

Phenomenology of Religious Experience IV: Religious Experience and Description

Jan Černý*

To Hear the Sound of One's Own Birth: Michel Henry on Religious Experience

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0103>

received April 02, 2020; accepted September 10, 2020

Abstract: The article consists of two parts. The first part outlines two conceptions of religious experience that can be found in the last three philosophical books of Michel Henry: the first, broad conception of religious experience is connected with the transcendental relation of human self to God as proposed by Henry; the second, narrower conception concerns the story of salvation as told in Henry's Christian trilogy, and acquires the form of the "second birth." Yet the transcendental disposition of Henry's phenomenology prevents it from developing hermeneutical tools that would guide the understanding of religious experience. The second part of the article deals with the critique of Dominique Janicaud, who questioned the phenomenological methodology of Michel Henry precisely because of its religious overtone, and with the subsequent discussion incited by Janicaud's criticism. The article defends the phenomenological status of Henry's work by arguing that Henry's thinking could not be rightly accused from being theological or metaphysical at the time of the publication of Janicaud's first critique. Yet it is true that the later Christian trilogy identified the general structures of appearing with the inner life of the God of the Christian Bible, and the experience of Christian faith thus became the presupposition of Henry's phenomenology. The article also argues that religious experience belongs to the field of phenomenological research.

Keywords: phenomenology of life, religious experience, Michel Henry, Dominique Janicaud, subjectivity, biblical hermeneutics

Michel Henry's "phenomenology of life" postulates the transcendental relation of human self to the absolute. This absolute acquired, in the last phase of the development of Henry's phenomenological project, in the Christian trilogy of books *I Am the Truth* (1996), *Incarnation* (2000) and *Words of Christ* (2002), the explicit form of the God of the Christian Bible. The trilogy identified general structures of appearing with God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ of the Gospels, and by doing so, Henry's phenomenology of life entered the field of religious experience, yet in a particular way: the identification of the transcendental (general structures of appearing and subjectivity) with the particular religious and historical content (the event of Jesus Christ and its interpretation in the Scriptures) made it possible for the phenomenology of life to view the entirety of human experience as religious. Then the question arises: Is there a non-religious experience at all? Is there any human experience which is not an experience of God who enables and carries out all human life? The Christian trilogy answered it positively – yes, one can "forget" about their original unity with God and act as if one, not God, is the bearer of one's activity. The central question of the trilogy then became how can one find the way back to its unity with God, the question of salvation. Dealing with this question, Michel Henry described religious experience in a narrower sense, religious experience as distinct from the non-religious one. This religious experience was given the name "the second birth" and two basic types of it, the acts of mercy and a proper understanding (i.e., living experience of the meaning) of the Biblical text were described in the Christian trilogy.

* **Corresponding author: Jan Černý**, Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Hradec Králové, Hradec Králové, Czech Republic, e-mail: jcerny540@gmail.com

Although Henry's phenomenology became openly religious only in its last phase, the Christian mystical tradition, in fact, inspired Henry's phenomenological project from the outset.¹ And albeit Michel Henry understood his philosophical project as phenomenological, the phenomenological status of the entirety of his work has famously been questioned by Dominique Janicaud precisely because of its religious overtone.² And even among the sympathizers of Henry's work, there is an ongoing debate whether his late turn to the "philosophy of Christianity" (as the subtitle of *I am the Truth* reads) means a turn to theology, and if yes, to what extent his methodology stayed phenomenological.³

In this article, I want to raise the question: "To what extent is the description of religious experience in Michel Henry's Christian trilogy a phenomenological one?" I will, first, briefly outline Michel Henry's description of religious experience as found within the Christian trilogy. Then I will present Dominique Janicaud's critique of Henry's phenomenological methodology and the subsequent debate incited by this criticism. I will defend Henry's earlier work from this criticism, but I will also show how the late phase of the development of Henry's project went beyond the field of purely phenomenological research.

1 The phenomenology of life and religious experience

The philosophical project of Michel Henry was founded, already in his first and major achievement, *The Essence of Manifestation* (1963), as an ontology of subjectivity – subjectivity identified with the Ego.⁴ At the same time, it was the question of *how* this Ego appears, the question of immanence and affectivity, that guided this philosophical research from the outset. Henry's phenomenology of life shifted the interest of Husserlian phenomenology, which moved primarily in the direction of investigating the phenomenon and the manner of its givenness, to the investigation of the very conditions of appearing. After this shift, it established the conditions for how any phenomenon could manifest itself, to the process of affective self-manifestation by which transcendental subjectivity is constituted. Phenomenology of life thus defined appearing as revelation: the radicalization of phenomenological reduction reached the non-intentional sphere, in which no objectivity is constituted and which is accessible only to itself – the basis of the apparentness of every phenomenon is this self-revelation of affective subjectivity. Intentional acts, thoughts, language expressions – all of these find their true reality only in their auto-donation within the sphere of immanence: the intention, too, must be first given to itself in its self-experience. This self-revelation is described as "auto-affectation," in which the affecting and the affected are the same, i.e., life which itself brings about its own content – auto-affectation as an a-cosmic feature, it is not affected by anything else than by itself, and as such it is radically foreign to the world. Auto-affectation of life

1 From this perspective, we can consider the late development of Henry's thinking as a rediscovery and a more concentrated appropriation of the New Testament writings and some other Christian literature. For the religious inspiration of entire Henry's phenomenological project, see Hart, "Without World;" Kühn, *Wie das Leben spricht*, the introduction chapter "Heil und Immanenz als Entwicklungsprinzip," 1–34, esp. 1–28; Dufour-Kowalska, "Art, affect et sensibilité. L'esthétique de Michel Henry;" Carla Canullo argues that "[...] all his [i.e. Henry's] work can be regarded as a phenomenology of religious experience." Canullo, "Michel Henry: from the Essence of Manifestation to the Essence of Religion," 174.

2 Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* and *La Phénoménologie éclatée*.

3 See among others, Audi, *Michel Henry. Une trajectoire philosophique*; Laoureux, *L'immanence à la limite. Recherches sur la phénoménologie de Michel Henry*; Sebbah, *Testing the Limit: Derrida, Henry, Levinas, and the Phenomenological Tradition*. The representative collections of essays dealing with the question of the alleged theological turn of French phenomenology (including Michel Henry) for the English speaking audiences is Jonkers and Welten (eds.), *God in France*. As a sort of response to this collection another collection of essays, entitled *Words of Life* (editors Benson and Wirzba) was published, whose authors did not accept the separation of phenomenology and theology proposed by Jonkers and Welten in *God in France*. Important Anglophone contributions dedicated specifically to Michel Henry and the phenomenological/theological nature of his work can be found in Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics?* in Rivera, *The Contemplative Self after Michel Henry* or in the collection of essays *Michel Henry. The Affects of Thought*.

4 The first sentence of the book reads: "The meaning of the Being of the ego is the theme of this investigation." *The Essence of Manifestation*, 1.

is radically invisible. It is, in the same time, the source of an original ipseity. This ipseity is born out of the identity of the affecting and the affected in the movement of auto-affection; and in this ipseity, the I is being constituted, the concrete and individual I.

The inspiration for Henry's conception of subjectivity comes from Christian mystical thought. At the center of Henry's main work *The Essence of Manifestation* is the figure of German mystic Meister Eckhart. His ontological solipsism of God and the human soul, a solipsism which excluded all exteriority, inspired Henry's concept of appearing as revelation in the immanence of life and also the identification of revelation with the structure of subjectivity.⁵ This sphere of immanence, in which auto-affection as the absolute self-givenness of feeling takes place, is the ego. The absolute character of the self of material phenomenology stemmed from its immanent auto-donation, in which it is given to itself absolutely, without reserve, without distance, in entirety.⁶ Henry at some point of *The Essence of Manifestation* mentions that Eckhart interprets this absolute as the eternal, divine essence of the self.⁷ Also when working with the texts of Fichte, young Hegel and Kierkegaard, it seems that Henry is presenting the reader with the ontology of the divine self. Yet when speaking for his own, Henry does not give the absolute foundation of the human self the name "God."

Numerous passages of *The Essence of Manifestation* thus place us before the question as to what subject Henry has in mind. It is clear that the Ego of the transcendental subjectivity is at issue – the condition of the possibility of all experience; the ontological status of this Ego is less clear – is it a human or divine subject? Or is it their identity? It seems that in *The Essence of Manifestation*, the status of the investigated subjectivity is ambiguous – moments of the human and divine alternate in it; it investigates the affectivity of "our" (i.e., human) subjectivity, although the specific mode of self-givenness in the immanence of life grants it the quality of the divine self: eternity, an absolute character, sovereignty.⁸

It was only in the Christian trilogy that Henry clearly elaborated two distinctive subjectivities, divine and human, and put them into a dynamic relation. First, the Christian trilogy brings about the series of new identifications of the structures of appearing with the content of the Christian Bible: Life is identified with God the Father and the ipseity of auto-affection is identified with Christ as the Son of God; auto-affection becomes God's self-revelation, the eternal self-generation of life.⁹ Then, the human self is "born" in the divine self, in the "coming to itself" of this divine self. God eternally comes to themselves in the process of their eternal generation (the generation of Christ who is the ipseity of the absolute divine life's auto-affection) – and in this very process, human selves are born. Both the human and divine self are constituted passively, but the divine life still brings itself – however, through the pathos – to its self-experience, whereas the human self does not bring itself to it. Auto-affection is not my work, "I do not affect myself absolutely, but, precisely put, I am and I find myself self-affected. [...] The [human] Self self-affects itself only inasmuch as absolute [divine] Life is self-affected in this Self."¹⁰ The human self is thus transcendently bound to the (eternal generation of) the divine self.¹¹

5 For the relation of Michel Henry to Meister Eckhart see Laoureux, "De « L'essence de la manifestation » à « C'est moi la vérité »;" Dufour-Kowalska, "Michel Henry lecteur de Maître Eckhart;" Depraz, "En quête d'une métaphysique phénoménologique."

6 See Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 682–3.

7 "[...] the existentiell union of man with God is possible only on the foundation of their ontological unity. Such is precisely the teaching of Eckhart: According to him, it is the absolute who, in the accomplishment of his task, constitutes the essence of the soul [...]" Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 309–10.

8 Sébastien Laoureux has arrived at the conclusion that *The Essence of Manifestation* investigates a divine subjectivity; see Laoureux, *L'immanence à la limite*, 191–7. By contrast, in his book *Michel Henry. Une trajectoire philosophique*, Paul Audi claims that *The Essence of Manifestation* pursues the research of a finite, corporeal individual and its transcendental relation to the absolute, as does *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*.

9 To the way by which the phenomenology of life was Christianized see Černý, "Michel Henry's Christian Trilogy: The Particular Universalism of Salvation."

10 Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 107.

11 Although Henry's conception of God places God exclusively to the immanence, their insertion in the primordial sphere of the human self introduces certain transcendence within the immanence of a subjective human life.

This closeness of the divine and human lives makes it difficult, according to Christina Gschwandtner, to distinguish between them.¹² Yet from the perspective of phenomenology of life, this is exactly the point: the human self is given only in its relation to the divine self, it draws its reality from the divine life and the further it gets from its divine source (the “further” in the phenomenological sense of falling into the estranging mode of appearing in the transcendence of the world), the less reality it has. Human life is born in the self-generation of the divine life, but its purpose is to return to its divine source. This thought clearly echoes the Neoplatonic reasoning: all souls return to the One, from which they emanated. This Neoplatonic vein of thinking present in phenomenology of life comes from Eckhart and his mysticism of the soul’s unification with the divine.¹³

This transcendental bond of the human being to God makes all human experience “religious” – and the religion in question is supposedly Christianity, because Christ is both the name given by phenomenology of life to the God’s Self and the Biblical figure who’s witnessing to God is being translated into the phenomenological discourse. A good example of this universalism of religious experience is Henry’s conception of intersubjectivity. Because the reality of human life rests in the divine life, there is no other way to the other, according to Henry, than through God: “[...] the way in which any transcendental Self reaches another is the same as the way in which it reaches itself: by passing under the triumphal arch, through this Door that is Christ [...].”¹⁴ For the human experience – the experience of myself, of the other, any feeling, thought, emotion – to be real means that this experience must be given in God first because life is God, and, for Henry, anything is real inasmuch it is alive, self-feeling, self-affecting. Living is a religious experience¹⁵ – we are constantly experiencing God because human life is an echo, a weakened form of a divine life. Yet we do not experience God intentionally. We cannot “become aware” of God, for becoming aware is an intentional activity. God is not an object of knowledge but the subject of (all) experience.

Although it seems that religious experience is universal and inescapable, Henry’s phenomenology makes it possible to think that one “forgets” about the divine foundation of their life. The phenomenology of life is based on the opposition of two modes of appearing, in which the first one, appearing in the immanence of life, is in fact the foundation and original way of realizing the second one, appearing in the transcendence of the world. The immanence of life and transcendence of the world are conceived of as two ontological regions, yet the very reality of the latter is the former. Although things, as they appear in the horizon of the world, are mere images bereft of reality (bereft of affective life), one can start to understand themselves as such a thing in the horizon of the world: the empirical self loses its foundation in the transcendental self and becomes “ghostly and unreal.”¹⁶ When the self understands itself out of its care for its being in the world (in the sense of Heideggerian *Sorge*), it is absorbed by the irreality of the world. This certainly reminds us of a Gnostic dualism and commentators of Henry’s work do discuss the extent to which Gnostic ideas are present in his thinking.¹⁷ Although I do not negate that features of the Gnostic thinking can be found in Henry, I find it more appropriate to see both Henry’s ontology and anthropology as closer to Christian Neoplatonism because the dualism of the living subjectivity and the transcendent world has not the last word. Henry shows – in *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, in *Marx*, in *Barbarism*

¹² See Gschwandtner, “Can We Hear the Voice of God?” 155.

¹³ For the Neoplatonic elements of Henry’s thinking see Hankey, “Neoplatonism and Contemporary French Philosophy,” esp. 16–8. Kevin Hart states that Henry’s philosophy “is at heart Neoplatonic in its emphasis that reality has the structure of exitus and reditus, although the basic principle is Life, not the Good, and is regarded as phenomenality and not noumenon.” Hart, “Without World,” 177.

¹⁴ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 255.

¹⁵ Similarly, Canullo argues in her article “Michel Henry: from the Essence of Manifestation to the Essence of Religion” that life also becomes the essence of religion for Henry.

¹⁶ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 143.

¹⁷ Jad Hatem finds dualism of Valentinian Gnosticism in Henry’s phenomenology; see Hatem, *Le sauveur et les viscères de l’être: Sur le gnosticisme et Michel Henry*. Joseph Rivera finds Gnostic features in Henry’s eschatology, in his theory of language and in his disqualification of the world yet he still prefers to see Henry’s phenomenology as a “non-temporal monism;” see Rivera, *The Contemplative Self after Michel Henry*, 161–2, 351, n. 75. Kevin Hart finds Gnostic element in Henry’s conviction that soul is uncreated; see Hart, “Inward Life,” 108.

and to a little degree also in the Christian trilogy – how the world can be permeated by the pathos of a living subjectivity and become a lifeworld, the sensible, affective, beautiful, threatening (and so on) world. The pathos of the human life transforms the world and this transformation takes on the form of both economic and cultural production.¹⁸

It is true, however, that in the Christian trilogy Henry shows little interest in developing this line of his phenomenological project and is almost entirely concentrated on the description of the opposition of (divine) life and world¹⁹ and the spiritual journey of the human self from its source in the divine life into the world and back (the Christian–Neoplatonic *exitus* and *reditus*).²⁰ The concentration on the divine life in its uniqueness and distinctiveness makes it difficult for Henry to ascribe reality in a strong sense to anything other than God. This conviction finds its expression in strongly monophysitist features of his Christology – the Biblical Christ, according to Henry, speaks nowhere of himself as a human being and the ecclesiastical teaching about two natures being juxtaposed in him is allegedly uncomprehensible.²¹ If we are to speak about two natures in Christ, we have to think of the “human” nature as something without substance, because the essence of the human life is God. Henry, in fact, rejects the idea that we can find any independent human “nature” not only in Christ, but also in the human being: “Life has the same meaning for God, for Christ and for man. This is so because there is but a single and selfsame essence of Life, and, more radically, a single and selfsame Life.”²² This absolute Life thus takes place of the One of the Neoplatonic philosophy²³ and, in the same time, the tendency of the human self to forget about its origin in divine life and act as if one, not God, is the bearer of one’s activity opens up the question of salvation.

2 Salvation and religious experience in a narrower sense

The Christian trilogy tells – in three slightly different ways – the story of salvation of the human self that has “forgotten” about its transcendental foundation in divine life. Salvation has become a redeeming turn in the conditions of *appearing*. Salvation in the biblical sense is emancipation from a material or spiritual (individually or collectively experienced) crisis through God’s redeeming intervention; to a certain degree already in the Old, but then especially in the New Testament, present salvation becomes the prototype of future salvation conceived of as the eternal abidance of redeemed human in God’s proximity.²⁴ Phenomenology of life appropriates the concept of salvation by conceiving of this future eternal abidance in God’s proximity as the present renewed penetration of the human transcendental subject by the divine foundation of all revelation.²⁵ This foundation is the absolute auto-donation of affective life in the non-intentional sphere of immanence. Salvation is the renewal of the appropriate proportion between appearing in immanence (in God) and in transcendence (in the world): the redeemed human self realizes,

¹⁸ “We transform the world. The history of humanity is the history of this transformation.” Henry, *Barbarism*, 45–6.

¹⁹ Henry takes the Gospel of John and its sharp opposition of light and darkness as the paradigmatic model of Christian thinking, because it is easy for him to interpret this opposition phenomenologically as a contrast of two regimes of appearing as formulated in his phenomenology of life, the immanence of life and the transcendence of the world.

²⁰ This mutually exclusive conception of life and world also mirrors Henry’s concern with the alleged crisis of the modern civilization, as introduced in his previous books *Barbarism* and *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe*. Christianity is, according to Henry’s reasoning in the Christian trilogy, the only tradition which maintains the subjective life, otherwise deadly endangered by the domination of technology and science in the modern world.

²¹ See Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 98–104; Henry, *Incarnation*, 337–8.

²² Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 101.

²³ It is important to note, however, that Henry is not informed by Neoplatonic texts – the Neoplatonic inspiration of his philosophy came through the lenses of Eckhart and German idealism, two main sources of Henry’s thinking in *The Essence of Manifestation*.

²⁴ *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. V: O–Sh.

²⁵ “Without World,” 183.

in its self-forgetting and loving action, the maxim which Henry expressed in *The Essence of Manifestation*: “Immanence is the original mode according to which is accomplished the revelation of transcendence itself and hence the original essence of revelation.”²⁶ The action of the human self once again becomes the unity of the inner and the outer – the action of the redeemed self in the exterior of the world is also penetrated by God’s self-revelation.

The story of salvation brings with itself a description of religious experience in a narrower sense, to which Henry refers by a term taken from the Gospel of John, “the second birth.”²⁷ Henry describes two types of experiences which lead to the realization of the second birth: acts of mercy and a proper understanding (i.e., living experience of the meaning) of the Biblical text. These are specific experiences, distinct from the universal religious experience described above in this article; yet, in the same time, their sense is to rediscover this universal religious experience within the human self – they are accomplishment of the Christian–Neoplatonic reditus to the divine source of all living: “[...] the new life to be reached, the second life, is just the first one, the oldest Life, the one that lived at the Beginning [...]”.²⁸ The second birth is the rediscovering of the first birth. Yet the first birth has nothing to do with our secular birth, the coming into the world which is for Henry – in the Christian trilogy – just the coming into the de-realizing condition of the appearing in the world.²⁹ The first birth is our transcendental condition of being born in God and so the first birth (a universal religious experience) is the transcendental condition of the second birth (the religious experience in a narrower sense). Both the first and the second birth are radically invisible and they have nothing to do with the transcendence of the world as they are the qualities of the invisible immanent life.

Acts of mercy lead to such a rediscovery of our first, transcendental birth: the inner principle of acts of mercy is self-forgetting action – it is no longer me who acts, it is the divine self, the giver of my life: “Only the work of mercy practices the forgetting of self in which, all interest for the Self (right down to the idea of what we call a self or a me) now removed, no obstacle is now posed to the unfurling of life in this Self extended to its original essence. [...] The person has rediscovered the Power with which he is born – and which is itself not born. [...] [O]ne who practices mercy has felt the eruption in himself of [divine] Life.”³⁰ Henry cites the phrase of the apostle Paul from the Epistle to the Galatians: “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” From the phenomenological point of view, it is not important what I intend to do in my act of mercy, in whose favor I am going to act, what are the visible results of my action – all these are just bearers of my self-forgetfulness, which makes place for God to act in me. What counts as religious experience here is that which comes only from God, “the eruption of divine life” in myself.

This “eruption” and Christ living on place of myself mark the deification of human subjectivity happening in the second birth. Occasionally, Henry brings a more descriptive wording for the reality of the second birth, “hearing the sound of one’s own birth.”³¹ In this hearing, one descends to their divine foundation and loses their own subjectivity in favor of God’s subjectivity: “Only the one who hears in him the sound of his birth – who experiences himself as given to himself in the self-generation of the absolute Life in its Word – who, given to himself in the auto-donation of the commencement, does not experience himself, to speak properly, but experiences in himself only the Self which gives him to himself, only that one can say to this Self of the Word: ‘I am certain of the truth which is in You.’”³²

Proper understanding of the Biblical text is the theme of Henry’s last book, *The Words of Christ*. Christ’s words, testified in the Gospels, lead the reader of the Scriptures, according to Henry, to a gradual unveiling of Christ’s true, divine identity and to a renewed recognition of the presence of divine life right within the reader.

²⁶ Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 227.

²⁷ See Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 152–70.

²⁸ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 164.

²⁹ Christ rejects, according to Henry, the idea of a secular birth in propositions like this one: “And do not call anyone on earth ‘father’, for you have one Father, and he is in heaven.” Mt 23:9. For Henry’s conception of birth, see Sebbah, “Naître a la vie, naître a soi-même.”

³⁰ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 170.

³¹ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 226; Henry, *Incarnation*, 371; Henry, *Paroles du Christ*, 149.

³² Henry, *Incarnation*, 371–2, my translation.

The proper understanding of the Biblical text is borne out of the identity of Christ who speaks in the Gospels with the Christ who constantly speaks the “Word of Life”³³ in the heart of the reader. The Word of Life is opposed to the logos of the world, i.e., to the human language as the capacity to represent things. Henry understands the language representationalism as the power of de-realizing, identical with the power to de-realize which classifies the secondary, derived mode of appearing in the world. Language cannot bring about the reality of that which is being signified. That is why the language of the world can deceive whereas the word of life never lies – pain is pain and joy is joy in life’s self-revelation.³⁴ The power of human feelings and emotions to reveal themselves finds, once again, its transcendental condition in God’s self-revelation that is Christ as the Word of God. The proper understanding of Christ’s words in the Gospels then means, similarly to the principle of the acts of mercy, the rediscovery of our first, transcendental birth in God. This rediscovery excites a strong emotion in the reader – Henry cites the proposition of the two disciples on their journey to Emmaus who met with the risen Christ but recognized him only later when he was breaking bread with them: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32). The proper understanding of the Biblical text leading to the rediscovery of a divine life carrying out my life is the second type of the religious experience in a narrower sense.

We may notice a certain hermeneutical shortcoming in Henry’s conception of the proper reading of the Scriptures. The unity of the transcendental (Christ as self-generation of God and the originator of our own first, transcendental generation) and the empirical (Christ’s words in the Gospels) is attained at the expense of the empirical: a comprehending reading of the Scriptures means the abolition of the sign-character of the text in favor of a tautological self-expression of the subjective life.³⁵ The Christianized version of phenomenology of life postulates the naturalization of reading which represents such a movement of understanding that goes against the movement of signifying – it is equivalent to the movement carried out by the redeemed subjectivity, the movement of withdrawal from the world to the immanence of divine life. This withdrawal means a rejection of any hermeneutics because hermeneutics apply to the search for meaning, but there is no search and no uncertainty concerning the meaning in life: life is always true, it always “says” itself. Henry rejected hermeneutics explicitly already in *I Am the Truth*: “In any case, phenomenology has given way to hermeneutics and commentaries, or rather, to endless hypotheses.”³⁶ And it has given way to hermeneutics also in *Words of Christ*.

Christina Gschwandtner finds this rejection of hermeneutics “deeply troubling” – how do we discern between God’s speaking to us and our answer to this message? How do we discern among the impulses of our heart? How do we communicate the divine message to the others?³⁷ Joseph Rivera argues that Gschwandtner mistakes Henry’s description of hearing the God’s voice with a kind of empiric bodily experience like, for example, the feeling of warmth, and that she mistakenly attributes to Henry the endeavor to domesticate God within consciousness.³⁸ Rivera is right when observing that the core of the religious experience in a narrower sense, as described by Henry, is the non-intentional experiencing of my life being originated in God and that it is stripped away of any empirical content; it is, in fact, rather God’s self-revelation taking place in me. Yet Christina Gschwandtner is right observing that there is an empirical way on the side of the human self to this pure core of religious experience – the acts of mercy and reading

³³ The “Word of life” from the First Epistle of John and the “Word” that “was God” from the Prologue to John’s Gospel.

³⁴ See Henry, *Paroles du Christ*, 88–99.

³⁵ Greisch expressed his doubts concerning the tautological self-expression of life in his article “‘Paroles du Christ’, un testament philosophique.” Opposed to his view, Depraz (in her article “Tautologie et antinomie. Quelle continuité entre le logos Henryen et le logos christique?”) discloses in Henry’s tautology of the word of life the hidden antinomy of the united opposites which assures the dynamic alteration of energies of the subjective personal life instead of the sterile repeating of the same thing. Similarly, Sackin-Poll’s “expressive interpretation” finds Henry’s phenomenological ontology suitable for the description of life’s own dynamic and productive movement; see his article “Michel Henry and Metaphysics: An Expressive Ontology.”

³⁶ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 225.

³⁷ See Gschwandtner, “Can We Hear the Voice of God?” 153–7.

³⁸ See Rivera, *The Contemplative Self after Michel Henry*, 207–8.

the Scriptures are conscious activities of the human self; and also, Henry does speak about concrete emotions accompanying religious experience – he mentions “intense emotion” provoked by the agreement of Christ’s words in the Gospel and his eternal word spoken in the heart of the reader.³⁹ And when explicitly treating “religious experience” on the last pages of *Words of Christ*,⁴⁰ Henry is referring to these Christ’s words: “Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own” (John 7:17). We find both conscious choosing and discerning on the side of the human self in this proposition about religious experience. There is a way leading to recognizing God’s immediacy in the human self and not everyone is going that way.

The rejection of hermeneutics in Henry’s treatment of religious experience arises from the hyper-transcendentalism of his phenomenology of life.⁴¹ Henry’s phenomenology is concerned with appearing as such, not with particular phenomena reached intentionally. Effective appearing as such is reserved for the sphere of immanence that has an inner structure of the auto-affection of life. Auto-affection, bereft of any intentionality, becomes a transcendental condition (in Kantian sense) of everything that appears which for Henry equates with everything that is. The empirical reality, everything we reach intentionally, is then “transcendentalized,” brought to its transcendental condition within the inner structure of immanence. It is this transcendentalization which abolishes the sign-character of the Biblical text in favor of a tautological self-expression of the subjective life, and it is this transcendentalization which makes it difficult to connect the experience of our transcendental birth in God with the empirical data of our human existence, including the question of discerning the spirits. Henry does not help the situation when he occasionally identifies the transcendental with the empirical (with a concrete historical subject, text, action) without further explanation, supposing that the majesty of invisible divine life explains everything from within. The most acute of these identifications is that which lies in the foundation of the Christian trilogy, the identification of the subjectivity of the absolute life with Christ of the Gospels – with the abolishing of any empirical support for such a claim (i.e., with the transcendentalization of all empirical phenomena), how do I know that it is Christ who is born in the absolute life and it is thus Christ who gives myself to myself? How do I know that it is Christ with whom I am being identified in the Eckhartian *Gelassenheit* of my self-forgetfulness?⁴² And what about if Jew or Hindu are doing acts of mercy or – that also happens – are reading the New Testament Gospels?

The estrangement from the empirical in phenomenology of life leads Henry to an almost complete disinterest in the historical, ecclesiastical Christianity⁴³ and to a problematic treatment of Christ’s historical incarnation. Henry’s Christology has, in fact, strongly Docetist features – although he does not deny Christ’s suffering, the real Christ’s flesh is thought of as invisible and the visible corporeity is conceived of as ghostly.⁴⁴ There is no real temporality at stake with the Christ’s incarnation and no resurrection or Pentecost as well.⁴⁵ There has been everything already there in the divine life and the human task is just to discover this divine “Immemorial,” as Henry calls it,⁴⁶ as the foundation of its own human existence. Christ’s incarnation is there only to remind us of our forgotten divine origin but even this incarnation does

³⁹ Henry, *Paroles du Christ*, 149.

⁴⁰ See Henry, *Paroles du Christ*, 153–4.

⁴¹ The term hyper-transcendentalism in connection with Michel Henry employed Laoureux in his book *L'immanence à la limite*, esp. 113–7.

⁴² F.-D. Sebbah posed similar question in his article “Une réduction excessive: où en est la phénoménologie française?”.

⁴³ Welten in his study “God is Life: On Michel Henry’s Arch-Christianity” rightly notices that Henry’s late phenomenology is a philosophy of Arch-Christianity, i.e. “Christianity before it became ecclesiastically instituted.” Welten, “God is Life,” 141.

⁴⁴ I defend the thesis that a kind of Docetist Christology – against Henry’s conscious endeavor to weaken it in the second book of the trilogy, in *Incarnation* – is to be found in the Christian trilogy in Černý, *Jevení a spása*, esp. 102–7 and 162–74. The interesting feature of this “Docetism” is that it applies to the human existence and human corporeity as well.

⁴⁵ Falque in “Y a-t-il une chair sans corps?” Kevin Hart in “Without World” and Rivera in *The Contemplative Self after Michel Henry* are attentive to the problematic treatment of Christ’s incarnation in Henry.

⁴⁶ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 151; *Incarnation*, 267.

not make the visible body (of Christ, of humans) and the visible world any better, any more alive and real – the world seems to be excluded from the salvation.⁴⁷ But then, once again, the hermeneutical tools for orientation on the journey to our “second birth” are not really at our disposal.

On the other hand, these remarks do not diminish the inspirational strength of Henry's work for both philosophers and theologians, attested by ever growing literature on him or informed by his thinking. Within this literature, some of the phenomenological and theological shortcomings became a subject to different criticisms: the famous among them was that of Dominique Janicaud. In the second part of this article, I will pay attention to his critique and to the discussion which followed it and I will also add my own perspective on the issue.

3 The criticism of Dominique Janicaud

Although Michel Henry has abandoned Husserlian intentional analysis and excluded consciousness from the phenomenological field, he considered his thinking *phenomenological* throughout his career.⁴⁸ And although his phenomenological project had a Christian inspiration from the outset and was openly Christianized in its latter phase, he always considered it to be non-metaphysical.⁴⁹ Yet both these presuppositions were questioned by Dominique Janicaud in his famous book *The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology* published in 1991 – even before the open Christianization of Henry's phenomenology which can be dated to 1996, the year of the publication of *I Am the Truth*. Janicaud sees Henry's thinking as theological and non-phenomenological even before it was openly Christianized in the trilogy – the main targets of Janicaud's critique are *The Essence of Manifestation* and *Material Phenomenology*.

Janicaud's objection in *The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology* was primarily methodological and its addressees were, besides Michel Henry, also Emmanuel Lévinas, Jean-Luc Marion and peripherally, Jean-Louis Chrétien. As the ironic title of his book suggested, Janicaud considered the phenomenological projects of some of his French colleagues to be an awkward attack of speculative metaphysics and theological terminology on the field of phenomenological research. Phenomenology for him thus ceases to be the “strict science” which it was intended to be in Husserl. The founder of phenomenology laid out for the new philosophical method and the science which emerged from it a path between the objectivism and naturalism of science on the one hand and speculative metaphysics on the other. Bracketing is intended to protect phenomenology against the naturalism of the natural attitude, but likewise against the statements of special metaphysics on the nature of the soul, the world and God. Phenomenology moves on the crossroads of science and philosophy, with the aid of two new methodological instruments – reduction and eidetic description. But according to Janicaud, the proponents of the “theological turn” depart from an eidetic description and with it also from the empirical pole of phenomenological research in favor of the transcendental pole, in favor of concentration on the search for the original and fundamental in appearing,

⁴⁷ “The aim of the historical incarnation of the Word into the visible body is to remind man that precisely in this Word he was made in the beginning according to the image and in the likeness of God: in the invisible. Incarnation makes apparent to man his invisible birth.” Henry, *Incarnation*, 369, my translation. As I suggested above, phenomenology of life shows how the world can be permeated by the pathos of a living subjectivity and become a lifeworld. The Christian trilogy, however, does not develop this line of thought and there is even a considerable shift between *Philosophy and Phenomenology of Body* and *Incarnation* in treating human corporeity: Whereas in the older book the constitution of human corporeity opened it to the world, the younger, Christian book describes the constitution of all layers of the corporeity as closed within the realm of immanence. For the detailed description of this shift see Laoureux, *L'immanence à la limite*, 140–50.

⁴⁸ Here I follow the chapter “(A)teistická fenomenologie a kritika Dominika Janicauda” of my book *Jevení a spása*.

⁴⁹ “[P]henomenology [...] is opposed to metaphysics in principle because it holds itself deliberately to the *phenomenon in the way it shows itself*.” Henry, *Incarnation*, 303, note 1, my translation.

which they find in speculative qualities such as Archi-revelation (Henry),⁵⁰ the pure call (Marion), originary alterity (Lévinas).⁵¹ But this is a serious methodological error. Janicaud allows that phenomenology does not have to adhere to Husserlian methodological orthodoxy where it is possibly too binding, but a certain setting of phenomenological method should remain preserved – and a dual limitation belongs to it: phenomenology should remain a philosophy of finitude which resigns from special metaphysics and researches experience in its phenomenal limits; and its transcendental view should always patiently search for invariants and be attentive to the complexity of worldly existence.⁵²

In the chapter dedicated to Michel Henry's work,⁵³ Janicaud declares that the characteristics which Henry attributes to the region of immanence are clearly religious: the revelation of absolute being is itself also absolute; life which reveals itself in auto-affection, is non-historic and infinite life. To Janicaud these are clearly metaphysical conclusions, and Henry does not bring in their favor a description of specific phenomena, but rather an ever more radical descent into the interior of appearing, therefore to the condition of phenomenality. The manner of this descent is not satisfactory, for the inner structure which Henry ascribes to the region of immanence is apparently no structure, for it does not contain any "identifiable characteristics or relations" and is therefore not phenomenologically evident. In Henry's project, we encounter instead of phenomenology an auto-referential essentialism. And despite the demand of phenomenology of life to establish a region of immanence in the materiality of feeling, Janicaud considers Henry's thought to be idealistic metaphysics, a certain form of negative theology. And the negative demarcation of divine immanence goes so far that it eludes knowledge. The experience of (divine) life is thus inexpressible, and life itself is entirely isolated; statements thereof are the work of metaphysical systematics. Janicaud observes Eckhart's mystical thought as the main inspirational source of Henry's project – this in itself would not present a problem if Henry followed onto Eckhart's legacy in a truly phenomenological manner and focused on the specific phenomena of life (as the young Hegel – another inspirer of Henry's – who also stemmed from this legacy, was able to do). Instead, Henry rejects all "real determining features of life" and finally rids the affectivity of life of corporeality; he presents neither a moral nor spiritual rule. The result of the monumental project which was to find the essence of manifestation is a mere "non-knowledge of affectivity." The religious dimension of Henry's research leads this thought "out of the strict domain of phenomenology."⁵⁴

This critique of Janicaud's is inspired by the four years older critique of Henry's phenomenology from the pen of Janicaud's friend, Michel Haar. In the article *Michel Henry entre phénoménologie et métaphysique* from 1987,⁵⁵ Haar accuses Henry's thought of a return to the metaphysics of the absolute subject, which was peculiar to post-Kantian idealism, for the being of the subject is, in phenomenology of life, identified with being as such; such an ontology then naturally leads to theology: the self-revelation of the absolute subject is referred to as "God" at the end of *The Essence of Manifestation*. Haar asks whether the phenomenology of the absolute is not a contradictory concept and finds this in the paradox of Henry's method which stems from the assumption that affectivity in the immanence of the subject is inexpressible. For the description of this absolute, therefore, Henry resorts to theological concepts – affectivity is *causa sui* and is entirely non-intentional; it is thus conceived of in the spirit of Spinoza's maxim *in Deo movemur et sumus*. According to Haar, Henry's project is one of onto-theology, which entirely ignores the finitude and historicity of human existence.

The argumentation of both critics is therefore similar; a certain difference between Haar's and Janicaud's critique stems from the fact that, while Janicaud contrasts Henry's phenomenology with phenomenological method as characterized by Husserl, Haar primarily emphasizes the fact that Henry neglects

⁵⁰ Janicaud here cites the concept used by Henry in the book *Material phenomenology* from 1990; the concept refers to self-revelation of the absolute subjectivity of life.

⁵¹ See Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn,"* 92–6.

⁵² See *ibid.*, 103.

⁵³ See *ibid.*, 70–86.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵⁵ Haar, "Michel Henry entre phénoménologie et métaphysique."

Heidegger's "destruction of metaphysics." Hence also the origin of the criticism of "onto-theology," to which Heidegger attributed the role of the representative of western metaphysics and its oblivion of being – Henry's thought is for Haar a "negative onto-theology," for unlike Hegel he makes the absolute inaccessible to language.⁵⁶ According to Haar, the possibility to insert phenomenology into metaphysics was, on the contrary, opened in Husserl, for whom the pure I is "absolutely given" in the sphere of immanence.⁵⁷

4 The sin of being metaphysical

Michel Haar later included his article into a book of articles in which he accused the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, the late Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel Henry respectively of the sin of being metaphysical, and condemned all of them.⁵⁸ The authority which determines what is metaphysical and by which the thought of French phenomenology is measured is, for him, Martin Heidegger in all cases. Only an article on Jacques Derrida, which researched Derrida's work with the concept of "game" and its inspiration by Nietzsche, represented a certain exception. Despite this, not even Derrida entirely escaped the accusation of the metaphysicality of his thought – in the introduction of his book, Haar poses the question as to whether Derrida, despite metaphysics being a pejorative concept for him, does not himself make a metaphysical gesture when he wants to deconstruct all metaphysical oppositions all the way to their origins to *différance*, which produces them.

Haar's argumentative strategy, in my view, illustrates a certain doubtfulness of his and Janicaud's critique of new French phenomenology, specifically also Michel Henry. In retrospect, one can label as "metaphysical" practically every thinker's achievement which focuses on questions of being and appearing as such, and thereby as un-phenomenological or retrograde; it always depends on what will become that authoritative criterion of metaphysicality. For Derrida, Husserl succumbed to the metaphysics of presence; for Marc Richir (yet another Francophone phenomenologist), Heidegger is a metaphysician whose intellectual heritage should be defied by phenomenology;⁵⁹ for Haar, Derrida could not resist a certain metaphysical temptation [...]. All of these accusations stem from the phenomenological interest to describe *without prejudice* the way in which one's experience appears and how one understands it. Yet in every such description, someone else can identify another prejudice, which is – apparently – necessary to overcome. This strategy is one of the ways by which phenomenological philosophy has ceaselessly been developing. The thought of Michel Henry is a good example of such a method: Henry accuses almost the entire phenomenological tradition of a certain prejudice, to which he refers as ontological monism and which, according to him, lies in the oblivion of a specific manner of the self-experience of life and in attention focused only on a horizontal, worldly givenness of the phenomenon. The assertiveness with which he presents his critique of the phenomenological tradition found its counterpart in the assertiveness of the critique to which Haar and Janicaud subjected his phenomenological project (and those of other colleagues of his). The danger of such great critical gestures lies in the fact that in the preoccupation of one's own point of view they reduce the complexity of a certain type of thought to a simple principle against which they then focus their rejection. In this reduction of the complex to the simple, the essential, we can perhaps truly see something "metaphysical," something which does not make justice to the complex experience with a certain reality (for instance with a certain set of texts). Without doubt, Henry's frontal critique of almost the entire philosophical tradition until now and, together with it, the absolute preoccupation for the fundamentally invisible manner of appearing in the immanence of life, is such a reductive gesture.

⁵⁶ Haar, *La philosophie française entre phénoménologie et métaphysique*, 141.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁸ It is above cited book *La philosophie française entre phénoménologie et métaphysique*.

⁵⁹ Richir, *Phénoménologie en esquisses*, 10.

But Haar's and Janicaud's critique of Henry's project is reductive in the same way. It is as though it proceeds from the rear, from the apparently "theological" conclusion to which Henry's phenomenology leads when he attributes certain divine attributes to subjectivity of feeling by the end of *The Essence of Manifestation*. In the light of this conclusion, it reads Henry's work – still before its open Christianization which is going to come later – as non-phenomenological, not researching any specific phenomena, not taking into consideration the finitude of human experience and human life, not observant to corporeality, etc. Yet in this way, both critics refuse to accede to the fundamental interest of Henry's project which does not research individual phenomena, but appearing as such (and only then, from this perspective to possibly research individual phenomena, authors and cultural and philosophical traditions). Henry understands his basic interest in researching phenomenality as such as a radicalization of phenomenology.

5 The self-experience of the pure Ego

In this – to some extent meta-phenomenological – research, however, phenomenology of life focuses comprehensively on the specific phenomenon, i.e., the self-experience of the pure Ego. This dimension also enters the forefront in the discussion of other phenomenological philosophers. Therefore when, for instance, Dan Zahavi – in the book *Self-Awareness and Alterity* – researches the problem of self-awareness across the board of various philosophical and, then more narrowly, phenomenological traditions, he does not focus on the question of the extent to which Henry's thought is or is not theological or metaphysical, but understands his analysis of the self-experience of the Ego as a relevant contribution to the research of pre-reflective self-awareness. Henry's rendition of the absolute self-manifestation in auto-affection is, for Zahavi, not a "regressive deduction of a transcendental precondition, but a description of an actual and incontestable dimension in lived subjectivity."⁶⁰ He approaches Henry's interpretation of living subjectivity with critical circumspection, as he does with other intellectual achievements with which he works – he identifies its strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of the theme which he researches in his book. In his article *Michel Henry and the Phenomenology of the Invisible*, therefore, he also defends Henry against Janicaud's accusation of metaphysicality, which his method should disqualify as non-phenomenological.⁶¹ Although Janicaud criticizes Henry's (and Levinas's and Marion's) phenomenology of the invisible of an absence of precision and clarity of real seeing, Zahavi sees their step from visibility to invisibility as phenomenologically motivated. When these authors want to resolve the fundamental phenomenological question as to the condition of the possibility of appearing, they cannot be satisfied with "surface phenomenology" which is focused on object-manifestation or act-intentionality. The radicalization of phenomenological research leads them to the area of the invisible which manifests itself differently than the visible. According to Zahavi, the question remains as to the extent to which this area can be researched by real phenomenological means, although this does not mean that phenomenology has to be limited only to the analysis of act-intentionality and object-manifestation. Henry can be reproached for the tendency to form needlessly paradoxical formulations, but not for his interest in other forms of manifestation than the visible; indeed, Henry's analysis of self-manifestation show that phenomenology can also research these other forms of manifestation.

6 The phenomenological status of the phenomenology of life

Haar's and Janicaud's critique, which accuses Henry's phenomenology – at the time when they published their first critical texts, therefore still before Henry's Christian trilogy saw the light of day – of

⁶⁰ Zahavi, *Self-Awareness and Alterity*, 110.

⁶¹ Zahavi, "Michel Henry and the Phenomenology of the Invisible."

metaphysicality is based, in my view, on an all-too-narrow concept of phenomenology and its method. The accusation is vague and unclear. Is Henry's phenomenology theological because its research leads, in the conclusion of the nine-hundred pages long *The Essence of Manifestation*, to a divine foundation of human subjectivity or, more precisely, to a description of divine subjectivity? (I have mentioned the ambiguity of this identification above.) But then one must also label as "theological" the writings of Hegel, Kierkegaard, or Fichte, who accompany the research of subjectivity in *The Essence of Manifestation*. God, who enters at the close of Henry's opus magnum, is far more a "God of the philosophers" than the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," if we are to adhere to the distinction made by Pascal's famous exclamation.

Or is phenomenology of life theological because its concept of the region of immanence – its exclusiveness and structure of self-revealing subjectivity – found its inspiration in the Eckhartian version of Neoplatonic thought? Phenomenology of life fills this formal framework with a specific content of affectivity, to whose analysis a quarter of the scope of *The Essence of Manifestation* is devoted; there is also an analysis of the relationship of affectivity and sensory perceptions or affectivity and action, thus the attention devoted to specific phenomena of life for which Janicaud's critique calls. And Janicaud is also wrong in complaining that the affectivity of life in Henry is deprived of corporeality – the analysis of corporeality is Henry's doctoral work *Philosophy and the Phenomenology of the Body*, which was meant to have formed an independent part of *The Essence of Manifestation*, although the publisher – in view of the scope of the work – did not enable this, and *Philosophy and the Phenomenology of the Body* was published as a separate book two years later. A philosophical talk about God does not make things theological – until we do not know more about the identity of that God, we are hardly in the theological field. We can speak of the "theological turn" of Henry's phenomenology only as late as the Christian trilogy – I will return to this question later.

But not even such reading of *The Essence of Manifestation*, which does not wish to ignore the identification of the foundation of human subjectivity with divine subjectivity at the close of the book, banishes Henry's philosophy to beyond the borders of phenomenology. Michel Henry is by no means the first who attempted to defend, by phenomenological means, the possibility of the specific forms of givenness which are adequate to religious phenomena. Even prior to the First World War, Adolf Reinach defended the specific integrity of religious experience, which cannot be viewed as perceptual experience.⁶² Jean Hering researched the specific character of religious consciousness in the book *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse* from 1925; Kurt Stavenhagen focused on human action face-to-face with the absolute in the book *Absolute Stellungnahmen* from the same year. Max Scheler postulated – besides normal appearance – a specific type of givenness to which he referred as "revelation" and which, according to him, has its own style of evidence based not on reason but on feeling. Michel Henry too based the specific form of givenness in the immanence of life in feeling, but in contrast to the authors just mentioned, he understood it as the basis of *all* appearing – this is indeed where his attempt to radicalize phenomenology lies.

Besides the plurality of phenomenology, one has to recognize the plurality of phenomenological methods, which means more than just a plurality of descriptions, which should – as Janicaud proposes – consciously stop at a certain limit, beyond which they cease to be atheistic.⁶³ One of the possibilities to define the activity of phenomenology is to understand as principal its assumption that reality is not the entirety of things, but the continuity of sense – as Husserl says in the 55th paragraph of *Ideas I*: "All real unities are 'unities of sense'."⁶⁴ A phenomenon is a structure of sense, and the task of phenomenology is to

⁶² I take all examples and references to literature from Anthony Steinbock's contribution "Evidence in the Phenomenology of Religious Experience" in Zahavi, *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*.

⁶³ Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn,"* 128–9. Janicaud requires of phenomenology a "methodological atheism" in his second polemical book *La phénoménologie éclatée* from 1998 (English translation *Phenomenology "Wide Open": After the French Debate*) in which he likewise devotes more space to the demarcation of his own concept of the task of phenomenology. On his requirement of methodological atheism, see the chapter "An Atheistic Phenomenology?" (in English translation: 13–26).

⁶⁴ Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy I*, 128.

find the way to such structures and their changes.⁶⁵ From such an assignment, however, one cannot exclude those cases in which people find – in the things of the world, in cultural creations, in their lives, in other people – the structures of *religious* sense. Husserl too focused on such cases in his texts. For instance, in a manuscript from 1923 titled *Formale Typen der Kultur in der Menschheitentwicklung*, he described historical movements of liberation from dogmatic forms of belief.⁶⁶ Although religious culture is among the oldest forms of a highly developed culture, it distinguished itself, according to Husserl – for instance, in Babylonian religion or Judaism – by a certain naivety or lack of freedom. Christ's figure, then, is the carrier of the critical re-examination of a nationalistic concept of religion and incorporation of ethical norms prescribed by religious laws. Value and moral intuitions are now connected with the intuitive conception of God and the renewal of the original religious experience takes place, in which Christ reveals his unity with God and becomes the prophet of divine life present in himself. But according to Husserl, it is remarkable that the assumption of this “messianic revelation” by the believer occurs in the form of free conversion, not by a mere external acceptance of the message, but through a connecting understanding (*Nachverstehen*) of the religious experience of the founder, the re-feeling of his intuitions in which these value intuitions are felt in a renewed, understanding way (*verstehende Nachföhlung*). New religion thus does not grow from irrational tradition, but from the source of original religious experience which is in a certain sense rational. In the next historical development, this “intuitive rationality of belief” encounters the rationality of philosophy and science, the freedom of the Christian and the freedom of the philosopher connect, but the complicated history of their reciprocal delimitation also begins to unravel.⁶⁷

It is needless for phenomenology to close itself from religious phenomena and religious belief, for religious belief or, as the case may be, the knowledge of religious and religious–philosophic traditions (among people without a religious creed) is part of living experience. Of course, this can problematize the demand of phenomenology for a description of universally accessible structures of sense – the religious sense of researched phenomena is not accessible to everyone. Phenomenology must then endeavor, in its description of this religious sense, to make it similar or accessible to some generally shared or at least generally registered experience or simply relinquish its universal demand. Michel Henry certainly does not alleviate this situation when, without further explanation, he attributes to the potentially religious–philosophical outcome of his research of affective subjectivity in *The Essence of Manifestation* a claim to a description of the general structures of subjectivity. The assertiveness of his method complicates the acceptance of his works for those readers for whom Kant's maxim that God cannot be the subject of experience applies.⁶⁸ This problem is yet further sharpened for readers of the Christian trilogy, in which a certain “theological turn” really occurs.

7 The theological turn – beyond phenomenology?

In the Christian trilogy, the identification of general structures of appearing with God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ of the Gospels is the result of a certain religious conversion. This conversion introduces into the material of phenomenology of life specific theological contents through numerous identifications of

⁶⁵ Hans-Dieter Gondek and László Tengelyi in this way attempt to find a common denominator in various concepts of phenomenology in their book *Neue Phänomenologie in Frankreich*, 20–9.

⁶⁶ Husserl, “Formale Typen der Kultur in der Menschheitentwicklung.” The text is the last, fifth article from the series titled *Renewal*, which Husserl was to publish in the Japanese magazine *Kaizo* – but only the first three were published; the last two were not published, for Husserl had a disagreement with the publisher. Jacques English interpreted Husserl's manuscript “Formale Typen der Kultur in der Menschheitentwicklung” with respect to Michel Henry in his contribution “Le Christ, figure de l'amour ou figure de la vie?”.

⁶⁷ Housset's book *Husserl et l'idée de Dieu* offers a well-researched study of the ways the founder of phenomenology thought about the idea – rather than experience – of God in different manuscripts of his.

⁶⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A685–6, A676.

phenomenological with theological terms, of which the most significant is the identification of the subject of absolute life with Christ. Although this identification comes as a solution to certain philosophical questions, especially the questions of what ontological status subjectivity of phenomenology of life has (questions which our reading of *The Essence of Manifestation* have posed), and how the individual human subject receives its subjectivity from divine life; but the Christological answer to these questions gives rise to new questions: What phenomenological status has such an answer? How convincing can this answer be for the non-Christian readers of Henry's texts?

It is not surprising that it was not convincing at all for Dominique Janicaud. He made just a very short and sarcastic remark on behalf of Henry's *I Am the Truth* in his book *La phénoménologie éclatée* published in 1998, in which he continued the critical discussion with new French phenomenology. "Numerous readers of *I Am the Truth*, including the theologians and biblical scholars among them, were struck by the audacious short circuit brought about between the teachings of Jesus and the phenomenology of Life. Without any historical or hermeneutical precautions, even without resorting to faith, phenomenology becomes religious and evangelical," writes Janicaud, who then rejects that Henry's descriptions of the divine life in the book could have any phenomenological status whatsoever.⁶⁹

It is not clear which "theologians and biblical scholars" Janicaud had in mind; but certain theologians, biblical scholars and philosophers connected with the Institut Catholique de Paris publicly met twice with Henry (in 1999 and 2001) to discuss his Christian books.⁷⁰ They welcomed Henry's endeavor, yet their reserve toward some of his findings and methodological advancements were evident. In the reflection on *I Am the Truth*, Joseph Doré questioned the absence of Christ's Cross, rejection of the Chalcedonian dogma, inimical attitude toward the creation, absence of both the Spirit and the church;⁷¹ Philippe Capelle questioned concentration dedicated solely to the kerygmatic Christianity leading to absence of historical Christianity, the conception of living God as closed toward the world, absence of the salvation of the world.⁷² In the reflection on *Incarnation*, Emmanuel Falque questioned the rejection to think of incarnation as Christ's coming to the body made from "the dust of the earth", and the conception of incarnation that, in fact, does not change anything in the world.⁷³ An interesting point was raised by a biblical scholar Yves-Marie Blanchard: Michel Henry, according to him, does not read the New Testament texts phenomenologically, i.e., as they are given to the reader, in their integrity – he chooses just those isolated verses which fit his conception. Yet the revelation announced in the prologue of John's Gospel (Henry's preferred part of the Gospel) is not fully realized, if the whole story of the Gospel is not really narrated.⁷⁴

From the theological point of view, it is clear that Henry's Christian trilogy is heterodox and that it does not try to be orthodox. There is no Trinity (the Spirit is missing except for several undeveloped remarks about the "common Spirit" of Father and Son), no human nature in Christ, no real Christ's incarnation in the visible body, no Easter, no church (except for the authority of the Scriptures and several Patristic texts) in Henry's account of Christianity. New Testament discourse is a phenomenological one for Henry and its truth is universal, it does not concern a particular religion.⁷⁵ But that does not mean that there was not a theological turn in Henry and that the phenomenological status of the Christian trilogy (and so of its description of religious experience) cannot be disputed. In the final part of the article, I will make a brief sketch of three different types of an answer given to the question of the theological turn within the Christian trilogy.

The first type of the answer denies that we can see the theological turn in the Christian trilogy. So Paul Audi in his survey of Michel Henry's philosophical trajectory speaks of the "inflection" instead of the turn: we find a *philosophical* meeting with New Testament texts in trilogy. There is no mystical experience to be found in the trilogy because everything in it is a work of reason; the trilogy writes about the experience of

⁶⁹ Janicaud, *Phenomenology* "Wide Open," 6–7.

⁷⁰ Their contributions can be found in Capelle, *Phénoménologie et christianisme chez Michel Henry*.

⁷¹ See Doré, "'C'est moi la Vérité: dialogue avec Michel Henry.'"

⁷² See Capelle, "Phénoménologie et vérité chrétienne. Réponse à Michel Henry."

⁷³ See Falque, "Y a-t-il une chair sans corps?"

⁷⁴ See Blanchard, "Michel Henry, lecteur de saint Jean."

⁷⁵ See Hart, "Inward Life" and "'Without World'."

understanding the absolute, not the experience of its revelation. According to Audi, Henry also could have resolved certain problems of his philosophy otherwise than by reference to the Scriptures. Yet Audi admits that the trilogy crossed the supposed border of phenomenology because the absolute – which was given the name God – was conceived of not as an object for thinking but was rather delivered to the experience of faith (as distinct from any mystical union).⁷⁶

Ruud Welten also denies that the theological turn can be found in the trilogy. His contribution to the question is a part of the representative collection of essays *God in France: Eight Contemporary French Thinkers on God*, intended as an answer to Janicaud's critique.⁷⁷ In the introductory essay, Peter Jonkers argues that new French phenomenologists, criticized by Janicaud, do not aim at writing the apologetics of any particular religion; they opened questions concerning God because they are convinced that it would deepen philosophical enterprise. Ruud Welten in his contribution about Michel Henry defends the view that the trilogy represents the radicalization of phenomenology, not its turn toward religion. Henry does not describe a mystical "path," he only finds in the Christian mystical tradition (mainly in Eckhart) conceptual means for describing the true phenomenality, the immanence of life – yet life reveals itself not only in religion but also in the subjective corporeity, in art or in living labor, as earlier Henry's works on Maine de Biran, Kandinsky, or Marx demonstrate. Henry discovers in Christianity "the Arch-structure of radical phenomenology," yet his phenomenology discloses rather the phenomenological structure of religion in general than that of Christianity.⁷⁸

The second type of the answer admits that there has been the theological turn in the trilogy and that this turn has brought Henry's research beyond the phenomenological field. So Sébastien Laoureux argues that the division of the auto-affection to its "strong" and "weak" conception and the resulting difference between Christ's and human subjectivity within the experience of the ego cannot be demonstrated phenomenologically – Michel Henry here exceeds his own conception of phenomenality as laid down in *The Essence of Manifestation* and in this sense really performs a certain theological turn.⁷⁹ Similarly, François-David Sebbah maintains that the figure of Christ as the incarnation of the subjective foundation of all appearing appears in the trilogy from the outside of phenomenology. Henry's conception of phenomenality is excessive and it is difficult for the reader to follow it – the author of the trilogy is always ahead of the reader, his gestures cannot entirely be imitated.⁸⁰ Yet both Laoureux and Sebbah find Henry's philosophy, even though it surpassed the borders of phenomenality at some points in the trilogy, as the enrichment of the philosophical tradition and the inspiring attempt to radicalize phenomenology. So, for example, it offers a possibility to think God otherwise than in the classical metaphysics, according to Laoureux.

Yet there are also authors who posit a certain limit to their acceptance of Henry's late development. So, for example, László Tengelyi in the book *Neue Phänomenologie in Frankreich* focuses attention especially on those passages of *Incarnation*, which resolve purely phenomenological problems: Henry's polemic with Husserl's concept of impression, the relationship of corporeity and the ego, the question of the constitution of time.⁸¹ Besides this, he declares that the entire Christian trilogy is an endeavor to bind the material, affective content of life with its individuation. But because this individuation is anchored Christologically, the whole project finds itself on the edge of phenomenology and theology, and one can therefore say that Henry's phenomenology of life truly underwent a theological turn which questions its phenomenological methodology.⁸²

The third type of the answer to the question of the theological turn comes from those who perceive theology and phenomenology as mutually bound disciplines. They can see the theological turn at work in the trilogy and find it enriching for both phenomenology and theology. So Joseph Rivera accepts without further ado Henry's identification of the invisible life with God who gives me to myself, making me a Son of

⁷⁶ See Audi, *Michel Henry*, 223–52.

⁷⁷ See Jonkers and Welten (eds.), *God in France*.

⁷⁸ See Welten, "God is Life."

⁷⁹ See Laoureux, *L'immanence à la limite*, 209–13.

⁸⁰ See Sebbah, "Une réduction excessive."

⁸¹ See Gondek and Tengelyi, *Neue Phänomenologie in Frankreich*, 114–51, 269–84, 334–52.

⁸² See *ibid.* 348–52.

God. He then distances himself from Henry's all too-easy merging of divine and human lives and proposes a more future eschatology but still claims that Henry is a major inspiration for his own "phenomenological theology."⁸³ Similarly, Christina Gschwandtner sees Henry's appropriation of the New Testament texts as refreshing because it helps us to see them in a new fashion. Gschwandtner questions the exclusiveness of Henry's position, according to which Christianity in his interpretation opens up the reality and truth unknown to any other religion (and also to philosophy and science), but still views Henry's thinking as an important part of the phenomenological movement.⁸⁴

This variety of answers coming from different thinkers stems from the series of translations and identifications that forms the development of Henry's *oeuvre*. Henry's quest for the mystery of invisible affective life made him to translate into the phenomenological discourse the work of diverse authors like Maine de Biran, Eckhart, Karl Marx, or Wassily Kandinsky; in broader sense it made him to translate from the Christian mystical tradition to phenomenology of life (in *The Essence of the Manifestation*), and later again from the New Testament discourses into his phenomenology (in the Christian trilogy).⁸⁵ The core of these translations lies in certain identifications, the most important among them is the identification of the immanent sphere of life with God – the identification made not unequivocally in *The Essence of the Manifestation* but then done decidedly in the Christian trilogy – and the identification of the ipseity of life's auto-affection with Christ. Different interpreters of Henry's work find these translations and identifications either more or less convincing, and either more or less in line with (Henry's own or a more general) phenomenological methodology.⁸⁶

I myself agree with the suspicion that within the Christian trilogy Henry underwent a theological turn that is not justified phenomenologically, i.e., not demonstrated as phenomenally evident. The concept of the human being as transcendently born in God and to that connected difference between my own self and Christ, as divine self, within my self-experience are rather an interpretational achievement of Christian faith than a phenomenological analysis of the experience of the ego, the analysis which governs the entirety of Henry's phenomenology of life. The Christian faith is tacitly presupposed but the reader of the trilogy is not presented – because of the hyper-transcendentalism of phenomenology of life – with hermeneutical tools that would conclusively navigate the description of the experience of the ego to its Christian home port. Yet as the variety of the interpretations of Henry's work shows there can be different attitudes toward his treatment of religious experience. Those who have Christian faith may find Henry's analysis as opening up new ways for their Christian understanding of their self-experience. Those who have other creed may find appealing Henry's conviction that life is essentially religious. And those who do not want to interpret their self-experience in religious terms may still be attracted by Henry's thorough analysis, phenomenological or speculative, of the mystery of life.

References

- Audi, Paul. *Michel Henry. Une trajectoire philosophique*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2006.
 Benson, B. E., and Wirzba, N. (eds.), *Words of Life: New Theological Turns in French Phenomenology*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010.

⁸³ See Rivera, *The Contemplative Self after Michel Henry*.

⁸⁴ See Gschwandtner, "The Truth of Christianity? Michel Henry's Words of Christ" and Gschwandtner, "Michel Henry: A God of Truth and Life."

⁸⁵ Kevin Hart sees in *The Essence of Manifestation* Henry's endeavor to translate from Christianity to philosophy in his essay "Inward Life."

⁸⁶ It is worth noting that in his last two books Henry himself detracted his sole devotion to phenomenology. He called the closing chapter of *Incarnation* "Beyond Phenomenology and Theology," and in his last book, *The Words of Christ*, he does not speak of phenomenology at all, although he does speak of appearing and revelation. By the end of his life, Michel Henry was looking for the "truth of life" as the common ground from which stem both theology and phenomenology.

- Blanchard, Yves-Marie. "Michel Henry, lecteur de saint Jean." In *Phénoménologie et christianisme chez Michel Henry. Les derniers écrits de Michel Henry en débat*, edited by P. Capelle, 83–94. Paris: Cerf, 2004.
- Canullo, Carla. "Michel Henry: from the Essence of Manifestation to the Essence of Religion." *Open Theology* 3:1 (2017), 174–83.
- Capelle, Phillipe (ed.). *Phénoménologie et christianisme chez Michel Henry. Les derniers écrits de Michel Henry en débat*. Paris: Cerf, 2004.
- Capelle, Phillipe. "Phénoménologie et vérité chrétienne. Réponse à Michel Henry." In *Phénoménologie et christianisme chez Michel Henry. Les derniers écrits de Michel Henry en débat*, edited by P. Capelle, 45–51. Paris: Cerf, 2004.
- Černý, Jan. "Michel Henry's Christian Trilogie: The Particular Universalism of Salvation." *Revue Internationale Michel Henry* 9 (2018), 215–30.
- Černý, Jan. *Jevení a spása: Subjektivita v materiální fenomenologii Michela Henryho*. Praha: Filosofia: Praha, 2019.
- Depraz, Natalie. "En quête d'une métaphysique phénoménologique: la référence henryenne à Maître Eckhart." In *Michel Henry. L'épreuve de la Vie*, edited by A. David, J. Greisch, 255–79. Paris: Cerf, 2001.
- Depraz, Natalie. "Tautologie et antinomie. Quelle continuité entre le logos henryen et le logos christique?" In *Michel Henry*, edited by J.-M. Brohm, J. Leclercq, 440–50. Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 2009.
- Doré, Joseph. "C'est moi la Vérité: dialogue avec Michel Henry." In *Phénoménologie et christianisme chez Michel Henry. Les derniers écrits de Michel Henry en débat*, edited by P. Capelle, 33–43. Paris: Cerf, 2004.
- Dufour-Kowalska, Gabrielle. "Michel Henry lecteur de Maître Eckhart." *Archives de Philosophie* 36:4 (1973), 603–24.
- Dufour-Kowalska, Gabrielle. "Art, affect et sensibilité. L'esthétique de Michel Henry." In *Michel Henry et l'affect de l'art. Recherches sur l'esthétique de la phénoménologie matérielle*, edited by A. Jdey, R. Kühn, 23–40. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2012.
- English, Jacques. "Le Christ, figure de l'amour ou figure de la vie? Husserl et Michel Henry." In *Michel Henry. Pensée de la vie et culture contemporaine – Actes du colloque international de Montpellier, 3-5 décembre 2003*, edited by J.-F. Lavigne, 167–79. Paris: Beauchesne, 2006.
- Falque, Emmanuel. "Y a-t-il une chair sans corps?" In *Phénoménologie et christianisme chez Michel Henry. Les derniers écrits de Michel Henry en débat*, edited by P. Capelle, 95–133. Paris: Cerf, 2004.
- Freedman, D. N. (ed.). *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. V: O–Sh. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Gondek, Hans-Dieter, and Tengelyi, László. *Neue Phänomenologie in Frankreich*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011.
- Greisch, Jean. "'Paroles du Christ,' un testament philosophique." In *Phénoménologie et christianisme chez Michel Henry. Les derniers écrits de Michel Henry en débat*, edited by P. Capelle, 193–210. Paris: Cerf, 2004.
- Gschwandtner, Cristina. "Can We Hear the Voice of God? Michel Henry and the *Words of Christ*." In *Words of Life. New Theological Turns in French Phenomenology*, edited by B. E. Benson, N. Wirzba, 147–57. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010.
- Gschwandtner, Cristina. "Michel Henry: A God of Truth and Life." *Postmodern Apologetics?: Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy*, edited by Cristina Gschwandtner, 125–42. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.
- Gschwandtner, Cristina. "The Truth of Christianity? Michel Henry's Words of Christ." *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 13:1 (June 2014).
- Haar, Michel. "Michel Henry entre phénoménologie et métaphysique." *Philosophie* 15:4 (1987), 30–59.
- Haar, Michel. *La philosophie française entre phénoménologie et métaphysique*. Paris: PUF, 1999.
- Hankey, Wayne J. "Neoplatonism and Contemporary French Philosophy." *Dionysius* 23 (2005), 161–90.
- Hart, Kevin. "'Without World': Eschatology in Michel Henry." In *Phenomenology and Eschatology: Not Yet in the Now*, edited by N. DeRoo, J. Panteleimon Manoussakis, 167–92. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009.
- Hart, Kevin. "Inward Life." In *Michel Henry: The Affects of Thought*, edited by J. Hanson, M. R. Kelly. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Hatem, Jad. *Le sauveur et les viscères de l'être: Sur le gnosticisme et Michel Henry*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004.
- Henry, Michel. *The Essence of Manifestation*. Hague: Nijhoff, 1973.
- Henry, Michel. *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair*. Paris: Seuil, 2000.
- Henry, Michel. *Paroles du Christ*. Paris: Seuil, 2002.
- Henry, Michel. *I Am the Truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Henry, Michel. *Material phenomenology*. Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Hering, Jean. *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse. Étude sur la théorie de la connaissance religieuse*. Strasbourg: Impr. alsacienne, 1925.
- Housset, Emmanuel. *Husserl et l'idée de Dieu*. Paris: Cerf, 2010.
- Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. Hague–Boston–Lancaster: Nijhoff, 1983.
- Husserl, Edmund. "Formale Typen der Kultur in der Menschheitentwicklung." In *Husserliana, Band XXVII: T. Nenon, H. R. Sepp (eds.). Aufsätze und Vorträge (1922–1937)*, edited by T. Nenon, H. R. Sepp, 59–94. Dordrecht–Boston–London: Kluwer: Ac. Publishers, 1989.
- Janicaud, Dominique. *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2000.
- Janicaud, Dominique. *Phenomenology "Wide Open": After the French Debate*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

- Jonkers P., and Welten, R. (eds.). *God in France: Eight Contemporary French Thinkers on God*. Leuven–Paris–Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2005.
- Kühn, Rolf. *Wie das Leben spricht: Narrativität als radikale Lebensphänomenologie. Neuere Studien zu Michel Henry*. Cham: Springer, 2016.
- Laoureux, Sébastien. “De « L'essence de la manifestation » à « C'est moi la vérité ». La référence à Maître Eckhart dans la phénoménologie de Michel Henry.” *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 99:2 (2001), 220–53.
- Laoureux, Sébastien. *L'immanence à la limite. Recherches sur la phénoménologie de Michel Henry*. Paris: Cerf, 2005.
- Richir, Marc. *Phénoménologie en esquisses. Nouvelles fondations*. Grenoble: Millon, 2000.
- Rivera, Joseph. *The Contemplative Self after Michel Henry: A Phenomenological Theology*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015.
- Sackin-Poll, Andrew. “Michel Henry and Metaphysics: An Expressive Ontology.” *Open Theology* 5:1 (2019), 405–19.
- Sebbah, François-David. “Une réduction excessive: où en est la phénoménologie française?” In *Phénoménologie française et phénoménologie allemande*, edited by É. Escoubas, B. Waldenfels, 155–73. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000.
- Sebbah, François-David. “Naître a la vie, naître a soi-même. À propos de la notion de naissance chez Michel Henry.” In *Michel Henry, l'épreuve de la vie. Actes du Colloque de Cerisy 1996*, edited by A. David, J. Greisch, 95–116. Paris: Cerf, 2001.
- Sebbah, François-David. *Testing the Limit: Derrida, Henry, Levinas, and the Phenomenological Tradition*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.
- Stavenhagen, Kurt. *Absolute Stellungnahmen. Eine ontologische Untersuchung über das Wesen der Religion*. Erlangen: Verlag der Philosophischen Akademie, 1925.
- Steinbock, Anthony. “Evidence in the phenomenology of religious experience.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, edited by D. Zahavi, 583–606. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Welten, Ruud. “God is Life: On Michel Henry's Arch-Christianity.” In *God in France: Eight Contemporary French Thinkers on God*, edited by P. Jonkers, R. Welten. 119–42. Leuven–Paris–Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2005.
- Zahavi, Dan. *Self-Awareness and Alterity. A Phenomenological Investigation*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999.
- Zahavi, Dan. “Michel Henry and the Phenomenology of the Invisible.” *Continental Philosophy Review* 32:3 (1999), 223–240.