

Love is a given

By [Bruce Ellis Benson](#) in the [February 8, 2003](#) issue

In Review



Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness

Jean-Luc Marion
Stanford University Press

When Jean-Luc Marion's *God without Being* first appeared in translation in 1991, it was immediately clear to many that here was a new and prophetic voice in theology

and philosophy of religion. Since then Marion's influence has continued to increase. David Tracy helped introduce him to the English-speaking (particularly American) theological world, and he soon became a permanent visiting professor at the University of Chicago. He has also become a visiting professor in the philosophy department at Boston College in addition to teaching at the University of Paris.

Marion is first and foremost a philosopher, and his academic credentials are primarily those of a Descartes scholar. Increasingly, though, philosophers' interest in Marion has been directed toward explicitly religious works like *God without Being*. Certainly that religious interest was the primary reason for Marion's being invited to speak (and also participate in a discussion with Jacques Derrida) at the first Religion and Postmodernism conference at Villanova University in 1997.

The prophetic voice is usually a challenging voice, and Marion challenges basic assumptions of theology and philosophy. He does this in writing that is tough going, often technical and theoretical. Even though very practical concerns lie just beneath the surface, sometimes they're not easy to see. If the formula for becoming a "famous French philosopher" is that of demonstrating sheer brilliance, then Marion has the formula down pat—having learned it well from his teacher Derrida. *Being Given* is, in this respect (and many others), simply dazzling: it is a work of tremendous depth and highly original thought although hardly the sort of book one picks up casually and immediately understands. Moreover, Marion's thought is not merely inspired by phenomenology (which to many is difficult enough already) but propelled by startling revisions of some of its most difficult notions, particularly "givenness."

How does Marion challenge our thinking and practice? One might answer that question by pointing to three themes running throughout Marion's thought—idolatry, the gift and love. These themes are so closely linked in Marion that it is impossible to discuss one without the others. Marion's reflections on them are distinct in how he combines phenomenological and theological concerns so that theology (or, more accurately, revelation) becomes primary. Like the prophet who directs attention away from himself to the prophetic message, Marion wants to move away from focusing on the receiver—a focus that he thinks characterizes virtually all philosophy and theology—to that of the sender.

It is no coincidence, then, that the theme of "givenness" is central to his thought, and also that *Being Given* stands as the summation of his thinking to date. In

relentlessly pursuing this theme, Marion is certainly not alone. In effect, he takes over the prophetic mantle of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who draws attention to the ways in which the “other”—particularly the widow or orphan—disturbs our self-centered world and moves us to action. Levinas was a deeply religious thinker whose Judaism was always implicit in his philosophy (and explicit in his Talmudic commentaries). The Roman Catholic Marion, however, expressly turns to scripture, often giving breathtaking readings of familiar passages that question the very orientation of both philosophy and theology.

Some of the most remarkable of these readings are found in *God without Being*, a text concerned first and foremost with idolatry. In an earlier text, *The Idol and Distance*, Marion affirms Nietzsche’s famed account of the death of God, but takes it in the opposite direction of the “death of God” movement of the 1960s. For Marion, that death is not the death of a living “god” but the death of the “god of the philosophers.” Such a death signifies the end of any theology or philosophy (or, more technically, metaphysics) that assumes the possibility of categorizing or properly naming “God.” Like Nietzsche, Marion sees both philosophers and theologians as often “idolatrous” in the sense of creating God in their image and postulating God as the highest “being.”

In *God without Being*, Marion explores various ways of thinking of God as “beyond being.” He begins by drawing a marked contrast between the idol and the icon, a contrast for which he finds scriptural support. Whereas the idol is something that merely reflects our gaze, the icon points our sight to something beyond it and thus to something beyond ourselves that we cannot master. The ultimate “icon” is Christ himself, whom Paul describes in Colossians 1:15 as “the image [eikon] of the invisible God.” Marion works this out practically by saying that theology is “done” in the Eucharist. Just like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, it is at the moment when the bread is broken that we finally “see.” As he puts it, “the Word intervenes in person only in the eucharistic moment.”

All of this has to do with how the Word is “given” to us. In effect, there is a clash between the logos of philosophy and the Logos of the Gospel of John. For the ancient Greeks, logos (which can be translated as reason or order) is all about control: to understand something’s logos is to master it. But, since the logos of philosophy (not to mention that of theology) at least tends to originate in us, it usually turns out to be idolatrous. In opposition to this idolatrous logos, the Johannine Logos is not of this world and so is controlled by neither philosophy nor theology. Or, to put that another

way, this Logos is given.

In an important sense, Marion is merely taking the phenomenological orthodoxy seriously. And here we digress for just a little “Phenomenology 101.” Put simply: phenomenologists claim that the basic problem with philosophy is that philosophers tend to start out with theories and then bend the world to fit them. That sounds like a fair enough charge. The solution, then, is to turn this around and let the phenomena (what the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, called “the things themselves”) dictate the theory. It’s like saying to the philosopher: “You ought to get out of your ivory tower a little more.” But Marion—even the radical—contends that even Husserl didn’t go far enough. For Husserl still thinks that there is a kind of “horizon” (i.e., a background) against which all phenomena appear. In other words, when I see a person or object, I always see that person or object in relation to a background (and this includes a cultural and even historical background).

Not only does Marion want to do away with that background (or at least suspend it), he also claims that the phenomenon of the Logos (not to mention other phenomena) appears to us as a “saturated phenomenon.” In other words, there’s so much there that we can never get our puny little minds around it. The Logos simply defies our categories and ways of making sense of things. Here we come to the real nub of the debate. Is there (as Marion would put it) a “pure givenness” of any sort of phenomenon, whether mundane or spiritual?

Husserl can be read more than one way on this point. Marion wants to insist that there really is a givenness that transcends, frustrates and ultimately doesn’t depend upon us or our concepts. And our response to that pure givenness is probably best summed up as love. For, at least in its purest sense, love “operates” without asking why or who or any other question. Love is not about concocting philosophical theories or ethical justifications. Instead of responding to that which is given us by trying to master it by way of concepts, we simply respond by loving. Or we might say: whereas the logic of theorizing is possession, the “logic” of love is simply letting be. There is good reason, then, why love crops up over and over in Marion’s thought. For he sees it as offering an alternative to philosophical logic and also providing a better way of speaking about God. But Marion also sees himself as being true to what phenomenology has always been about. The penultimate sentence of *Being Given* reminds us that love is the “basic motive for phenomenological understanding” (a quote from Heidegger).

Marion is trying to reverse the very way in which philosophy and theology have usually operated. Instead of beginning with us and our categories and background and ways of thinking, he is attempting to turn the whole business around. As to whether he can do that, of course, the jury's still out. And I suspect it will be out for quite some time. Marion (very much like Levinas) is attempting to push philosophy and theology in a truly radical direction.

The question is not merely whether he can do this, but whether it's really a good idea. It's hard to imagine many who would be against moving away from philosophies and theologies that turn out to be idolatrous. After all, philosophers have long thought they were doing just that, however much they may have been self-deceived. What's much more worrisome is whether there is something inherently problematic with the project itself. Does Marion's reduction to pure givenness obliterate the very conditions that make it possible to understand and appreciate that which is given? Put in a theological context, does the revealed Logos break through as a "pure phenomenon" without any horizon? Or does that Logos depend upon the context of, say, Old Testament prophecies for its very identity (at least for us)? Or, alternatively, when the Logos becomes present to us in the breaking of the bread, how much does its meaning (again, at least for us) depend upon the very ordinary biological reality that bread sustains life and the very particular historical occurrences of the Passover and the Last Supper?

Those are some of my worries about Marion's path, and I think they're substantial. But, having said that, I have to add that Marion makes for fascinating, edifying and even exhilarating reading. If I were to put this in good old-fashioned evangelical terms, I'd say I feel "blessed" whenever I read Marion.

It's amazing to me how much Marion (along with Levinas and Derrida, not to mention some lesser known though hardly less important figures like Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean Greisch and Michel Henry) has changed the landscape of phenomenology—or what we on this side of the Atlantic call "continental philosophy of religion." When Dominique Janicaud published his report on the state of philosophy in France in 1991 (see *Phenomenology and the 'Theological Turn'*), he pointed out that phenomenology in France is now dominated by religious and ethical concerns. For some of us, that's particularly welcome news. The result is that philosophy is being rethought in some truly profound ways, ones that are prophetic in both tone and substance. Where exactly that will go is hard to predict. But I think it's safe to say that continental philosophy of religion—as practiced on both sides of

the Atlantic—will grow exponentially in the coming years. And Marion’s prophetic voice is one of the reasons why.