

# Is Phenomenology the Promised Land of Philosophy of Religion?

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In a well-known and often quoted passage of his Postface to *Ideen I*, Husserl compares his situation to that of the dying Moses on mount Nebo, to whom Yahweh shows the promised Land of Canaan which he is only allowed to contemplate from outside and from above, but without being permitted to enter it.<sup>1</sup> This very striking image is the clue of the questions I am currently struggling with in writing the third volume of my book: *The Burning Bush and the Lights of Reason*, in which I explore some paths of a hermeneutical phenomenology of religion. For Husserl, the identity of the Promised Land of Reason towards which he never ceased to march since his *Logische Untersuchungen* until his *Krisis*, was beyond all question. Only a transcendental phenomenology is able to fulfil the dream of philosophy as rigorous science. Unfortunately, very few of Husserl's nearest followers were willing to share his dearest dream. Therefore, quoting Paul Ricoeur, the history of contemporary phenomenology can be read as that of the numerous heresies which Husserl has produced.<sup>2</sup>

In this matter, France, as always, has proved to be an especially fertile ground for the development of heretics of all kinds. A major feature of the «heretics» which dominate the French intellectual landscape over the last thirty years, is that many of them endeavour to «refund» the very idea of phenomenology. Therefore the conflictual relation between the «founding father» and the «refounding sons» puts them in the role of potential parricides. Let me name the most

outstanding of them: Emmanuel Lévinas, Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion. Regarding philosophy of religion, my leading question can be stated as follows: are these «refounders» in the situation of Josuah, crossing the river of Jordan, and taking possession of the promised land? Even if we suppose that their claim is justified, we have good reasons to ask ourselves whether the land they are taking possession of is not that of theology rather than that of philosophy. This question, raised in 1991 by Dominique Janicaud in his book: *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*,<sup>3</sup> should be taken very seriously, although, in my opinion, one must be rather cautious about the idea of «theology» with which Janicaud is working.

This is why my critical reading of Levinas, Jean-Louis-Chrétien, Jean-Yves Lacoste, Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry focuses on their contribution to a phenomenology of religion rather than on their impact on ongoing debates in theology. Rather than giving here a general overview of my leading hypotheses regarding these authors, I prefer dealing with some of the questions raised in Michel Henry's forthcoming book: *Paroles du Christ*, which will be published at the end of September. Henry, who died on the 3th of July, worked on the proofs of this book, which is the third volume of his «philosophy of christianity» until the last days of his life. Thus *Paroles du Christ* has become his intellectual testament. But it is not just in order

<sup>1</sup> Dt. 32, 48–52.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *A l'école de la phénoménologie*. Vrin, Paris 1986, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Dominique Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*. Editions de l'éclat, Combas 1991; Id., *La phénoménologie éclatée*, Combas. Ed. de l'éclat, Combas 1997.

to honour the memory of one of the outstanding figures of contemporary French phenomenology that I have chosen to focus on this book. It is also because it helps us understanding the aims and the issues of a refoundation of the very idea of phenomenology developed in Henry's trilogy: *L'essence de la manifestation, Phénoménologie matérielle, Généalogie de la psychanalyse*. Henry's leading thesis is that in order to found the idea of phenomenology we must go beyond Husserl's and Heidegger's definition of the tasks of phenomenology, an understanding dominated by the catchword: «intentionality». In Henry's opinion, this «ekstatic» understanding of the essence of phenomenology is unable to take into account the originary phenomenon of life and its radical immanence. This leads him to a daring phenomenological interpretation of Christianity which finds its expression in a trilogy of books published in the last six years: *C'est moi la Vérité, Incarnation* and the forthcoming: *Paroles du Christ*.<sup>4</sup>

In this last and very startling book Henry apparently reads all words of Christ we find in the Gospels as being the ipsissima verba of Jesus. This decision will, of course, scandalize the specialists in biblical exegesis, especially as Henry suggests provocatively that historical-critical exegesis, as it has taken shape at the end of the 19th century, is profoundly indebted to the «positivistic», «pseudo-historical» and «atheistic» spirit of this age (PC 11). But the problem he deals with is not that of the epistemological status of biblical exegesis, but rather how one can understand the words of Christ in the light of a new understanding of phenomenology. In his book Henry presents himself as a candid reader of the words of Christ written in the Gospels, and not as a philosopher aiming at rendering the task of exegesis superfluous. To accuse his reading of being faithful to his philosophical convictions makes no more sense than accusing Hegel of being a Hegelian or Heidegger of being a Heideggerian. The true question is up to which point one can share the presuppositions of Henry's reading from the standpoint of an hermeneutical phenomenology.

Apparently Henry's reading starts with a dogmatic presupposition, namely the double, both human and divine nature of Christ, as defined by the Council of Chalcedon. In fact, this presupposition plays here a mere heuristic role. It helps us to clarify the following question: under which conditions does the Christian concept of the «Word of God» make sense in relation with the real words spoken by Jesus Christ? The leading question which Henry is dealing with throughout his book can be stated as follows: are the human intellect and philosophical reason able to give a meaning to the very concept of «Word of God»? If so, under which conditions can this Word be understood, or, in other words: «how could a language which would be that of God himself become understandable in our own language?» (PC 12).

«Is it possible that a human being may hear in his proper language a word speaking quite another language which would be that of God, or, more precisely that of his Word? If not, how could the human being at least become sure that such a word exists?» (PC 13). From the beginnings of Christianity up to the dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* of the second Vatican Council, lots of theological treatises have dealt with this fundamental question. Does the philosopher's attempt to contribute resolving this question not come much too late? The answer he is trying to work out is not meant to give a speculative solution to a speculative problem, but to be «very concrete» (PC 13) — «concrete» of course in the phenomenological and not the empirical or utilitarian meaning of this word!

Being «concrete» means first listening to the words which Christ has spoken to his contemporaries in their own language, addressing their own questions. But it means also paying attention to the many sayings in which Christ speaks of himself, presenting himself implicitly or explicitly as the very Word of God. These first two problems raise two supplementary questions which have both strong hermeneutical implications. First the fundamental question of the relationship between the Word of God and the words of humans, examined under the respect of their «saying» (*dire*) and their «said» (*dit*). This leads necessarily to the last and most difficult question: are human beings «able to listen to this

<sup>4</sup> Michel Henry, *Paroles du Christ*, Ed. du Seuil, Paris 2002 (quoted as PC).

Word which is no longer their own and are they able to understand it?» (PC 14).

## What does Christ reveal about ourselves?

The starting point of Henry's reading of the Gospels is an evidence which — as is the case of many other evidences — it is hard to become aware of. Unlike most Sunday preachers, Jesus not only speaks to his fellow-humans about «le bon Dieu», he speaks to them about themselves in words which are much more surprising and even more startling than the words one would expect from a «master of wisdom». Christ's first words quoted by Henry have been carefully chosen. They deal with the enigma of evil. For Christ, «all evil thoughts stem from the heart»<sup>5</sup> and they alone make humans impure.

This identification of the primary source of evil immediately raises an important question, which no philosopher can elude: which understanding of the human being underlies the notion of the «heart» used here? Obviously, it is not the bodily organ pounding in our breast which cardiologists have sometimes to take care of. For Henry, the «heart» designates the innermost place «where the human being endures all that what it endures and where it endures itself» (PC 18). This definition implies an understanding of the human being, which takes us far beyond Aristotle's definition of the *zoon logon echon* which dominates all philosophical anthropology up to our times. Long before being a «reasonable animal» (a definition which most of the time its real behaviour shows to be empirically untrue) the human being «endures itself» (PC 18). Its life consists in nothing else but «enduring what one is and enjoying it, enjoying one's own self-enduring» (PC 19).

In proposing «a definition of the human being as a being whose reality stems from the Affectivity of Life, which means that they are living beings which never cease to endure themselves in suffering or in joy» (PC 19), Christ invites all humans to modify radically their self-understanding. This definition, which moves far

beyond the horizon of a rationalistic understanding of humanity, has nothing in common with modern biology and even less with the so-called «socio-biology». Classical rationalism as well as contemporary biology are both unable to find access to the realm of the «invisible», in which life reveals itself to itself through the ceaseless process of its self-enduring. The «invisible» as Henry understands it, has nothing in common with the traditional distinctions of the intelligible as opposed to the sensible nor with that of body and soul. It is the realm of life, experienced both in body and soul, in other words that of «the living flesh» («chair», *Leib*, as opposed to *Körper*), «which endures itself in life and therefore is invisible as is life itself». Far from being an obscure feeling, this «self-enduring», which Henry calls also «self-affection», «is our true reality, the heart and the secret of our being» (PC 23). Only if we accept that «the invisible designates the human being itself and its true reality» (PC 24) will we understand the radical meaning of Christ's words denouncing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, when he proclaims that «the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath»,<sup>6</sup> or when he establishes the primacy of «the living self over against all things which help sustaining his life and which take their value from this use» (PC 21).<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding the singularity and the strangeness of the words of Jesus with which Henry starts his reading of the Gospels, they could still be put into the mouth of a «master of wisdom» or a «spiritual master», as history, including the history of philosophy has produced many of them. In Henry's opinion, there is no doubt that sometimes at least philosophy has proved to be «able to reach the same intuitions introducing to a new understanding of the human» (PC 30). Does this mean that Christ is just a «master of wisdom» among many others and perhaps even the first of all philosophers as some Church Fathers thought?<sup>8</sup> Henry's strategy of reading aims to show that even Christ's most «anthropological» statements, in which he is

<sup>6</sup> *Mc* 2, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Mt* 6, 25–34.

<sup>8</sup> Xavier Tilliette, *Le Christ et la philosophie*, Ed. du Cerf, Paris, 1990, p. 69–92.

<sup>5</sup> *Mt* 15, 11–20; *Mc* 7, 14–23.

dealing with Kant's question: «What is man?» cannot be reduced to a human wisdom, i.e. to what Henry calls the «system of humanism». Whatever expression it takes, this «system» consists in a «reading of the fundamental elements of the human condition» (PC 31), or of what Kant calls the «great game of life»<sup>9</sup> in his late lecture on Anthropology. In Henry's opinion the words of Christ submit all these games and the ordinary vision of the human condition and even that of the human nature to a «merciless critique» as sharp as a sword.

The text of the Beatitudes and the *logia* of the Sermon on the Mountain allude to «another Reason» and «another Logos» (PC 33) than the underlying logic of the «system of humanism». The catchword of this system is «reciprocity». From the standpoint of cultural anthropology we could translate it as the «logic of the gift». In his beautiful book: *Le prix de la vérité*, Marcel Hénaff has reflected upon the fundamental meaning of the category of the «gift» in contemporary anthropology.<sup>10</sup> Moving back to Malinowski's description of the practice of ceremonial exchange of gifts in his book: *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* which, together with the field researches of Franz Boas on the *potlatch* practised by the Kwakiutl Indians, inspired Marcel Mauss in writing his famous *Essai sur le don*, Hénaff shows that neither the economic nor the moral interpretation of these practices render justice to the underlying «logic of the gift». In his understanding, the decisive feature of this logic is not the exchange of gifts as such, but the challenge implied in the gesture of offering and the risks taken in accepting gifts and offering

something in exchange. This interpretation offers us an anthropological equivalent of Hegel's famous analysis of the «struggle for recognition» in his *Phenomenology of the spirit*. But contrary to Hegel, who stresses the conflictual element of this relation, leading to the deathly struggle between master and servant, Hénaff thinks that the challenge of giving must not be identified with a deathly rivalry.

Without discussing further Hénaff's thesis here, I think that it should be confronted with the numerous attempts in recent French philosophy — from Derrida to Marion and Henry — to reflect upon the category of «Givenness» with the resources of phenomenology. Henry's presentation of the «system of humanism» and of the category of reciprocity which is its cornerstone overshadows the decisive element in Hénaff's analysis. In defining reciprocity in terms of economic exchange «thanks to which each partner expects to receive and indeed receives from the other the equivalent of what he offers» (PC 37), Henry obviously misses the specific logic underlying the ceremonial exchange of gifts and the problem of mutual recognition which explains the anthropological importance of reciprocity.

For him the «human all too human» world of reciprocity, in which it is natural to love those who love us in turn literally «decomposes itself» when it is struck by the words of Christ. Christ's words reveal «the hidden meaning of reciprocity» (PC 38) underlying the so-called «Golden Rule» which states that we should not inflict to others that which we do not want to be inflicted to ourselves. Moreover, his words induce a radical transformation of the human condition as such. Christ not only reminds his fellow-humans that they are inhabited by an inner life, which is necessarily invisible to the eyes of the world; moreover, «within the invisible itself, which is our true dwelling, Christ's words trace a new line of separation which isolates the deepest dimension of our life» (PC 41). This line of demarcation appears for instance when we ponder upon the *logion*: «Your Father sees what you are doing in secret».<sup>11</sup>

A demystifying hermeneutic as that of Nietzsche presents God's way of looking at humans

<sup>9</sup> Regarding this formula and the role it plays in Heidegger's *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, see my essays: «The «Play of Transcendence» and the Question of Ethics» in: François Raffoul/David Pettigrew (éds.), *Heidegger and Practical Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2002, p. 99–116; «Le jeu de la transcendance: la percée métaphysique de 1928–1929» in: *Rencontres philosophiques*, Actes des Journées Académiques des Professeurs de Philosophie, Centre National de Documentation Pédagogique, DAFPEN de Paris 2001, p. 141–157.

<sup>10</sup> Marcel Hénaff, *Le prix de la vérité. Le don, l'argent, la philosophie*. Ed. du Seuil, Paris 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Mt 6, 6.

as the eyes of a voyeur, and even of a persecutor, following us ruthlessly into our most hidden places. We are not far from Victor Hugo's famous verse, speaking of Cain: «*Et l'œil était dans la tombe et regardait Caïn ...*». Even in the darkness of the tomb, Cain is not at peace; here too, God's eyes are staring accusingly at him. In Hugo's description, God's way of looking at humans is nothing else than the hyperbolic version of a human observer. Its overwhelming power consists in the ability to render our most intimate feelings and thoughts «objective» and «mundane».

This of course is not at all Henry's interpretation, when he states that «within the invisible, this secret, this mysterious and impenetrable I is pierced by another glance which penetrates its heart, in the very place of its secret» (PC 42). Contrary to all objectifying glance, God's way of looking at the human beings makes them more alive. It disrupts drastically the ordinary human condition «in which men and women observe each other and struggle to obtain more prestige» (PC 43). This disruption strikes the ordinary understanding of our human condition in its very heart, namely «the law of the reciprocal feelings governing all relations between humans» (PC 43). A totally new definition of the human condition puts an end to the human all too human order of the «pettiness of reciprocity» (PC 45). It is subverted by the new condition of the children of God, a condition which is non-reciprocal by definition, having its source in «a all-powerful Life which has the ability of bringing itself to life — namely the unique and absolute Life which is that of God» (PC 47).

Stressing that the «non-reciprocity designates here «the immanent generation of our finite life within the infinite Life of God» (PC 46) — in Hénaff's terminology we could speak of the «logic of grace» — becomes misleading if one overlooks the fact that this ordinary non-reciprocity founds «a new reciprocity» between humans «stemming from the inner relationship between each living being and the Life thanks to which it is living» (PC 49). This is what Pascal called the «order of Charity» or the order of love, understood as «the true name of life» (PC 50). Because it constitutes an ultimate

order which it is impossible to exceed it can be identified with the «Kingdom of God» within us and among us.

## How does Christ speak about himself?

In the first three chapters of his book, Henry's reading of the words of Christ deals with Kant's question: «What is man?» As soon as it has become evident that for Jesus all human beings are children of God, that is to say that each one of them is «a living being begotten in the invisible and absolute life of God, a life which dwells within him as long as he lives and outside of which no living being exists» (PC 54), the questioning shifts to another level. It follows now a crest-line which appears in the Synoptic Gospels as well as in the Gospel of John: «the words through which Christ speaks to humans about themselves leads back to himself who speaks these words to them» (PC 55).

In Henry's opinion, Christ's teaching is of a unique kind in the history of all religions. The reason for this is that in his case the question: «*what does he say?*» leads sooner or later to the question: «*who is he?*». This question in turn can be taken in several different senses: *what does he say about himself?*, out of *which authority* (*exousia*<sup>12</sup>) does he say what he says and act as he acts?, what gives him the right to call others to be his followers?, which leads them to ask him: «*Master where are you dwelling?*»,<sup>13</sup> a question which obviously can not be confounded with a quest for information of the kind: at which address may you be joined?, etc.

Henry's commentary of the first question focuses significantly on the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well.<sup>14</sup> Several reasons justify this hermeneutic decision. The first is that John describes the encounter between two human beings confronted with the elementary needs of all finite life — hunger, thirst, tiredness. They remind us of the fact that all human life «is vowed to

<sup>12</sup> *Mt* 7, 28.

<sup>13</sup> *Jn* 1, 39.

<sup>14</sup> *Jn* 4, 9–14.

unkeep its life which claims relentlessly to guarantee the conditions of its survival» (PC 7). The second reason is that it is the encounter of two persons who are not allowed to meet, according to the social laws of their time: a Jew and a Samaritan woman who moreover, proves to be a sinner! Finally and most decisively, the content of their dialogue shows ever more clearly that Christ claims to be the true Messiah insofar as «he is nothing else and nothing less than He who, being the possessor of eternal life, can also dispense it to whomever he likes» (PC 64).

In hearing Christ declaring: «If someone comes to me without preferring me to his father, his mother, his wife, his children, his brothers and sisters and *even his own life*, he cannot be my disciple»,<sup>15</sup> we confront a paradox which no «humanistic» reading of the Gospel, taking Christ as an imitable or inimitable model of moral perfection can make sense of. In Henry's opinion this statement can only be understood in the light of the following question: «what can I prefer to my own life if not the Life within it which gives it to itself and makes that I am a living being?» This crucial question admits no other answer than acknowledging Christ as being «the Word which is hidden within the life of all those to whom, in liberating their life, he gives the condition of children of God» (PC 67). This explains why Christ is more than a specimen within the series of all living beings whose common condition he shares totally and why he is not submitted to the founding institutions of the Jewish religion: Temple, Law and Sabbath.

## Krisis: the Word of Life judging the language of the world

Nowhere does the identification of Jesus with Christ and the Messiah and even his identification with God himself become more apparent than during his trial. Here the question whether his words and his self-designation are true or not reaches its dramatic climax. In the third move of his reading of the words of Christ, Henry focuses precisely on the question of the «truth of

Christ's words claiming to be identified with the Son of God and thus with God himself» (PC 73). In chapters VI-VIII of his book, he shifts from the *quaestio facti*: what does Christ say about himself? to the *quaestio juris*: what gives him *the right* to speak thus? The way in which Henry deals with this question is not only crucial in itself, but also because of its hermeneutical implications.

As we have seen, the second question is highlighted by the dialogue with the Samaritan woman. As to the «crucial question of legitimacy» (PC 77), it underlies the dramatic episode of the healing of the blind-born near the pool of Siloah and many other stories like that of the adulteress.<sup>16</sup> Henry focuses here on the texts of the Fourth Gospel, not because he thinks that the other Gospels ignore this question, but for another reason. More than the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John helps us in «understanding *what kind of understanding*» (PC 80) we need in order to answer the frightful question of Christ's legitimacy. The Gospel of John offers us a hermeneutic of witnessing which has its center of gravity in the following paradoxical statement: «I bear witness of myself and the Father who sent me bears witness of me.»<sup>17</sup> Paradoxically the weakest of all testimonies in the eyes of the world – namely the testimony of someone testifying in his own favour — becomes the strongest of all if we have good reasons to believe that Christ's testimony is supported by that of God himself.

A beautiful verse in Paul Celan's poem *Atemwende* says that «no one testifies in favour of the witness» («*Niemand zeugt für den Zeugen*»<sup>18</sup>). If we apply this verse to the trial of Jesus leading to a death-sentence, it appears that his self-presentation as one who is his own witness is the great exception which confirms the rule expressed in Celan's verse.

Far from resolving our problem this paradoxical thesis seems to confront philosophical rationality with an insurmountable scandal. In Henry's eyes the only way to avoid an arbitrary

<sup>16</sup> *Jn* 7, 3–11.

<sup>17</sup> *Jn* 8, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Celan, «*Atemwende*» in: *Gesammelte Werke*. Zweiter Band, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1983, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> *Lc* 14, 26.

«*credo quia absurdum*» consists in reflecting more intensely upon the difference between the language in which we speak about the world and the words through which life speaks about itself. «Ordinary» language whether «prosaic» or «spiritual», whether «proper» or «improper», literal or metaphoric has no other reference than that the things which show themselves directly or indirectly within the horizon of the world. All «logos», whatever its content subdues itself to the general law of appearing and accepts the separation between «word» and «object» which it implies.

The fact that the purely conventional relation between the linguistic sign and that which it signifies («signifiant» and «signifié» in Ferdinand de Saussure's terminology) establishes a distance between «word» and «object» does not prevent language from plying itself to the structure of the world. Conversely, this means as Wittgenstein states right from the beginning of his *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, that the world which we are talking about in our propositions is «all that is the case». Although Henry's «world» and Wittgenstein's world are not at all the same, Wittgenstein would probably agree with Henry defining the general structure of appearance by the following three characteristics. 1. The «world» is a «milieu of pure exteriority» in which no living being can recognize himself. 2. Whatever appears within the horizon of the world possesses the «terrifying neutrality» of mere facts without any intrinsic meaning. 3. Finally, it is a «void milieu», totally sterile, inhabitable and unliveable. It commits us to «the situation of a traveller sitting at the window of a train», discovering the fugitive appearance of the «things which are slipping by under his powerless stare» (PC 91).

Doubtlessly this characterization of the «world-language» will raise vehement protests among most of the contemporary «philosophers of language», especially among those who defend the theory of *speech-acts* in the line of Austin and Searle. But before denouncing the insufficiencies of Henry's presentation, we should be aware of the fact that it meets some themes of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. The comparison with the early Wittgenstein helps us to understand Henry's boldness when he suggests

examining the problem of language from quite a different standpoint, namely that of «the Life thanks to which we are living beings» (PC 93). But does «this other language, which is more originary and more essential than that of the world» (PC 92) exist somewhere? Wittgenstein's answer to this crucial question is clearly negative: any attempt at speaking of subjective life and its meaning is unsayable or «mystical» by definition.

This thesis claiming that we must be silent about that which we are unable to speak of is shared by the great majority of contemporary «philosophers of language», denouncing the traps of the «myth of private language»<sup>19</sup> in which we get caught whenever we try to speak another language than the public language governed by a public grammar. In Henry's opinion however, if we have good reasons to think that «*in revealing itself to itself, life tells us something about itself*» (PC 93), this must have consequences for our understanding of language itself. If we believe in the existence of «a language whose possibility is that of Life itself through which life speaks about itself while revealing itself, a language through which life never ceases speaking to us about itself» (PC 94), the black spot of the very sophisticated theories of language produced by the 20th century philosophers appears to consist in the denial of the very possibility that the self-revelation of life can produce its own language.

This does not mean, of course, that Henry claims to propound a new theory of language endeavouring to replace all former theories. Rejecting the ladder of ordinary language in favour of the language of life would lead Henry to the same consequence as that which Wittgenstein expresses in the last words of the *Tractatus*: we must be silent about that which we are unable to say. In my opinion, we should rather characterize Henry's strategy as that of a «deconstruction» in the Heideggerian meaning of the term. He invites us to move back to an originary question which all contemporary theories of language forget to ask. It is that of the «essen-

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Bouveresse, *Le mythe de l'intériorité. Expérience, signification et langage privé chez Wittgenstein*, Ed. de Minuit, Paris 1976.

tial relation which unites speech and life», a relation which is grounded in an «unwavering experience» (PC 94). The primary task of the phenomenologist is to describe the specific features of this experience. Those who are unable to accept such a description will not follow Henry when he opposes the main characteristics of the «world language» to the originary language of life itself. Because the language of life ignores the cleavage between the *mode of saying* and that *which is said*, it is essentially true and beyond all falsehood. Surely enough, one can «weep crocodile tears». Notwithstanding this fact, our feelings as such are unable to lie and admit no duplicity. Someone who really endures suffering cannot lie to himself, even if he may have good reasons to hide his suffering from his family circle.

In claiming that «the possibility of a language of suffering» — or of joy, sadness or anxiety, etc. — «is contained in the Word of life» (PC 97), Henry invites us to reflect anew upon a problem raised briefly by Husserl in the first of his *Logische Untersuchungen*. It is that of the meaning of our expressions in the «solitary life of the soul», independently from the intention of communication. The only concrete example given by Husserl is the voice of moral conscience, telling me: «You did wrong». What we discover here is the old and new problem of which Saint Augustine called the «*verbum mentis*».<sup>20</sup> As Jean Grondin has pointed out very convincingly, in Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics it is synonymous with «understanding» as such.<sup>21</sup>

In my opinion, this common interest in the problem of the «*verbum mentis*» (which should not be identified with the «private language» in the sense of Quine and other analytical philosophers) constitutes the fundamental point of contact within the chiasm which separates Henry's understanding of phenomenology from a hermeneutical phenomenology like that of Paul Ricoeur for instance. One of the tasks awaiting a hermeneutical phenomenology today,

is to show under which conditions one can accept a phenomenology of the «inner word» like that of Michel Henry or Jean-Louis Chrétien, as being one of its most fundamental presuppositions and at the same time, meet the objections raised by analytical philosophers against «private language».

An example taken from literature may help us in better understanding the problem we are dealing with here. In the fourth and last Part of *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift describes the adventures of his hero in the country ruled by the *Houyhnhms*, intelligent and wise horses who have built an ideal society, in which the depraved and degenerated humans, called *Yahoos*, are used as slaves. The main characteristic of the Houyhnhm language which «expressed the passions very well»<sup>22</sup> consists in the inability to say «*the thing which was not*» (ibid., p. 286). As their language lacks words allowing to express the false or to lie, the arrival of Gulliver confronts the Houyhnhms with a very difficult hermeneutical paradox. It offers us a kind of literary equivalent of the problem of «radical translation» in Quine or Davidson. How can these horses, who have no idea of «letters» and who therefore ignore the whole world of fiction, express their doubts as they are confronted with the unbelievable narrative of their host? Swift himself draws our attention to this difficulty in noting that «*doubting* or *not believing* are so little known in this country, that the inhabitants cannot tell how to behave themselves under these circumstances» (ibid., p. 286).

Should the Houyhnhm language be invoked as a paradigm of the language of life in Henry's sense? Evidently not! The impossibility of saying «*the thing which is not*» ((ibid., p. 294) (which impossibility is also a social interdiction) has no other justification than serving the objective truth of facts and their understanding. Far from taking us back to the words of life, such a language, sticking perfectly to «objective reality» is just a hyperbolic version of the «world-language» as defined by Henry. Swift's characterization of this language has also consequences

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Saint Augustin et les actes de parole*. PUF, Paris 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Jean Grondin, *L'universalité de l'herméneutique*. PUF, Paris 1994.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. P. Dixon and John Chalker. Penguin Books, Hammondsworth 1984, 1997, p. 273.



for the institutions on which the ideal society is grounded. Under this respect too, Gulliver's narrative retelling his turbulent travels and his description of the English society of his time are met with stupor and insurmountable indignation. The structures of power, the forms of government, «war, law, punishment, and a thousand other things had no terms wherein that language could express them, which made the difficulty almost insuperable to give my master any conception of what I meant» (*ibid.*, p. 291).

Although Swift does not mention religion here, the ghost of the wars of religion and their innumerable victims lurks in the writer's mind. This appears clearly when he opposes what we could call with Apel and Habermas the proceedings of «argumentative reason» (confronting several opinions with each other at the risk of forgetting that they are mere opinions) and true reason, which deals with indisputable evidences and not with mere conjectures. Under this respect, the Houyhnhm understanding of reason fits better Husserl's definition of reason, grounded ultimately in an apodictic evidence than Apel's or Habermas's idea of argumentative reason: «Neither is *Reason* among them a point problematic as with us, where we can argue with plausibility on both sides of a question; but strikes you with immediate conviction». Unfortunately for us, as for Gulliver, not everybody is willing to share the phenomenologist's idea of reason! «I remember», says Gulliver, «that it was with extreme difficulty that I could bring my master to understand the meaning of the word opinion, or how a point could be disputable; because *Reason* taught us to affirm or to deny only where we are certain» (*ibid.*, p. 315).

This short excursus into the world of literature (which Henry himself has explored in his writing three novels) sheds light upon the objections any defender of his conception of phenomenology must expect from of the representatives of the analytic tradition of philosophy. Regarding our leading question about the conditions under which phenomenology helps us to cross the river Jordan and enter into the promised land of philosophy of religion we should also pay attention to the final pages of *Gulliver's Travels*. They start with an act of excommunication: despite the proofs that Gulliver is an intelligent

being, the Houyhnhms decide to banish him from their perfect society. Gulliver's way back to the «real» world of humans fails to end on the stake of the Inquisition. Having learnt to avoid at all costs «saying the thing which is not», he has become unable to lie, even in order to save his life. In Swift's novel he spends his last years in a kind of misanthropic retreat, preferring the society of his horses to that of his fellow-humans. This is obviously not at all the attitude which Henry is encouraging in his philosophical and literary writings!

The task which he confronts us with if we accept his distinction between the «words of life» and the «language of the world» is to figure out a way of articulating «public» and «private» language. This is also he task awaiting a phenomenological hermeneutic eager to avoid a dichotomous reading of Henry's thinking. Henry himself draws our attention to this problem when he asks himself «why the Truth leads back to Life and why it belongs to Life» (PC 98). His answer stresses the self-witnessing character of life, which reaches its climax in Christ, the only «faithful Witness»,<sup>23</sup> who is indeed «the Word of Life bearing witness to itself because it is nothing else than this self-witnessing» (PC 111).

Supposing that we accept Henry's invitation to ask ourselves «how this self-revelation through which Life speaks of itself and never ceases to tell truly what it is accomplishes itself» (PC 98) and that we accept consequently to ask ourselves under which respect «Life is a word» (PC 102), does this dispense us from asking Dilthey's question: how does life *express* itself? This question has received a strong echo in the writings of O.F. Bollnow and Georg Misch, the main inheritors of Dilthey's hermeneutics. They invite us to ask whether the numerous tautological expressions we find in Henry's writings — for instance «sufferance expresses its sufferance and joy its joy» (PC 102) can be the last word in this matter.

Independently from this difficulty one should also reflect upon Henry's argument stating that the common denominator of the Judeo-Christian religious culture is the reference to the Word of Life. Henry's reading of the «initiatory»

<sup>23</sup> *Apoc.* 1, 5.

(PC 103) text of the Prologue of the Gospel of John, which he takes to be the summary and the conclusion of the whole Gospel, aims to show that the Word of Life is the keystone of both Testaments.

If God is Life, any attempt to prove his existence comes too late in aiming at establishing the possibility of an encounter, which has already taken place as soon as living beings have come into existence! Of course one could imagine a more charitable interpretation of this intellectual enterprise. Hegel, for instance, asked himself whether the «so-called proofs» are not to be understood as a way of retracing the different «ways» of the encounter with the living God before the eyes of our intellect.

Looking at Henry's phenomenological approach to Christianity with the eyes of Hegel, it would seem that we are compelled to move straight back to the aporias of «immediate knowledge» as it is understood by Jacobi and Schleiermacher, and submitted to a ferocious critique by Hegel, who comments Schleiermacher's definition of religion as the «feeling of absolute dependency» in saying that it suits dogs better than spiritual beings. But Henry's phenomenological understanding of «immediacy» does not allude to the romantic masters of immediate knowledge. In fact, it has nothing to do with knowledge at all. In this matter, Henry's real precursor is the old «master of life» (*Lebensmeister*) Meister Eckhart. Instead of echoing Thomas Aquinas' statement that it is easier to know what God is not, than knowing what he is, i.e. to get a positive knowledge of his divine essence, Henry claims that «each living being who bears life within itself not as an unknown secret, but as what he is enduring ceaselessly as its own essence and its very reality» (PC 104) knows God through this very fact.

But does this mean that we are immediately able to understand the abysmal difference — which I would like to call «bio-phenomeno-logical» rather than «onto-theo-logical» — which separates the thirst of living proper to all finite living beings from the originary us Source of life as such? This is quite a different question, which philosophy as well as theology never cease to be confronted with, as soon as they deal with the following question: «How does God's infinite

Life give life to all finite lives, to the living beings which we are all of us?» (PC 105).

Henry's answer implies a particular hermeneutical presupposition grounded in his reading of the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel. The Word is the only qualified interpreter of the Father, the only one able to «translate» (and to transmit) Eternal Life without betraying it.<sup>24</sup> This axiom supposes that we distinguish between the *creation or production* of the things of the world and *life* itself, which is *uncreated*. In Henry's opinion, the Creator of the world is not the «creator» of life, for creating (producing) and begetting are not the same. Creation, as understood by Lévinas, establishes a separation which excludes all participation between the human and the divine, a participation whose religious expression is the feeling of the sacred or the «numinous».<sup>25</sup> In affirming that life is uncreated and in interpreting the verse of the Book of Genesis according to which man and woman are created «to the image and resemblance of God» in the following way: «God being Life, man is a living being» (PC 109), Henry does not, contrary to what some Levinasians would fear, defend a fusionary conception of the relation between the human and the divine. He simply gives a new actuality to Meister Eckhart's intuition according to which the human soul is the «adverb» of the divine Verb.

If this thesis deserves to be discussed, we should ask Henry the following question which one might also address to Lévinas: what about the other living creatures — cats and dogs, whales and dolphins, sparrows and lilies of the field, etc., — who have no «face» in the Levinasian sense of the world, meaning that they do not appeal to our responsibility as human faces do? In some religious traditions at least, the destiny of these creatures «whom we should not mourn»,<sup>26</sup> is not indifferent to that of human beings! Paradoxically even Lévinas dealt with this problem in his small essay: «Nom d'un chien ou du droit naturel».<sup>27</sup> It can be addressed

<sup>24</sup> *Jn* 1, 18.

<sup>25</sup> See: Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. Nijhoff, La Haye 1974, p. 49-53.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Josef Bernhardt, *Die unbeweinte Kreatur. Reflexionen über das Tier*. Kösel, München 1961.

to Henry in the following form: what meaning does his phenomenology give to the mysterious verses of saint Paul's letter to the Romans, in which he says that «the whole creation groans in the pains of childbirth», awaiting earnestly «the revelation of the sons of God»?<sup>28</sup>

### From misunderstanding to understanding: How can the «Word of Life» be understood?

Henry's last question is also the most difficult: can the Word of Life be received and understood by us humans, who are mere finite beings? In order to answer this question, we have to plunge into the heart of a hermeneutical paradox, which some specialists of the Gospel of John as Rudolf Schnackenburg have called the «Johannean misunderstanding». A close reading of the Fourth Gospel shows that, contrary to the image of the genial interpreter which Schleiermacher uses frequently in his *Discourses on religion*, Christ is not a seducer, endeavouring to smooth away the obstacles which prevent us from accepting his words. Some theologians, above all Karl Barth, have concluded that the relation between the Word of God and the human listener is of the same kind as that between the hammer and the anvil: the first is made to strike, the second to endure the blows! If we push this analogy even further, Christ will appear as a kind of «prophet with a hammer» — or a Messiah with a sickle, which was probably the image of «He who must come»<sup>29</sup> which John the Baptist had before his eyes in his preaching.

If we look at how Jesus himself distinguishes his teachings and his style of life which form an intimate unity, from that of the Baptist<sup>30</sup> it be-

comes obvious that we should not move too far in this direction. Christ's words and his behaviour manifest a kind of «divine philanthropy»<sup>31</sup> which finds its literary expression in the parables of the Kingdom of God. The parabolic language builds a bridge between «this life which we are enduring within ourselves as being our own life» and «Eternal Life which within our life never ceases to give it to itself and to make it alive» (PC 116). Nowhere is the reflection upon the capacities and the difficulties of accepting and understanding Christ's message more explicit than in the parable of the sower. In Henry's reading, each obstacle which prevents the word of life from germinating corresponds to a particular figure of evil. Above all, this parable confronts us with Kierkegaard's question regarding «the ability of being able»: is the addressee of the word of life a «sujet capable» in Ricoeur's understanding of this term, or should we stress his fundamental inability?

Henry's testamentary book starts and ends with pondering upon the evil stemming from the human heart and which prevents us from listening to the calls of life. Does this mean that the human being is a fundamentally wicked creature, inhabited by a violence which explodes fully when we are confronted with «the violence of a self-revelation without restriction nor reluctance, without delay nor discourse» (PC 124)? In stressing that the evil becomes sin only when it transforms itself into hatred of the truth, Henry meets saint Augustine's distinction between the «truth which radiates» (*veritas lucens*) and the «truth which puts us into question» (*veritas redarguens*).<sup>32</sup> Even if the Johannean theme of the «Judgement» (*krisis*) gives an ultimately dramatic shape to this distinction, Henry's last words do not consist in proposing a hyperbolic version of Heidegger's distinction between *Rede* (authentic speech) about life and endless *Gerede* («chattering») about the world. This opposition can be surmounted if we do not forget that «the

<sup>27</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile Liberté. Essais sur le Judaïsme*. Ed. Albin Michel, Paris 1976, p. 213–216. Regarding this question of a possible «transcendence in the animal» see: John Llewelyn, *The Middle Voice of Ecological Consciousness. A Chiasmic Rereading of Responsibility in the Neighbourhood of Levinas Heidegger and Others*. Macmillan, Basingstoke 1991.

<sup>28</sup> *Rm* 8, 19–22.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Mt* 3, 10–12.

<sup>30</sup> *Mt* 11, 16–19.

<sup>31</sup> *Tite* 3, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions* X, 23, 34. The same theme is briefly evoked by Heidegger in his *Phenomenology of Religious Life* (Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 60, p. 192–204).

word of life... never ceases to tell everybody about his own life, whether this speech will later be expressed, or not expressed in the language of conversation which is also that of written texts, or Books – and The Scriptures» (PC 128).

Finally all depends upon a correct understanding of the precedence of the word of life over against the world-language. The former implies a «decisive affinity» (PC 128) between the finite words of life which we utter from time to time and the Word of Eternal Life: «He who is born into life hears the Word of Life» (PC 129–130) says Henry, echoing the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel. This affinity reaches far into the past, if we consider the fact that it is supposed throughout the whole Old Testament.

I even wonder whether the implications of the following thesis, through which Henry rejoins Karl Rahner's transcendental definition of the human being as the «addressee of the Word»: «man's coming into the condition of enduring himself and that of self-revelation fulfils itself through the self-revelation of absolute Life within his Word» (PC 131) are not still more far reaching. If we read «the Gospel not as a philosophical treatise about the inner dynamic of divine life», but as being «turned towards the humans» (PC 140), it is turned towards all humans without exception, including those who seek Eternal life within their own religious tradition. This is so, because «the relation between the living being and Life itself, between the heart and the Word which begets this life» (PC 132) ignores all borders including the borders which oppose religious denominations!

Henry opens here a new path towards a philosophical hermeneutic of «the phenomenon of religious experience», an experience unescapable for all human beings who are submitted to it» (PC 153). The keystone of this hermeneutic is Henry's unshakeable conviction that there is no other Burning Bush than that of Eternal Life. At the end of his uncommon philosophical itinerary, which started with Spinoza's dictum: «*sentimus experimenturque nos aeternos esse*», his thinking finds its ultimate expression in the following thesis: «*We endure and we experience life within us as that in which we live although we endure and experience that it is not us who have given this life to ourselves.*» (PC 149).

\* \* \*

Reflecting upon the topic of this opening lecture, I am afraid that in choosing to discuss the ideas of one of the most hyperbolic representatives of French phenomenology, I have unwillingly played the role of a hermeneutical Gulliver, trying to convince the wise analytical Houyhnhms of this country that not all French phenomenologists are just stupid Yahoos. Has my attempt been successful, or should I expect to be excommunicated from this conference? This is what the forthcoming discussion will show.

Before concluding, let me express my peculiar hermeneutical situation, which underlies also my current research regarding the contemporary issues of philosophy of religion in reference to another literary text. It came quite unexpectedly to my mind while I was writing the last lines of this paper. In a famous scene of Goethe's *Faust*, Faust reads once more the Prologue of the Gospel of John, wondering how he should translate the verse: *En archè èn ho logos*, «In the beginning was the Word», in order to make it understandable. Should he translate by: «In the beginning was the Spirit» or rather «In the beginning was Force»? Finally, he chooses a Fichtean translation: «In the beginning was Action».

Being neither a Hegelian nor a Fichtean, my problem is not the same as that of Faust. It could be described as follows. In reading the first verse of the Gospel of John, I hear the voice of Lévinas, whispering: you should translate by: «In the beginning was the Debt due to the other». At the same time, I hear the voices of Marion and Derrida, suggesting to translate by: «In the beginning was the Gift». Moreover, I hear Henry's voice in my inner ear, trying to convince me that the true translation should be: «In the beginning was Life itself». The task of a «hermeneutical phenomenology», as I understand it, is to figure out a way of dealing with all these voices, without rejecting any one of them. It becomes still more difficult if one accepts to meet those who think that in the beginning there were just «language-games», which have nothing else in common but a vague «family-resemblance».