

On Doing Theology 'After' Ontotheology: Notes on a French Debate

Joeri Schrijvers

One of the catch phrases of philosophy nowadays is that 'God is dead'. But who is this God and how are we supposed to mourn him? Or rather, *are* we supposed to mourn him at all? It is true that, in Europe, there has been some despair about this death as to what extent God talk was still possible at all. Others, mostly humanists in the wake of the Enlightenment, welcomed it as a liberation: people were, at last, freed from the addictive, but false comfort of a God that was human all too human.

In recent times, however, the God that passed away is brought to life again in what has been called 'the theological turn of French phenomenology' or, more broadly, philosophy's 'turn to religion'.¹ Thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion are all trying to understand what the word 'God' might mean in a world which is secularised to a significant extent.

In their respective response to the European context, they all try to think God as other than the 'God' of ontotheology. The term 'ontotheology' stems from Heidegger. According to Heidegger, ontotheology first and foremost concerns philosophy. Broadly speaking, Heidegger criticised philosophy's tendency to talk about God too hastily and too easily. Philosophy's task is to think 'being' and not God. For Heidegger, ontotheology is, like metaphysics, essentially a forgetting of being. It is concerned merely with beings. Therefore, philosophy cannot open up to the 'ontological difference' between being and beings; it prefers controllable, foreseeable and 'present-at-hand' objects. Objects lend themselves easily to the reckoning and calculations required for technology's mastery over being. It is in this sense that we encounter in our God talk the same sort of primacy of beings or objects. In general, the ontotheological endeavour seeks an ultimate reason that can account for the totality of beings. Its point of departure – beings – forbids that ontotheology

¹ D. Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (Paris: Ed. de l'Éclat Combas, 1991). H. De Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999). For an introduction in English, see also D. Janicaud, J.-F. Courtine & J.-L. Chrétien, eds., *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn. The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

encounters anything *other*, at the end of the chain of beings, than *a* being. Proceeding from the finite to the infinite, ontotheology's obsession with objects decides in advance how God will enter philosophical discourse. This 'God' is, often, modelled after causal theories – as much as each house requires an architect as its cause, the totality of beings requires a 'prima causa', a *First Being*. God is an instrument used, by philosophy, to found finitude, to give reasons for the totality of beings. God, in the ontotheological way of thinking, *must* be a foundation or the explanation of the totality of beings. God cannot be anything else than that instance that saves the finite system from its own contingency and incoherency. And yes, *this is what we all call God* or, rather, this is what we all called God.

Heidegger's critique, of course, gave rise to a variety of responses. Some proposed to leave philosophy altogether and to focus on revelation as prior to reason. Others interpreted ontotheology as a means to express their disdain for everything that, even remotely, resembled 'theology' or logos about God. For them, Heidegger was just one more success for secularisation that slowly but surely was conquering Europe. However, in this essay I would like to propose to look at *ontotheology from a theological point of view*. This means, in the first place, that, from a Christian point of view, the critique of ontotheology is part and parcel of the critique of idols that motivated Christianity from its early beginnings: the God of ontotheology, the *Causa sui*, is considered to be, almost by everyone, yet another idol. Secondly, it seems that Heidegger himself never believed that his critique was the last word to be said in matters of faith and theology. On the contrary, he appears to have interpreted his own critique in a quite Lutheran fashion: criticising the God of philosophy leaves all the more room for faith in the God of the Bible. Therefore, we propose to see how Levinas, Marion and others envision the relationship of God to human beings and ask to what extent these thinkers remain caught within the metaphysical schemes Heidegger mentioned. In the course of the argument, I will underline the metaphysical way in which finitude and the God-man relationship is developed and look for a possible other way of seeing things.

1. The Present and our Obsession with Objects

It is true that Marion, Lacoste and Levinas – the thinkers to which this paper will often turn – all frame their thought around that which might counter the reckoning with beings and objects (respectively 'givenness', 'liturgy' and 'the other'). Nevertheless, it is Heidegger who first interpreted our obsession with objects as a danger. Even as

early as his *magnum opus*, '*Being and Time*'², he refused a long standing tradition that saw things merely as representations or as objects, that is, as represented by a subject. Our being-in-the-world, our existence, Heidegger says, hardly encounters objects at all. This is the reason why he draws a distinction between objects, which are present-at-hand, and tools or equipment which are ready-to-hand. Although Heidegger uses a hammer as an example of this latter kind, things which are ready-to-hand cannot be reduced to that which we usually see as a tool. The distinction between ready-to-hand and present-at-hand is simple: When one is playing the guitar, one doesn't reflect on the chords and on the corresponding fingersettings. Heidegger would say that while playing the guitar, one is involved in a caring relationship toward things that are ready-to-hand. The guitar only becomes an object – present-at-hand – when one, while playing, starts reflecting on these settings. However, if one does this, and this is Heidegger's point, one can no longer play: the guitar has become an object and loses the self-evident character that is needed for things ready-to-hand.

Soon Heidegger came to interpret (post-)modern culture as the example par excellence of humanity's obsession with objects, of its incapacity to open up onto the difference between being and beings. That human beings (and thus not only philosophers) forgot being was, according to Heidegger, obvious in the fact that they lost themselves in their dealings with beings: A being is vulnerable to manipulation. Beings are reduced to that which we know of them. For instance, Heidegger was, already in 1928, wary of magazines and of the phenomenon of zapping (though, in his time, this concerned only radiobroadcasts).³ To give a postmodern example: our knowledge of David Beckham, for instance, consists in hardly more than what we have read of him in magazines. The person Beckham, then, is reduced to that which is depicted of him. Heidegger would say: the person is *reduced to the image* people have of him. However, and this is Heidegger's point, that a being is always more and other than that which people imagine, is thereby forgotten (without this forgetting even noticed). That someone like Beckham *is*, or exists – that this being, Beckham, has to be its being, the being of this/a being – is not, as it is said, 'in the picture'. Of course, this is rather innocent an example, but one need only think of gene-technology, euthanasia etc. to see just how far human beings' mastery and manipulation over beings extends.

² M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967).

³ See for instance, Heidegger, *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, GA 27 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1996), p. 335.

Levinas was one of Heidegger's first commentators in France, and many of Levinas' own themes echo those of Heidegger.⁴ Levinas, for example, was concerned with the problem of encountering *the other as other*. However, every other I meet in the public space is an other that I need and use as a means to my own ends. When I buy my train ticket, I do not see the other as other, I see him or her as the one who is going to give me the tickets that I need to get on the train. Levinas says: In this way, the other person is reduced to my representation of him or her. The other is reduced to that which he or she can do for me. That the other is truly an other, that a black person, for instance, cannot be reduced to his blackness, is thereby suppressed. The other is merely what I represent of him/her. And every representation, every image, is, according to Levinas, only an expression of humanity's will to power.

Both for Heidegger and for Levinas, the question is how to escape the self-evident manner with which knowledge proceeds. Whereas Heidegger asks how we can trace the being of beings (and so re-open the question of being), Levinas wonders if an encounter with the other as other, not merely as what he or she can mean 'for me', is possible at all. Jean-Luc Marion expresses a similar concern, but he does so with regard to our knowledge of God. In his book, *God without Being*⁵, he distinguishes between the idol and the icon. The first is very close to what I am describing here as object. The idol is, according to Marion, an *image* of God. God is reduced to that which human beings can know, represent or experience of God. God is, in this case, modelled after our own image and, in and through this image, tied to finite conditions of appearing. However, if God is truly God, Marion argues, the mode of God's epiphany should be unconditional, and thus not restricted to the limits set forward by any mode of (human) knowledge whatsoever. In his later works, Marion proposes to expound his thoughts on the revelatory power of God in a more philosophical manner. In *Being Given*, Marion indeed describes human beings' mastery over beings and objects more thoroughly. What precisely is an object? Consider the following example. When I look at a dinner table, I evidently see only one side of it. That I, however, still see the table as a table, i.e. as consisting of a plateau with four legs, arises from the fact that I constitute the table. 'Constitution' is a term of Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, and it refers to a mental act which somehow adds to the perception of one leg the three others in order to secure the unity of the table. Constitution occurs with almost every object human beings perceive. (Think of a cube, the

⁴ Levinas's main works are: *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002) and *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002).

⁵ J.-L. Marion, *God without Being. Hors-Texte*, transl. T.A. Carlson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995). For what follows, see also his *Being Given. Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. J.L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

dark side of the moon, etc . . .). However, suppose that I walk around the table and discover that what I constituted as a brown table is, in fact, partially green. One of the legs can be, for instance, colored green. This does not alter my constitution of the table as a table in a significant way. Marion concludes that our knowledge, experience and representations are, in one way or another, exercising a will to power, or, in his terms: the unseen of an object – the green leg of the table – always has the rank of a pre-seen.⁶ Though I may not have seen that the table has one green leg, I still constitute the table as a plateau with four legs. An object, therefore, can only be unknown, not unknowable. Everything that one wants to know of an object can be known, and it is in this sense that, once again, knowledge is power. Objects are transparent, they have no secrets.

How, then, can we encounter the unknowable? And how, if everything that we see is always 'pre-seen', can we see (or experience or know) the invisible God? How, to turn to Levinas again, can we see the other as other, and not only as what he or she can mean 'for me'? Or, to use Heidegger's terminology, how do we know being if we only encounter beings? How can we experience God if, as Marion tells us, every (idolatric) experience of God is like an invisible mirror?⁷ Mirror, in that human beings want to experience or see God, but, in fact, see only the image they themselves have made of God. Invisible, in that people like to forget that the God they worship is only a God made after their own likeness. But how, if everything that we see is always 'pre-seen', can we see (or experience or know) the invisible God of faith? To put it in philosophical terms, how can we avoid that the experience (or perception) of an object always refers to a subject that experiences it and, in so doing, exercises its power over it, fashions it as a means to its own ends? Let us have a look at the answers these French philosophers provide.

2. Jean-Yves Lacoste : The Experience of Faith

One can interpret Lacoste's work⁸ as expounding a common belief: the Church is one of the few places where one can recover one's breath, a place of peace and quiet amidst the rat race of modern society. Lacoste tries to give a philosophical description of the weal and the woe of the ordinary believer. A believer, Lacoste argues, has to reckon with a non-experience. One has to take this non-experience

⁶ See Marion, *Being Given*, p. 186, and also his *In Excess. Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. R. Horner & V. Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), pp. 35–36.

⁷ Marion, *God without Being*, pp. 11–14.

⁸ J.-Y. Lacoste, *Expérience et Absolu. Questions disputées sur l'humanité de l'homme* (Paris: P.U.F., 1994) and *Note sur le temps. Essai sur les raisons de la mémoire et de l'espérance* (Paris: P.U.F., 1990). The former is translated as *Experience and the Absolute. Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, trans. M. Raftery (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

quite literally. When a believer directs his attention to God in prayer or by attending the Eucharist, it seems that nothing is happening. Usually indeed, no ecstasy occurs, and neither the blinding spiritual force of a celestial prophecy. While the believer expresses his desire to know God or to dwell in his Kingdom, he or she finds himself or herself in a gray, and often tiresome, Church. Nothing happens: faith is first and foremost a non-experience.

Lacoste conceives of this non-experience as a passive encounter with God in which the believer imitates Christ's passivity and obedience toward the will of God. Therefore, the non-experience of faith is ascetic: The believer must renounce every desire to appropriate God, to experience God at will (Cf. Lk. 22,42). However, Lacoste goes on to describe this ascetic passivity of the believer in terms of objectivity, 'an objectivity, moreover, that is akin to that of the thing – one can say that the believer is in the hands of God as the clay is in the hands of the potter'.⁹ A commentator, Catherine Pickstock, remarks: 'For Lacoste, our bodiedness is a sign of our fundamental objectivity in relation to God, more important than any notion of subjective desire, which implies that *undergoing* a relationship with God is more fundamental than desiring it'.¹⁰

But if Lacoste's answer to our age's obsessions with objects is to reverse the terms subject-object, if, in other words, human beings no longer see God as the object of their own imagination, but if it is God who turns human beings into objects, are we, then, not once again caught in the mazes of the web of the problem that we wanted to resolve? Is not this God, who treats believers as if it were things, in turn a bit too much *like* the subject that can only deal with that which it encounters as objects?

3. Jean-Luc Marion: Experiencing the Given

A striking parallel to this reversal can be observed in the works of Jean-Luc Marion. Marion tries to develop an account of the phenomenon as it gives itself by and from itself without any interference from a human agent. The modern subject, Marion argues, distorts that which gives itself with its intentions and desires. One can understand this interpretation of subjectivity like the way in which an accused criminal would narrate the story of the crime he or she committed. Indeed, it is unlikely that the criminal will relate his or her offence as it really happened. On the contrary, the criminal will

⁹ J.-Y. Lacoste, *Expérience et Absolu*, p. 188, translation mine.

¹⁰ C. Pickstock, *After Writing. On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 250.

distort what happened so as to tell the event of the crime to his own benefit. One cannot expect that the crime, as related by the criminal him- or herself, gives an account of this crime as it was in and by itself. The criminal will, most often, reduce the crime to such an extent that it makes him or her, in one way or another, 'look good'.

To avoid such an interference, Marion tries to describe phenomena as they give themselves, or, in his terms, as their 'selves', to human beings. However, to receive such a givenness, Marion argues, the modern subject be turned into the 'clerk'¹¹ or recorder of that which is given. All intentions and desires of the subject must be put between brackets and subordinated to the gift of the phenomena. How is this possible? How to encounter the given as it gives itself or its self (or the other as other, to recall Levinas' question)? Marion's answer is that the phenomena already give themselves *before* any perturbation or interference of a subject can occur. This gift is an appeal that one cannot not hear, like the crime has already been committed when the criminal starts to look for excuses. Marion distinguishes his account of the given both from objects and from beings. Whereas an object is determined within the classical scheme of adequation, meaning that the table is nothing more or less than an adequate mental representation of a plateau with four legs, beings are determined within an account of finality: The guitar is there *to* play it, the pen *to* write etc. This finality stems from human beings: they will determine both what is an adequate representation of an object and what use a being has. The given, on the contrary, is given regardless of its actual reception (by human beings): Marion develops an interpretation of reality that no longer relies on man as its measure. Everything is a given, if its reception remains doubtful this is so because people's ability to receive it is always hindered by their desires and intentions. One can say: given that the crime happened, an account of it as it was in and by itself is possible; the crime is (a) perfectly given, but the reception of that given (by the criminal, by the witness, by the victim) always deforms the account of the crime as it was in itself. Marion writes about that which Lars von Trier called, in his film *Dogville*, the most difficult thing for human beings: to receive. Grace is given to us, whether or not we receive it, however, depends on our willingness to receive. As in the film, grace often is raped, deformed and not recognized: 'He was in the world, but the world did not recognize him' (John 1,10).

But how can anything give itself regardless of whether or not it is received? Marion's answer is very similar to the one of Lacoste. The gift is perfectly given, not because we aim at it (as we aim at an object) nor because we determine its finality, but because it aims at us.

¹¹ Marion, *In Excess* p. 26.

Hence the parallel: 'intentionality is inverted: I become the objective of the object'.¹² This seems to be Marion's solution from his earlier theological works to his later philosophical argumentations: The object, beings and the given aim at us, they point to us as their receivers whether we actually receive them or not, just as Christ's gaze looks at us through the visible wood of the icon, even if human beings do not always pay attention to Christ's presence therein. That which gives itself is able to give itself in its "unsubstitutable selfhood"¹³, thus, able to give its self. All human beings have to do is to record this event as accurately as possible.

4. Emmanuel Levinas: The Other's Otherness

To sum up: Marion and Lacoste try to bring the modern subject's obsession with objects to a halt by perceiving in this subject a fundamental objectivity. For Lacoste, human beings are the object of a divine intention. For Marion, human beings are the object and the objective of the given. The active and autonomous subject is replaced by a passive instance, in that the subject's will to power (over object and beings) is reversed and turned into the "will to powerlessness"¹⁴ of a clerk. However, if this is the case, is the problem of subjectivity and its supposed mastery over reality really solved? Have we not simply replaced this problem by postulating, on the one hand, God as (modern) subject, or, on the other hand, granting givenness the contours of subjectivity?

This is one of Levinas' fundamental questions: how to avoid seeing the relation between, for instance, human beings and God, as a relation between antithetical terms, i. e. between "terms that complete one another and consequently are reciprocally lacking to one another".¹⁵ How to avoid seeing myself as a subject that aims at the other to determine what use this other can have for me, or, the other way around, how to avoid seeing the other as the subject that determines me as his or her object? Levinas' answer is: such a relation is not between antithetical terms, but between "terms that suffice to themselves".¹⁶ This means that the subject cannot be understood *by relation to* an object or that human beings cannot be understood *by relation to* God, but, rather, that in order to understand the relation of human beings to God one must, first, interpret human beings *as* human beings, as existents that stand on their own, suffice themselves

¹² Marion, *Being Given*, p. 146. Compare his *The Crossing of the Visible*, transl. J.K.A. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 39.

¹³ Marion, *Being Given*, p. 264.

¹⁴ Lacoste, *Expérience et Absolu*, p. 197–201.

¹⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 103.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 103.

and do not need recourse to God to know what it is to be human and finite, in short, that are 'capable of atheism'.¹⁷ The finite does not point to the infinite as its fulfilment and the infinite is not the satisfaction of the supposedly inferior creature's desire.

This 'relation without relation' discards the traditional account of the creature as a diminution of the transcendent creator. Such an account is the result of a theoretical approach towards transcendence. Such a conscious thematisation of this relation will inevitably see God as a term of this relationship. But, according to Levinas, transcendence is not a theoretical affair. God is not the answer to the problems that finitude poses. If this would be the case, God not only is the term of the relationship but also its terminus. For example, the problem of death is answered with reference to the promise of eternal life – the finite is supposed to point to, to aim at this eternal life as its term. But such a solution, obviously, entails the danger of terminating transcendence and human beings' involvement in it. Indeed, all too often, the promise of eternal life has blinded human beings for their ethical duties in the here and now.

According to Levinas, a theoretical account of transcendence overlooks that the finite has a positive role to play in its relation to transcendence or, in his own terms, that the atheism of the creature – and, thus, its freedom to relate to God – is "a great glory for the creator".¹⁸ The relation to transcendence is not theoretical: all abstract theology – theo-logos as thematisation of God – is to be avoided. What Levinas is looking for is an existential involvement with transcendence, not the abstract glance of the scientist that terminates transcendence by only thinking of it. For Levinas, 'the dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face'.¹⁹ It is, therefore, only through the face of the other that we might be able to speak of God again. This, therefore, is the positive role to be played by the finite being: the creature must attend to the neighbour in an ethical way. 'God' is at stake in our ethical response toward the other. Amidst (post)modern relativism, there is one instance that utters an absolute appeal: the other. This other is the one thing that cannot be thematised, since he or she is always more (or less) than that what I can represent of him. Therefore, the other *exceeds* the subject's will to power, but not because he or she is more powerful than I am (which would be to fall back again in an antithetical relation), but because he or she, as other, is at the same time more and less than I am. More, since his or her appeal is absolute and I, therefore, cannot not hear it. Less, since the other's appeal toward me

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

implies that I have the means to respond to it and to help him or her in his or her destitution. The other does not deprive me of my power and knowledge, but he or she appeals to my power and knowledge precisely to alter their orientation: I do not need them for my own sake, but for that of the other. Levinas says: "I did not know that I was rich, but now I know, I no longer have the right to hold anything back".²⁰

5. Theology 'After' Ontotheology

The recurrence of the metaphysical subject-object distinction in the works of Lacoste and Marion is, at least, remarkable. In both cases, human beings are reduced to a fundamental objectivity (over and against God or givenness, which, then, takes on the contours of subjectivity). The finite is taken to be an obstacle for people's relation to God. Rather than our embodiment, Lacoste prefers our objectivity toward God, as a mere thing and object in the hands of the potter. Rather than writing our own history with God, Marion wants us to be the clerk of that history, as if it occurred without ourselves. Levinas interpreted our encounter with the other as the drama in which, in one way or another, God is involved. The finite is no longer an obstacle, the positivity of the encounter with transcendence lies in its ethical response towards the other. *Il y a quelque chose à faire*. The God who is dead is, according to Nietzsche, indeed the God who hides behind the sensible world in an 'otherworldliness', uncontaminated by the needs and peculiarities of this concrete and material world. To do theology after ontotheology, therefore, is to take this world and its finitude serious. For such a theology, transcendence no longer is that which occurs *in spite of* finitude. On the contrary, it tries to take this finitude as the starting point of its reflections and inquires into the possible ways in which this finitude might signal transcendence. But as all things finite, such a signal is never univocal and not without ambiguity. Perhaps this desire for a single and univocal approach to God is the metaphysical residue that one can observe in Levinas' works as well. For Levinas, only the ethical response toward the other paves the way for a subject that absolutely absolves from the auto-position of the modern subject. Only ethics is able to loosen and even to cut through the subject's attachment to itself, to its finite being. According to Levinas, only the other's appeal helps to overcome the subject's adherence to being and ties the subject to the ethical 'otherwise than being uncontaminated

²⁰ Levinas, *La trace de l'autre*, in ID., *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 2001), p. 270. Translation mine.

by being'. This move that aims to re-figure the subject's adherence to being as a decentring that is 'not contaminated' or as a transcendence supposedly, as Marion would say, without 'residue or perturbation'²¹ by being or immanence, is perhaps what we need to question, since it entails that transcendence signals itself purely, iconically and univocally. Finitude is, yet again, made to signify *completely*, as if it were part and parcel of an infinite register. Perhaps it is with such a move that ontotheological structures surface: the totality of beings (of finitude) is explained and founded by transcendence. Consider the ontotheological manner in which, traditionally, the problem of evil has been taken into account. When someone close to you is sick or dies, the question is posed to God *why* he or she got sick or *why* bad things happen to good people. However, this often implied that God knows the ultimate reason of this sickness or, who knows, might even have *caused it*. 'God' is used to give reasons for the human condition. That sickness or death might not have a single and univocal signification or reason is not taken into account. The same thing occurs in Levinas' works. The human condition and its ambiguities are replaced, yet again, with the "total transparence"²² of the encounter with the other. Death, for instance, is made to signify for the other: My death ceases to be meaningless, since now I can die for the other, and, in fact, I must.²³ I cannot hold anything back, I am completely for-the-other: a finite and separate being "without secrets".²⁴

However, what if immanence cannot, at least not totally, receive its signification from transcendence? What if, for instance, all there is to transcendence is the ambiguous encounter with the sensible realities of the broken bread or with the texts of Scripture? In this way, an enquiry into ontotheology operates a decentring of the modern subject that no longer succumbs to the temptation of a 'pure' encounter with its other (and that thereby would differentiate between pure and impure encounters). Such an incarnational approach to transcendence – incarnational, since it encounters transcendence only *through* and *in* immanence – indeed avoids attempts to "demarcate the rigid

²¹ Givenness is in Marion's works repeatedly qualified with terms like these. *All perturbations seem to belong on the side of finitude and visibility*. Compare J.K.A. Smith, *Speech and Theology. Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 59 n. 40: '[I]n this I agree with Marion: that to appear is to be given . . . Where I disagree is with Marion's hyperbolic qualifier which claims that the phenomenon is *perfectly* given'. According to Smith, every phenomenon consists in 'a giving and a withholding'.

²² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 182.

²³ Levinas, 'God and Philosophy', in Levinas, *Of God who comes to mind*, tr. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 200 n. 259: "[N]othing can dispense me from the response which I am *passively* held to. The tomb is not a refuge; it is not a pardon. The debt remains".

²⁴ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 138.

boundaries of the community".²⁵ An incarnational approach would be, in and through its awareness of ontotheological violence, fundamentally tolerant, both toward an other's faith and toward other religions, and in this way this incarnational approach retrieves at least some instances of the biblical encounter with God. (Mt.7,1; Lk. 6,37). In the end, this is decentring the subject in such a way that this subject is conscious of the fact that its desire for a pure and transparent encounter with otherness might be yet another expression of its ontotheological tendency to master transcendence. However, it does not forget Levinas' point that the other interrupts this comfort of being the author of one's history with God. Indeed, the subject is decentred in the recognition that it is a particular other – for instance, another's faith or another religion – that alerts the individual (or the community) to the frailty and equivocality of his or her own conceptions concerning God. That is why such an encounter instigates a humble and *to a certain extent* non-ontotheological stance toward transcendence: It is both aware of the fact that every concept of God does violence to God, in that every effort to confine God to a 'pure' encounter might be an expression of an unjust and egoistic mastery over God, and it lets itself be questioned by others, since they are precisely the ones who alert to the particularity and contingency of one's own conceptions of transcendence.

To give but one example: what would the difference be between an objectivity without secrets with regard to God, as we have seen in Marion, Lacoste and Levinas, and an incarnational approach? Is not this 'God' who turns me into an object when confronted with his gaze or who makes me the object and objective of a gift, not once again the Sartrean God/other who cannot do anything other than objectivise me? Did we not encounter, once again, the terrible God who knows 'more of Lucien than Lucien did of himself', as Sartre wrote in *Le mur*? Such an identity without secrets is avoided by the incarnational approach by the simple fact that finitude is not fully signified by an otherwise than being. The secret, and the sting, of finitude remain: The finite I is not only an enigma for itself, but even for God – there is no transparent encounter. Hence the reason why the encounter between human beings and God can be construed as an encounter of two singular freedoms. Incarnation entails both God's freedom to appear and the freedom of human beings with regard to God. God's freedom, since the encounter with transcendence is confined neither to ethics nor to liturgy. God is always able to appear wherever God wills: in objects, sacraments, persons or nature. The freedom of human beings to relate to God, since the secret and the sting of their finitude is not made transparent, not to the other, and not to God. Perhaps this is religious experience: trying to get rid of

²⁵ See for a similar approach J.K.A. Smith, *Speech and Theology*, p. 169.

the terrifying ontotheological God to make our way into the arms of the God of love. Unlike the story of Jonah here, to be able to escape God is at the same time to be able to relate freely to God in the decision to pray, to attend to the neighbour etc. In this way, one comes close to at least one instance of the biblical encounter with God: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev 3,20).

Joeri Schrijvers
Research Assistant of the Research Foundation-Flanders
(FWO- Vlaanderen)
Afd. Systematische theologie
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
St.-Michielsstraat 6
B-3000 Leuven