

# A Response to Jean Greisch

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*Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm ställer i sin respons till Jean Greisch ett antal frågor till Michel Henrys fenomenologi, och jämför denna med den svenske religionshistorikern och ärkebiskopen Nathan Söderblom. Bråkenhielm är professor i Empirisk livsåskådningsforskning vid Uppsala universitet.*

At the outset of his lecture professor Jean Greisch refers to Edmund Husserl's comparison between his own situation and that of the dying Moses on mount Nebo seeing the Promised Land from afar, but not being able to actually enter it. For Husserl the Promised Land was the land of reason. For me — and maybe a few others at this conference — it is contemporary French Theology and Philosophy. We look upon from a distance, realizing that even if we may have some scant knowledge by description, we have more or less no knowledge in the form of acquaintance. This situation is a sufficient motive for this conference, and I am grateful to professor Werner Jeanrond for inviting such an outsider as myself to give an introductory response to the fascinating lecture of professor Jean Greisch.

Promised Land for many of us is also the work in focus for professor Greisch's lecture, namely *Paroles du Christ* of the late Michel Henry, a book to be published posthumously later this month (i.e. September 2002). Like Joshua professor Greisch has already entered this intellectual landscape, and unlike Moses many of us look forward to a fulfilment of the promise when the book appears in press. And there is one particular reason for this. As professor Greisch shows it raises a number of challenging questions for contemporary philosophy and theology. In this response I will simply formulate some of these question and conclude with some more general remarks. Some of my questions has to do with the particular philosophical tradition from which I depart and which is not as heavily influenced by phenomenology as that of professor Greisch and Michel Henry.

My *first* question concerns Henry's phenomenological interpretation of Christianity and the hermeneutical consequences this perspective implies. Henry characterizes Husserl's understanding of phenomenology as ecstatic as opposed to his own more radically immanent approach. I assume that this means that he wants to place the phenomenon of *life* — or more precisely, self-conscious and self-enduring life - and the centre of his interpretation of reality and of Christianity. Incidentally, this comes close to the famous Swedish theologian and archbishop Nathan Söderblom, who in his understanding of reality as life draw inspiration from French theology and philosophy. Time does not allow me to go deeper into a comparison between Söderblom and Henry, but I might note one interesting difference. Söderblom did not want to bypass the whole issue of *the historical Jesus*. And I must admit that I am not quite convinced that Henry is justified in doing this in the name of his daring phenomenological interpretation of Christianity. But professor Greisch might convince to the contrary.

A *second* theological problem concerns the relationship between the Word of God and the words of Jesus, not to mention the words of the biblical authors. I would myself prefer a reformulation of this question: how does a person discern truths about God — let alone truths from God — in the words of Jesus and in other parts of the Bible. Let me take a crude example: is it a truth about God, from God, that God and Christ acts to drive out evil spirits from certain people ("If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you». Luke 11:20). Surely, this belief in

evil spirits and the power of God has something to do with the enigma of evil, that all evil thoughts stem from the heart, which Henry finds central to the self-understanding that Jesus proposes to his listeners. But there are clear indications in the New testament that Jesus of Nazareth shared the mythological personification of evil prevalent in his culture. Should we follow the invitation of Jesus and modify our self-understanding accordingly? Are we really justified in bypassing all other sources of knowledge about human beings coming from contemporary medicine, psychology or biology or any other of the sciences?

My *third* question concerns professor Greisch's (and Michel Henry's?) sharp contrast between «the system of humanism» and the words of Christ, between on the one hand reciprocity, «the logic of the gift», expressed in the golden rule *and* the logic of grace or self-sacrifice, which flows forth without asking anything in return on the other. But how sharp is this contrast? Or should we rather try to find a synthesis between the system of and the words of Christ? Many Christian theologians have proposed different solutions to this problem, some of which have suggested that the logic of the gift or self-sacrifice is for convinced Christians, while we cannot demand more than the system of humanism from the heathens. This is not a particularly convincing solution, but neither is Henry's that we simply and totally deny the value of the system of humanism. I would rather see the system of humanism as a universal platform and the logic of self-sacrifice as an ethical possibility in certain extreme situations, a kind of emergency ethics.

Shortage of time and — I might add — the difficulties of the problem does not allow me to go into more specific Christological problems. But let me, *fourthly*, just make a critical remark. I find myself in agreement with Henry's basic thesis that the basic question of Christology is what Jesus Christ leads us to believe about God and human beings. But Henry has inconclusive arguments for his emphasis on the uniqueness of Christ. And contrary to Henry, I would view the historical Jesus in the context of — rather than in contrast to — Jewish religion. But this issue

would take us too far from contemporary French Theology and Philosophy.

*Fifthly*, I would like to make a short comment to Henry's philosophy of language. As I understand Henry and Greisch, there is not only a contrast between the «system of humanism» and the «logic of the gift», but there is also a corresponding contrast on the linguistic level between ordinary language and «originary» language, the language of life. To me this echoes not only and primarily the early Wittgenstein, but first and foremost the later Heidegger, especially when he writes that before humans speak, they must first let themselves be addressed again by Being, «taking the risk that in response to this address he will seldom have anything much to say». <sup>1</sup> When we are addressed by Being — when, for example, our consciousness tells us: «You did wrong!» — there is no cleavage between the mode of saying and that which is said. With his illuminating reference to Swift's *Travels of Gulliver*, he makes quite clear how this is *not* understood. Professor Greisch argues that the language of life expresses an experience which «is essentially true and beyond all falsehood» (p. 8). It seems that language of life expresses a certain kind of self-authenticating experience. But are such experiences really possible? Are there really self-authenticating moral experiences, let alone self-authenticating religious experiences, or — for that matter — any kind of experiences that having them is sufficient for believing that they are experiences of something real, i.e. real in the sense of existing independently of my experiencing it or not? Needless to say, there might be self-authenticating experiences in the sense that there are experiences, the content of which is directly known *only* by the experiencing subject. That I am thinking of my wife at 11.53 on April 16<sup>th</sup> 2003 is such an experience. But the perception that my wife exists at 11.53 on April 16<sup>th</sup> 2003 cannot be a self-authenticating experience, because the fact that my wife exists belongs to those types of facts which by the very nature of those facts goes beyond the content of my particular mental

<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, *Über den Humanismus*, Klostermann, Frankfurt 1947, s. 10 — incidentally a quote that is applicable to my role as a respondent.

state. Experiences of other observers are *always* relevant for the question whether my experience is veridical or illusory.<sup>2</sup>

My last and *sixth* remark concerns the possibility of an internal inconsistency of Henry's phenomenological theology. On the one hand Henry writes that the teachings of Christ are unique in the history of all religions, that the words of Christ submit the ordinary wisdom and ordinary vision of human condition/human nature to a «pitiless critique» which is sharp as a sword. But on the other hand Henry at the same time wants to affirm that the Word of God is turned towards humans without exception «*including those who seek Eternal life within their own religious tradition*». Michel Henry wavers — it seems to me — between a more exclusive and a more inclusive understanding of Christianity. I would clearly opt for the latter alternative and find myself in clear affinity with Henry's thesis that «we endure and we experience life within us as that in which we live although we endure and experience that it is not we who have life to ourselves».

Let me briefly — in conclusion — return to my earlier observation about the affinity between Michel Henry's philosophy and theology and that of Nathan Söderblom

As for Henry, so for Söderblom, life the key to an adequate understanding of the ultimate nature of reality — even if Söderblom draws more heavily on Bergson and Sabatier than Henry. Söderblom develops a kind of natural theology. He argues that life is the best analogy that we have for ultimate reality. There is an

<sup>2</sup> See further my *Problems of Religious Experience*, Uppsala 1985, chapter 8.

important corollary to this idea. If life is revelatory of the fundamental nature of reality, higher forms of life are even more revealing. Ultimate reality is most clearly discerned in human existence — and among human beings it is most clearly encountered among artists, geniuses, founders of religion and ultimately and most deeply in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the qualitatively highest peak of life - at least on this planet. (It is interesting to note that Söderblom is open to the possibility of life in other parts of the universe.<sup>3</sup>) Moral consciousness coincides with the experience of eternity. In an ethically coloured experience of eternity, God is revealing God's self.<sup>4</sup> As I remarked earlier, Söderblom is more sensitive to the historical Jesus, than Henry. Both emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus. But both in a sense undercut and dissolve this exclusive claim by their emphasis on universal religious experiences, which makes them stress the importance of other religious traditions. In fact, Söderblom towards the end of his life argued that he could prove God through the history of religions. In general, I would say there is in Söderblom openness to a natural theology, which I cannot find in the theology of Michel Henry. In this sense I would prefer Söderblom before Henry.

<sup>3</sup> See Nathan Söderblom, *Religionsproblemet*, Stockholm 1910, p. 404.

<sup>4</sup> Nathan Söderblom, *Uppenbarelsereligion*, 1963, pp. 96 and 98.

