

IMAGES OF THE INVISIBLE: ICONS AND ICONOCLASM IN JEAN-LUC MARION

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Atheists and Iconoclasts

Before theists attempt to defend God against atheists, they would be wise to first take measure of themselves: *can* they talk even about God? To speak about something requires an understanding of it, but the optimistic theologian would do well to recall the famous warning of Augustine, “If you have been able to comprehend it, you have comprehended something other than God.”¹ To ignore this danger and to continue talking is only to expose our words and concepts as falling short of their target and merely referring back on ourselves.

If talking about God leads us into danger of idolatry, then, perhaps it is best to settle for silence. However, this position would lead to problems at least as dangerous as the first. Now both the atheist and the theologian go unanswered; the atheist’s questions receive no response and the theist does not have any idea what they believe in, and because of this the distinction between atheist and theist begins to break down. Both of them negate without distinction any positive statement made about God, and it is questionable how long the theist can hold out with a blind faith in an amorphous no-thing without falling into atheism himself.

The first case is pure idolatry, the second is pure negation. Is it possible to move beyond this impasse of overconfidence or despair, of purely univocal or purely equivocal language of God? If we hold Christian revelation to be true, we must be permitted to say *something*. In order to do this, first of all, we would need to recast our ideal of what it means to speak or have understanding about God. The underlying idea of both of the positions above required that speech be the perfect adequation of the words spoken and God’s essence; the only difference was that the negative theologian and atheist have already realized that this is impossible. In order to move forward, there must be a new way to understand the function of speech about God, a kind of analogous language or understanding that both refers to God and preserves the infinite distance that removes the divine from our understanding.

It was to overcome this impasse that contemporary scholar Jean-Luc Marion introduced first the concept of the icon to philosophy. He explains in *God Without Being* how the icon is a visible bridge of this theological paradox. The icon is a visible sign that depicts something for us to see, an image of Christ or the saints. And yet it does not claim to circumscribe what it points to, for it yet preserves the invisibility of God’s removal from us. By using this paradoxical nature of the religious image as a model for a philosophical

1 Augustine, Sermon LII.16. (translation by SR)

concept, Marion develops a way of saying something real about God while yet leaving room for God to infinitely transcend our concepts of him. It is a compelling move for philosophy of religion, for it allows one to successfully fight the idolatry of overconfident positive theology as well as the iconoclasm of excessive negative theology or atheism.

Not everyone believes that Marion has succeeded in his project, however. Many readers fear Marion ultimately places God too far beyond human reach. Bruce Ellis Benson, for example, concludes that Marion essentially wants to suspend all language and knowledge about God, demanding either a full and immediate knowledge of God or nothing at all.² In other words, according to Benson's logic, Marion falls squarely into the realm of philosophical iconoclasm.

This objection is not one that is easily answered. Scholars have given extensive discussion to these issues from a philosophical perspective. Yet, few authors, including Benson, take into account Marion's writings on the icon's original sense as a holy image. In a lesser known work, *Crossing the Visible*, Marion affirms the important role of religious icons, even proclaiming them to be the cure for our image-saturated age.³ To defend his position, he draws extensively from the key writings of the tradition that opposed the iconoclastic movement in the 8th century: the *Three Orations on the Defense of Holy Images* of John Damascene and the documents of the Second Council of Nicaea, which officially confirmed the importance of icon veneration in 787. If Marion is looking to key sources to affirm the value of the religious icon, this hardly sounds like the iconoclast Benson makes him out to be. A well-rounded philosophical critique of Marion's work would be remiss to accuse him of an "idolatry of transcendence"⁴ without first accounting for how his positive stance on images fits in his larger philosophy of iconic words and ideas. Of course, we must first ask whether Marion is properly representing or simply misappropriating the traditional view. Two of these three tasks will be taken up in this paper. After first explaining Marion's interpretation of holy images, it will be compared more closely to those of John Damascene to analyze whether he is truly in line with the tradition. If John's writings mark Marion as an iconoclast even in his understanding of holy images, then Benson is right, and Marion's philosophical contributions must ultimately be rejected as the same extreme apophaticism that leads to atheism. If his writings properly defend religious icons, this makes possible the third task of defending Marion's icon at a philosophical level. The careful analysis demanded by this philosophical project exceeds our current limitations of time and space. Nevertheless, clarifying Marion's theological foundations and their relation to the tradition will provide an important step in this direction.

Two Icons

While this paper is not primarily a philosophical critique, we might offer a brief word about Marion's stance as a phenomenologist. Phenomenology as a school of philosophy seeks to return to the things themselves through a careful, self-reflective examination of how they appear to us. The image-heavy word "icon," is far from superfluous for

2 Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida & Marion on Modern Idolatry* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 222.

3 Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. James K.A. Smith (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 87.

4 Benson, *Graven Ideologies*, 223.

Marion's methodology, then, for sight is traditionally one of the most important ways that things appear to us. This phenomenological approach to God might at first evoke skepticism. How could the visible bring us to the ultimate invisible when metaphysics and abstract reasoning have failed? In fact, Marion wants to challenge precisely the notion that appearance yields only the visible, and he believes that icons are one of the best examples of this. To examine how this is possible, we will focus on Marion's more recent discussion of the icon as the face, and then use this to interpret Marion's theological work on religious icons.

1. The Gaze of the Other. The "idol," for Marion, was first and primarily used to describe a closed conception of God. Yet in his more recent work on the saturated phenomenon, Marion uses the term "idol" to describe a dazzling visual spectacle that commands the gaze to be still before it in admiration. This is not an evil in itself. A good painting ought to act as an idol, to awe and surprise us. Yet in order to dazzle, the painting must remain within the limitations of the subject's own vision and understanding. For this reason, Marion will claim that the idol is well suited for an art gallery, but unable to manifest the revelation of a God who challenges and transcends any human limitations.

In contrast, the icon is an appearance that does *not* submit to the subject; rather, it challenges the subject to submit to it on its own terms. Marion believes the human face offers one of the best examples of this phenomenon, and we can use this to describe how an icon works by highlighting three different characteristics.

First of all, the icon offers us the appearance of invisibility. This invisibility may not be always immediately evident to us. In an everyday sense one might ignore a passerby or interact with a sales clerk as a "visible" appearance, free of great mystery. At a careless glance, then, the face is banal. Yet, when I approach it through love, the phenomenon of the face appears in a different way.⁵ Now the focus is not on the face, but on the eyes of the other, specifically the negative space that is the pupil. This invisibility is not simply a lack, but the origin of a counter-gaze that emerges from its unseen origin to regard me. This forms a second point of comparison; the painting escapes the rank of an ordinary object in its splendor, but it offers no gaze to meet and challenge the authority of mine. Before a face, I am being regarded.⁶ Whereas in the idol I reigned unchallenged, simply shown the limits of my desires and thus a mirror image of myself, "coming before the icon empties the ego of its ability to control, to understand, to manipulate, to grasp. To come before the icon is to be overcome by the irreducible, inconceivable other who gazes upon me." The gaze of the other unseats me as a subject. I do not make demands of it, for it makes demands of me, silently commanding me to respect its personhood.⁷

This demand leads to the third aspect of the icon; I must change my response to it. As it is love that allows for my experience of the face to have invisibility, so the more I love, the more I encounter the invisibility that marks the personhood mediated by the visible face that appears.⁸ For, of course, no matter how well I know someone, she will always surprise me, revealing that she is beyond the categories I make for her. Thus, here, invisibility is not the sign of a defect, but of an excess over my ability to know and

5 Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Steven Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 164.

6 Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Beraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 113.

7 Ibid., 116.

8 Ibid., 119.

perceive the given intuition with my limited concepts. For this reason, the unseen must always be preserved, for to make a face fully visible is to objectify it. The invisibility mediated by the visible face marks off the other's personhood.

Thus, we see in the iconic face the presence of three elements interacting with one another to yield the phenomenon of the icon: invisibility, counter-intentionality, and the change of my response. At first, the invisibility was hidden by banality, but after the introduction of the change of my response, this invisibility is the focus of attention, marking the counter-intentionality that shows the face as something to radically challenge the reign of my subjectivity. Once recognized, the counter-intentionality denies me as the ultimate subject ruling over the visible by its gaze, for it gazes at me and challenges me to love further. Although my choice to respond in love preceded my recognition of the face as a person, it is the counter-intentionality that makes this possible; if I loved my pencil, no such iconic experience could occur. Only after I make this initial choice do I experience that my love is following from the face's demands, even if the face was the one demanding this love all along.

2. *The Trace of the Holy*. Created in God's image, all faces are icons already, but religious icons are distinct because "they alone can keep and manifest a trace of the brilliance of the Holy."⁹ These icons, including the holy images as well as the saints they depict, can be understood as religious not by a change of nature, but by the degree to which they mediate the holy. This is most perfectly shown in the person of Christ, "the perfect likeness [εἰκὼν] of the Father" (Colossians 1:15).

Material images, too, can mediate the holy. Unlike human beings, icons seem to bear their *imago Dei* (or *imago sancti* – image of the saint) on their facade rather than in the very fabric of their innermost, invisible being. But this external display is not where Marion locates the iconic property of a material image, as if one could determine how iconic the painting is by how accurately it portrays the saint's visage. If visual likeness were the criterion of the iconic, this would lead to a "mimetic rivalry" between the original and the image. The image would seek to rival or perfectly capture the original as its equal, even overshadow it, forcing a choice between *either* the original *or* the image. This is very similar to the total overconfident positive theology we saw in the beginning, which claimed total comprehension of the incomprehensible God. Clearly, such logic is more appropriate to an idol than an icon, which ought, instead, acknowledge an original that infinitely surpasses it.

It is important to note what follows from this claim. Once visual likeness is eliminated as a criterion for constituting the relationship between type and prototype, both similarity and dissimilarity are ruled out as a valid means of assessing the iconicity of a particular object. Clearly we must avoid defining iconicity by its similarity to its original, but if we demand that an image be *unlike* the original in appearance this would simply be an inversion of the same logic.¹⁰ Thus, Marion is not arguing that icons must possess no visible resemblance whatsoever to their prototypes, but that visual similarity must not act as the primary principle of what makes an image iconic.

To find the properly iconic relationship between type and prototype, Marion turns to the text of the Second Council of Nicaea, which posits the Cross as the first and fundamental

9 Ibid., 68.

10 Ibid., 71.

type, after Christ. Religious icons are therefore given the title “icon” by their similarity to the cross.¹¹ For this reason, Marion looks to the relationship between the Cross and Christ as the exemplary relationship between type and prototype. The Cross, as a type, indicates precisely the moment when the appearance of Christ is the furthest removed from his divine glory, and yet in doing so he is simultaneously manifesting the heights of glory.

Christ kills the image on the Cross, because he crosses an abyss without measure between his appearance and his glory. He definitively disqualifies the least pretension of an image to produce or even reproduce what it might of the glory of the original.¹²

The Cross is thus not marked for the visibility it offers, as in the case of the idol; it neither offers visibility for its invisible prototype, nor in some sense even for itself. If it were a horrific spectacle, it would be a powerful idol indeed, holding captive the gaze, but for most of the people of Judea, a crucifixion was simply a common occurrence they might overlook as they walked past, similar to the way one could overlook the face of a passerby. Based on the model of the Cross, where there is no longer priority on what is visible, the icon may now escape the mimetic rivalry that causes idol to overshadow its original. The icon lets the prototype surpass it entirely; and it is precisely this fact that allows it to reach the prototype where the idol failed. As Christ emptied himself of his humanity in his obedience to the point of death (Philippians 2:8), so the icon empties itself of visibility, “effaces itself to the point of transparency”; to do so is what makes it iconic.¹³ Thus, the primary relationship between type and prototype Marion identifies as *kenosis*.¹⁴

If this relationship is to remain kenotic and thus iconic, the gap between the type and the prototype can never be closed; they must always be separated by an infinite distance. This is essential to Marion’s argument, for it ensures that the images and concepts used to refer to God always fall short, parallel to the classic doctrine of analogy. If it were otherwise, Marion would fall into the overconfident positive theology he condemns elsewhere. Thus, just as in the icon of the face, the distance of the seen and unseen may not be collapsed. Yet this does not mean that it is impossible to cross.

As we saw earlier, to see another as a person instead of an object required a choice on the part of the viewer, but this was made possible in the first place because there was counter-intentionality that originated from the unseen to cross the viewer’s gaze; thus it was not possible to have an iconic experience of a pencil like an iconic encounter with the face. In the same way, the gaze of the painted eyes alone could not make an iconic relation possible; it requires the gaze of the invisible prototype passing through the image. The Orthodox traditions of iconography are designed to reveal this truth, converging the perspective not at a point on the horizon of the painting, but within the heart of the viewer, tracing the path of the counter-gaze of the icon upon me.¹⁵ Because this union between the type and the prototype does not occur naturally, like a human

11 See for example, John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, trans. by David Anderson (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980), II.19; see also John’s statements following the commentary of the First Apology, p. 41.

12 Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 69.

13 Ibid, 78.

14 Ibid, 62.

15 Robyn Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-Logical Introduction* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 65.

face, it can only become iconic through a deeper principle at work. Marion draws this from the model of the greatest paradoxical unity, the person of Jesus who in his humanity could visibly be passed over like an ordinary man while invisibly being God himself. Thus, Marion calls the icon an “aesthetic parallel to the hypostatic union.”¹⁶ Just as the hypostatic unity of natures in Christ elevates the human nature to the divine, so the intentional unity of an icon links the painted counter-gaze of the type to the heavenly counter-gaze of the prototype. It is the Holy Spirit who makes possible the bond of the visible and the invisible, just as he unites the Father and the Son: never collapsing the distance, but always crossing it “without movement and yet without respite.”¹⁷

It is possible to see through the banal appearance the trace of the invisibility of the prototype, but just as to see the counter-intentionality of the face required the choice to first love it as a person, so to see the gaze of the prototype through the icon requires the viewer to change her perspective, the third element we emphasized in the phenomenon of the face. Just as a special grace of the Spirit was required to make present the counter-intentionality of the icon, a special grace of the Spirit is needed for the viewer to see it in the right way. Thus, according to Marion, the new hermeneutic of vision required to see the true glory in this kenotic appearance requires not just love, but prayerful veneration:

[T]he icon can be contemplated with honor only by a gaze that venerates it as the stigmata of the invisible. Only the one who prays can thus climb from the visible to the invisible (according to the logic of the type), whereas the spectator can only compare the visible to the visible (according to the logic of the mimetic). To the saints these things are holy: only the one who prays crosses the icon, because he alone knows the function of the type.¹⁸

The icon empties itself to become the meeting place between the gaze of the holy one and the gaze of the one at prayer, united in the love of the Spirit. Through prayerful encounter with the gaze of the holy one mediated through the icon, we are challenged to grow still deeper in love, and to imitate this kenotic act of the icon to become an ever more perfect trace of the Father.

Religious icons therefore show once again the interplay of these three primary elements: invisibility, counter-intentionality, and change in response. They interact in much the same ways as the icon of the face. Here, however, the Holy Spirit plays a critical role, both linking the counter-intentionality of the prototype to the type, and allowing the viewer to recognize this counter-gaze. The invisibility present in the visible is first overlooked as a banal phenomenon, but once the viewer decides to change her attitude to prayerful veneration, she becomes aware of the counter-intentionality of the prototype mediated by the type. This further demands a change in the viewer’s response, and a greater recognition of the insufficiency of the painted image to capture or objectify the whole of the prototype.

16 Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 84.

17 Ibid., 84

18 Ibid., 75.

Negativity and Iconoclasm

Robyn Horner insists that Marion's theology essentially falls within the tradition of the Second Council of Nicaea and John Damascene.¹⁹ Both essentially agree that the icon, is "a likeness, or a model, or a figure of something, showing in itself what it depicts,"²⁰ and that "all images reveal and make perceptible those things which are hidden."²¹ Especially in light of Benson's critique of Marion as an iconoclast, however, a deeper unity is not so immediately obvious. Let us turn to weigh Marion's claims against the view of icons given by John Damascene to examine whether Marion can truly claim to be an iconodule.

1. Participation and Kenosis. Both Marion and John Damascene acknowledge Christ as the true icon, the perfect "image (εἰκὼν) of the invisible God" (Colossians. 1:15). But next to Christ, Marion makes the cross his definitive icon, where John Damascene does not give one type of image as superior. This point is minor in itself, especially considering that Marion has lifted the definition from the text of the Second Council of Nicaea. Nevertheless, it bears importance as Marion's justification for a second area of difference, that kenosis is the essential relation of type and prototype, rooting icons in the stark light of the Crucifixion. It is this "self-emptying" or "self-effacing" nature of Marion's theology of icons that sounds closest to iconoclasm.

John Damascene does not explicitly draw out what kind of relationship the type has to the prototype. It is not a similarity in matter, for it makes no difference if a cross is made of gold, wood, or iron.²² Nor is it based on similarity in visual form, for the Cross is venerated as a type of Christ (and the burning bush as a type of Mary), despite their obvious visual differences from the persons they represent.²³ This would at least rule out the mimetic relationship also rejected by Marion: it is not visual similarity that constitutes the likeness of the type and prototype.

But if it is not matter and not visual similarity, what links the icon to what it represents? Christoph von Schönborn holds that the most we can infer from John's writings is that the relationship of the type to the prototype is most properly defined by participation; the more the image participates in the original, the more its likeness.²⁴ John defines this position more clearly in his more systematic writings. As he explains in *On the Orthodox Faith*, there are indeed different kinds of participation corresponding to the level of being of the thing in question. All creation participates in God's goodness through its being, but living things participate by both being and living. Human beings participate in being and living but most of all through their rationality, a faculty which makes them even more like God. Nevertheless, to participate rationally is only possible through a free choice to persevere in the good.²⁵ If one chooses not to persevere one falls into sin. Those who

19 Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-Logical Introduction*, 63.

20 *On the Divine Images*, III.16. "Εἰκὼν μὲν οὖν ἔστιν ὁμοίωμα, καὶ παράδειγμα, καὶ ἐκτύπωμά τινος, ἐν ἑαυτῷ δεικνύον τὸ εἰκονιζόμενον." *Patrologiae Graecae* (PG), vol. 94, 1337b.

21 *Ibid.*, III.17, "Πᾶρα εἰκὼν ἐκφαντορικὴ τοῦ κρυφίου ἔστι καὶ δεικτικὴ." PG, vol. 94, 1336b.

22 *Ibid.*, II.19.

23 *Ibid.*, II.20.

24 Christoph von Schönborn, *God's Human Face: The Christ-Icon*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 194.

25 John Damascene, "On the Orthodox Faith," in *Writings*, trans. by Frederic H. Chase, Jr. (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958), IV.13.

persevere the most, however, and thus participate the most, are the saints. John says in *On the Divine Images* that the saints have become:

likenesses of God as far as possible, since they have chosen to cooperate with divine election. Therefore God dwells in them. They are truly called gods, not by nature, but by adoption, just as red-hot iron is called fiery, not by its nature, but because it participates in the action of the fire.²⁶

In *On the Orthodox Faith*, John calls them “gods” or “kings,”

not by nature, but because they have ruled over and dominated sufferings, and because they have kept undebased the likeness of the divine image to which they were made—for the image of the king is also called a king, and, finally, because they have been freely united with God and receiving Him as a dweller within themselves have through association with Him become by grace what He is by nature.²⁷

Through these similar passages, we see that the participation of human beings involves free cooperation in both an active element—overcoming sufferings—and a passive element—keeping their true nature as the image of God pure. The end result of this cooperation is the union with the Divine nature through grace. It follows that if the greatest act of God’s salvation in Christ is completed on the Cross, then the fullest imitation of creatures is to participate in this kenosis. If John links the type to its prototype by participation, and the participation of human beings is to act like the loving God who emptied himself for our salvation, then this is very much in line with Marion’s identification of the icon as kenotic.

The greater difficulty, however, is to show how physical images can participate by kenosis. Icons are not made in the image of God in the same way that the saints are, nor are they able to freely cooperate in God’s Divine plan. Nevertheless, just as saints are ultimately only able to become iconic through the free gift of Divine grace, not through their natural abilities alone, so icons are also holy because of the initiative of God’s grace. According to Ambrosios Giakalis, an icon is thus considered holy not because of what it is by itself, but only “in so far as it preserves its integrity” as “vehicle and stable channel of divine grace.”²⁸ The icon must be an “open road.”²⁹ What would it mean for an icon to be a channel or an open road? A road, first of all, cannot be a dead end. Thus, an icon could not be anything that would stop the gaze on its own image, like the idol. A road is always a means to an end, and the road that is the most “open” is one that has the least emphasis on itself as a road, but rather transports its travelers to its primary destination; thus the icon must transport the believer to the presence of the holy one, and the presence of the holy one to the viewer. In other words, an image can only become an

26 *On the Divine Images*, III.33. “Οὗτοι δὲ εἰσιν οἱ κατὰ τὸ δυνατὸν ὁμοιωθέντες Θεῷ, ἕκ τε τῆς ἑαυτῶν προαιρέσεως, καὶ τῆς Θεῷ ἐνοικήσεως, καὶ συνεργίας· οἵτινες καὶ Θεοὶ λέγονται ἀληθῶς, οὐ φύσει, ἀλλὰ θέσει· ὡς πῦρ λέγεται ὁ πεπυρακτωμένος σίδηρος, οὐ φύσει, ἀλλὰ θέσει, καὶ μεθέξει πῦρος.” PG, vol. 94, 1352a-b.

27 “On the Orthodox Faith,” IV.15. “Θεοὺς δὲ λέγω, καὶ βασιλεῖς, καὶ κύριους, οὐ φύσει, ἀλλ’ ὡς τῶν παθῶν βασιλεύσαντας καὶ κυριεύσαντας, καὶ τὴν τῆς θείας εἰκόνας ὁμώσωσιν, καθ’ ἣν καὶ γεγένηται, ἀπαραχάρακτον φυλάξαντας· βασιλεὺς γὰρ λέγεται, καὶ ἡ τοῦ βασιλέως εἰκὼν· καὶ ὡς ἐνωθέντας Θεῷ κατὰ προαίρεσιν, καὶ τοῦτον δεξαμένους ἔνοικον, καὶ τῇ τούτου μεθέξει γεγονότας χάριτι, ὅπερ αὐτος ἐστὶ φύσει.” PG, vol. 94, 1164b.

28 Ambrosios Giakalis, *Images of the Divine: The Theology of Icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council*. (New York: E.J. Brill, 1994), 121.

29 Ibid.

open channel if it is a kenotic image, referring beyond itself and thus emptying into its final destination. Thus, if Marion claims the relationship between type and prototype is founded on kenosis, John Damascene would have no serious objections, either for the saints or the images that depict them.

Of course, John does not explicitly say any of this. His primary concern is to defend the veneration of icons, not to give a philosophical analysis of what they are. Yet, Marion's kenotic principle is not only in harmony with John Damascene's writings, but it would even solidify his position. John unites his broader category of icons, which includes both human beings and painted images, by the common action of revealing the hidden. Adding a kenotic principle would further reinforce by *how* they do so. Kenosis would lend the theology of icons a cohesion with the rest of Christian life that a strong focus on something like visual similarity lacks, for as in Marion's thought, icons reflect the self-giving charity to which everyone is called. This would allow icons to inspire desire and imitation of the good in a more intrinsic way than John Damascene supposed, again, not merely in what it presents, but in the very mode of its presenting, inspiring the believer to deny herself as the center of attention to refer all glory back to its source in God. In other words, the icon is not only said to participate in its prototype because the Holy Spirit acts through it, but because it shares in the same activity as its prototype: kenosis.

There still remains a critical difficulty in Marion's thought, and one not shared by John Damascene, and so we are left to defend Marion on his own terms. Namely, an icon must empty itself—kenosis is by definition a subtraction from the original. Without a properly positive principle to counter this, one could interpret it as leading to self-destruction. Marion does indeed say that an icon must “efface itself to the point of transparency.”³⁰ Although Benson does not seem to be well acquainted with *The Crossing of the Visible* himself, he finds this phrase alarming enough to quote it through another author. He argues that an icon saved from its own visibility is self-negating; for it to be an image requires first of all that it appear.³¹ According to Benson's critique, this self-effacing kenotic principle demands the destruction of the image to protect it from idolatry. If we take Benson's critique concretely, he believes Marion's logic requires us to replace all images of saints with single-hued color fields or whitewashed walls.

Such an interpretation is not consistent with Marion's text, especially when the isolated phrase Benson quotes is placed within the whole. First of all, if kenosis of an image for Marion is based on the model of Christ, then in principle it must not imply destruction. Recall:

it is precisely at the moment that he loses his human appearance [*figure*] that Christ becomes the figure of the divine will: in him, it is no longer his human appearance [*figure*] that is imagined [*sa figure*]; and shedding appearance, he gives shape [*donne figure*] to a holiness that would have remained invisible without the shrine [*écrin*] (not screen [*écran*]) of his body.³²

Just as Christ's obedience unto death is also the reason for his greatest glory, so the saints in dying by their self-giving love are raised to a new life in which they partake of

30 Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 78.

31 Benson, *Graven Ideologies*, 222.

32 Marion, *The Crossing the Visible*, 61.

Divine nature. In neither case does the “self-effacement” destroy the type or collapse it into the prototype. This principle must also hold for images; in offering up their place as spectacle to yield the glory to the original, the icon should not be erased but enhanced. Of course, for saints, this kenosis is never according to hatred or self-effacement, but self-giving love which is in itself already a sharing in Divine nature. The more saints love, the more they become who human beings are meant to be—one with Divine nature.

Once again, to defend the positive value of a painted image must take on a different character than the saints, for the principle of kenosis as free self-gift does not easily translate to an image without a will. Yet, it certainly does not mean destruction of the icon or its removal. The meaning of an image’s kenotic “effacing” becomes clearer in the context of more moderate statements Marion makes elsewhere, for example:

the visible surface must, paradoxically, efface itself, or at least efface within it every opacity that would obfuscate the crossing of gazes [*la cruise des regards*]: the icon *dulls* the image in it, in order to prevent any self-sufficiency, autonomy, or self-affirmation.³³

The icon is thus dulled, not prohibited from appearing, at any level, as Benson’s interpretation of “transparency” suggests. This is still very abstract, and Marion himself acknowledges the need to translate this theological principle of kenosis into an aesthetic one. While he appreciates the Byzantine icons of the Orthodox Church, he certainly does not think that icons are limited to this. Although most of his writings favor modern minimalist art as examples of images that preserve invisibility, in *The Crossing of the Visible*, Marion does also observe that many other traditions in Christian art operate by very kenotic principles; the interplay of light in Gothic domes as well as the shadows of Rembrandt and Caravaggio are attempts to mediate the mystery of the unseen, not merely present the visible.³⁴ Recall that Marion does not object to art that bears visual similarity to the prototype, providing it does not try to surpass its original, but simply to using similarity—or dissimilarity—as a standard to judge the iconicity of an image. Whatever its style, all iconic art is united not by mimesis but by this common principle: “the prestige of the visible object impoverishes itself [*s’appauvrissent*].”³⁵ Marion’s aesthetic guide remains a rough outline, but it is clear at least from his examples that he does not think it is possible to exclude representational images from the role of icon.

In fact, far from warranting the elimination of religious images, Marion’s stance actually makes any iconoclasm illegitimate. According to Marion’s definition of iconicity, it is not up to the icon alone whether it reaches the invisible. Certainly, the icon has a part in this process by emptying itself of spectacle, but a painted gaze on its own still shares the rank of my pencil; it needs the counter-intentionality of the holy one depicted in order to be iconic, just as the counter-intentionality of the face was needed to make possible my recognition of its invisibility and my unseating as the subject. This counter-intentionality does not just happen on its own; as Marion concluded from his brief foray into Trinitarian theology, it is ultimately the initiative of the Holy Spirit that makes possible this connection of the type to prototype, and it is then the one praying who is able to see it as such. If we want to call an image and idol, then, it is not enough to rule out the image on its own terms. We must also rule out the possibility that the Holy Spirit

33 Ibid., 60-1.

34 Ibid., 63.

35 Ibid., 62.

can act through it and the viewer can venerate the holy through it. On what grounds could one make such a claim? I might argue an image is “too visible” or idolatrous for me to use, but I cannot make the claim that it could never be iconic, especially if another person or group find worship through it to be fruitful. Thus, iconoclasm is simply not a defensible interpretation of Marion’s kenotic principle, since the role of an image as icon rests also on the action of the Holy Spirit and the one at prayer.

To sum up, Marion’s kenotic identification of type and prototype is not identical to John Damascene’s position, since he left this idea undeveloped, the two views can be brought into harmony with each other. This in itself is not enough to defend Marion against a “self-negating” interpretation of his kenosis, but a closer look at his thought reveals that iconoclasm is inconsistent with his thought. Because counter-intentionality and the response of the viewer is a critical dimension of the icon, the iconicity—or idolatry—of an image depends on more than the appearing alone.

2. *Revealing or Keeping Hidden.* The second key area of disagreement between John Damascene and Marion is their respective emphasis on the positive value and negative limitations of icons as a way to know of invisible things. Some of the differences between these authors on this issue are no doubt related to their audiences. John is addressing iconoclasts, and thus stresses the positive quality of images, while Marion is speaking primarily against the temptation of idolatry, and thus must stress their transcendence from the human mind. Nevertheless, John puts a strong emphasis on the teaching value of corporeal images:

Anyone would say that our inability immediately to direct our thoughts to contemplation of higher things makes it necessary that familiar everyday media be utilized to give suitable form to what is formless, and make visible what cannot be depicted, so that we are able to construct understandable analogies.³⁶

In contrast to this, Marion does not focus on the teaching ability of images. Although Marion is often more abstract than we might prefer, true to his method as a phenomenologist he starts with what appears. He departs from John in two places. First, he does not think that the visible in itself can lead to an iconic understanding, for it is already too satisfied with the intentions it possesses in itself. The visible in itself is unable to perform the reversal of the subject’s priority necessary to an icon. Second, Marion places less faith in the faculty of reason, for the counter-intentionality is not only invisible to reason, but its very invisibility is concealed as banality, a veil which even a closely rational scrutiny will not pierce. It is only in the choice to love that the experience of the iconic becomes possible.

Marion’s refusal to make reason the ultimate criterion of vision is not to surrender to irrationality; rather, it is to acknowledge that the excess of evidence is too much for reason to bear.³⁷ This is true of the face, and especially true of God, who so exceeds in evidence that our intellects are blinded, even to the extent that we overlook that there is even something to see. This means that the initial decision to believe is far from obvious,

36 Ibid., I.11. “Ὅτι μὲν γὰρ εἰκότως προβέβληται τῶν ἀτυπώτων οἱ τύποι, καὶ τὰ σχήματα τῶν ἀσχηματίστων, οὐ μόνον αἰτίαν φαίη τις εἶναι τὴν καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἀναλογίαν, ἀδυνατοῦσαν ἀμέσως ἐπὶ τὰς νοητὰς ἀνατείνεσθαι θεωρίας, καὶ δεομένην οἰκείων καὶ συμφυῶν ἀναγωγῶν.” PG, vol. 94, 1241a-b.

37 Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, 59.

and if it did not radically exceed one's expectations, it would once again fall back to confirm the limits of reason's subjectivity. The will alone, the faculty which loves,³⁸ can pass beyond this poverty of appearance which renders the intellect powerless.

[I]n knowing God by the loving act of the will, man imitates God in his highest name, and becomes, by the grace of love, himself God. God is approached only by he who jettisons all that does not befit love; God, who gives himself as Love only through love, can be reached only so long as one receives him by love, and to receive him by love becomes possible only for he who gives himself to him. Surrendering oneself to love, not surrendering oneself to evidence.³⁹

Only through this choice to love is the gaze able to bear any evidence. "Only love, 'which bears all' (1 Corinthians 13:7) can bear with its gaze Love's excess," and the more the love, the less it will turn away, blinded to this "bedazzlement" of Love's evidence.⁴⁰ This is true most of all in accepting the truths of Revelation, but it is also true in the icon of the face. Only if she decides to empty herself of her need to let her intentions dominate her intuitions, only if she decides instead to love, can a subject allow the other enough distance to appear in his unique otherness and counter-intentionality.⁴¹

Marion believes that this is precisely the meaning of "knowing the charity of Christ which surpasses all knowledge," (Ephesians 3:19): not that we renounce knowledge, but that we yield to a knowledge that surpasses the limits of ordinary philosophy—"To know following love, and to know what love itself reveals."⁴² Thus, Marion's ultimate motive in his emphasis on the unknown is not to undermine the importance of images as a valid way to understand the world, but merely to preserve these icons from a philosophy uninformed by love.

If this is the case, John Damascene's views would not fall so far from Marion's as it first seemed. John's concern throughout his treatises is not primarily the technical philosophical relations between the type and prototype, but the basic relationship between the believers and holy image. Namely, the icon is not there to be thought or pondered, but venerated, and to defend this obligation is John's primary goal. John frequently insists that icons are a powerful aid to those who come to them already with a disposition of prayer and love. When John suggests that icons are understood with reason, it is therefore only a reason already based on the truths of Revelation, starting first with the truth of the Incarnation. He is much more explicit on these views on *De Orthodoxa Fide*, where he states clearly that God can only be pursued by faith, not rational inquiry, "for the more he is sought out, the more he is unknown, the more he is investigated, the more he is hidden." For this reason, he advises the faithful to

38 Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, 59. Marion draws heavily from Pascal in this chapter, and here cites the origin of this idea as *Pensées* §82/L. 44. See also Marion's *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 125-7.

39 Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, 61.

40 *Ibid.*, 67.

41 *Ibid.*, 166-7.

42 Marion, *In Excess*, 169.

“adore God with a mind that is not overcurious.”⁴³ John believes that concepts and metaphors, along with visible icons, can help reason reach some understanding of the mysteries of God, but only as informed by faith.⁴⁴ Thus, the optimism in reason that John Damascene shows by using relatively few qualifications to speak of God in *On the Divine Images* is in a context of analogous language addressed to the faithful. We cannot grasp or encompass God. Nevertheless, in supporting a knowledge that does not aim at total comprehension, images help us to keep in mind the truth of salvation. Ultimately, however, the role of the icon is to help us to desire and imitate the good, not simply teaching us facts but also inspiring us to holy deeds.⁴⁵

Even if the difference is smaller than it originally appeared, it is not entirely overcome; Marion still does not allow icons a teaching function other than to model the form of Christian life. Yet, perhaps the need for caution that Marion shows does not reveal a desire to ignore corporeal things, but his use of a methodology that relies so heavily on phenomena. While it is true that both the methodology of phenomenology and John Damascene place the beginning of knowledge in the senses, and give priority to vision, phenomenology rests on sense experience to a much greater degree. There are no convenient *a priori* principles or appeals to a spiritual realm to fall back upon. *All* knowledge starts from experience, and thus if we are to have knowledge of the invisible, it must start from the appearance itself. If the appearances did not empty themselves to show that they are insufficient, phenomenology would be forced to negate itself by becoming iconoclastic metaphysics or sink into idolatrous nihilism—the former stating that the appearance is not the real and the latter stating the image is everything, and our own limitations define the extent of the world. For John, what is seen reveals the invisible. For Marion, what is not seen reveals—and must reveal—the invisible.

There is much more to discuss concerning Marion’s phenomenological commitments. But this must be reserved as a further step of research. The discussion here was not a philosophical critique but a theological one, to determine whether Marion’s writings on the religious icon were consistent with the Christian tradition. Although Marion’s abstract approach can undermine the positive applications of his ideas, his ideas still find harmony with the views of John Damascene. We found some strain between the two traditions in the way that the type is linked to the prototype as well as the teaching value of the images, but both of these differences were reconcilable. Further philosophical critiques ought to keep in mind the faithfulness of this theological formulation before so easily forming an accusation of iconoclasm. Marion’s caution against visibility is in this case not iconoclasm, but a vigilant concern to protect the order of love from the objectifying of rationality that submits everything to the idolatry of the subject’s understanding, allowing instead a space for the other to take initiative in the radically de-centered realm of charity.

43 John Damascene, “Against Heresies,” in *Writings*, 162. “ὅσῳ γὰρ ἐρανᾶται, τοσοῦτῳ πλέον ἀγνοεῖται, καὶ ὅσῳ πολυπραγμονεῖται, ἐπιπλίον κρύπτεται. Ἀπεριέργῳ τοίνυν λόγῳ προσκυνεῖσθω θεὸς ὑπὸ τῶν πιστῶν.” PG, vol. 94, 779a.

44 John Damascene, “On the Orthodox Faith,” IV.11.

45 *Ibid.*, III.17, II.6.

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