG, 190.

intuition might exceed intention.[84] This opens the possibility for saturated phenomena.[85]

Having established the possibility of unconditioned and irreducible phenomena, Marion proceeds by describing what they might be like. Unlike common phenomena which lack intuition, these phenomena would be 'saturated with intuition'.[86] Whereas in common appearances, the concept of an object exceeds its intuition, when a saturated phenomenon appears, its intuition is in excess of any concept that the subject may bring to bear. Using a photographic metaphor, the saturated phenomenon renders the concept 'overexposed – invisible, not by lack of light, but by excess of light'.[87]

> The intuition of the phenomenon is nevertheless seen, but as blurred by the too narrow aperture, the too short lens, the too cramped frame, that receives it – or rather that cannot receive it as such.[88]

The phenomenon is not seen as an object – it cannot be, since there is too much intuition for it to be conceptualised by the subject. Since there is no concept or object under which this intuition can be understood or defined, it is simply given as pure and infinite intuition. The primary feature of Marion's account of saturated phenomena is the excess of intuition, and it is to this basic definition that we may return if certain elements of Marion's delineation of the different modes of saturation prove troublesome. As we turn to Marion's inversion of Kant's table of categories to describe saturated phenomena, we must remember at the outset that any assessment of Marion's use of the categories remains distinct from his basic claim that there could possibly be a

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[84] BG, 196–97.

[85] Shane Mackinlay criticises Marion for misreading Husserl, arguing that, in the *Logical Investigations*, adequation relates to intentional acts of perception: excess intuition when viewing a cube would entail the impossible perception of more than six sides. Although Marion does seem to have misread Husserl on this point, there remains the possibility of an experience, not initiated by an intentional act, which has too much intuition to be conceptualised. Hence, a better definition of excess would concern the failure to find a concept that can completely contain the given. Shane Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess: Jean-Luc Marion, Saturated Phenomena, and Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 72–73.

[86] SP, 195.

[87] SP, 197.

[88] BG, 215.

phenomenon which exhibits such an excess of intuition that it resists any possible conceptualisation.[89]

Saturating the Categories

A saturated phenomenon can be *invisable*, unbearable, absolute and *irregardable* – according to the Kantian categories of quantity, quality, relation and modality.[90] We will briefly discuss Marion's approach to these four categories and his paradigmatic examples of their saturation, following parallel discussions in "The Saturated Phenomenon" and *Being Given*.

First, according to quantity, saturated phenomena are *invisable*.[91] On Kant's understanding, common phenomena are anticipated as an aggregate of their finite number of parts. Synthesis is possible because the object is antecedently perceived as a totality, allowing the discrete object to be recognised as such. With saturated phenomena this is not possible, since the excessive intuition is too much to be quantified by the subject. This renders the given saturated phenomenon immeasurable and thus precludes the subject's ability to apply synthesis.[92] Marion's paradigm of an *invisable* phenomenon is the event. In an event such as a battle, there is an excessive quantity of intuition, such that no individual can see the entire phenomenon. There are an infinite number of viewpoints, none of which can fully contain all the others. Consequently, an infinite number of horizons would be needed to fully comprehend the event and successfully apply synthesis; since this is impossible, anyone attempting to objectivise the event is caught up in an 'endless hermeneutic'.[93]

Second, according to quality, saturated phenomena are unbearable. An unbearable phenomenon is blinding, so intense that it bedazzles the gaze.[94] In *Being Given*, Marion emphasises that this bedazzlement is not the result of the

[89] So Mackinlay's argument that Marion's use of the categories remains 'problematic and unconvincing' will not necessarily undermine the wider project of saturated phenomena. Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess*, 217.
[90] SP, 198.
[91] Kosky often leaves the French word *invisable* untranslated. The sense of this word comes from *viser* and refers to that which cannot be aimed at or intended. BG, 363, en. 41.
[92] SP, 198–99; BG, 199–202.
[93] BG, 228–29.
[94] SP, 200.

quantity of intuition but of its intensity:[95] the light is so bright that it 'blind[s]', 'bedazzles' and even 'burns' the gaze.[96] This is equated with the weight of glory, so intense that no human can bear it.[97] The gaze must turn away, overcome by the excess an intensity of intuition.[98] The paradigm of unbearability is the idol (more specifically, the painting). The idol always gives more than can be understood or conceptualised by the subject. Hence '[i]t is never enough to have seen it just once to have really seen it'. We are always drawn to see it again, since the 'unbearable bedazzlement' of each experience always exceeds our ability to conceptualise it.[99]

Third, according to relation, saturated phenomena are absolute. For Kant, experience must be a unity; given phenomena must respect the unity of experience by respecting the common network of inherence, causality, and community. As the setting within which phenomena must appear, these analogies of experiences place limits on what appears. Marion rejects Kant's claim and suggests the possibility that there could be some appearances which do not conform to the analogies of inherence, causality, and community.[100] These would be saturated phenomena, and are described as absolute because they have no 'common measure' with the phenomena of ordinary experience.[101] The truly absolute phenomenon bedazzles each and every horizon and is intolerable to any combination of horizons.[102] In this case, the phenomenon does not depend at all on any conditions for experience and is thus 'unconditioned'.[103] Marion's paradigm for absolute phenomena is flesh. He adopts an approach according to which all affection is primarily auto-affection of the flesh: any affection from the external world is first and foremost an awareness by the flesh of itself. The auto-affection of flesh exhibits two key features: 'immediacy' and 'mineness'. The intuition of auto-affection is so immediately present that it blocks (and so exceeds) any

[95] BG, 204.
[96] BG, 203.
[97] SP, 200.
[98] SP, 201.
[99] BG, 229–30.
[100] SP, 203–4.
[101] SP, 205.
[102] BG, 209–11; SP 206–7.
[103] SP, 207–8.

intentionality that might arise; the feeling that my flesh is mine is given to me prior to any engagement with the world, so occurs before and beyond any possible horizon.[104]

Fourth, according to modality, the saturated phenomenon is '*irregardable*'[105] (translated as 'incapable of being looked at' by Kosky).[106] Kant's category of modality is distinct from the others in that it concerns the relation of a phenomenon to a knowing subject. Hence the final mode of saturation moves from discussing the excess present in a phenomenon to the excess experienced in its relation to the subject. For Kant, there must be an agreement between an appearance and its subject, such that the appearance submits itself to the conditions of the possibility of experience for the subject. The I thus has a transcendental role, upon which the appearances of phenomena depend.[107] Marion imagines a reversal of modality, whereby the appearing phenomenon does not agree with or correspond to the transcendental I. For common phenomena, this agreement failure would cause a failure to appear. However, in the case of saturated phenomena, the disagreement is caused by an excess of intuition; the I cannot play its transcendental role because there is *too much* for it to constitute. Yet this does not mean that nothing appears; rather, the excessive appearance given cannot be objectivised.[108] Marion explains this by differentiating between the verbs 'to see' [*voir*] and 'to gaze' [*regarder*], playing on the relation of the latter to the verb *garder*, which means to keep or to hold.[109] Marion considers *regarder* to have a much stronger sense than *voir*. Whereas the latter refers to the arrival of visibility to intuition, the former indicates a level of control on the side of the subject. We hold something in our gaze, exerting control and transforming it into an object, 'visible within the limits of a concept'.[110] Hence, when a saturated phenomenon which fails to agree with the transcendental I appears, it is not gazed upon, but is simply seen. 'It imposes itself on sight with such an excess of intuition that it can no

[104] BG, 231–32.
[105] PS, 119.
[106] SP, 208.
[107] SP, 208–9; BG, 212–13.
[108] SP, 209; BG, 213.
[109] Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess*, 161.
[110] BG, 214.

longer be reduced to the conditions of experiences (objecthood), therefore to the I that sets them.'[111] Marion describes this reversal of modality as 'counterexperience'.[112] A reversal occurs such that the I no longer constitutes the phenomenon but is constituted by it. The I is no longer dominant and anterior, but engulfed by the 'intuitive flood' of the saturated phenomenon. At this point Marion suggests an alternative vocabulary: the I becomes a me; 'the constituting subject becomes the constituted witness'. The saturated phenomenon is thus *irregardable*, and cannot be reduced to the subject.[113] Marion's paradigm of the *irregardable* experience is the icon. The icon offers nothing to be looked at but instead 'exerts its own gaze' on the I which 'renounce[s] its transcendental function'. When confronted with an *irregardable* phenomenon, there is nothing for the I to look at, and so the icon inverts intentionality and imposes its own gaze upon the viewer.[114] Further, the icon allows the invisible to appear. Because the icon has no visibility of its own, it can point beyond itself to its referent; the religious icon points beyond itself to the saint to whom it refers.

Mackinlay rightly argues that Marion gives no reason for presenting the inversion of intentionality as characteristic of phenomena saturated according to modality.[115] Although the idea of a phenomenon that resists being held by the gaze is coherent, the transition from this to the idea that such a phenomenon becomes active and regards the beholder is not obvious. It is not clear why the dethroning of the primacy of the subject in terms of modality necessitates the enthroning of the seen phenomenon. If Marion is right, this would leave the *irregardable* phenomenon as simply defined by its inability to be looked at, which as Mackinlay points out, fails to distinguish it from the other three modes of saturation. Given this, I am inclined to agree with Mackinlay that saturation according to modality should be understood not as a separate kind of saturation, but rather a different aspect of saturation in general.[116] This would also be consistent with our earlier recognition that

[111] BG, 215.
[112] SP, 210.
[113] SP, 211.
[114] BG, 232–33.
[115] Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess*, 163.
[116] Ibid., 162–63.

modality, and its saturation, is distinguished from the other three categories by referring to how a phenomenon is known by a subject, rather than to the phenomenon itself.

Finally, Marion considers the possibility of a phenomenon which exhibits all four kinds of saturation together: revelation. Revelation 'saturates phenomenality to the second degree, by saturation of saturation'.[117] Without casting judgement on the actual occurrence of revelation or its 'ontic status', Marion argues that *if* revelation is to occur, it will appear according to this figure of saturation.[118] Marion resists the notion that he is presenting his own 'transcendental conditions of possibility' of revelation; his intention is rather to free the possibility of revelation by removing any antecedent conditions for its possibility.[119] Nevertheless, the sense here is that revelation cannot occur unless it appears according to this double saturation. This is certainly not a transcendental argument insofar as placing subject-oriented limits on what can appear to a subject, yet Marion is clearly limiting *ex-ante* what can and cannot be regarded as revelation. We might wonder whether Marion is imposing precisely the kind of transcendental limitations on revelation that Kant does on ordinary phenomena.

Since the phenomenon of revelation is most obviously relevant to our purposes, we will spend some time discussing it, considering first what Marion considers to be revelation *par excellence*: Christ.[120] In his earlier work, Marion insists that he does not assume any answer to the theological veracity of Christianity; rather, he maintains that, since the phenomenon of revelation is a *possibility*, then the example of Christ offers a paradigm of what revelation would be like according to the four kinds of saturation. In some of his later work, Marion is much more theological in his approach to revelation and is closer to claiming that Christ really is the true revelation of God, rather than the paradigm of a possibility. Nevertheless, even the later Marion would want to maintain that the possibility of the phenomenon of revelation can be established without any commitment to its actuality. Using evidence from the

[117] BG, 235.
[118] BG, 235–36.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.

gospels and church tradition, Marion presents his case that Christ is *invisable*, unbearable, absolute, and *irregardable*.[121] We need not recapitulate Marion's entire argument here, but rather note Mackinlay's criticism of Marion's use of Christ as the paradigm for revelation, which contends that Marion makes an eclectic use of scripture which does not reflect the overall concerns of the gospels. This results in Marion citing 'only incidents where Christ's appearance is in some way dazzling or overwhelming' and ignoring occasions where people respond with confusion or misunderstanding.[122] This is a fair criticism, and Marion's concern to present Christ as the paradigmatic example of revelation according to the four modes of saturation seems to influence his application of scripture. However, these criticisms are overcome when Marion returns to the subject of Christ as saturated phenomenon in his 2014 Gifford Lectures. Here, Marion does not refer to the four modes of saturation, but focuses on Christ as icon. He presents a double anamorphosis, or double reverse intentionality, first of Christ, and then the believer. Marion describes Christ's revelation of the Father as anamorphosis; in fact, 'no one accomplishes the anamorphosis as perfectly as Christ in his absolute self-referral without remainder, as Son, to the Father's point of view.'[123] In a kenotic move, Christ relinquishes his own viewpoint and takes that of the Father, acting in accordance with his will (John 5:30; 6:38) and directing the gaze beyond himself towards the Father (John 8:19; 14:9). The anamorphosis of the believer (e.g. Peter's confession) is a second reverse intentionality, specifically taking 'the Father's point of view on the Son' who himself, as an icon, points back to the Father.[124] Marion's later position, which emphasises the excess of intuition which accompanies Christ's appearance and the iconic function that this plays, circumvents Mackinlay's criticisms. By focusing Christ's kenosis, the discussion moves away from saturated phenomena *qua* the four modes of saturation and towards an understanding of saturation centred on excess and icon. This move is legitimised by Mackinlay's own recognition that Marion's fourth mode of saturation may be better understood as a different aspect of saturation, rather than a different kind. Instead of trying

[121] BG, 236–41
[122] Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess*, 186.
[123] GR, 86.
[124] GR, 87.

to apply each mode of saturation to the scriptural accounts of Christ, it is sufficient that the iconic revelation of Christ encompasses infinitely more than can be regarded by any individual and refers beyond Christ himself to the revelation of the Father.

Relating Saturated Phenomena to Religious Experience

If Christ is Marion's paradigm, how do our examples of divine communication compare? Does Marion's notion of saturated phenomena help us to better understand these revelatory experiences? It is worth noting at the outset that Marion does not necessarily have these kinds of discrete experiences in mind when he describes revelation. Clearly Christ is the paradigm; we might suggest occasions of experiencing Christ as well, perhaps through the sacraments. Nevertheless, it will be instructive to assess how far our examples accord with Marion's four modes of saturation. This will first suggest the usefulness of Marion's thought to achieving a theological understanding of divine communication experience, and second indicate the relationship between these and other forms of revelatory experience.

George Fox's experience (example E in Chapter One) was *invisable* in that it could not be foreseen; it came 'immediately', and then 'as soon as I got into the city'. It was unbearable, prompting Fox to remove his shoes, and the shepherds he encountered 'trembled'. It was *irregardable*: Fox describes his experience as the word of God which 'came to me', thrust upon him. He is 'commanded by the Lord' to act and puts his shoes back on only when he 'felt the freedom from the Lord so to do'. It was less obviously absolute. Although Fox does not fully understand the command until after the event, he does understand what he has been commanded to do, which is described conceptually through language. Added to the fact that the event comes specifically to Fox alone, we cannot say that the event saturates all possible horizons.[125] It is thus difficult to conclude that Fox's experience can be said to display Marion's four modes of saturation.

We can consider another account, described by Edwin Starbuck (A). This is certainly *invisable*. It is unforeseen, coming 'suddenly', a sensation 'never

[125] *Varieties*, 10–11.

experienced before'. It is also *irregardable*; the one undergoing the experience is 'conducted around' and has thoughts impressed on the mind by the Holy Spirit. The sense is of little autonomous control on the part of the subject, and we might describe her new self-perspective, of being 'cleansed of all sin' and 'filled with the fullness of God', as anamorphosis, whereby she takes on the intentionality of God. Again, the absolute nature of this experience is more complicated. Because our examples of divine communication all concern discrete revelatory events, the sense of multiple saturated horizons that we could recognise in a battle will necessarily be limited. Nevertheless, the report indicates that this experience is something 'never experienced before', offering a realisation recognised 'for the first time in all my life', suggesting an event which surpassed any previous horizon of the subject. The experience is not unbearable. Rather than being overexposed or bedazzling, the room is 'well-lighted' and the subject can easily look around the room and recognise different things. The 'conductor' (not explicitly stated as being divine, but who can certainly be assumed to be at least nonhuman) is 'invisible', yet without indication that they are unbearably so.

Kate, recorded in Luhrmann (I), has an experience which is *irregardable*. God takes the initiative in regard to what questions he answers and when. Further, Kate mentions that she 'feels completed', indicating a constitutive role for the phenomenon in this experience. However, the other three modes of saturation are much harder to identify. The experience is not *invisable* but somehow foreseen since Kate is trying to 'hear back from God'. It is not unbearable, but rather a 'small, still voice', and 'like the impression words make on a page', indicating a very gentle engagement with God. It is not absolute. Not only do we have the problems of our earlier examples in that the experience occurs to only one person, but what Kate hears from God is 'easy to confuse with things I'm thinking in my head'. There is so much similarity between this phenomenon and the rest of Kate's experience that she easily confuses the two; this ease of continuity with the rest of experience suggests that the voice she hears from God is in accord with the analogies of experience.

Some examples of religious experiences do fulfil Marion's four modes of saturation. First, example W from Luhrmann. This is *invisable*; it is not

anticipated, but happens 'suddenly for no reason'. It is unbearable. The experience is so overpowering that it causes the subject to weep, and she describes a 'massive awesome sense of the presence of God'. The absolute character of the experience is indicated by the inability of the subject to 'fully express' the experience, suggesting the inability of the experience to be inscribed in any horizon. There is nothing in the normal unity of experience that can provide an analogy to which the experience could be related (in fact, the only analogy given is with the effects of hallucinogenic drugs, which also interrupt the unity of experience). Finally, the experience is *irregardable*. The subject loses her autonomy to the phenomenon which 'just came', leaving her with 'absolutely no control'; intentionality is reversed until the feeling subsides, again at the initiative of the phenomenon rather than the subject.

James too describes experiences which seem to fulfil Marion's four modes of saturation. Especially notable is his discussion of the experiences of St Teresa. These are *invisable*, since '[s]he neither sees, hears, nor understands, so long as she is united with God'.[126] Her union with God is so extensive that she is unable to use any mental or intellectual faculties that would allow her to see or recognise what is occurring by objectivising what she sees. Teresa's experiences are unbearable, vividly described as 'something too extreme to be borne, and as verging on bodily pain.' The absolute character of these experiences is evident in their indescribability, 'too subtle and piercing a delight for ordinary words to denote'. There is nothing analogous in human experience that would aid a useful description of what occurs. They are finally *irregardable,* exhibiting the inversion of intentionality. This is evident in descriptions of truth being 'impressed upon her' or something that the 'Lord made me comprehend'; in both of these examples, Teresa is the object of action rather than the subject. Further, Teresa describes an experience in which she perceives the immanence of God as a 'view so subtile [sic] and delicate that the understanding cannot grasp it'.[127] This recalls Marion's distinction between *regarder* and *voir*, according to which a saturated phenomenon can only be seen [*voir*] passively and not actively gazed upon [*regarder*].

[126] *Varieties*, 446.
[127] *Varieties*, 446–49.

What is interesting is that the examples of divine communication, which present communicated linguistic content along with an affective element, do not exhibit all four of Marion's modes of saturation. Conversely, the more mystical experiences which do not communicate linguistic content are able to exhibit these four modes. This might not be a surprise. Linguistic communication requires some kind of conceptual understanding, without which the words used in the communication cannot be meaningfully applied to any object the receiver could know. It is the nature of a saturated phenomenon, and especially of fourfold saturation, to resist conceptualisation. The basis of Marion's description of saturation is the recognition that intuition exceeds intention; there is so much given that no concept can ever be applied successfully. If some linguistic content is to be communicated, then at least one of the categories would need to remain unsaturated to allow the communication of a concept. This concurs with Marion's own approach to revelation in his Gifford Lectures. 'First and above all, God reveals only Himself, and the economy of salvation.' The revelation of God is strictly not to impart knowledge but to reveal God himself. Hence Marion describes revelation as having 'clearly non-epistemological intentions' which instead aim 'to manifest God in person'.[128] It is epistemological knowledge that would require conceptual communication; relational knowledge is not predicated in concepts.[129] Marion expresses this most clearly in a rhetorical question:

> Does God reveal himself in order to make himself known and take a place in our rationality? Or does he instead reveal himself in order to allow himself to be loved, and to love us?[130]

We might want to question what seems to be a false dichotomy here, between the communication of love and knowledge. Even so, there is a distinction between revelation experiences that communicate epistemological knowledge and those that do not. Our examples of divine communication are not strictly

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[128] GR, 27.
[129] We could also refer at this point to Marion's discussion of love in Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). See also Robyn Horner's comments on this theme in Marion's thought. Robyn Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-Logical Introduction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 135–46.
[130] GR, 29.

limited to God revealing himself personally in order that we might love him. Rather, the scope of our enquiry is precisely those cases where there is additional, linguistically communicated, epistemic content. Is there any way in which Marion's thought might help us with these examples?

One answer might simply be no: To be consistent with Marion's thought, we must conclude that our examples are either not experiences of God or should not be called revelation. There would be some support for this conclusion. As well as the evidence from Marion's Gifford Lectures, which describe revelation as being personal rather than epistemological, *Being Given* suggests that a phenomenon that is not saturated according to all four modes should not be called revelation. We noted above that Marion does limit what can and cannot be regarded as revelation in *Being Given*, arguing that '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*'.[131] Although we were right to recognise that this does not amount to a transcendental condition of possibility for revelation, it does seem that the notion of a revelation which does not subscribe to the model of fourfold saturation must be ruled out. This is not to deny that these experiences are phenomena at all, which would run against the spirit of Marion's project of letting phenomena appear as they show themselves and without presumption.[132] However, it does seem that Marion would have us recognise these cases as phenomena but deny them the status of revelation.

This illuminates two important considerations. The first regards the judgement of revelatory phenomena. Marion is careful throughout his phenomenological work to establish that he is doing philosophy rather than theology, that he is not adjudicating on whether revelation actually occurs, but establishing it as a possibility and sketching hypothetically what it would be like.[133] This makes it difficult for him to assess historical claims of revelatory experience, since the question of whether revelation actually occurs is beyond legitimate

[131] BG, 235 (my emphasis).
[132] BG, 8–10.
[133] Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion*, 132.

phenomenological enquiry. This seems at odds with the conclusion that any revelatory phenomenon would have to be given in terms of fourfold saturation. If Marion intends to return the initiative to the phenomena themselves then it ought to follow that any phenomenon that seems to give itself *as revelation* must be regarded as revelation, even if it is not given according to fourfold saturation. Any limitation on what counts as revelation leads to an onto-theological judgement. Marion might reply that he is not limiting what counts as revelation, but simply describing what is possible: non-saturated revelation is not actively excluded, but simply impossible. This response only works until an example of a non-saturated revelatory phenomenon is offered. At this point, Marion must make a judgement: to maintain that such a phenomenon is impossible comes at the cost of rejecting what someone reports to have appeared. This relates to a difficulty identified by Horner in relation to the debate between Marion and Dominique Janicaud about whether Marion's phenomenology is unwarrantedly theological.[134] Horner argues that if phenomenology is to include the possibility of revelation, then it ought to be able to identify examples of revelatory phenomena. But the identification of such examples immediately raises the question of whether they are indeed revelatory. Positing examples necessarily shifts the discussion from the phenomenological possibility of revelation in general to the onto-theological judgement of this particular example, since to qualify as a revelatory phenomenon, there must be a revelation *of* something.[135] For Horner, this demonstrates the strength of Janicaud's critique: Marion's discussion of revelation exceeds the limits of phenomenology and strays into theology. Marion cannot discuss the phenomenological possibility of revelation without simultaneously making an onto-theological judgement; the act of calling a phenomenon revelation immediately grants it the status of truth disclosure. Horner argues that the actual problem here is not making the judgement itself, but passing off that judgement as 'pure description' and not recognising that describing a phenomenon as revelation is itself an implicit judgement. Hence,

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[134] See Dominique Janicaud, "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology", trans. Bernard G. Prusak in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*, by Dominique Janicaud et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 50–69.

[135] Robyn Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 157.

a legitimate option for Marion would be to take a step back from the question of whether a particular phenomenon is revelatory and instead ask how we would deal with a phenomenon *if* it were to overrun intuition with excess.[136] This avoids the issue of judgement and allows Marion's work to remain focused on the possibility of revelation. This would successfully respond to Janicaud by keeping Marion squarely within the hypothetical realm. However, this success comes at the cost of being able to use Marion's thought to describe and understand particular religious experiences. Faced with a concrete example, Marion must choose between silence and theology.

We then reach the theological question of the status of revelation. In *Givenness and Revelation*, a much more explicitly theological work, Marion argues that 'God reveals only Himself, and the economy of salvation.'[137] Hence Christ is the revelation *par excellence*: Christ, as the perfect representation and communication of the Father, must be our paradigm for God's revelation of himself. It might seem that, given this, any other phenomenon that claims to be revelatory is false. Nothing short of Christ can express the fullness of God, and hence is idolatry. It would help to consider here Marion's distinction between the idol and the icon. Both can saturate intuition, yet an idol, dazzling the gaze, remains subject to the horizon of the beholder and reflects intuition back on itself.[138] By contrast, the icon, though also saturating the gaze, points beyond itself as a 'visible reference to the invisible'.[139] An icon may be honoured, since honour of the icon refers the worshipper beyond itself to God. Christ is revelation *par excellence* because he operates as an icon.

> Christ appears as the visible icon of the Father, who remains invisible, because the believer, in looking at his face *as it should be* looked at, not only sees Jesus, the son of the carpenter of Nazareth, *as* the Christ, but also the Christ *as* the Son, and thus, finally the Son *as* the Father.[140]

If Christ is the revelation *par excellence* then other revelatory phenomena can be judged according to his iconic mode. A phenomenon is revelatory if, in its

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[136] Ibid., 159–60.
[137] GR, 27.
[138] Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift*, 62–63.
[139] Ibid., 63.
[140] GR, 103 (original emphasis).

saturation, it refers the beholder beyond itself to the invisible God. Hence the eucharist is revelation and not idolatry, because it refers the believer beyond the elements themselves to Christ, and hence to the Father. St Teresa's orisons are iconic, since they direct her attention beyond herself towards contemplation of and union with God. Luhrmann's example of saturation (W) is also iconic: 'I remember thinking that I was so in love with Jesus at that moment that no one else on the planet could come close'.[141] The experience does not reflect the subject back towards herself, but directs her beyond the experience and towards the love of Jesus. We earlier concluded that the icon ought to be regarded as a different aspect of saturation in general; it is thus legitimate for us to emphasise the iconic function of revelation when describing its saturation in general.

Obviously, we have made a theological move here, which Janicaud would oppose. Yet it is precisely this move which allows us to begin to come to a theological understanding of religious experiences using Christ as our paradigm of revelation. How can we extend Christ's iconicism to reach an understanding of religious experiences without setting up these experiences as idols? Shane Mackinlay suggests an answer in his response to Marion's essay "They Recognised Him; and He Became Invisible to Them",[142] a discussion of the relationship between faith and revelation in the account of Jesus' appearance on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Mackinlay challenges Marion's reading that the disciples have an excess of intuition and that Jesus provides them with concepts adequate to understand the revelation that they have experienced. For Mackinlay, when Jesus breaks bread for the disciples, he offers a new hermeneutic perspective from which they can recognise Jesus. We will deal with the significance of hermeneutics later on in this chapter; for now, it is enough to note that Mackinlay identifies participation as the key concept in this revelatory experience. 'It is through participating in Jesus' repetition of [the Last Supper] that the disciples at Emmaus experience Jesus' Revelation'.[143] This specific instance of revelation to two people participates in

[141] WGTB, 127.
[142] Jean-Luc Marion, "They Recognised Him; and He Became Invisible to Them", trans. Stephen E. Lewis, *Modern Theology* 18, no. 2 (2002): 145–52, doi: 10.1111/1468-0025.00181.
[143] Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess*, 192–93.

the global and ultimate revelation of Jesus Christ. The Emmaus revelation is dependent on the Last Supper and the revelation of Christ, without which the experience has no significance beyond the literal breaking of bread. This experience is not only iconic, but also, by participating in Christ's first revelation, subordinate to it. The Emmaus revelation can have no pretensions to idolatry because, without reference to the revelation of Christ, it cannot reveal anything at all. It is tied down by its participation in the Christ-revelation, which provides its reference point and allows it to operates as revelation. This discussion allows us to understand how a revelatory experience could be iconic. By participating in the original revelation of Christ any particular examples of revelation are assured of their iconic status because they can only have meaning if they point the believer to the revelation of Christ.

Our discussion so far has offered a model by which we might understand certain religious experiences, such as those of St Teresa, by way of participation in the first iconic revelation of Christ. This still leaves unanswered the question of those divine communication experiences which do not exhibit such a strong sense of saturation. The challenge of Marion's statement that 'God reveals only Himself' remains: as soon as some additional content is offered, the experience loses its saturated quality. If Marion is right, then in order to be considered revelation, a phenomenon must be either Christ himself or participating in Christ. Such revelation must be in the iconic form of Christ's revelation, making itself invisible and pointing towards God. Our examples of divine communication would fail this test since they make the beholder aware of themselves, either because they give a specific command, or because the beholder learns something new about themselves. One solution would be to argue that these examples should not be called revelation. This is not to deny their appearance as phenomena, or even to question their religious legitimacy. These are clearly legitimate communications from God, yet cannot be described as revelation according to any interpretation of Marion. We might suggest, then, that Philip (M) is not receiving *revelation* from God, but *communication*. This would further legitimate our isolation of divine communication as a distinct theological category. We can find support here

from Karl Barth's identification of revelation with incarnation. 'To say revelation is to say "The Word became flesh."'[144] Divine communication is slightly distinct from revelation since there is an additional engagement with particular situations in the world. Thus, unlike his revelation, God's communication can change across historical and societal situations because of the mutability of creation.[145] Having said this, we would be unwise to entirely divorce divine communication from revelation. As Barth writes, there is 'no distinction of degree or value between the three forms' of revelation – and the same sentiment can be extended to divine communication. For Barth, God's Word revealed 'is the form that underlies' God's Word preached or written.[146] All are ultimately directed at the purpose of God revealing himself to humanity. The same may be said of divine communication, which our examples reveal is directed to the end of God's revelation (through human action or self-knowledge).[147] Nevertheless, as we have seen, divine communication and revelation are experienced differently by humans and, as I highlighted in Chapter One, it is this difference perceived from the human perspective that interests us in this study. If we accept this model of divine communication, it is clear that we will need to go beyond Marion's theory of saturated phenomena and find a theory that can explain not just the givenness of revelatory phenomena to the human subject, but also the human experience of receiving communicated knowledge from God. Before we advance any further, let us consider another key aspect of Marion's thought.

Inverting the Subject

The Receiver

Equally significant to Marion's phenomenology is his treatment of the subject or recipient of phenomena. In Book V of *Being Given*, Marion develops his account of subjectivity, considering first common phenomena, and then

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[144] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:119.

[145] We are reminded at this juncture of Herbert McCabe's comments on God's relationship to a changing creation, as well as Thomas Weinandy's defence of a simultaneously dynamic and immutable God. Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Continuum, 2002), 39–46; Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 123–27.

[146] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:120–21.

[147] For example, Acts 8:26-40, where the Spirit's communication to Philip leads him to proclaim the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch.

saturated phenomena. He begins to use the term 'receiver' to describe the one to whom a phenomenon appears, as 'the successor of what metaphysics means by "subject"'.[148] The intention here is to avoid the reduction of the phenomenon to the subject, to the end that the subject 'can no longer claim to possess or produce phenomena'. [149] There are three key features we can identify regarding the receiver of phenomena. a) The me who receives a phenomenon loses its constituting role. Unlike the Kantian or Cartesian ego, Marion's receiver plays no active role in constituting what is given to it.[150] b) The receiver's function in receiving phenomena is restricted to 'accomplish[ing] givenness by transforming it into manifestation'.[151] The images Marion uses to convey this idea are of the receiver as a 'filter', 'prism', or 'screen'.[152] The receiver does not affect the appearance of the phenomenon, but allows it to appear by giving occasion for the phenomenon to show itself. The receiver acts as a screen to display a projection of light, or a prism to render white light visible. c) The receiver does not precede the phenomenon but receives itself from it.

> Before the not yet phenomenalized given gives itself, no filter awaits it. Only the impact of what gives itself brings about the arising, with one and the same shock, of the flash with which its first visibility bursts and the very screen on which it crashes.[153]

Marion regards this as a condition of (a). By inverting the metaphysical roles of subject and object, Marion reverses the notion of the ego as antecedent to and constituting of the phenomena that appear to it. It is the receiver (no longer ego) who is constituted by the appearing of the phenomenon. It cannot play a constituting role, since it only exists after the arrival of the given.

We can already begin to see potential problems here, even before we consider saturated phenomena. It is not immediately clear that Marion's notion of the receiver as utterly passive and playing no constituting role in the reception of

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[148] BG, 249.
[149] Ibid.
[150] BG, 263.
[151] BG, 264.
[152] BG, 264–65.
[153] BG, 265.

phenomena is coherent. To use Marion's own image, a screen will affect what is shown on it: if it is torn, or coloured, or concave, it will have an effect on what appears. This goes beyond a criticism of Marion's analogy. Shane Mackinlay is right to contend that:

> …in Marion's account, nothing about the *adonné* affects phenomena other than this capacity to transform givenness into manifestation, and that therefore a phenomenon can appear indifferently to any *adonné* whatsoever, while remaining essentially the same phenomenon.[154]

Mackinlay demonstrates that, on Marion's account, the 'me' of a given phenomenon does not matter. There is a strong sense of selfhood attributed to phenomena which impose themselves on recipients. The autonomous phenomenon takes the initiative, and gives itself as it intends to be given.[155] In Marion's words, the phenomenon 'shows itself' in an 'unpredictable landing'. It 'aligns me along the line of its appearing [and] confirms the claim that the initiative falls to the phenomenon'.[156] Marion does this to maintain the irreducibility of the phenomenon as given and thus to allow us to move away from an egocentric epistemology. However, this comes at the cost of recognising the individuality of the recipient. Because the initiative is entirely with the phenomenon, Marion cannot account for any differentiation in how a phenomenon appears to different individuals. This need not entail a strong sense of constitution by the ego. For example, how I am affected by the phenomenon of grief – how it appears to me – will be bound up with my past experience, my relationships with others, my own temperament, and so on. This differentiation between individuals is not a result of their constituting the phenomenon differently, but grounded in hermeneutically relevant differences between them. The same problem occurs with revelation itself. Where some people see the person of Christ as revelation, others see nothing at all about him that is revelatory.[157] This is inexplicable according to Marion's theory,

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[154] Shane Mackinlay, "Phenomenality in the Middle: Marion, Romano, and the Hermeneutics of the Event", in *Givenness and God*, ed. Ian Leask and Eoin Cassidy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 178.
[155] Ibid., 168.
[156] BG, 138.
[157] Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess*, 196.

whereby the strong autonomy of phenomena ought to enable them to take the initiative and appear to every receiver as revelation.

This problem, which is essentially the question of hermeneutics in experience, becomes one of the major points of discussion between Marion and Richard Kearney in their public dialogue of 2001. Kearney summarises their differences of position regarding hermeneutics as follows:

> I would pass from phenomenology to hermeneutics more rapidly than you would. It strikes me that your approach is more strictly phenomenological since for you the "saturated phenomenon" is fundamentally *irrégardable*, a pure event without horizon or context, without "I" or agent. As such it appears to *defy* interpretation. […] Whereas I would argue that there is no pure phenomenon as such, that appearing – not [sic] matter how iconic or saturated it may be – always already involves an interpretation of some kind. Phenomenological description and intuition, in my account, always implies some degree of hermeneutic reading, albeit that of a pre-reflective pre-understanding or pre-conscious affection for the most part.[158]

Kearney is describing a hermeneutics that can account for the differences between individuals. The 'always already' of Kearney's hermeneutics indicates an interpretation that is not actively applied by the receiver, but that shapes and affects how a certain phenomenon is received by a particular receiver.

Marion's reply is that hermeneutics is in fact necessary, but as a consequence of the 'surplus of intuition'. The excess of intuition, and thus the lack of concept, requires hermeneutics, yet this occurs at a later point than for Kearney. There remains with Marion a pre-hermeneutic arrival of an autonomous phenomenon which is only subsequently interpreted. In the case of a saturated phenomenon, the excess of intuition renders all interpretation incomplete, resulting in an 'endless hermeneutics'.[159] Even with common phenomena, Marion resists Kearney's notion of a hermeneutic that occurs

[158] "Dialogue", 12.
[159] Ibid.

'always already' with the appearance of a phenomenon.[160] This disagreement seems to be the result of a slight difference in how Marion and Kearney understand the function of hermeneutics. For Marion, hermeneutics is 'always an inquiry for further concepts'. Hermeneutics is necessary when there is a surplus of intuition because it is these cases where there is a 'conceptual deficit' which needs to be remedied by the application of hermeneutics.[161] We may suggest, therefore, that Marion's understanding of hermeneutics is closer to the Kantian concept of synthesis, the act of unifying perception and applying it to a concept. We find support for this interpretation in Marion's discussion of the event in *Being Given*, where he describes hermeneutics in terms of the constitution of an object from multiple intuitions. Such a plurality 'practically forbids constituting the historical event into *one* object'.[162] This would make sense of Marion's claim that, 'if we are to have hermeneutics it has to be an endless hermeneutics', [163] since where there is an excess of intuition, hermeneutics will never complete its task of interpreting intuition through concepts.

Mackinlay offers two complementary senses of hermeneutics that oppose Marion's. The first draws on a distinction between an 'ontological' sense of hermeneutics and hermeneutics in a 'marginal and derivative sense'. [164] The former regards hermeneutics as intrinsic to the appearance of a phenomenon, and is what Kearney understands by an 'always already' hermeneutics: the facticity of the receiver affects how phenomena appear to them. The latter refers to the opening of a hermeneutic 'space' in the reception of phenomena.[165] How and whether a phenomenon appears is in part determined by the receiver's approach; they must see it from the correct perspective if it is to be recognised. This is particularly relevant to revelation: Mackinlay argues that faith opens a hermeneutic space within which the revelation of Christ can be recognised as revelatory. Without this prior existential faith, the historical

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[160] "Dialogue", 13.
[161] "Dialogue", 12.
[162] BG, 229.
[163] "Dialogue", 13.
[164] Mackinlay, "Phenomenality in the Middle", 172; cf. Shane Mackinlay, "Eyes Wide Shut: A Response to Jean-Luc Marion's Account of the Journey to Emmaus", *Modern Theology* 20, no. 3 (July 2004): 453, doi: j.1468-0025.2004.00261.x.
[165] Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess*, 217–18.

events have no revelatory significance.[166] Unlike Marion's account, hermeneutics understood ontologically or as a hermeneutic space can account for differences in the appearance of phenomena to different individuals. We can understand why only some people see the cross as revelation if we recognise that ontological and existential differences between people will affect how they receive the phenomenon. My contention is that, while Mackinlay is right to criticise Marion's restriction of hermeneutics to this derivative sense, it remains possible to integrate the two complementary alternative approaches to hermeneutics into Marion's thought. If my interpretation is correct, it would suggest that it is possible to retain Marion's concept of saturated phenomena and strong sense of phenomenal autonomy while maintaining a hermeneutic role for the receiver.

Clearly, either of the above approaches to hermeneutics would resolve the problem of non-individuality in Marion's thought. The question now is whether it is possible to adopt this kind of hermeneutics and remain faithful to Marion's broader thought. We will thus consider how this new conception of hermeneutics would relate to Marion's description of the receiver as outlined above. We refer to the three key features of the receiver identified above.

a) An ontological hermeneutics is compatible with Marion's non-constituting receiver and maintains a strong degree of autonomy for the phenomenon. A phenomenon still takes the initiative regarding when to appear, to whom, and for how long, and there is still a relationship of dependency between how the phenomenon appears to the receiver and the autonomy of the phenomenon. Equally, the opening of a hermeneutic space need not be understood as the receiver affecting or changing what is given; rather, it is simply a case of the taking up of a position from which what the phenomenon autonomously gives can be seen. This explains why someone can view a revelatory phenomenon as 'nothing': it is not that the phenomenon has been changed from one thing to another, but that, from the receiver's position, the phenomenon appears *as* nothing.

[166] Ibid., 194.

b) The role that Marion gives to the receiver is compatible with (and may even logically extend to) both an ontological hermeneutics and the opening of a hermeneutic space. If the receiver is that which provides the occasion for a given phenomenon to appear, it is not inconsistent that the phenomenon may appear in a certain way, according to certain features of the receiver. Equally, the opening of a hermeneutic space could be precisely how the receiver gives the phenomenon occasion to appear. The ability for a phenomenon to appear is already dependent on certain aspects of the receiver, such as their physical location and the direction they are looking in. If this is the case, there is no reason to deny that the receiver's hermeneutic perspective cannot be as relevant a factor in the ability for a phenomenon to appear as their physical perspective.

c) The last feature, that the receiver receives their self from the phenomenon, causes more difficulty and will have to be dealt with at greater length. It does seem that Marion's insistence on the antecedence of the phenomenon and its production of the receiver causes problems for either a dispositional hermeneutic or the opening of a hermeneutic space. Both imply some prior fact about the receiver that is relevant to the appearance of the phenomenon, such that the receiver could not receive their whole self from the phenomenon. I will first briefly criticise Marion's idea that the receiver receives itself from the given phenomenon, before demonstrating that this feature of the receiver can be dispensed with without damaging Marion's wider purposes.

It is unclear how Marion anticipates the reception of the self to work in practice. In a passage in *In Excess*, Marion describes the arrival of the given as provoking a 'double visibility'; the given and the receiver, both invisible before the appearance, are made visible through the arrival of the given. Although there is some ambivalence in how Marion describes the receiver's reception of self, the thrust of his argument is towards a strong conception of reception, such that the self 'no longer precedes the phenomenon', and that 'properly speaking, *l'adonné* is not without this reception'.[167] The receiver does not exist until the arrival of the phenomenon. The phenomenalisation of

[167] IE, 50.

the self is an important consequence of the more fundamental reception of the self; this seems to make non-derivative hermeneutics impossible. It is thus legitimate to ask how and when the reception and constitution of the self of the receiver takes place. Marion is ambiguous on this point: it is unclear whether the receiver receives itself anew for every given phenomenon,[168] or if the reception of self is some prior event, such as birth.[169] Either of these positions can be criticised. The former suggests a strange carving up of experience into discrete moments of givenness, which undermines the continuity of experience and implies an antecedent process of interpreting experience by dividing it up ahead of time. The latter avoids this, but reinstates the antecedent self for any subsequent perceptions, restoring the subject's horizon in the process.

Regardless of the success of this criticism, I also contend that this third feature of Marion's receiver can be dispensed with without harming Marion's wider purposes. I take Marion's purposes here to be the ability to describe the appearance of phenomena without them being constituted by a horizon or reduced to an I. This is evidenced by Marion's introductory paragraph to Book V of *Being Given*.

> The phenomenon gives itself and shows itself only by confirming itself as a "self"; and this "self" is attested only counter to every exclusively transcendental claim of the I. For the "self" of the phenomenon in person to recover initiative in its own phenomenality, we are obliged to redefine the I according to the guiding thread of its anamorphosis, as well as its mere witness.[170]

This is in line with what Tamsin Jones regards as Marion's broader purpose: to articulate a nonmetaphysical philosophy. According to Jones, Marion defines metaphysics by two characteristics. First, a metaphysical method will impose limits on the conditions of possibility for phenomena, and second, metaphysics

[168] This would make sense of Marion's examples of saturated phenomena, such as the event or battle, which clearly operate as discrete phenomena.
[169] 'My birth, which fixes my most singular identity even more that my existence, nonetheless happens without and before me.' BG, 289.
[170] BG, 248.

upholds the subjective starting point and privileges the question of Being.[171] If we can show that our alternative approaches to hermeneutics offer no threat to Marion's nonmetaphysical philosophy, then we may conclude that they are compatible with Marion's thought, and thus offer them as a resolution to the problem of the differentiation of receivers outlined above. This can in fact be done. As noted above, a strong degree of autonomy for the phenomenon can be maintained even with a non-derivative hermeneutics. I have already shown how a phenomenon might retain its initiative in appearing under such circumstances in a way that does not depend on the antecedence of the phenomenon. Certainly, we must avoid an appearing phenomenon being *created by* a subject or ego; nevertheless, the phenomenon and receiver could plausibly have mutually independent origins. This accords with Jones' own critique, who notes that, 'although the phenomenon emerges from itself and in no way can be constituted or produced by something other than itself… it must give itself *to* one still, the conscious I'.[172] However much Marion insists that the phenomenon is irreducible and unconstituted, there is still *something* or *someone* that the phenomenon appears to; the notion of an appearing phenomenon does not allow for an appearance to no one or nothing. This is precisely how Marion avoids the positing of a transcendent being, and the elision of phenomenology into onto-theology. It is the *appearing to* of an appearing phenomenon that keeps it strictly phenomenological and protects it from relying on the transcendent existence of phenomena (or their causes). For Jones, this is the critical distinction between Marion and Emmanuel Levinas. Janicaud has accused the latter of betraying phenomenology by positing transcendent beings;[173] Marion avoids this precisely by maintaining the *to whom* of appearance. Thus, we can challenge Janicaud's extension of his criticism from Levinas to Marion, which argues that Marion's work 'leads us back to an autosufficiency… that restores *metaphysica specialis* – and its favourite trick, autofoundation…'[174] Marion's understanding of the given does not culminate in the autosufficiency or autofoundation of phenomena precisely

[171] Tamsin Jones, *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion: Apparent Darkness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 91.
[172] Ibid., 94.
[173] Janicaud, "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology", 47.
[174] Ibid., 65.

because he maintains the *to whom* of appearances. However, this move also enables the introduction of an 'always already' hermeneutics into Marion's thought – operating within the reduction to givenness. Because the reduction does not do away with the receiver entirely, there is room for a differentiation among receivers – so long as this differentiation does not entail the active altering or constituting of what it receives. An 'always already' hermeneutic, according to which the initiative remains entirely with the phenomenon but which allows phenomena to appear in different ways to different receivers, would not betray Marion's thought.

The Gifted

Returning to the dialogue between Marion and Kearney, we find that Kearney presses Marion specifically on the hermeneutics of revelation. 'Can we have a hermeneutics of God *qua* saturated phenomenon?'[175] Marion's initial response is to recapitulate his conception of revelation as fourfold saturation, that it is a 'phenomenon saturated to the square'.[176] He then uses the example of the Apostolic Creed to argue that the excess given in revelation leaves it open to different, sometimes conflicting interpretations. Kearney then presses the point further.

> Do you think that the phenomenon of God can be experienced outside a specifically monotheistic context? Is there something in the notion of Revelation as an absolute saturated phenomenon that requires a Judeo-Christian theology? It is not just *any* God that appears in revelation, is it? And how can we tell the difference?[177]

Marion replies by reaffirming the differences and varieties in interpretation, but Kearney pushes further: 'So one could have a Buddhist or Hindu hermeneutics of the phenomenon of God?'[178] Marion's response is revealing.

> I do think that the question of God is so great that, to some extent, we have to admit that all the different traditions, including those that are

[175] "Dialogue", 13.
[176] Ibid.
[177] "Dialogue", 14 (original emphasis).
[178] Ibid.

> apparently foreign to the Biblical heritage, are needed in order to say something about God.[179]

This reaches the heart of the question of hermeneutics and revelation. The logical endpoint of Marion's rejection of hermeneutics is that, when it comes to the saturated phenomenon of revelation, we have no way of interpreting what appears to us. Only after the fact can we determine that the experience was of God (or anything else) – and doing this will never provide a fully adequate account of the appearance.[180] We will explore the implications of this shortly, but it is first worth noting that Marion himself embraces this conclusion as a necessary aspect of understanding revelation. We will examine Marion's argument for the anonymity of the source of revelation, starting with his understanding of the call.

Following his discussion on the role of the receiver during the appearance of phenomena, Marion discusses the radicalising effect on the receiver by the appearance of saturated phenomena. The unpredictable impact which brings the receiver into being is radicalised into the 'call' and the receiver becomes 'the gifted' (in French, '*l'adonné*', which also has connotations of addiction or devotion).[181] Guided in part by Levinas's depiction of reverse intentionality, Marion's *l'adonné* is secondary to the call, and receives itself through an unequal relationship of interlocution[182] Despite its primacy over *l'adonné,* the call is only made possible for Marion by the response; without the recognition that one is being called and the willingness to listen, the call remains invisible.[183] This mirrors Marion's earlier argument about the receiver who, while not constituting the given, still plays a role in allowing the given to show itself. Likewise, the call retains the initiative but is only recognised as a call in the response. The call remains primary because there is a delay before the response. The call arises 'originally', such that no horizon could be outlined ahead of time; by responding, *l'adonné* creates a horizon for the call to appear within, but with the recognition that the call is anterior and always has more to

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[179] Ibid.
[180] Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion*, 117.
[181] BG, 266.
[182] BG, 268–71.
[183] BG, 287.

give.[184] Marion recognises that this discussion of the call threatens to stray into the realm of metaphysics. The call raises an inevitable question: 'who or what summons, invokes, and surprises the gifted?'[185] This question seems to suggest a metaphysical answer: some kind of transcendent caller (or God) which exceeds the limits of phenomenology. Marion's response is that the origin of the call must remain anonymous: 'it belongs essentially and on principle to the call to be given without, however, giving its name'; here Marion positively embraces our conclusions regarding hermeneutics.[186] We shall explore and critique Marion's arguments for this claim.[187]

First, Marion argues that the origin of the call must be anonymous because the function of the call is not to name itself, but to call *l'adonné* to response.

> Phenomenologically, the call must remain anonymous because its function is never to name itself, only to call the respondent and thus arouse him. […] And if it is ever necessary to give a name to the call, this will not be the job of the call itself (nor the giver), but of the responsal (or the givee).[188]

It falls to *l'adonné* to name the call in its response – a response that does not occur concurrently with the call but that is delayed. This recalls our earlier discussion of the hermeneutics of experience: Marion insisted that the appearance of a phenomenon *does* necessitate hermeneutics, but that hermeneutics must follow the prior appearance of the given phenomenon. The origin of the call is anonymous; *l'adonné* subsequently names it. Yet this poses the challenge of appropriate response. Being able to respond appropriately is

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[184] BG, 287–89.
[185] BG, 296.
[186] BG, 297.
[187] For the sake of brevity, we will pass over Marion's debate with Derrida regarding the possibility of the gift; establishing the possibility of the gift is one of Marion's motives for conceiving of the giver as anonymous. Without getting caught up in the complexity of this debate, we can first suggest, with Robyn Horner, that this is a case of mixed metaphors, derived from Heidegger's use of the German idiom *es gibt*, and second that, since we are specifically interested in revelation, God – who does not need his sense of self reaffirmed and whom humans cannot hope to repay – will interact with gift differently to anything else. While this is by no means conclusive, it is enough to suggest that, if reason can be found to dispense with the anonymity of the caller, Marion's debate with Derrida need not hold us back. See Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift*, 6–18; and BG, 297–98.
[188] BG, 298.

contingent on knowing who the caller is and what they are communicating, since these two elements are involved in establishing the distinctive character of the call. Without this knowledge, the boundaries of an appropriate response – or even what would be counted *as* a response – are unclear. Two examples, both used by Marion, will illustrate this. The first illustration is the call of seduction. Marion imagines a conversion between two people. They talk about everything and nothing, but crucially not of each other; 'no call cuts across the dialogue'.[189] The call of seduction slowly emerges, and we will quote Marion at length.

> And yet it could happen that, imperceptibly, the until now loose web of this conversation about some third or a neutral object is drawn tighter, without anyone saying anything about it; for this to occur one has only to try by allusions, too well chosen examples, or false generalities, etc., to direct the conversation's centre of gravity to the other himself. At one fell swoop, from partner to the discussion, the Other imperceptibly becomes also what's at stake in it. The call of the seduction thus begins. Nevertheless, this call remains as such null and does not happen as long as its target does not grasp or, more often, does not want to grasp what new game you are playing with him, what new role you would like to make him play. *As long as this call remains implicit* (at least apparently), *it will remain absolutely in vain*, for it will never take place, so long as it has not been explicitly heard, recognized, admitted – so long as nothing will have happened.[190]

A call that is not recognised and named remains ineffectual. For the call to become effective, *l'adonné* must acknowledge that he has heard a call and that it is addressed to him; he must respond, 'silently utter this "Me?"',[191] for seduction to take place. Hence the call received by *l'adonné* must be anonymous: the call is made effective not by anything that could be positively said about it, but by the response of *l'adonné*. This causes problems. Marion does not recognise that a call of seduction can be misidentified. One could

[189] BG, 285.
[190] BG, 285–86 (my emphasis).
[191] BG 286

plausibly respond to a call that has not been made, or respond inappropriately, perhaps misinterpreting one call for another. My criticism does rest on an assumption that there in fact is a right and wrong way to respond to or identify a call, yet with Marion's examples, this is precisely the case. It is only appropriate to identify a seductive call as seduction if in fact the caller intended to seduce me. Although seduction cannot take place without my response, I am not the only actor, and the intentions of the other direct what counts as an appropriate response. Hence the identity and intentions of the seducer are as relevant in effecting the call as the response. A second example, which Marion argues operated in the same way as seduction, highlights the same point: the call of Samuel (1 Samuel 3).[192] Marion argues that 'without [Samuel's] response, the Lord would not have been able to call'.[193] Yet Samuel can only make this response once he knows the identity of the caller. As long as Samuel misidentifies the origin of the call as Eli, he hears nothing. Equally, if it was Eli who was calling, responding to God would have been inappropriate. Marion is right to argue that the call is contingent on the response, yet it does not follow that the caller must remain anonymous; it was the anonymity which initially undermined Samuel's ability to respond. These two examples support our argument that the identity of the caller and their intentions form an intrinsic part of the call and demarcate the boundaries of appropriate response.

Second, Marion argues that the excess of the saturated phenomenon of revelation makes naming the source of the phenomenon impossible, since it would require an 'infinite denomination'.[194] The endlessness of intuition experienced in a saturated phenomenon renders any name inadequate, so we can never know the identity of the source of revelation. Marion uses Exodus 3:14 as evidence: the 'highest name of God' is an 'empty tautology – I am who I am'.[195] This is essentially an apophatic point, described in terms of saturation. God (and the excess of revelation) is such that no description or name could ever sufficiently describe him without misrepresentation. Hence

[192] BG, 286–87.
[193] BG, 287.
[194] BG, 297.
[195] Ibid.

we are limited to anonymity. Why is this problematic? First, consider the verse that follows, Exodus 3:15.

> God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':
>
> This is my name forever,
> and this my title for all generations.

Although God's correct name is ambiguous and apophatic, he is clearly identified with someone or something in particular, 'the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'. This refers specifically to something that that Israelites have experienced – through traditions, stories, religious experience, and so on – and excludes certain interpretations. This is not one of the Egyptian gods. So, while Marion is right to argue that *l'adonné* could never fully and accurately name the source of the call, he goes too far when he argues for a 'radical anonymity of what calls'.[196]

By now we can see that Marion falls short in proving the necessity of the caller's anonymity – although we note that anonymity remains a logical consequence of Marion's position regarding hermeneutics. Since I have already argued that it would not do too much violence to Marion's thought to introduce non-derivative hermeneutics to Marion's thought, we might suggest this as a solution to the problem of anonymity. But why would we do this? I will now argue that, far from violating the phenomenon of revelation, recognising the source of revelation is a key component that cannot be done without.

The nub of my criticism is best illustrated by Marion's own words in his dialogue with Kearney:

[196] BG, 297.

> I have no authority to decide whether the Buddhist, for example, would or should use this or that interpretation of his experience of the infinite.[197]

Marion's phenomenology gives no room for assessing different interpretations of revelation. Since there can be no hermeneutics intrinsic to the experience, and any subsequent hermeneutics would do violence to the occurring phenomenon, the interpretation of the phenomenon is entirely open. As John Milbank argues, the radical anonymity of the caller makes it 'difficult to know how [the giver] is 'the Good''. For Milbank, Marion's belief that the caller is good (or Good) is nothing more than a 'wager'.[198] Horner picks up this critique when she notes that 'the undecidability of the excess risks an encounter with "the Devil"'.[199] Merold Westphal draws a similar conclusion, but regards this as a positive response to those who accuse Marion of smuggling theology into phenomenology. For Westphal, it is a strength of Marion's that that there are 'multiple possibilities for naming the caller, all of which must be distinguished from the pure form of the call as such.' What this allows, Westphal argues, is for Marion to give an account of 'a structural element common to the various specific possibilities.'[200] Remarkably, when it comes to religious experience, there seems to be a similarity here with William James: there is a basic spiritual experience (the saturated phenomenon of revelation) which can be interpreted in various legitimate ways. Of course, the two operate within very different theological and philosophical traditions, and Marion's conception of revelation is much wider than James's focus on religious experience. Nevertheless, both thinkers end up unable or unwilling to distinguish the content of different experiences across different religious traditions and have no metric by which one response can be judged to be more appropriate than another.

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[197] "Dialogue", 14–15.
[198] John Milbank, "Only Metaphysics Overcomes Theology", in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 43.
[199] Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift*, 174.
[200] Merold Westphal, "Vision and Voice: Phenomenology and Theology in the Work of Jean-Luc Marion", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60, no. 1 (December 2006): 129, doi: 10.1007/s11153-006-0009-2.

Returning to our examples of divine communication, we have already seen the limitations of saturated phenomena in describing communicative experiences. Even so, it is worth noting further problems that arise when we consider the effect of Marion's reversal of intentionality. These apply to our examples of communication, as well as those more revelatory experiences (such as St Teresa's) which did not resist the category of saturation. First, anonymity simply does not feature in our examples. The source of George Fox's revelation (E) is clear: it was 'the word of the Lord'.[201] Starbuck's example (A) has a greater degree of anonymity: it describes the experience of 'a something' and an 'invisible conductor'. Nevertheless, the subject can identify 'the Holy Spirit' as the origin of his new understanding and his new knowledge includes his being filled with the fullness 'of God'.[202] Luhrmann's subject Kate (I) is clear that she expects to hear 'from God', and the fact that Luhrmann's work is with committed Pentecostal Christians indicates a confidence in the source of the call.[203] Anonymity also causes problems for the more obviously revelatory experiences, which were capable of being described according to saturation. Teresa describes the initiation of one of her experiences with the phrase 'Our Lord made me comprehend', indicating knowledge of the source.[204] She also describes her soul as being 'fully awake to God' during the experience, again indicating an awareness of the identity of God during the reception of revelation.[205] Equally, another of Luhrmann's subjects (W) remembers being 'so in love with Jesus Christ at that moment', indicating her awareness of the identity of the source of the phenomenon during the experience.[206]

Second, the anonymity of the caller makes it impossible to discern an appropriate response. If we cannot distinguish between God and the Devil, it is impossible to know whether to respond with joy or fear. Monotheistic experiences will demand a different response to an experience of Buddhist or Hindu notions of infinity; an experience interpreted solely according to psychological or physiological explanations would demand yet another. How I

[201] *Varieties*, 10.
[202] *Varieties*, 278.
[203] WGTB, 69.
[204] *Varieties*, 448.
[205] *Varieties*, 445.
[206] WGTB, 127.

respond to revelation is tied to my perception of its source. When Marion argues that the caller is only named in the response of *l'adonné*, he fails to recognise that the response of *l'adonné* is itself a response to the source of the call. This returns us to the issue of normativity. Religious experiences are interesting because they affect what people believe and how they behave; an experience of a saturated phenomenon will be deeply affective. Indeed, earlier in *Being Given*, Marion argues that the most fundamental thing that a painting gives to the viewer is the effect it has on them. [207] We are moved by what we experience, and we should expect that the excessive experience of revelation will move us deeply and profoundly. Yet Marion cannot deal with normativity. It is plausible under Marion's thought that normativity comes into play along with hermeneutics – that is, as a distinct event after the experience of the phenomenon itself. However, this would not be the normativity of the phenomenon itself, but of the receiver's subsequent interpretation of it. George Fox has no means by which he can attest that his interpretation of the experience (that he is to condemn Lichfield) is valid, since it will always be his subsequent projection onto an unknowable event. Equally, there is no room for religious conversion in Marion's thought because whatever I experience must remain anonymous. I can interpret it myself, but this violates the experience and I have no way of judging that, if I make a Christian interpretation of the experience, it is any better – and thus has any greater normative force on me – than any other religious or nonreligious interpretation.

Conclusion

We can draw three main conclusions from our discussion of Marion. First, revelation can be successfully understood as saturation, with Christ as the paradigm, but this specifically excludes examples of divine communication. Although there are problems with delineating Christ's revelation according to Marion's four modes of saturation, revelation can be successfully described in terms of the icon. This is legitimated by Mackinlay's observation that the irregardability of the icon is better considered as a different aspect of saturation in general and is consistent with Marion's own view that 'God reveals only Himself'. Christ is the primary occasion of revelation and, through an excess

[207] BG, 52.

of intuition, operates as an icon by pointing beyond himself and to the Father. Subsequent experiences of revelation operate by participating in the original revelation of Christ; hence they are not idolatrous but iconic, pointing to Christ, and thus to the Father. Certain religious experiences – specifically, those where God is personally revealed in himself to the beholder – fit this model of revelation. However, the specific kinds of experience that this study is concerned with – that is, phenomena which communicate some cognitive and linguistic content along with their affective content – consistently resist description according to this understanding of revelation. To maintain the benefits of Marion's description of saturation as it pertains to the revelation of Christ and those experiences that participate in it, I have suggested that we refer to these latter experiences as divine communication, rather than revelation. Although always accomplishing the purposes of revelation, these experiences do not communicate God himself, but are occasions of God communicating some other content to a believer. This category of communication suggests the need for an alternative approach to understanding such experiences and, since it concerns the communication of cognitive content from God to the human, this approach will need to engage with hermeneutics. We will pick up this theme in the following chapter.

Second, despite Marion's arguments to the contrary, we still need a hermeneutic approach to phenomena, and one that is not derivative to their appearance. This becomes apparent when we consider the problem of differentiation: Marion's conception of the phenomenon is over-autonomous, making the fact that certain phenomena appear in different ways to different people inexplicable. This is not about people having different interpretations of phenomena, but about them appearing *as* different to different people. Grief appears to me in a particular way depending on my previous experience of grief or emotional constitution. Christ's revelation also appears to some differently than to others. At the cross, some people mocked Jesus, while others recognised his divinity. Equally, while some people see in the gospel the revelation of God, others see nothing important at all. This demonstrates the necessity of a non-derivative hermeneutics in phenomenology and I have shown that this would not undermine Marion's ultimate phenomenological

project. This is consistent with our first conclusion and supports the decision to turn to the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer in the next chapter.

Finally, I have challenged Marion's insistence on the anonymity of the caller in the phenomenon of revelation. This is a logical consequence of Marion's approach to hermeneutics, as well as a thesis that Marion defends independently. Having demonstrated that Marion's own arguments for the anonymity of the source of revelation are inadequate, I presented two further criticisms. First, the notion of anonymity does not align with our recorded examples of religious experience, both revelatory and communicative. Although Marion may resist the process of judging his thought in such an empirical manner, it is surely problematic if there are many accounts which do not match his description of revelation. Second, the issue of anonymity highlights Marion's inability to deal with normativity in religious experience. It is precisely the normative effect of religious experiences that make them interesting to the theologian and compelling to the believer, yet for Marion this normativity is relegated to a derivative role. Marion's conception of revelation leaves it impossible to act, since any normative force I perceive can be nothing more than my own projection of meaning onto an unknown phenomenon. We might wonder whether the issue of normativity can also be resolved by recognising the hermeneutic element of appearance. It is to this question that we now turn.

Gadamer

Our discussion of Marion has led to the conclusion that a successful understanding of divine communication must include a role for hermeneutics that recognises the influence of the receiver on what is received. For this reason, we turn to the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, which I will argue presents a much more compelling account of communication and will thus provide further clarity for understanding religious experience. My argument is that Gadamer's hermeneutics is best conceived in terms of the mediality of understanding, and that this approach offers a unique insight into both revelatory and communicative phenomena. In this chapter I will examine Gadamer's various descriptive models of understanding, before demonstrating the function of mediality throughout these approaches. The discussion will then open onto the examples of religious phenomena we have been considering.

Models of Understanding

Our focus over the next few pages will be Gadamer's account of understanding. This will help us to develop an account of understanding derived from divine communication later on.

Play

Many commentaries on Gadamer's hermeneutics focus on his concept of the fusion of horizons.[208] However, my starting point is Gadamer's concept of play (*Spiel*). This is for two reasons. First, in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer's discussion of play occurs much earlier that his discussion of the fusion of horizons. Second, it is crucial to understand how play functions in Gadamer's thought in order to correctly interpret what he means by the fusion of horizons.

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[208] See, for example, E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 245–64; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1980), 293–326; Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); Thomas K. Carr, *Newman & Gadamer: Towards a Hermeneutics of Religious Knowledge* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 29–41; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), 106–7; Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Oxford: Routledge, 2000), 248–86; David Vessey, "Gadamer and the Fusions of Horizons", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 17, no. 4 (2009): 531–42, doi: 10.1080/09672550903164459.

Play initially functions in Gadamer's thought as part of his aesthetics. He first gives serious thought to the concept of play in Part 1 of *Truth and Method*, and subsequently develops the idea in various essays on aesthetics written throughout the following decades. Gadamer builds up his concept of play, starting with the metaphorical sense of the word, using such examples as the play of light or of waves, the play of gears in machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces or of gnats, or a play on words.[209] Consistent in all these uses is a back-and-forth motion which is intrinsic to the play. In "The Relevance of the Beautiful" Gadamer notes that, in the example of the play of light, 'neither pole of the movement represent the goal in which it would come to rest'.[210] There is no final end in which the real meaning of the play can be said to reside; the play is not teleological, but rather precisely defined by the non-intentionality of the movement between at least two poles. Hence play emerges and is defined not as an intention on the part of one or other of the players, but as the result of the unintentioned movement itself.

Following this discussion of nonhuman play, Gadamer concludes that '*man* too plays'.[211] The typographical emphasis on *man* demonstrates that primacy does not lie with human play, but with play itself, including play within nature and the play of animals. Rather than mapping a primarily human phenomenon onto nature, the natural proliferation of play requires us to conclude that, as well as everything else, human beings also engage in play. As well as the characteristics described above, Gadamer describes human play as having three further unique features. First, it is intended. This is not to contradict the unintentionality described earlier, but to note that, unlike the light or waves, humans choose to engage in play behaviour. They mark out a specific field of play, within which new goals and behavioural restrictions, internal to the play activity, become meaningful. It is an intended unintentionality.[212] Second, human play requires involvement. Even though the play is recognised to be playful and non-serious, the players of a game must take it seriously in order to

[209] TM, 104.
[210] RB, 22.
[211] TM, 105 (original emphasis).
[212] RB, 23.

play:[213] 'someone who doesn't take the game seriously is a spoilsport'.[214] The new goals and restrictions must be taken seriously in order to play, but they are playful because the purpose of the activity is not to achieve the task at hand but to engage in playful behaviour.[215] Third, the being of play is communicated through the activity of play itself, and allows the involvement of spectators. The spectator of a game is more than merely an observer of what is taking place; rather, they are equally involved participants in the game.[216]

Play functions as one of three key concepts Gadamer uses to describe the aesthetic experience (the other two being symbol and festival).[217] Art exhibits this back-and-forth movement between the artwork and the viewer. 'The work issues a challenge which expects to be met. It requires an answer – an answer that can only be given by someone who accepted the challenge'.[218] The development from play to art occurs through the 'transformation into structure'.[219] A game, even when played before spectators, is not presented for anyone; if others participate in the play by spectating, their involvement is accidental to the emergence of play. In contrast, when play is intended *for* spectators it is transformed and becomes *a* play, a work of art. The meaning of the artwork is transformed to include the presence of spectators, who become necessary players involved in the back-and-forth of the play.[220] The aesthetic play achieves a form of ideality: it is 'in principle repeatable and hence permanent'. Thus the activity is transformed into a structure (*Gebilde*) and becomes a work.[221]

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[213] RB, 23–24.
[214] TM, 103.
[215] TM, 107.
[216] RB, 24.
[217] Jean Grondin has written on the role of the concept of festival, which implies temporal serious commitment, in relation to Gadamer's aesthetics. According to Grondin, the idea of festive ritual ought to replace the idea of tradition in Gadamer's thought since festive ritual encompasses the enabling situatedness of human reason without a conservative traditionalist shading. Jean Grondin, "Play, Festival, and Ritual in Gadamer: On the Theme of the Immemorial in His Later Works", in *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. Lawrence K. Schmidt (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2000), 51–57.
[218] RB, 26.
[219] TM, 110.
[220] TM, 108–9.
[221] TM, 110.

The spectators are now necessarily involved by their participation in the back-and-forth of the artwork. This is achieved through the interaction between the presentation of the work and the response of the viewer. As a result, the viewer of a work of art is drawn into involvement with the artwork: genuine experience of a work of art is only available to one who 'plays along' and 'performs in an active way himself'.[222] This is evident in tragic drama, and Gadamer follows Aristotle's claim that the defining characteristic of tragedy is the effect it has on the spectator. Thus the spectator commiserates with the fate of Oedipus, despite recognising the unreality of the events presented.[223] In "The Play of Art", Gadamer writes that 'the mere onlooker who indulges in aesthetic or cultural enjoyment from a safe distance … simply does not exist.'[224]

Further, the transformation into structure transforms reality (that is, the present moment) into ideal truth. What is experienced by the spectator in the performance of art is not simply their subjective experience of artwork, but the presentation (*Darstellung*) of truth.[225] In making this claim Gadamer is developing a previously identified feature of play: now, not only is the being of play presented through the activity of play, but the making present of truth is also achieved through the playing out of representation. Gadamer employs the concept of *mimesis* to describe the means by which artwork presents truth. Importantly, *mimesis* is not the imitation of an anterior reality or something that we already know, but rather 'implies that something is represented in such a way that it is actually present in sensuous abundance'.[226] Therefore in art, through *mimesis*, 'the thing presented is there'.[227] In another essay Gadamer writes that *mimesis* 'does not imply a reference to an original as something other than itself, but means that something is meaningful there as itself.'[228] When it comes to aesthetic experience, art presents itself not as a reference to a

[222] RB, 26.
[223] TM, 126.
[224] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Play of Art", in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 129–30.
[225] TM, 112.
[226] RB, 36.
[227] TM, 113.
[228] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Poetry and Mimesis", in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, 121.

previous moment of artistic creativity, but as a current presence of truth. True artistic appreciation does not primarily admire the skill of the artist, but recognises the truth presented in the artwork. Gadamer describes this as a 'double mimesis' which is 'one'.[229] In one act of *Darstellung*, the creative act of the artist and the truth communicated by the art are made immediately present to the audience through their serious involvement with the work.

We can already begin to see, through Gadamer's aesthetics, how play can be involved in understanding. Monica Vilhauer argues that play is the key to grasping Gadamer's conception of understanding.[230] In play we recognise the back-and-forth motion which is fundamental to all acts of understanding, and of which art is an exemplar. Vilhauer argues that Gadamer's description of the hermeneutic circle – the interplay between our preconceptions and the response from the text – exemplifies another moment of play. For Vilhauer, the ongoing dynamism of understanding-as-play resolves those critiques which represent the fusion of horizons as allowing the dominance of either the subject's horizon over the object of interpretation, or the horizon of tradition over the subject's capacity for criticism.[231] This also means that play is the means by which we guard against the influence of misleading prejudices, which 'ultimately means here that we must guard against dropping out of play'.[232] For Vilhauer, our prejudices are kept in check by keeping ourselves "in play". This idea of keeping oneself in play is slightly at odds with Gadamer's own thought. For Gadamer, it is the serious involvement inherent in being in play that makes an activity play at all. The uninvolved 'spoilsport' who does not take the game seriously can barely be said to be playing at all.[233] Mapped onto understanding-as-play, the subject who is not "in play" is not just

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[229] TM, 116.
[230] Monica Vilhauer, *Gadamer's Ethics of Play* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nottingham/detail.action?docID=686286/.
[231] See, for the former, Emilio Betti, "Hermeneutics as the General Methodology of the Geisteswissenschaften"', in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift, trans. Josef Bleicher (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 159–97, and for the latter, Jürgen Habermas, "A Review of Gadamer's Truth and Method", in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser, trans. Fred Dallmayr and Thomas McCarthy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 243–76; and particularly Jürgen Habermas, "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality", in *The Hermeneutic Tradition*, 245–72.
[232] Vilhauer, *Gadamer's Ethics of Play*, 57.
[233] TM, 103.

unduly influenced by their prejudices, but is disengaged or fails to understand at all. Vilhauer is correct to argue that understanding-as-play can help to defend Gadamer from Habermas's and Betti's criticisms; however, this is not because the subject has the capacity to "remain in play", but because understanding itself is precisely the playful mediation between text and tradition which occurs in the process of interpretation. The subject must always be involved in the play-like process of understanding whenever they are engaged in hermeneutics; the act of interpretation brings their prejudices into play, which will stand or fall based on their ability to comprehend the text. The function of play in understanding for Gadamer does not concern the ability to hold prejudices in check; rather, play, in its back-and-forth motion, describes the process of understanding itself.

Play can enable us to understand how Gadamer uses Heidegger's hermeneutic circle in his universal hermeneutics. For Heidegger, the hermeneutic circle describes the interaction between the projected fore-structures of understanding and the object being understood in the hermeneutic event. Understanding resides in this constant interaction between the interpreter's habits of thought and the being of the interpreted object, and it is the task of the interpreter to consciously remain guided by the thing itself. For Gadamer, Heidegger's hermeneutics marks a decisive break from the nineteenth century.[234] Unlike previous hermeneutic theorists (Ast and Schleiermacher are exemplars), Heidegger's circle is not dissolved by full understanding. The hermeneutic circle is not the route by which one reaches some static understanding of a text; rather, understanding is inherent in the circular relationship between the interpreter and interpreted.[235] Here we see the influence of play. Just as the being of play arises in the back-and-forth movement between the players, so understanding arises in the back-and-forth between the interpreter's pre-conception and the resistance offered by the object of interpretation. Indeed, Gadamer writes that the hermeneutic circle 'describes understanding as the interplay [*Zusammenspiel*] of the movement of

[234] For an excellent analysis of Gadamer's critique of Romantic hermeneutics, and especially his criticisms of Schleiermacher, Hegel, Ranke, and Droysen, see Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 5–34.
[235] TM, 293.

tradition and the movement of the interpreter'.[236] Playfulness is fundamental to understanding, since '[h]ermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness'.[237] There can be no understanding without this ongoing movement between the poles of the interpreter and the thing itself; this movement is inherently playful. Play captures the dynamism that underpins Gadamer's conception of understanding and the hermeneutic circle. With the importance of the ongoing movement between the poles of interpretation established, we are now in a position to consider the fusion of horizons.

Fusion of Horizons

The fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) is Gadamer's descriptive model of interpretation. Given the numerous commentaries on *Horiztonverschmelzung*, it will suffice to assume a basic understanding of this concept and limit our engagement to themes that will be significant for our analysis of divine communication. Although a horizon represents a historically situated perspective, it is worth remembering that the metaphor, borrowed from Husserl, is intentionally dynamic.[238] A horizon is not a closed or fixed perspective, but 'something into which we move and that moves with us', which allows the human to be 'never absolutely bound to any one standpoint'.[239]

> There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.[240]

The dynamism of two interacting horizons allows understanding to pass from one perspective to another, despite the historical and cultural embeddedness of

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[236] TM.
[237] TM, 295.
[238] 'Moreover, my indeterminate surroundings are infinite, the misty and never fully determinable horizon is necessarily there. […] I can change my standpoint in space and time, turn my regard in this or that direction, forwards or backwards in time; I can always obtain new perceptions and presentations, more or less clear and more or less rich in content, or else more or less clear images in which I illustrate to myself intuitionally what is possible or likely within the fixed forms of a spatial and temporal world.' Husserl, *Ideas*, §27.
[239] TM, 303.
[240] TM, 305 (original emphasis).

both communicants.[241] Fusion is possible because individual horizons are dynamic, offering the potential for movement and indicating the existence of yet unseen perspectives.[242]

A related concept is prejudice. For Gadamer, the negative connotations attached to the notion of prejudice are unwarranted and the result of 'the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment [which] is the prejudice against prejudice itself'.[243] The etymology of prejudice does not necessitate the negative connotation of a hasty, biased, or otherwise false judgement; it is simply something that occurs before a judgement, a pre-judgment. This applies equally to the German word, *Vorurteil* (*Vor-urteil*), and the French *préjugé* (*pré-jugé*).[244] Prejudices have three key features. First, they are hidden, often inchoate, including various dispositions and sensibilities, and operate implicitly before (both logically and temporally) rational thought.[245] Second, they are inevitable, common to all rational thought, and the possibility of thought free from prejudice is incoherent.[246] Third, prejudices are necessary for rational thought. 'Reason… is not its own master but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates'.[247] Without prejudices, reason has no basis on which to make judgements, since there are no means by which certain perceptions or ideas present themselves as more salient or important.[248] Building upon Heidegger, Gadamer argues that the

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[241] The picture is slightly more complicated, since Gadamer posits a singular historical horizon which is anterior to the multiple individual horizons. The location of all horizons within the singular historical horizon is part of the mechanism by which Gadamer explains the possibility of *Horizontverschmelzung*. See Gadamer's comments at TM, 303.

[242] Without understanding the dynamism of the horizon, we are open to the kind of critique offered by E. D. Hirsch, which concludes that, since a horizon encompasses what is understood by a subject, *Horizontverschmelzung* is either impossible or unnecessary. As David Vessey notes, it is by recognising the Husserlian influence of horizonal dynamism that we come to an appropriate understanding of *Horizontverschmelzung*. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 254; Vessey, "Gadamer and the Fusions of Horizons".

[243] TM, 273.

[244] Ibid.

[245] For a discussion on the inchoate and non-propositional nature of prejudice as conceived by Gadamer, see Brice R. Wachterhauser, "Prejudice, Reason and Force", *Philosophy* 64, no. 244 (1988): 233–38, doi: 10.1017/S0031819100043382.

[246] TM, 272.

[247] TM, 277.

[248] My distinction between the inevitability and the necessity of prejudices is related to Charles Lamore's distinction between our psychological and epistemological dependence on historicity. Our psychological dependence indicates the unavoidability of prejudices which are already present when we begin to reason. The epistemological dependence refers to the fact

hermeneutic circle is the process by which our prejudices are tested as they come into contact with objects of interpretation. Prejudices shift when they are inadequate to the interpretive task. When one is 'pulled up short by the text',[249] it is an indication that the underlying operative prejudice is problematic. This is what Gadamer refers to as 'foregrounding';[250] through this process, prejudices become explicit and can then be assessed and altered.[251]

The central issue of hermeneutics for Gadamer is application. Gadamer argues that legal and theological hermeneutics are exemplars of interpretation; in both cases, interpretation is not the achievement of right understanding, but the application of the text to a present situation. 'A law does not exist in order to be understood historically, but to be concretized in its legal validity by being interpreted.'[252] This helps to clarify Gadamer's conception of *Horizontverschmelzung*. Application does not mean enacting the ethics of the text, but rather recognising that the claim made by the text on the interpreter in their present situation.[253] This is true of the historian, whose job is not simply the establishing of fact, but 'understanding the significance of what he finds'.[254] This can only be done by recognising the application claim made by the *Sache* on the historian (to judge a certain historical character in a particular way, for example), and will involve the horizonal prejudices of the interpreter.[255] Application means that, in the process of hermeneutics, the

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that any appraisal of our prejudices must be accomplished on the basis of our other prejudices. Charles Lamore, "Tradition, Objectivity, and Hermeneutics", in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, 150.

[249] TM, 270.

[250] TM, 271.

[251] Gadamer's conception of prejudice reflects his concern with the linguisticality of understanding. However, we could bring the idea into contact with current discourse by drawing parallels between the inchoacy of prejudice and what Schaefer refers to as the affective processes which occur 'beneath the rose', or Taves's description of 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' unconscious processes. Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 20; Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 62.

[252] TM, 307.

[253] This helps respond to Warnke's criticism: 'why should we not move away from tradition and fill in the "etc." by adding Hitler and Stalin?' Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 154.

[254] TM, 334.

[255] For an excellent critical engagement with the application of hermeneutics, see Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 91–106. James Risser brings further clarity to the issue by arguing that Gadamer casts hermeneutics as the successor to the Greek notion of φρόνεσις. James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 105–9.

interpreter cannot disregard themselves or their situation but must recognise the claim being made upon them by the text. This prevents prejudice or tradition from monopolising the process of interpretation. Gadamer insists that the interpreter is always 'guided by the things themselves'; this makes possible the experience of 'being pulled up short by the text'.[256] The *Sache* involved in interpretation is not wholly passive, so the interpreter does not have an interpretive monopoly.[257]

Language and World

There is a progression in *Truth and Method*, which starts with aesthetics, moves through historical and literary criticism, and turns finally to language and human experience as a whole.[258] Gadamer justifies the universality of hermeneutics through his conception of the fundamentally linguistic nature of human experience. For Gadamer, the fact that human thought and experience is mediated through language is not a barrier to true understanding of the world in itself, but precisely the means by which understanding is possible. Consequently, the jurisdiction of hermeneutics must be extended to include all human experience. Gadamer argues first that all understanding is verbal, and second that the world is constituted linguistically. Together, these arguments are intended to justify the extension of hermeneutics to all human experience.[259]

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[256] TM, 269–70.

[257] The role of the *Sache* in the interpretation process offers resistance to Jürgen Habermas and Brice Wachterhauser, who both fear the threat of a false consensus achieved through psuedo-communication or force, respectively. Habermas, "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality"; Wachterhauser, "Prejudice, Reason and Force". For an excellent contemporary summary of the debate between Habermas and Gadamer, see Jack Mendelson, "The Habermas-Gadamer Debate", *New German Critique*, no. 18 (Autumn 1979): 44–73, doi: 10.2307/487850.
We do not have space to consider the role of question and answer here; the ability of a text to ask questions into the interpreter's horizon is another means by which *Horizontverschmelzung* operates. See Peter Fristedt, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Relativity of Truth and Meaning", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 18, no. 4 (2010): 473–92, doi: 10.1080/09672559.2010.503348.

[258] Philippe Eberhard, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Basic Interpretation with Some Theological Implications* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 98–99.

[259] We do not have space to develop fully Gadamer's arguments here; for his extended justification, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem", in *The Hermeneutic Tradition*, 156; and TM, 389–444.

Gadamer resists any view that would separate human language from that which it describes. Language is world-creating and there is an 'intimate unity of word and subject matter'.[260]

> Not only is the world world only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it. Thus, that language is originally human means at the same time that man's being-in-the-world is primordially linguistic.[261]

Gadamer's 'world' echoes Husserl's *Lebenswelt* and describes the horizon within which the human being acts and understands. Since all understanding is linguistic, the world is constructed according to language; hence 'a language-view is a worldview'.[262] Human beings find themselves in a linguistically constituted world that is already interpreted. [263] Because language is 'the mode of the whole human experience of the world' hermeneutics must be regarded as universally operative. There is an important relationship with prejudice worth noting:

> [t]here is always a world already interpreted, already organized in its basic relations, into which experience steps as something new, upsetting what has led our expectations and undergoing reorganization itself in the upheaval.[264]

Because the human is already in-the-world, the linguistic structures of understanding are already in place and operational; whatever phenomenon is given to the human will accordingly be prejudicially interpreted.

Gadamer specifically resists the potential for linguistic determinism, arguing instead that language 'contains various possibilities for saying the same thing'.[265] The crucial concept here is dialogue, which acts as a counterpoint to the linguistic constitution of the world. The 'true being'[266] of language is not in

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[260] TM, 404.
[261] TM, 440.
[262] Ibid.
[263] TM, 440.
[264] Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem", 156.
[265] TM, 441–42.
[266] TM, 443.

some system of referential signs, but in the back-and-forth of dialogue, which occurs in-situation and is related to the community life of the speaker.[267] Dialogue enables the possibility of *Horizontverschmelzung* since dialogue roots the hermeneutic event in intersubjective social reality. Language is thus inherently playful, exhibiting a back-and-forth movement which nevertheless requires the full and serious involvement of the participants.[268] Understanding can occur whenever two conversation partners are willing to engage in open dialogue with one another about a subject.[269] This takes place through the speculative structure of language, which has two related meanings. First, Gadamer uses 'speculative' to refer to a 'mirror relation', which is 'like a duplication that is still only the one thing'.[270] The speculative nature of language prohibits any philosophy of language according to which the word is a distinct thing from the object to which it refers. Instead, there is a unity between the word and its referent, guaranteeing the ability for words to relate to things. Second, speculation allows the word to refer to the interpreter's broader horizon. The whole of language itself is a 'speculative medium',[271] which means that words spoken 'express a relation to the whole of being'.[272] A word reflects not only the object to which it refers, but the whole of language itself which, as we have seen, constitutes the whole world of the interpreter.[273]

Mediality

Given the range of models and ideas present in Gadamer's description of hermeneutics, it is unsurprising that many commentators have sought to find an interpretative key in his writings. One of the most persuasive examples of this is Philippe Eberhard's *The Middle Voice in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, which presents mediality, or the middle voice, as the key to understanding

[267] Here we are reminded of Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of language-games.
[268] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Man and Language", in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. David E. Linge (Berkley: University of California Press, 1976), 66.
[269] For an extended account of the function of dialogue and its relationship with the concepts of play, horizon and language, see Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*.
[270] TM, 461.
[271] TM, 469.
[272] TM, 465.
[273] Peter Fristedt has shown how the speculative structure of language, and specifically the gap between being and presentation, enables communication across radically different worldviews. Fristedt, "Philosophical Hermeneutics", 473–92.

Gadamer.[274] I will briefly outline and evaluate his argument – beginning with a definition of the middle voice and proceeding to consider Eberhard's arguments in relation to play, *Horizontverschmelzung*, and the speculative structure of language – before exploring the implications of what we have achieved so far to faith, revelation and religious experience.

Eberhard describes the middle voice as a third voice which sits 'between the active and passive'.[275] After a broad review of grammatical literature, he uses examples from Ancient Greek and then English to illustrate the function of the middle voice. A key example in Greek is the verb "to marry". In the active voice, this is γαμέω; in the middle voice it is γαμέομαι. While γαμέω carries the active sense of a subject in control of the process who takes a spouse, γαμέομαι is focussed on the process of marriage within which the subject acts and is acted upon. This is different to a passive rendering, which would indicate the subject's lack of control; rather, the subject is an agent in a process within which they are themselves involved.[276] Another Greek example, pertinent to hermeneutics, is the verb διαλέγομαι, "to dialogue". The partners in a dialogue are neither active nor passive, but medially involved.

> The internal *diathesis* suggests that the subject remains subject while being part of the process that happens to him or her. The innovation is that by stressing the locality of the subject within the process, the middle voice allows one to think of the subject in nonexclusive terms: the issue is not the division of labor between the doer and the done to. The question is not who the subject is but where he or she is.

Again, the middle voice is more concerned with the location of the subject: specifically, that the subject is not performing a process from the outside, but acting from within, affecting and being affected.[277]

English does not have middle voiced verb form, but there are various constructions which have a medial sense. Eberhard uses the examples of "I am sorry" (with the sense of "I am saddened" as opposed to "I apologise") and "I

[274] Eberhard, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*.
[275] Ibid., 9.
[276] Ibid., 16.
[277] Ibid., 17.

dream that I go to Paris" (in contrast to "I dream of going to Paris") as medial expressions in English where the subject "I" both effects the action and is affected by it; I act within a process within which I am involved.[278] A useful example is the "get-passive", such as "to get married". This is syntactically a passive, but there is no question of who is doing the marrying (as opposed to "to be married", where one might ask, "by whom?"). As with the Greek γαμέομαι, one who gets married is involved in the performance of the action by which they are affected.[279] For Eberhard, these examples illustrate the unique function of the middle voice:

> …the middle voice as internal *diathesis* introduces a different way of thinking about the subject and the verb. The subject/object dichotomy and the focus on the subject fade. The middle voice underscores the location of the subject with respect to the verbal process. Locality not identity is key. The subject… is not jettisoned but remains subject within the process that happens to him or her.[280]

The middle voice has two characteristics: it refers to a verb for which the subject is affected by their own action, and it shifts the focus from the subject/object distinction to the inside/outside question of the location of the subject. Both characteristics are pertinent to Eberhard, although he stresses the second.

With a brief explanation of the middle voice in place, we will now review Eberhard's tripartite argument that mediality is the key term in Gadamer's hermeneutics, examining the concepts of play, *Horizontverschmelzung* and the speculation of language. The mediality of play derives from the way players engage in it. Eberhard argues that, for Gadamer, '[p]lay, as the way of being of the work of art, precisely conveys that to be involved in something means to also be wrapped up in it'.[281] This is confirmed by Gadamer himself:

> Hence the mode of being of play is not such that, for the game to be played, there must be a subject who is behaving playfully. Rather, the

[278] Ibid., 18–19.
[279] Ibid., 19–20.
[280] Ibid., 20.
[281] Ibid., 66.

> primordial sense of playing is the medial one. Thus we say that something is "playing" somewhere or at some time, that something is going on or that something is happening.[282]

The medial sense of play, with the notion of play as something which happens or occurs rather than is done or performed, is more apparent in the German. The phrases that Weinsheimer and Marshall translate as 'something is going on' ('*etwas im Spiele ist*') and 'something is happening' ('*etwas sich abspielt*') are much more clearly related to play (*Spiel*) in German than in English. English does have this relation in the verbal phrase "to play out" (such as the playing out of an event), which refers to a happening or occurrence and carries the sense of an indeterminate (perhaps back-and-forth) process, which has its being in the playing out, or the happening, of the event. An event is not performed by a subject, and yet the actions of actors remain a key part of the event. A battle, for example, is played out: it is not performed by a soldier (with "soldier" in the nominative case and "battle" in the accusative), and yet the actions of the soldier contribute something essential to the battle (without any soldiers fighting, there is no battle). This medial understanding of the event mirrors Eberhard's reading of Gadamer: 'A play is not an object that a subject does. Game means playing. The emphasis is on the verbal process that befalls the player. The verb is first.'[283] This does not demote the subject, but redirects the emphasis: the question of play is less about who initiates or engages with play behaviour, and more concerned with the location of the subject within the process.[284] In this sense, Gadamer's play is medial.

The fusion of horizons also occurs in the middle voice. This derives from the nature of the horizon not as an object that the subject possesses, but as a dynamic viewpoint which the subject inhabits.

> The horizon encompasses the subject. Its changeable nature suggests that the horizon is encompassing rather than an encompassment. Far

[282] TM, 104.
[283] Eberhard, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, 69.
[284] Ibid., 71.

> from being a static limitation of the subject, the horizon is a dynamic process that involves the subject.[285]

This mirrors our earlier insistence that Gadamer's horizon ought to be read as a dynamic viewpoint, rather than a limit on visibility. A middle voiced rendering of "to have a horizon" refocuses the discussion onto the locality of the event, rather than the identity of the subject, thus establishing a dynamic, mutually affective relationship between horizon and subject, and the possibility of *Horizontverschmelzung*. This is best exemplified in Eberhard's discussion of prejudice. Rather than being something that we have, Eberhard casts prejudgements as the locality within which understanding takes place.

> [Prejudgements] are the horizon we bring along and, therefore, they are the condition and limits of our understanding. We are within this horizon and not in charge of it. Like the horizon, our prejudgements constantly change as we change. […]The medial interpretation of fusion of horizon(s) underlines that prejudgements make us what we are without totally determining us. In fact, we do not have prejudgements. We are our prejudgements.[286]

Eberhard captures the complex relationship between prejudice and subject, whereby the subject neither owns nor is owned by their prejudices. Rather, the subject is located *within* their prejudices, and within their horizon, and it is this locality, rather than any discussion regarding possession, that enables and informs understanding. Hence *Abhebung*, which occurs to prejudices as they are tested in interpretation, captures the medial relationship between the subject and their prejudices better than any English translation. Often translated as "foregrounding", Eberhard notes that the German word has less emphasis on the action of the subject, and has a sense of the subject allowing a prejudice to become manifest.[287] The subject still has a role to play, but it is a role located within a process that they themselves are affected by. With a medial interpretation of having (or being in) a horizon, the concept of

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[285] Ibid., 78.
[286] Eberhard, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer's Hermeneutics,* 85.
[287] Ibid., 86.

Horizontverschmelzung becomes much clearer. Because a middle voiced *Horizontverschmelzung* refocuses the processes away from the subject, the complex relationship between subject and horizon is revealed.

> The horizon shifts as we move in it, but we can climb a mountain to see farther. The subject is not passively submitted to the horizon but medially subjected to it. He or she can make efforts to see farther, to get a clearer picture, to know more and, therefore, to broaden his or her knowledge.[288]

The horizon and the subject are mutually influential; what is important is that the process of understanding and interpretation is predicated on the subject being located *in* a horizon. The subject does not use their prejudices as a possession in order to understand an external *Sache*; rather, the subject is always already within a horizon and the event of understanding is a process which the subject acts within and is affected by.

For Eberhard, the middle voice in Gadamer's hermeneutics reaches its climax in the speculation of language, in which both senses of mediality – the focus on the verb as a process, and the location of the subject within the process – are illuminated. Language is not an object or tool to be used by humans, but a process which encompasses them, and a medium in which understanding occurs. Two passages will elucidate this position.

> Mediality refers to an encompassing event that is subject together with the subject within it. Its hallmark is a focus on the location of the subject with reference to the process of which he or she is *also* subject instead of the active/passive relation between subject and object.[289]

> Language, dialogue, coming to an understanding, is an encompassing life process in which we live ourselves out and receive access to our world. It is not a means by which communication takes place but the

[288] Ibid., 88.
[289] Ibid., 100.

> medium within which we understand because it is in the process of language that our world discloses itself.[290]

As the medium within which understanding occurs and humans live, language exemplifies mediality. Gadamer specifically rejects an extrinsic model of language whereby the human exists outside of language, using it as a tool with which to render the *Sache* intelligible.[291]

> It can be stated as a fundamental principle that wherever words assume a mere sign function, the original connection between speaking and thinking, with which we are concerned, has been changed into an instrumental relationship.[292]

A medial approach to language, as Eberhard identifies in Gadamer, resists the dichotomies of subject/object, human/language, and language/world , thus circumventing various epistemological problems by placing the human being within the process of language, which is the medium by which they come to understanding. This does not subsume the subject to some linguistic idealism, but balances the position of the subject with the process of language. The subject who speaks and understands within language is affected by language and affects the language that they occupy. In Eberhard's words, '[t]he point of the medial interpretation of hermeneutics is precisely to bring forth the balance between the process of understanding and the understanding subject within it.'[293]

Eberhard's medial interpretation of Gadamer suggests the possibility of a productive approach to religious experience. An initial opening onto this discussion can be found in what Eberhard refers to as the 'mediality of faith'.[294] A medial interpretation of faith goes beyond what Eberhard refers to as the Protestant and Catholic understandings of faith (roughly corresponding to passive and active conceptions, respectively) and offers an interpretation whereby faith is reconceived as a life process, within which the believer lives

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[290] Ibid., 102.
[291] TM, 103, 425.
[292] TM, 432.
[293] Eberhard, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, 107.
[294] Ibid., 204.

and receives faith. Crucially, a medial understanding 'shifts the attention from faith as object to faith as a process'.[295] A lot turns on Eberhard's analysis of the phrase "I believe", which he argues currently means to believe in a truth proposition, but originally referred to an orientation of life. Particularly noticeable in the sacrament of baptism, the claim to faith means much more than a claim to believe the truth-claims of Christianity and encompasses a pledge of allegiance to a person or organisation and to live in a certain way. This is mirrored in the roots of the Latin word *sacramentum* (the root of the English "sacrament"), which was a pledge of allegiance taken by Roman soldiers to the Emperor. Returning to the middle voiced exemplar of marriage, Eberhard writes: 'To get married does not mean to hold true to the institution of marriage... It means to get involved in the process of marriage and married life.'[296] Put simply, faith is much like marriage. Faith is medial, since the locus of its attention is not the subject who has or receives the object of faith, but the event of faith, which the believer lives within and is affected by. Rather than speaking of "having faith", "receiving faith", or "offering faith", an English rendering of Eberhard's conception of faith might employ the get-passive characteristic of marriage: one "gets faithed".[297] This is obviously not the place to engage more broadly in the grace and nature debates of twentieth century Catholic theology; nevertheless, our discussion suggests that further research in the direction of Eberhard's medial faith would be productive on this front.

Revelation

It is testament to the importance of Gadamer's hermeneutics that his work has been influential in a variety of settings, including Biblical interpretation,[298] qualitative research in nursing,[299] and science education.[300] We will use brief

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[295] Ibid., 206.
[296] Ibid., 210.
[297] Some Christian traditions might render this as "gets born again".
[298] For example, Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*; Nathan Eric Dickman, "Between Gadamer and Ricoeur: Preserving Dialogue in the Hermeneutical Arc for the Sake of a God Who Speaks and Listens", *Sophia* 53, no. 4 (2014): 553–73, doi: 10.1007/s11841-013-0402-0.
[299] Linda L. Binding and Dianne M. Tapp, "Human Understanding in Dialogue: Gadamer's Recovery of the Genuine", *Nursing Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (2008): 121–30, doi: 10.1111/j.1466-769X.2007.00338.x.
[300] Anniina Leiviskä, "Finitude, Fallibilism and Education Towards Non-Dogmatism: Gadamer's Hermeneutics in Science Education", *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 45, no. 5 (2013): 516–30, doi: 10.1080/00131857.2012.732012.

outlines of some of these discussions as springboards into our main aim, which is religious experience.

Anthony Thiselton is a New Testament scholar whose work on New Testament hermeneutics exploits the capacity of Gadamer's thought to capture the complex process involved in Biblical interpretation. In an insightful analysis of the parables of Jesus and a survey of the relevant literature, Thiselton shows the impact of a listener's horizon on their interpretation of a parable. A pertinent example is the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector (Luke 18:9-14). Key insights can be gained from recognising the historical horizon of the parable (through historical criticism), such as the relative dignity of the Pharisee and the tax-collector in first-century Palestine, the customs of the society, and the expectations that the original hearers would have had regarding the characters. Historical criticism can offer a deeper insight into what the parable would have meant to the hearers at the time. However, without recognition of the horizon of contemporary interpreters, the effect of the parable is distorted. Unlike a first-century Palestinian, contemporary Christians who exist within a long tradition of Christianity associate Pharisaism with sinful hypocrisy and expect Jesus' verdict in favour of the tax-collector (even a reader coming to Luke for the first time will have their expectations set up by the trajectory of the rest of the gospel); rather than being challenged by Jesus' punchline, the contemporary reader has their expectations confirmed. The function of the parable has been inverted. 'A parable which originally had the function of unsettling the hearer and overturning his values now serves to confirm him in the values which he already has.'[301]

Here we see the influence of the interpreter's horizon on the process of interpretation: in Thiselton's example, a difference of horizon can completely invert the meaning of the text. Thiselton employs Gadamer's *Horizontverschmelzung* as a concept which will aid good interpretation of the text. A fruitful engagement between the text, the prejudices of tradition, and

[301] Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 12–16.

the present brings about *Horizontverschmelzung* and allows the interpreter to understand the text; indeed, understanding by any other means is impossible.[302]

For Thiselton, Gadamer's approach to language is a restatement in different terms of his approach to *Horizontverschmelzung*.[303] In Thiselton's view, there is common ground between Gadamer and the new hermeneutics of Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling: all three resist any formulation of language as a tool for communicating mental concepts. Rather, Thiselton argues, Gadamer and Ebeling are united in 'insisting that the real problem of language was not to find a new *means* of speech, but to bring about a new *coming* to speech'.[304] We can see resonances of Gadamer in Ebeling's words, '[t]he word is not really the object of understanding… [r]ather the word is what opens up and mediates understanding'.[305] Jesus communicates with his hearers not by communicating a mental content from far off through the use of a word, but by entering the language-world of his listeners and speaking from within. As Fuchs argues, Jesus speaks parables that touch the everyday lives of his first-century Palestinian audience. However, this is not simply as a 'point of contact' intended as a useful illustration to engage the listener; rather, Jesus enters the world of his listeners and speaks the language that they speak.[306] Fuchs uses the metaphor of the home. In the home one speaks a certain familial language, using private words and meanings that are understood by other members of the family. This familial language is not used as a point of contact to allow understanding between family members, but used precisely because there is already understanding within the home.[307] In Gadamer's terms, one speaks within the language-view of the home, each word bringing at once its object

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[302] Ibid., 315. There is a tendency in Thiselton to present *Horizontverschmelzung* with the sense of horizons being melted together, with any tension dissolved. Although our discussion of Gadamer thus far indicates that this is a misrepresentation of Gadamer, Thiselton does conclude that Gadamer holds together fusion and tension, which mitigates some of our concerns. See Ibid., 317–319.
[303] Ibid., 310.
[304] Ibid., 337 (original emphasis).
[305] Gerhard Ebeling, "Word of God and Hermeneutic", in *New Frontiers in Theology: Discussions Among Continental and American Theologians*, ed. James M. Robinson. and John B. Cobb, trans. James W. Leitch, James W., vol. II: The New Hermeneutic (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 93.
[306] Ernst Fuchs, "The New Testament and the Hermeneutical Problem", in *New Frontiers in Theology*, 126.
[307] Ibid., 124.

and the whole of the language into focus. By entering into the world of the hearer, Jesus is able to present the truth of the parable. In the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16), the shock of the apparent injustice of the landowner's actions allows the presentation of truth.[308] The speculative structure of language that Jesus has entered by describing a familiar situation has been subverted by the unexpected conclusion. Jesus' hearers can come to an understanding of this teaching about grace that would be utterly inaccessible to them had Jesus not entered their language-world and then introduced dissonance to the speculative structure. To use another of Gadamer's models, Jesus speaks within the horizon of his listeners, according to their prejudices, then, through the introduction of the *Sache*, demonstrates the inadequacy of those prejudices, prompting an adjustment.

How does this help us with divine communication? The above discussion of parables is congruent with our examples of divine communication since they concern Jesus linguistically communicating within the lives of his followers. The insight offered by Gadamer's theories of language and *Horizontverschmelzung* suggests a useful model for understanding these communicative religious experiences. We might formulate it thus: In communication, God enters the language-world of the hearer and speaks truth within their horizon, bringing this truth into being (by *Darstellung*) through language. However, this communication is guided by the truth of God's word (which is the *Sache*), which cannot be adequately comprehended by the prejudices of the hearer. As a result, a fusion of horizons occurs, bringing the hearer into a closer comprehension and understanding of the truth spoken. Let us see how this description might apply to some of our examples.

It is first worth noting the effect of language. Since our methodology has selected for religious experience events that exhibit linguistic communication, it is no surprise that all of our examples take place within language. What is more striking is the correlation between linguistic experiences and experiences that lead to new understanding. We can compare Starbuck's case (A) – which did not fulfil Marion's description of saturation – with cases that did, such as

[308] Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 345.

St Teresa's orisons. In Starbuck's cases, there is a 'clear thought' in the mind, expressed linguistically, 'they are not here, they are gone'. Although 'no word was spoken', the communication from God was received linguistically.[309] Compare this with St Teresa, who 'neither sees, hears, nor understands'.[310] This is not to say that there is no experience of truth in Teresa's orisions; indeed James writes that 'the truth remains so strongly impressed on her',[311] and quotes her statement that God 'made me comprehend in what way one God can be in three persons'. Consequently, it would be helpful here to distinguish between knowledge and understanding. Teresa comes to see new truths without necessarily understanding them.[312] The language used to describe Teresa's orisions is the language of knowledge and sight, rather than understanding and hearing. The '*truth* remains so strongly impressed'; 'she *sees it clearly* later'; James refers to '*truth* communicable in mystical ways'; Teresa writes, 'it was granted to me *to perceive* in one instant how all things are seen and contained in God' and continues, '*the view* was so subtile [sic] and delicate that *the understanding cannot grasp it'*; and later, 'Our Lord made me comprehend in what way it is that God can be in three persons. He made me *see it so clearly*…'.[313] Where nothing to be understood is communicated, the language of sight is used. This reflects Gadamer's comments on the 'priority of hearing' for hermeneutics. For Gadamer, language is a function of hearing since verbal experience is primarily experienced through this sense (even a silent reader listens to an "inner voice").[314] Hence understanding is in the realm of hearing.[315]

A comparison between Luhrmann's cases offers similar insights. Although Kate (I) describes her communication from God as 'not an audible thing', aural language remains prominent. She discusses what she was '*listening* for'; she

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[309] *Varieties*, 278.
[310] *Varieties*, 446.
[311] Ibid.
[312] We might understand this with reference to Blum, "The Science of Consciousness and Mystical Experience".
[313] *Varieties*, 446–48 (my emphasis).
[314] TM, 458.
[315] For further comments on the place of hearing in Gadamer's thought, see Eberhard, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, 132; and Binding and Tapp, "Human Understanding in Dialogue", 126.

'expected to *hear back* from God', who would '*say something* to [her]'; it would be a 'small, still *voice'*, like 'the impression *words* make on a page'.[316] These communicative events, where Kate seeks understanding from God, have an aural character and occur within language. As with Starbuck's case above, Kate regards understanding to be a linguistic event; anything God says will be relayed within her speculative linguistic structure, offering the possibility of deriving meaning from what is experienced. Again, a comparison is useful – this time with Luhrmann's recount of a pastor's experience (W). Again, the aural language is replaced, but this time by descriptions that are affective rather than visual. Hence she describes 'weeping', and she 'felt a massive and awesome sense of the presence of God'.[317] The prominence of affect and emotion (in contrast to sight) in this account is perhaps explained by the emphasis placed on God's role in the emotional lives of believers that Luhrmann observed in the churches in which she was involved.[318] There is a cognitive aspect to this experience: 'I remember thinking that I was so in love with Jesus at that moment that no one else on the planet could come close.' However, this is distinct from what is received from God, which remains primarily affective and much more to do with 'presence' than understanding. Even granting that there is cognitive reflection involved in the experience, what the subject comes away with is a reaffirmation of a feeling of love and the presence of God, rather than any specifiable new understanding.

Other paradigms of communicative experience are equally well explained with the support of Gadamer. Philip's encounter with the eunuch is initiated by a word of command from the Spirit (Acts 8:29). While it is unclear whether this word is externally audible, it is certainly linguistic and within the realm of hearing. On hearing the word, Philip understands – and, to return to Gadamer, we know that Philip understands because he interprets an application and obeys the command. The conversion of Paul (Acts 9:1-22) is an example *par excellence* of *Horizontverschmelzung* in divine communication. When Paul encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus, he is spoken to in language that he

[316] WGTB, 69 (my emphasis).
[317] WGTB, 127.
[318] For example, WGTB, 180, 130. Additionally, this example illustrates a passage in which Luhrmann describes a pattern of emotional practice she calls 'emotional cascades'.

understands (v. 4); further, Paul recognises his interlocutor as Lord, asking 'Who are you, Lord?' (v. 5). Jesus has entered Paul's language-view and spoken into his horizon: Paul's question indicates that he already recognises the Lordship of the one speaking before he is explicitly told. His horizon interprets the dramatic appearance of his interlocutor: the one appearing here is appropriately referred to as Lord. A speech-event then occurs in Paul's horizon which foregrounds the inadequacy of Paul's prejudices: 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting' (v. 5). This speech-event combines two concepts that could not be combined within Paul's original horizon, those of Jesus and Lord; until now, the speculative structure of Paul's language had placed "Jesus" in antithesis to "Lord". Hence Paul's horizon has to shift in order to come to an understanding of the truth now being presented. Paul understands what he has heard: he goes to Damascus as instructed (v. 8), and later begins to proclaim Jesus as Son of God and Christ (vv. 20-22). Understanding is outworked in application: Paul adjusts his actions to align with a broader horizon which encompasses a synthesis between "Lord" and "Jesus".

We must be careful to avoid a one-sided view of Gadamer in which the horizon dominates. As we have seen, too much emphasis on the movement of horizons can obscure the playful and dialogical nature of Gadamer's hermeneutics. As Warnke argues, dialogue protects Gadamer from a projectionist view of hermeneutics whereby the prejudices of one's own horizon determine in advance how something is understood.[319] This advantage is employed by Linda Binding and Dianne Tapp when they argue that Gadamer's notion of the genuine conversation offers possibilities for qualitative research in the human sciences. This approach can be beneficial in 'revealing one's biases, altering beliefs and challenging previous patterns of practice' while offering a 'stimulus for a more self-critical approach to one's entire practice'.[320] Nathan Dickman has applied these insights to Biblical interpretation, arguing that readers are addressed through dialogue with a text only in an 'existential hermeneutic' (as opposed to an 'exegetical

[319] Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 169.
[320] Binding and Tapp, "Human Understanding in Dialogue", 129.

hermeneutic').[321] Dickman argues with Gadamer and Ricoeur against trying to psychologically reconstruct the original author of a text and maintains that the dialogue we have is with the text rather than the author. The author 'behind the text' is fixed and cannot answer; the author 'before the text' can listen and respond. Consequently, '[t]his fabricated God may not be worthy of dogmatic commitment, but it is the God with whom we can really engage in reading the Bible'.[322] Dickman perhaps overstates his case here: arguing for the death of the God behind the text seems premature. Even if a psychological reconstruction is impossible, it does not follow that such a being does not exist at all. Further, if one is engaging within a belief system that accords Biblical authorship to God is some capacity (as Dickman is), then the situation is more complex. In contrast with Anselm's writing (Dickman's other example), we could plausibly posit that the author of the Bible *is* present in some way and able to dialogue with a reader. Nevertheless, Dickman is correct to highlight the function of a dialogic engagement with Scripture. Not only does a dialogue with the Bible offer an application that asks normative questions of the reader, it also guides the communication between reader and text, resulting in an enriched understanding of a subject-matter.[323]

James has examples of dialogue, and we will consider a few. As well as examples F, G and H from Chapter One, we include two more.

X) I talk to him as a companion in prayer and praise, and our communion is delightful. He answers me again and again, often in words so clearly spoken that it seems my outer ear must have carried the tone, but generally in strong mental impressions. Usually a text of Scripture, unfolding some new view of him and his love for me, and care for my safety.[324]

[321] Dickman, "Between Gadamer and Ricoeur", 564-68.
[322] Ibid., 569.
[323] Ibid., 566–68.
[324] *Varieties*, 81.

Y) God is quite real to me. I talk to him and often get answers. Thoughts sudden and distinct from any I have been entertaining come to my mind after asking God for his direction.[325]

This brief survey demonstrates a range of back-and-forth dialogues reported to have been had with God. Examples F, G and H all contain a verbal back-and-forth between God and believer, while X and Y offer general comments on the experience of regular dialogue with God. Notably, however, most of these examples seem to resist a conception of dialogue or conversation which is guided by the understanding of the *Sache*. Only in example X might we suggest that a new understanding occurs, through the 'unfolding of some new view of him…'. In the main, new understanding is not the focus of these examples. Rather, the function of these divine communicative events is closer to divine command – a clear command in F, and interrogatives with a strong imperative tone in G and H – and, to a lesser extent, the presence of God (specifically X: 'our communion is delightful').

We see something similar in Luhrmann. She comments on Kate's experience (I): 'These days Kate experiences prayer as a conversation. She talks; God listens and responds. She says sometimes she thinks he's guiding her thoughts.'[326] Equally, another subject, Hannah (J), comments that learning how to hear from God involves 'learn[ing] how to speak and listen and respond'. Luhrmann notes that Hannah 'was talking to God casually and easily throughout the day, asking him about what she should do, telling him what she had been thinking.'[327] Hannah describes speaking to God, 'I'm asking my unconscious – which is really the Holy Spirit – "What do you think about this idea?" And I recognise that it's not me, but God inside me, that I'm having a conversation with.'[328] Again, the dialogical aspect is unmistakable, yet the emphasis is on the relational and presencing aspect of divine communication. The shift from James to Luhrmann away from command and towards relationship may reflect cultural differences of their subjects, yet both present

[325] *Varieties*, 81–82.
[326] WGTB, 69.
[327] WGTB, 81.
[328] WGTB, 83.

an interest in lived human life as opposed to gaining new understanding. At this point, we must heed the warnings recounted in Chapter One against an overemphasis on language.[329] In light of this scholarship, we would be unwise to go all the way with Gadamer and accept that human life is fundamentally linguistic. However, it is worth noting that Gadamer's primary concern is with understanding. Insofar as we are concerned with linguistically epistemic phenomena – and our interest in divine communication indicates that we are – we need not be too concerned with Gadamer's own overemphasis on language.

Conclusion

What advantage does Gadamer have in helping us to understand divine communication? *Horizontverschmelzung*, and the function of tradition and prejudice, allows for the recognition that the subject of religious experience is not dislocated but exists in a situation which affects their response. This is an advance on Marion, for whom there is nothing that can distinguish between different receivers of divine communication. For Marion, there is no reason that revelation would manifest itself differently to different people; for Gadamer, this is to be expected. Gadamer's hermeneutics also gives the receiver capacity for interpretation, something ruled out by Marion. The role of prejudice in reasoning – recognising salience and giving value to certain things over others – is mirrored in the reception of experience. Gadamer would allow us to distinguish between a Buddhist and a Christian experience, since we would expect them to have qualitative differences that would be picked up by the prejudicial expectations and assumptions of the receiver. Further, the concept of fusion protects the receiver from being in thrall to their background beliefs. *Horizontverschmelzung* precludes a total projectionism and requires some guidance by the *Sache*. This offers some initiative to the revelatory phenomenon, which will resist being interpreted in certain ways. The function of the hermeneutic circle allows for an initial interpretation of a religious experience to give the phenomenon purchase on the life of the receiver, without ceding to them total control. Gadamer also helps us to make sense of religious conversion. We noted in Chapter Two that Marion's account of

[329] For example, Wynn, *Emotional Experience*; Blum, "The Science of Consciousness and Mystical Experience"; and Schaefer, *Religious Affects*.

revelation offers no resources that would make sense of a conversion experience since, on his account, the caller must remain anonymous and there is no way to evaluate between different religious interpretations. Gadamer offers resources that can allow for an experience from an alien worldview to be simultaneously rendered relevant to the receiver and yet still open new possibilities of belief and understanding to the receiver. This is a serious benefit for his account, since many experiences of divine communication are also conversion experiences. Only a Gadamerian approach can account for the normativity of divine communication experiences identified above.

Despite these advantages, limits begin to appear when we consider dialogue. For Gadamer, understanding is dialogical and arises through the mutual conversation of two partners. This seems not to occur in our examples of divine communication: most dialogue we have observed is not directed towards understanding, but is much more interested in the concrete life of the believer. On this basis, we might suggest that a focus on understanding in divine communicative experiences is too narrow. This does not reverse the benefits of Gadamer observed in the previous paragraph, and we could perhaps portray understanding in a broader sense: a command-based or relational dialogue must be understood by the receiver as such. However, we must be careful not to read an understanding event into cases where it is not present. Rather, we may settle on accepting that *Horizontverschmelzung* offers insight into the receptive and interpretative processes of religious experience, but query the value of understanding as the key concept. This suggests that we should move away from a model of understanding as the reception of a piece of knowledge, and divine communication as the passing of understanding from God to the human. Rather, understanding is a playful, communicative event – and divine communication involves relationality expressed through articulable dialogue. Our examples of divine communication may be the other side of the coin to St Teresa's ineffable experiences of communion with God.

Finally, it is worth returning to Eberhard's discussion of mediality. We recall Eberhard's description of the mediality of faith which stresses the location of the believer within a life-process (akin to marriage), and mixture of activity

and passivity, whereby the believer acts within a process which affects them. A medial understanding of dialogue presents a complex process within which the dialogue partners are located. In dialogue we act and are affected. The same approach could be fruitful for divine communication. A medial understanding of religious experience would shift the emphasis away from what I do, receive, or understand, and onto my location within a process. Within this process, the *Sache* (God, or the truth of God's Revelation) is made present. Further, the medial experience will be something which I act upon and am affected by, striking the balance between activity and passivity. This allows room for hermeneutics: my prejudices and tradition are actively involved in the process without monopolising control. Contra Marion, the identity of the receiver does matter, but this does not threaten to produce a strong, constitutive subject. Rather, the receiver is neither actively controlling, nor passively receiving; they are medially involved in an experience in which God and human meaningfully interact, diminishing neither the autonomy of God, nor the individuality of the human.

Conclusion

What conclusions can we draw from this discussion? I suggest three.

First, the establishment of divine communication as a specific category of religious experience is itself an important result. Through the interrogation of various examples, we have seen that there is a kind of experience that, along with a certain affective quality, involves the communication of some articulable material. As well as the conceptual clarity that this conclusion offers studies into religious experience, it also allows us to make some tentative remarks regarding revelation. We recall the discussion in Chapter Two of the complex relationship between divine communication and revelation which, following Barth's incarnational understanding of revelation, posited divine communication as a category distinct from revelation which is nevertheless ultimately formed by and in service to revelation. God's diverse and historically particular communication with human subjects is the combined function of the immutability of God and the eternal truth of his revelation on the one hand, and the temporal, changeable nature of creation on the other. God can simultaneously speak one eternal message and engage in multiple, diverse communications. This conception of divine communication and revelation offers some theological warrant for the application of hermeneutics in theology and the study of religious experience. Our study has shown that the particular, historical situation of the human does have a bearing on what is received – and our discussion of revelation demonstrates that this position need not contradict Marion's contention that 'God reveals only Himself'.

The first conclusion leads to the second: that any discussion of divine communication is incomplete without engagement with hermeneutics. As Chapter Two demonstrated, a failure to engage in hermeneutics inhibits the human's ability to recognise or interpret what it is they have received. Foregoing hermeneutics ignores the humanity involved in religious experience, yet it is this humanity that makes religious experience a topic worthy of research. An uninterpretable religious experience has exactly no religious implications since, faced with some unnameable, incomprehensible Absolute,

there is no way to determine an appropriate response. Of course, we must be sensitive to the concerns of apophatic theology and treat with suspicion any approach which reckons it can completely define God. We must be guided by the namelessness inherent in the name YHWH. And yet this namelessness does not displace hermeneutics – even YHWH offers a means of interpreting His name. There are things we can begin to say of God (he is Good and not the Devil), and consequently there are responses which are more or less appropriate. Without hermeneutics, this discernment cannot begin, and so religion can have nothing to say. This is the other side of my discussion in Chapter One regarding normativity. From a human perspective, religious experiences – and divine communication experiences in particular – are interesting because they have normative implications, affecting the behavioural and doxastic life of many Christians (we refer back to the 600 million who can roughly be defined as Pentecostal). Without hermeneutics there is no normativity because normative applications are derived from interpretation of an experience. This is particularly exemplified in the case of conversion experiences. Religious conversion is the ultimate normative response to religious experience. The capacity for a phenomenon from an apparently alien worldview to have enough in common with a subject to have meaningful purchase on their life, but remain distinct enough to precipitate a sometimes radical life reorientation, brings into sharp relief the paradoxical nature of religious experience. At conversion, a human takes as normative for them the concerns of a foreign horizon. Recalling our discussion of Thiselton, we would not be far wrong to posit the parable as the archetype of divine communication.

Our final conclusion is to note the fruitfulness of the concept of mediality for discussions of divine communication. It can be tempting to regard divine communication as the transfer of some piece of information from God to the believer – and at times it has been necessary to lean in this direction in order to distinguish divine communication from other kinds of religious experience. However, if this is the only description we have, we will be sold short. As Eberhard argues, faith is medial. It does not primarily concern what I know or believe in, or even what I do; rather, it is a process within which I act and am acted upon. Like a marriage, I enter into faith and then continue to live on the

inside of a life-transforming process – and, like a marriage, this process consists in the involvement of more than one individual. Divine communication can be regarded as God's interaction with the believer from within the process of faith occupied by them both. It is informative that Gadamer give prominence to the concepts of dialogue and conversation. We previously noted problems with mapping the concept of dialogue directly onto experiences of divine communication. Nevertheless, we might find more luck if we regard the whole life of faith in dialogical terms – a medial, playful dialogue of life between human and God, which finds further expression through engagement with community. This faith conversation involves discrete moments of more concrete communication – we call these divine communication experiences – but they occur within the dialogue of religious life (and the experience of conversion might suggest that this divine dialogue is not limited to those who already claim religious faith – a suggestion that would put us in the company of Karl Rahner). The believer in conversation has an interpretive role, yet they are simultaneously meaningfully affected by the autonomous voice of God.

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