

Between Theory and *Theoria* *Philosophy, Contemplation, and Participation*

*The partaker partakes of that which
changes him.*

—WALLACE STEVENS¹

By the middle of the twentieth century, philosophy of religion appeared almost extinct within most philosophy departments—a few dinosaurs notwithstanding—while across the campus one could find philosophical theologians facing similar odds within their own divinity faculties. Philosophical naturalists, on the one hand, and broadly neo-orthodox theologians, on the other, seemed to collude in finally ridding philosophy and theology from centuries of entanglement. Or so the story went. By the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the situation appeared dramatically different. The subdiscipline of philosophy of religion had by this time entered into what many felt compelled to speak of as a *renaissance in philosophy of religion*, what others referred to as a kind of *religious turn* within both analytic and continental philosophy.² So disconcerting were these developments that the naturalist philosopher Quentin Smith felt compelled to sound an alarm about an encroaching desecularization of

1. "NOTES TOWARD A SUPREME FICTION IV," IN WALLACE STEVENS, *COLLECTED POEMS*, 1ST COLLECTED ED. (NEW YORK: VINTAGE, 1990), 392.

2. A more detailed account of the renaissance in philosophy of religion can be found in ch. 5 of this book.

academia being led by philosophy departments, and especially by the multiplying ranks of philosophers of religion. “God is not ‘dead’ in academia,” wrote Smith. “[H]e returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy departments.”³

I do not share Smith’s philosophical naturalism. Where he is concerned that the renewal of philosophical and theological questions has gone too far, I wonder whether we haven’t yet gone far enough. In this book, I propose that the surprising twentieth-century recovery of philosophy of religion and philosophical theology may be brought to a still fuller term through a creative retrieval, not just of neglected theological sources, but of the contemplative dimension that originally brought to birth and continually sustained the greatest achievements of the classical traditions of Christian philosophy and theology. First, however, we need a sense of how the question stands today. Accordingly, this chapter begins the argument by considering the insights and shortcomings of four prominent contemporary philosophical approaches to the question of contemplation, approaches that differ widely enough and are representative enough to provide an overview of how the question is currently treated in the academy. Rather than endorsing any one of these accounts, I will argue instead for what I call a “participatory approach” to the problem of contemplation and philosophy. It is participatory in that it has explicit recourse to metaphysical theories of participation but also in that it entails a necessarily self-implicating and transformative rendering of the philosophical and theological project. I propose, in other words, not simply another philosophy of contemplation or mysticism but a renewal of contemplative philosophy. When philosophical theory is separated from contemplative *theoria*, contemplation too often becomes merely the pious ornament of a beautiful soul, sentimental and subjective, while philosophy for its part is made banal, desacralized, and alien from the wonder that is its *raison d’être*.⁴ This book argues, by contrast, for the creative expansion of philosophy of religion through a thick engagement with the Christian contemplative tradition, contending that the two remain aboriginally entwined, mutually enriching, and increasingly vital to the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual challenges of aging modernity.

It is true that philosophy of religion has recently begun to consider questions of contemplation and mysticism with a vigor that has not been

3. Quentin Smith, “The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism,” *Philo: A Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (2001): 196.

4. Cf. Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe*, *Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

seen for centuries, but nearly all of these recent studies treat contemplation as something alien to the intellectual life itself, an other perhaps capable of providing support to cumulative case arguments for the existence of God, on the one hand, or revealing the phenomenological limits of intentional horizons, on the other, but rarely treating contemplation as an already intelligible tradition capable of challenging and shaping our very practice of philosophy. I want to try to chart a different course in the attempt both to uncover and, to some extent, to reinvent a mode of philosophy that is no longer allergic to prayer and contemplation, but instead derives its energy and *raison d'être* from them.

Such an approach was once common but has long since fallen from favor. The divorce between philosophy and spiritual practice that began nearly a millennium ago in the new universities has widened through the centuries. Theoretical pursuits were uncoupled from the integral participatory transformation of the inquirer, thereby allowing philosophical and theological inquiry to be increasingly construed as properly a profession rather than a vocation. These developments, it is often argued, reached a kind of climactic apotheosis in the Enlightenment when the traditional priority between philosophy and theology dramatically reversed. No longer did philosophy stand as the summit of the other arts and sciences, all of which found their meaning within a larger theologically ordered milieu, but, rather, the newly minted generic concept of religion was now positioned by a supposedly autonomous philosophy.⁵ Moreover, modern philosophers asserted themselves still further, claiming the right either to legitimate or to curtail the exercise of religion and theology within European society. When such philosophers occasionally dealt with practices of spirituality, prayer, contemplation, questions of the heart's desire, and so on, they characteristically did so from the outside looking in. This, then, has become the paradigmatic stance of philosophy with regard to religion for three centuries now: philosophy observes these strange religious behaviors, and may either approve or disapprove of them, but it seems to be the case that, whatever else it does, philosophy does not pray.

5. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

WILLIAM ALSTON'S PHILOSOPHY OF MYSTICAL PERCEPTION

This remains true even among those philosophers of religion who pay most attention to the texts, authors, and experiences of the Christian contemplative tradition. Consider, for example, the vibrant conversation among analytic philosophers about the role of experience in assessing the warrant of religious beliefs, especially belief in the existence of God. This diverse and complex discussion, which is in many ways at the forefront of the contemporary renaissance in philosophy of religion, is epitomized by the works of philosophers such as Kai-Man Kwan, Caroline Franks Davis, Richard Swinburne, Keith Yandell, and William Alston. The latter's contribution to this field, which was announced already in his seminal essay "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," is principally evident in his magnum opus *Perceiving God*, and has continued to develop through a series of perspicuous essays published in the intervening decades.⁶ Alston's work has been and continues to be influential; indeed, Brian Hebblethwaite hailed *Perceiving God* as "unquestionably one of the most important philosophy of religion books to have been published during the [preceding] fifteen years."⁷

At the heart of Alston's argument is the realist claim that we are well within our epistemic rights to take accounts of the putative perception of God as *prima facie* evidence of their truth. Such beliefs (Alston calls them "M-beliefs" because they are based upon manifestation) are not secondary additions to a primary experience but are, rather, a direct part of the experience itself. Alston holds that this is the way it is with all perceptual experience: we do not come to a belief in the external world as an explanation of sense experience but, rather, belief in the external world is co-primordial with sense experience itself. I do not conclude to the world's existence; I am simply *aware* of it. And so it is with these putative mystical experiences. God is not an explanation—certainly not a hypothesis as some prominent atheists have claimed—but is, rather, the object of the perceptual experience. In other words, we should hold that people who claim to see God do, in fact, see God.

This needs to be slightly qualified. Alston is chary of drawing an exact analogy between sensory perception and the perception of God. Instead, he

6. William P. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); idem, "Two Cheers for Mystery!," in *God and the Ethics of Belief: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Andrew Dole and Andrew Chignell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); idem, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

7. Brian Hebblethwaite, "Review of *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* by William P. Alston," *Modern Theology* 10, no. 1 (1994): 116.

points to what he identifies as a “generic identity of structure” between the two activities that is due to the fact that both practices are *perceptual*. This could seem to present a defeater to the argument right at the outset, as the disanalogy between sensory and nonsensory (to say nothing of mystical) perception may simply be too large. Can we even conceive of nonsensory perception? I think Alston is right in holding that we can. Consider, for example, the neurologist Oliver Sacks’s fascinating descriptions of a pair of autistic savant twins. Although neither of these twins, named John and Michael, had learned either to read or to do multiplication, they were both capable of rapidly naming prime numbers up to and beyond eleven digits without any preparation. Indeed, John and Michael seemed to enjoy this so much that they made a game out of it, spontaneously rattling off higher and higher primes as Sacks struggled to keep up by reading from a prepared list (when the game wrapped up the twins were naming primes of up to twenty digits).⁸ The twins’ ability to perceive numerically was not limited to the identification of primes. On another occasion, a box of matches fell open on the twins’ table. Sacks describes what happened next:

“111,” they both cried simultaneously; and then, in a murmur, John said “37.” Michael repeated this, John said it a third time and stopped. I counted the matches—it took me some time—and there were 111.

“How could you count the matches so quickly?” I asked. “We didn’t count,” they said. “We saw the 111.”

And why did you murmur ‘37,’ and repeat it three times?” I asked the twins. They said in unison, “37, 37, 37, 111.”⁹

Sacks himself was even more surprised at their apparent factoring of 111 than the initial spontaneous discernment of the number of matches. The twins were incapable of doing even simple calculations on paper and yet they could instantly “see” the three equal components of the numeric entity 111, in the same manner that they seemed to be able to see “primeness.”

“How did you work that out?” I said, rather hotly. They indicated, as best they could, in poor, insufficient terms—but perhaps there are no words to correspond to such things—that they did not “work it out,” but just “saw” it, in a flash. John made a gesture with

8. Oliver W. Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 202–205.

9. *Ibid.*, 200.

two outstretched fingers and his thumb, which seemed to suggest that they had spontaneously trisected the number, or that it “came apart” of its own accord, into these three equal parts, by a sort of spontaneous, numerical “fission.”¹⁰

Here, then, is an empirical case of extraordinary but real nonsensory perception. One can argue the point, however, in a more quotidian manner. The great merit of the sixth of Edmund Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*, for example, is to establish that there exist different sorts of intuitions relating to real and ideal objects.¹¹ The latter, what Husserl called “categorical intuition,” names the nonsensory perception that is present in our everyday sensory perceptions rendering them intelligible, unified, and meaningful, as opposed to a blooming, buzzing confusion. In other words, as Heidegger says in one of his *Four Seminars*, we have “two visions: sensuous vision and categorical vision” and these two visions intertwine in our every act of ordinary, mundane perception.¹² All of this is merely to say that Alston’s claim to establish a generic structural identity between sensory experience and a mystical experience cannot be dismissed simply because the latter is intangible—indeed, we have good reasons to hold that both might be real forms of perception.

Discerning this generic structural identity leads Alston to make the strong claim that there is epistemic parity between sensory and mystical perception, thus inviting us to ascribe the same veridicality to the latter that we do the former. To support this, Alston first introduces an externalist theory of justification. As Alston summarizes his account, “To be epistemically justified in believing that *p* is for that belief to be based on an adequate ground, which could either be experiences or other things one knows or justifiably believes. A ground is adequate provided it is a sufficiently reliable indication of the truth of belief.”¹³ Nevertheless, such justification is only *prima facie* justification and can be reversed in the event that one encounters sufficient reasons to render it suspect. “Prima facie perceptual justification can be **overridden** either by sufficient reason for supposing the belief to be false (**rebutted**) or by sufficient

10. Ibid.

11. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1970). Cf. Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), §6.

12. Heidegger, *History*, 66.

13. William Alston, “Précis of *Perceiving God*,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54, no. 4 (1994): 864.

reason for supposing that the experience in this case does not indicate what it more normally indicates (**undermined**).¹⁴

With this reliability constraint on justification in place, Alston considers the means by which the reliability of our practices for belief formation can be established. Although he has his eye on beliefs formed in mystical perception, Alston initially conducts an extensive survey of the reliability of sensory perception and concludes that all noncircular attempts to prove the reliability of sense perception fail: either they disguise the circularity inherent in the argument or they fail for other empirical reasons. The upshot of this is that mystical perception cannot be dismissed as inferior to sense perception simply because its reliability is not provable without epistemic circularity—since the reliability of ordinary vision, for example, is similarly subject to justificatory circularity, it follows that to dismiss the mystical out of hand can only be a mark of prejudice.

Are we then left in a skeptical bog? Alston avers otherwise. Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein and Thomas Reid, he develops the notion of *doxastic practices*. A doxastic practice is a way of forming specified beliefs under specified conditions in which the content of the beliefs is a consequence of those very conditions. Doxastic practices are not only about immediate belief formation but also include critical procedures that allow us to weigh and discern amongst legitimate and illegitimate beliefs, the sort of procedure that allows us, for example, to discern between real visual perception and hallucination. Alston argues that all *basic doxastic practices* refuse justification in a noncircular way. This is because a basic doxastic practice provides primary access to its particular sort of content. Thus, for example, memory is our basic way of forming beliefs about the past and the senses are our basic way of forming beliefs about the physical world. We have no means of exhaustively justifying these practices by appeal to some other register outside of memory, on the one hand, or sensory experience, on the other. How do we know that sensory perception provides real insight into the world? We cannot appeal to scientific evidence, for this evidence—no matter how far abstracted from sensory perception—nevertheless presupposes an initial fund of sensory data. In like manner, all basic doxastic practices evidence this necessarily circular form of justification. But despite this circularity, it is reasonable to trust the deliveries of these practices. One reason for this basic trust is simply pragmatic: “given that there are no non-circular ways of distinguishing between reliable and unreliable basic doxastic practices, it would be foolish to abstain from established practices, even if we

14. Ibid. (emphasis in original).

could.”¹⁵ Moreover, basic doxastic practices provide internal evidence of their trustworthiness: we can make predictions based on our sense experiences, for example, and even though our predictions can only be confirmed by later sensory perceptions, nevertheless this circular confirmation is still a mark of trustworthiness. As William Wainwright explains, “Even though we can’t show that our sense perceptual practice *is* reliable without falling into circularity, it displays the features it would have if it *were* reliable. In the absence of strong philosophical reasons for doubting its reliability, it is therefore reasonable to trust it.”¹⁶

The strikingly Wittgensteinian point that Alston highlights is thus the communal validation of doxastic practices.¹⁷ We trust them because our community has traditionally trusted them. Any given individual perception may be wrong but that doesn’t matter because the reliability of a doxastic practice is only vouchsafed within the larger context of tradition and community; the stranger I think I see might, in fact, be the shadow of curtains blown by the wind, but that doesn’t invalidate the normal practice of visual recognition which although it may be wrong is vouchsafed not only by my experience but also by my peers. Along these lines, Alston argues that what he calls “Christian mystical perceptual practice” (CMP) ought to be considered just such a socially sanctioned basic doxastic practice.¹⁸ CMP includes those ways of forming beliefs about God on the basis of mystical experiences, a sense of empowerment, the sense of being forgiven, and so forth, and it yields beliefs either “that God is doing something currently vis-à-vis the subject—comforting, strengthening, guiding, communicating a message, sustaining the subject in being—or to the effect that God has some (allegedly) perceivable property—goodness, power, lovingness.”¹⁹ These practices have been handed down and tested over generations, include their own internal

15. *Ibid.*, 865.

16. William J. Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999), 127.

17. This is the principal difference between Alston’s defense of basic doxastic practices and Richard Swinburne’s “principle of credulity.” Where Swinburne argues for the rationality of accepting the *prima facie* deliverances of individual perceptions, Alston argues for the reliability of socially established doxastic practices. Presumably, the reliability of the one entails the general reliability of the other, but the philosophical difference between starting with the individual versus starting with the community may be quite significant. See Alston, *Perceiving God*, 195. For Swinburne’s principle of credulity, see Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

18. Alston writes, “My main thesis in this chapter, and indeed in the whole book, is that CMP is rationally engaged in since it is a socially established doxastic practice that is not demonstrably unreliable or otherwise disqualified for rational acceptance.” Alston, *Perceiving God*, 194.

19. *Ibid.*, 1.

criteria for judging between true and false beliefs, and generally display the expected congruence between the results of the perceptual practice and the peculiar object of the perception (in this case, God). Moreover, reliable practices do not need universal social sanction; they just need some degree of communitarian authorization in order to be rational. Minoritarian practices are not necessarily any less reliable than majoritarian ones—Alston gives the examples of those who have rare but reliable expertise in particle physics or wine-tasting—and so the comparative infrequency of CMP should not count against its trustworthiness. Alston makes short work of other traditional objections to his thesis (for instance, it is impossible to verify independently; there are disagreements between mystics themselves about the output of CMP; there are naturalistic explanations for CMP; and that CMP conflicts with secular practices, particularly in the natural sciences) and thus claims to have established the *prima facie* reliability of beliefs based on CMP.

He ends his magnum opus with a chapter that delineates the difference between evidence for the existence of God based on perceptual presentation (as in CMP) and arguments based on inference to the best explanation. In doing so, Alston displays both the strengths and the weaknesses of his approach. On the one hand, Alston holds that his approach to the problem allows us to marshal evidence from CMP that can contribute forcefully to a cumulative case argument for the existence of God. This is not only because, as for Swinburne, arguments from one sphere magnify the probability afforded to arguments in another sphere, as if each argument were adding strands to a cable in order to increase its strength. Alston's cumulative case is more complex, allowing for a delicate interplay between the deliverances of one sphere and another, in such a way that one source might contribute to the background system presupposed by another source in an elaborate and recursive give and take.

All of this does indeed produce a strong, rhetorically powerful argument for the existence of God, but therein lies its pitfall as well. Even though Alston's writings are distinguished by the admirable and generous use of actual reports from contemplatives themselves—one encounters numerous lay testimonies alongside the voices of Francis de Sales, Jacques Maritain, Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating, and, throughout it all, especially the voice of Teresa of Avila—nevertheless, Alston's concern to defend the existence of God and his means of going about this bear little resemblance to the concerns of the contemplative tradition itself. For instance, as Douglas Hedley indicates, Christian mystics tend to philosophize along lines directly contrary to Alston's: while mystics would agree with Alston that sense perception is incapable of establishing its own validity, they by no means take the next step of arguing

that since we nevertheless trust our senses we should also trust our perception of God. For the Christian mystic, the real issue is contemplation, which may involve the perception of God, but is by no means on epistemic par with the senses by virtue of contemplation's indubitability. Traditionally understood, contemplation allows the mystic access to precisely that certainty that the senses can never bestow.²⁰ Moreover, the very concern with the existence of God (or the truth of theism) is never an essential question for contemplatives who are far more concerned with the problem of God's nearness and absence in an existential and transformative way. It is not a matter of justifying propositional belief in God, but of discovering how one responds to the divine through discernment, growth in intimacy with God, and the integral conformation of one's entire life to the divine lure.²¹

Despite accurately arguing for the relative frequency of CMP throughout ecclesial life, the performative dimension of Alston's philosophy perpetuates a vision of contemplatives as a special, anomalous class of Christians, useful in providing support for cumulative case arguments, but immaterial to the practice of philosophy itself. His analysis of basic doxastic practices is symptomatic of this approach, for it confirms each basic practice as procedurally autonomous within its own region. Thus, in defending the rationality of CMP, Alston simultaneously establishes the autonomy of reason (the practice of reason being the basic practice that gives rise to philosophy) within its own sphere. In this way, philosophical theory is never contaminated by contemplative *theoria*. By contrast, the contemplative is interested in new possibilities for consciousness, an integral noetic ascent—or, if one prefers the language of the Hesychasts, a descent of the mind into the heart. However it is nuanced, whether ascent or descent, in both grammar and performance, *the contemplative concern is with a transfigured reason rather than the rationality of transfiguration*. Those contemplatives who say with Gregory the Great that love itself is a way of knowledge (*amor ipse notitia est*),²² and who proffer a way of life in accordance

20. See Douglas Hedley, *Living Forms of the Imagination* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2008), 94–102.

21. Alston's approach in these matters is especially evident in his recent essay "Two Cheers for Mystery." Although he commendably seeks to "plump" for giving divine mystery more recognition than it has generally received in Anglo-American philosophy of religion, Alston's approach remains entirely extrinsic to the mystery about which he seeks to philosophize. In violation of his own philosophy of appearing, which would prohibit considering the contemplative confession of divine mystery as an inferential proposition rather than an immediate perception, Alston treats belief in the divine mystery in Thomas Keating and Thomas Merton as a propositional belief: the "Divine Mystery Thesis," or DMT in Alston's shorthand. See Alston, "Two Cheers for Mystery!."

22. Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the Gospels*, II, 27, 4.

with Nicholas of Cusa's maxim, "The mind without love cannot understand; the mind without intelligence cannot love,"²³ will never be satisfied until philosophy itself is porous to the very movements of divine love that already anticipate and eschatologically culminate in both beatific vision and divinization. This porosity is close to the heart of this book, for my question is the one that Alston never asks: How does contemplation transform philosophical practice itself?

JEAN-LUC MARION: MYSTICISM AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Perhaps this question is better answered by appeal to resources from the other end of the philosophical tropics. The renaissance of philosophy of religion in the Anglo-American analytic schools has been paralleled by a very different turn to religion in the hermeneutic and phenomenological traditions of Continental philosophy. Whereas analytic philosophers of religion tend to concern themselves with the viability of arguments for the existence of God or with the exploration, systematization, and clarification of what Alvin Plantinga calls "commitments and allegiances fundamentally religious in nature,"²⁴ Continental philosophers of religion, by contrast, operate within a largely Nietzschean and Heideggerian milieu concerned with questions about the death of God, the end of metaphysics, and the call of the other. As its detractors have rarely failed to mention, even before its "theological turn" in the last decades of the twentieth century, phenomenology already displayed such a deep affinity with religious traditions and practices that Continental philosophy itself seemed like something of a religion. Nor was it only the straight-laced critics of phenomenology who remarked upon this nascent religiosity. Edmund Husserl held that the practice of phenomenology entailed "total transformation" and something like a "religious conversion" if it was to be successful.²⁵ The early phenomenologist Eugen Fink even compared the phenomenological *epoché* to divinization or *theosis*, a process that "unhumanizes" the subject and makes her

23. "Nam mens sine desiderio non intelligit et sine intellectu non desiderat." [Sermo 172 (Haubst number)], quoted in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge*, (Minneapolis: A. J. Banning, 1996), 86.

24. Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 315.

25. "The total phenomenological attitude and the *epoché* belonging to it are destined in essence to effect, at first, a complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion." Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy: Philosophy as Rigorous Science, and Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*, trans. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 137.

as one of the gods, “a player of the world.”²⁶ And Heidegger’s famous insistence that we dwell within the fourfold (the *Geviert*) of “sky and earth, mortals and divinities,” along with his notorious *Der Spiegel* remark that only a God can save us now, have left an indelible and deeply contested mark upon twentieth-century philosophy.²⁷

From its origins in the work of Husserl until now, phenomenology has exhibited a provocative dalliance with the religious and mystical dimensions of life, a flirtation that seems to commend phenomenology as an approach perhaps able to reunite the contemplative and philosophical domains that the centuries have rent asunder. Moreover, in recent decades these religious gestures have emerged from the margins of reflection to become arguably the single most significant site of present phenomenological thinking. Those who have worked in this area are among the best philosophers of their generations: Emmanuel Lévinas, Jacques Derrida, Michel Henry, Jean Louis Chrétien, and Jean Yves-Lacoste, though perhaps the most important of them for our purposes is Jean-Luc Marion.

Marion is an immensely prolific and varied thinker. Although he read philosophy at the *École Normale Supérieure* under the tutelage of radical philosophical icons such as Derrida and Louis Althusser, at the same time he cultivated a vibrant interest in theology. A Roman Catholic, Marion found his theological guidance in the *Communio* wing of post-Vatican II thought rather than in the more liberal *Concilium* thinkers (such as Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx); his theological mentors include architects of the *Nouvelle théologie* such as Louis Bouyer, Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac, and especially Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Marion’s complex body of work can be roughly divided into three distinct but interrelated projects: first, works in historical philosophy that have established him as one of the world’s foremost scholars on René Descartes; second, Marion’s own constructive contributions to phenomenology, especially his remarkable magnum opus, *Being Given*; and third, Marion’s studies in theology, works that are notable for his consideration of the problems of

26. Eugen Fink and Edmund Husserl, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation: The Idea of a Transcendental Theory of Method*, Studies in Continental Thought (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 235. Quoted by Kevin Hart, “Introduction,” in idem, *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 10.

27. For a translation of the *Der Spiegel* article, see Martin Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us Now: An Interview with Martin Heidegger,” *Philosophy Today* 20 (1976): 267–84. On the fourfold, see Julian Young, “The fourfold,” in Charles B. Guignon, *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, 2d ed., Cambridge Companions to Philosophy. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 373–92.

idolatry and iconicity as epitomized in his influential *God without Being*. Although Marion is keen to distinguish the latter two projects—the phenomenological and the theological—from one another, critics and admirers alike note the way in which both projects tend to seep into each other.²⁸ This is because in both his phenomenology and his theology Marion is always seeking to avoid the specter of what, following Heidegger, he sometimes calls metaphysics, sometimes ontotheology, but by which he always means the transcendental conditions the mind seeks to place upon the appearing of either being or the divine.²⁹ These conditions stem from the finitude of the ego and so force the world of appearing to conform to the limits of the subject's rationality, cutting the vast givenness and mystery of appearance down to the manageable dimensions of the subject itself, suffocating the other in the embrace of the same. In short, Marion seeks to free both philosophy and theology from the burden of transcendental constraints.

Marion begins his thought like a man pondering two gravestones, one of which marks the death of God and the other the death of metaphysics. He mourns neither, for Marion holds that the God who died along with metaphysics was no God at all, only the god of the philosophers, “a determination of God that formulates him in a precise concept.”³⁰ For Marion, it is axiomatic that to enclose God within any concept is already to commit idolatry. As Augustine remarks, “if you comprehend it, it is not God.”³¹ The question that animates him, therefore, is this: How do we think God prior to any determination? But this is no easy task, for to think outside of determination is to think outside metaphysics and ontology, the *a priori* sciences of being *qua* being. As Marion sees things, ontology is akin to a metaphysical police state governed by human thought. To liberate God from such strictures we must think the unthinkable.³² But how can we cognize without the concept? How can we think the ineffable? For help in this impossible endeavor, Marion turns

28. See Dominique Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate*, trans. Bernard G. Prusak, Jeffrey L. Klosky, and Thomas A. Carlson, *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy*, no. 15 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

29. Marion follows Heidegger in all but equating metaphysics and ontotheology, for as Heidegger says in an important chapter in *Identity and Difference*, the latter constitutes the former. On which, see Emmanuel Falque, “Larvatus Pro Deo: Jean-Luc Marion's Phenomenology and Theology,” in *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

30. Quoted in Jean Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 29.

31. *Ibid.*, 37.

to the Christian contemplative tradition and especially to the mystical theology of Dionysius the Areopagite.

Although Dionysius has been a presence in nearly all of Marion's theological work, his most mature engagement with the Dionysian tradition occurs in the final chapter of *In Excess*, Marion's final book in his great phenomenological trilogy on givenness (the chapter first appeared as the lead essay in the volume *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*). It is therefore an important piece in Marion's oeuvre. "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of It" is an extended Dionysian rejoinder to Derrida's writings on negative theology. In this essay, Marion seeks both to exonerate the tradition of mystical theology from the charge that it is complicit in the "metaphysics of presence," and to delineate the contours of his new phenomenology of givenness, a project centered in Marion's discovery of the "saturated phenomenon."

Of course, before Dionysius can help Marion escape metaphysics, Marion must show that Dionysius himself is not subject to Derrida's critique of metaphysics. As Marion notes, Derrida's concern with negative theology is largely defensive.³³ Derrida needs to distinguish his own strategy of *différance* from the apparently quite similar strategies of the *via negativa* in the mystical tradition. Like negative theologians, Derrida would emancipate speech and writing from the burden of representation. He seeks to free speech as a form of unknowing, the play of signifiers no longer tethered to their fulfillment in intuitions, and so Derrida draws attention to the way that language functions most powerfully when intuitive fulfillment is impossible. Indeed, this impossibility of fulfillment makes possible not only the jubilation of phonic melody that allows one to enjoy hearing Dante or Joyce even apart from comprehension, but also the discoveries of non-Euclidean space, quantum realities that are necessarily unimaginable, and the entire realm of faith, the evidence of things unseen.³⁴ But doesn't the *via negativa* seem to do something similar in its verbal riot of affirmation and negation? Derrida rejects this claim

32. There are pronounced resonances here with Emmanuel Lévinas's attempts to think ethics outside of ontology, an ethics that will think the unthinkable beyond even the logic of noncontradiction. See Marion, *God without Being*, 37.

33. "Negative theology does not furnish deconstruction with new material or an unconscious forerunner, but with its first serious rival, perhaps the only one possible. In short, for deconstruction what is at issue in 'negative theology' is not first of all 'negative theology,' but deconstruction itself . . ." Jean Luc Marion, "In the Name : How to Avoid Speaking It," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 22.

34. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 6.

for he holds that negative theology only appears to elude affirmation. Negative theology is only a quasi-deconstruction “since it claims to reach in fine what it deconstructs: It claims to put us in the presence of God in the very degree to which it denies all presence.”³⁵ Marion discerns in Derrida four primary objections to negative theology. First, it inherits and perpetuates the Hellenic errors of ontotheology (in other words it falls within the broad genealogy mentioned above); second, it is caught within the horizon of Being; third, while it seems to annul the reifications of presence (apparently denying that God is caught by being, truth, essence, etc.), it reinscribes these terms in a hyperbolic manner, establishing them all the more securely; and, finally, negative theology never does away with predication (and therefore the rule of the concept), for it always has recourse to praise which, unlike pure prayer, remains assertoric. As Marion notes, these four charges pose a challenge:

[They] put into question the possibility, for theology, of making an exception to the metaphysical conditions of discourse. In short, can Christian theology . . . remove itself in principle . . . from the ‘metaphysics of presence’—or is it in the final analysis reducible to this metaphysics? Which amounts to asking: Is Christian theology subject to deconstruction, or not?³⁶

In order to demonstrate that Christianity is impervious to deconstruction, Marion draws attention to Dionysius’s threefold semiotic strategy. Negative theology, or, as Marion prefers to call it, mystical theology, is not reducible to the two movements of affirmation and negation, which would only yield an aporetic predicative shuttle, but instead suspends or transgresses both affirmation and negation in a third superlative form of speaking. The logic is as follows. First, according to the way of affirmation (*kataphasis*), we name God by drawing on the positive characteristics or perfections manifest within the created world; thus God’s love is akin to whatever is positive in human love. Second, according to the way of negation (*apophasis*), we speak about God by asserting a radical difference between God and any creaturely reality. Yes, God loves as we also do, but the distance between our finite loving and God’s infinite love is so great that any similarity is swallowed in a greater disanalogy. Finally, according to the way of super-eminence, we ascribe names once again to God for he is the cause (*aitia*) of all creaturely perfections. But when we name God as the cause of these perfections, our names are free from the subject’s

35. Marion, “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking It,” 22.

36. *Ibid.*, 23.

mastery for we do not know what they contain. All they indicate is a direction and not a concept; they do not circumscribe God but serve to comport the subject in her stance before the divine. Thus the *via superlativa* is not, as Derrida charges, a return to affirmation but instead “re-establishes (or rather deepens) the unknowing.”³⁷

This Dionysian strategy is basic and pervasive within the Christian contemplative tradition. For example, Marion points to the way in which this threefold semiotic works in Nicholas of Cusa:

He does not end up with apophasis pure and simple, but with infinity. “According to negative theology, infinity is all we discover in God.” This infinity does not revert to affirmation after passing through negation, but lays bare and circumscribes the divine truth as the experience of incomprehension: “[i]n the shadows of our ignorance shines incomprehensibly the truth defined more precisely.” This is not a description of an hypostasized apophasis, but of a third position, the sole target ever since the beginning: “That, then, is the learned ignorance for which we have been searching.”³⁸

On Marion’s reading then, the *via superlativa* of mystical theology takes leave of predication entirely, becoming instead an evocative, pragmatic, and erotic speech about the divine. The signifier in prayer and praise merely functions to delineate a trajectory, a way of comporting oneself toward, or relating to, the God with whom one is involved.

The third way is played out beyond the oppositions between affirmation and negation, synthesis and separation, in short between the true and the false. Strictly speaking, if thesis and negation have in common that they speak the truth (and spurn the false), the way which transcends them should also transcend the true and the false. The third way would transgress nothing less than the two truth values, between which the entire logic of metaphysics is carried out.³⁹

37. *Ibid.*, 25. Cf. also Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 145–48.

38. Marion, “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking It,” 25. For the Nicholas of Cusa texts, see *On Learned Ignorance* [De Docta Ignorantia] I. c. XXVI.

39. Marion, “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking It,” 26.

This is why, as we will see below in chapter 4, Nicholas speaks of the wall of paradise (the *murus paradisi*) as the law of noncontradiction beyond which alone God makes God's habitation and can be seen.⁴⁰ For Marion, no less than for Nicholas (though perhaps for different reasons), the law of noncontradiction must yield at the summit of contemplative ascent.⁴¹ Marion speaks of this third way, the *via superlativa* beyond the true and the false, as *dé-nomination*, which is equally and at the same time a naming and an "un-naming" in one integral, nonpredicative speech-act.⁴²

De-nomination, therefore, does not end up in a "metaphysics of presence" that does not call itself as such. Rather, it ends up as a [*pragmatic*] *theology of absence*—where the name is given as having no name, as not giving the essence, and having nothing but this absence to make manifest; a theology where hearing happens, as Paul remarks, "not only in my presence but also in my absence." . . . But if essence and presence, and therefore a fortiori ground and the concept of being, are missing from this name, one can no longer speak of onto-theo-logy or of metaphysics or even of a "Greek" horizon.⁴³

So far, it seems, so good. Marion's recourse to the contemplative performance of prayer and praise allows him to argue for a mode of Christian speech impervious to Derrida's critique of metaphysics (deconstruction being, in Marion's view, the most rigorous critique of metaphysics yet offered).⁴⁴ But does this get us any closer to an integrally contemplative and sapiential practice of philosophy or has

40. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God* IX.39.

41. Nicholas of Cusa's account of this is not precisely what philosophers call *dialetheism*, for it goes beyond the dialetheist truth-value glut of propositional conjunctions (whereby "P and not-P" is true), in order to simultaneously affirm the propositional bination (whereby "neither P nor not-P" is true). For Nicholas, both the glut and bination are affirmed but only in the nondual event of contemplative cognition. On dialetheism, see Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

42. "In its ambiguity, *dé-nomination* bears the twofold function of saying (affirming negatively) and undoing this saying of the name. It concerns a form of speech which no longer says something about something (or a name of someone), but which denies all relevance to predication, rejects the nominative function of names, and suspends the rule of truth's two values." Marion, "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking It," 27.

43. Marion, "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking It," 27. The brackets indicate the addition of the qualifier "pragmatic" that Marion inserted when the essay was republished as chapter 5 of Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* (Fordham University Press, 2002), 154.

44. It should be noted, however, that Marion differs from Derrida when it comes to the precise identification of what constitutes metaphysics.

Marion simply reasserted the hiatus between philosophy and contemplation that emerged so forcefully in the late medieval period? The question is complicated by the way Marion's exegesis of mystical theology dovetails with his radical revisionary proposals for the expansion and completion of phenomenology. In the same manner that Marion argues mystical theology opens up a third way beyond either affirmation or negation, so, too, he contends that phenomenology can only be completed through the embrace of a third reduction beyond the earlier phenomenological reductions of Husserl and Heidegger.

What are these three reductions? Phenomenology was founded upon the operation of the first reduction, which can be described simply as the suspending of the natural attitude in order to let lived experiences bring about their own appearing apart from our intentions for them.⁴⁵ Adopting this phenomenological attitude effects something like a religious conversion, thrusting the phenomenologist into a more pristine and wonderful encounter with the world. The natural attitude, by contrast, enacts a world in which, to use the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins's words:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

But adopting the phenomenological attitude is like an initiation.
One takes off one's shoes and wakes to the realization:

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs . . .⁴⁶

45. In order to set up Marion's third reduction, I am simplifying the rather tortuous development of the reduction in Husserl, which can be divided into various phases and types at different periods in his work, and indeed in different sections of the same work. Marion deals extensively with Husserl's reduction(s) in *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy, no. 27 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 154. See also idem, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

46. From Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), 27.

The world is revealed anew to the phenomenologist apart from the self-containment of the *cogito* that gives us only ever “man’s smudge” and “man’s smell.” Behind the vagaries of our personal histories and our sophistication, we are always already plunged into the raw experience of the transcendental subject itself, a kind of pure consciousness already in touch with the world because already in touch with the immanent cascade of its own life. There is even a sense in which Husserl would join Hopkins in the final verses: “Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”⁴⁷ Thus Husserl says, “In my phenomenological reduction I simply want to gather all philosophies and religion by means of universally valid method of cognition.” As Dermot Moran notes, Husserl’s aim was nothing less than to reach “God without God.”⁴⁸

Even Husserl’s closest students, however, began to see the danger in such a reduction. There is something still too Cartesian about it; I am only put in touch with the life of the world because the world is swallowed by my own transcendental ego.⁴⁹ Everything is reduced but the self, so that it is not the Holy Ghost that hovers over the bent world with bright wings, but rather my own “I.” Heidegger balked at this account and so introduced what Marion calls the second or “existential” reduction.⁵⁰ Because the “I” is the horizon of Husserl’s reduction, this first reduction can only lead to the objectivity of objects. Phenomena thereby appear solely in the dative case as held in the intentionality of the subject to whom they appear. By reducing phenomena to objectivity, Husserl discloses the *whatness* of the phenomena, but he has no means for getting at the more fundamental issue *that they are*. Heidegger believed that Husserl’s reduction fell short of phenomenology’s calling—to return to the things themselves—and so he introduced what Marion calls a second reduction to the Being of beings. Phenomena, on this account, should

47. Ibid.

48. As quoted in Dermot Moran, *Edmund Husserl: Founder of Phenomenology*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 17. Husserl’s remark was first reported in Adelgundis Jaegerschmidt, “Conversations with Edmund Husserl 1931–1938,” in *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, ed. Burt Hopkins and Steven Crowell (Edmonds, WA: Noesis, 2001), 343.

49. The Husserlian transcendental ego is, however, not the Kantian ego for it includes far more than pure reason, even including the body itself as part of the constitution of this ego.

50. As Heidegger told his students, “For Husserl, phenomenological reduction . . . is the method of leading phenomenological vision from the natural attitude of the human being whose life is involved in the world of things and persons back to the transcendental life of consciousness.” Martin Heidegger and Albert Hofstadter, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 1st Midland bk. ed., Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 21. Quoted in Hart, “Introduction,” in Hart, ed., *Counter-Experiences*, 12.

be allowed to show themselves from themselves.⁵¹ There is a more original appearing than the inner contents of pure experience and this primordial appearing discloses the weight and fragility of Being that is presupposed in all eidetic awareness. In order to get to this primordial Being, Heidegger's existential reduction proceeds by way of anxiety (*Angst*). Anxiety dislodges *Dasein* from its ordinary preoccupation with objectivity. This privileged mood discloses the world as uncanny rather than pristine; it reveals a prereflective "understanding" of the Being of beings in their contingency and hiddenness, all beings plunged into the nothingness that surrounds them like a dark halo, and our own Being itself constituted only by the Being-unto-death that is *Dasein's* own-most. This second reduction bears comparison to the *via negativa* for, where Husserl's reduction discloses the positive forms or essences of the phenomena, Heidegger's reduction cancels this form and discloses the negativity at the heart of Being, the ontological difference between the beings of the world and Being itself, which properly speaking, is not.

As one might expect, Marion is dissatisfied with both moves, whether Husserl's transcendental reduction to objectivity, *eidōs*, and presence, or Heidegger's ontological reduction to being.⁵² Both Husserl and Heidegger preserve two basic conditions apart from which phenomena never appear: a horizon against and within which they find their meaning, and a subject to whom (or in whose clearing) they manifest.⁵³ Both reductions are still effected by a subject (either the transcendental ego or *Dasein*) that conditions appearance, but where the subject itself comes from is left unexplored. The horizon polices appearing: "It excludes from the field of manifestation not only many phenomena, but above all those most endowed with meaning and those that are most powerful."⁵⁴ Might we imagine an even more primordial reduction, one that is not effected by the subject but instead lets phenomena appear prior to any determination? In a startling reading of Husserl, Marion suggests that phenomenology's founder already intuited this very possibility when Husserl himself postulated: "one must take phenomena as they give themselves."⁵⁵ This was at the heart of the much-contested "principle of all principles,"⁵⁶ but Husserl was unable to accept its consequences or to articulate it with precision. Marion, therefore, suggests a new version of the

51. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Stony Brook: State University of New York Press, 1996), §7.

52. Marion, *Being Given*, 256–58, 59–62.

53. *Ibid.*, 179–89.

54. *Ibid.*, 4.

55. Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, 108.? Quoted in Marion, *Being Given*, 14.

phenomenological principle: “so much reduction, so much givenness [*autant de reduction, autant de donation*].”⁵⁷ In doing so, Marion portrays himself as a more faithful phenomenologist than either Husserl or Heidegger. Marion’s reduction aims at the subject itself for givenness is revealed only inasmuch as the subject is suspended. This new reduction dispenses with all horizons and is consummated by the bedazzling appearance of a givenness that knows no bounds.⁵⁸ This is Marion’s *via superlativa*, a way leading back to the primal self-givenness of phenomena, the intuition of giving as such. Here, intentionality is reversed. The “I” does not constitute phenomena but finds itself constituted by its own givenness. The “I” thus becomes what Marion calls the *interloqué* or the *adonné*: the one in whom the given is manifest and who in that revelation receives his very self.⁵⁹

The reduction to givenness allows Marion to discover a new phenomenon: the saturated phenomenon that cannot appear against eidetic or ontological horizons because it is too great for them. The saturated phenomenon is a pleromatic intuition that exceeds all intentionality. It is never shown: it bedazzles, staggers, overwhelms; it is “*invisible* <sic>” and impossible. Marion explains, “It is important to insist here particularly on this: this failure to produce the object does not result from a shortage of *donation* . . . but from an excess of intuition, and thus from an excess of *donation*.”⁶⁰ The saturated phenomenon is not endlessly deferred like Derrida’s messianic *différance*, the *avenir* that is always to come, but is, rather, that which comes with such intensity that it cannot be comprehended. And so the saturated phenomenon allows us to discern within philosophy the possibility of a return to Dionysius. Marion identifies Dionysius’s “third way as the saturated phenomenon.”⁶¹ We move decisively beyond predication, beyond the metaphysics of presence, into mystical theology.

56. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1982), §24.

57. Marion, *Being Given*, 14.

58. Marion understands how radical this move is. He recounts, “I said to Lévinas some years ago that in fact the last step for a real phenomenology would be to give up the concept of horizon. Lévinas answered me immediately: ‘Without horizon there is no phenomenology.’ And I boldly assume he was wrong.” From “On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, Moderated by Richard Kearney,” in Caputo and Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, 66.

59. Marion, *In Excess*, 50.

60. Jean-Luc Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon,” in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn,”* ed. Dominique Janicaud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 195–96.

61. Marion, “In the Name,” 39.

In this third way, no predication or naming any longer appears possible, as in the second way [the *via negativa*], but now this is so for the opposite reason: not because the giving intuition would be lacking (in which case one could certainly make a favourable comparison between “negative theology” and atheism or establish a rivalry between it and deconstruction), but because the excess of intuition overcomes, submerges, exceeds, in short saturates, the measure of each and every concept.⁶²

In this appeal to mystical theology, Marion is in agreement with the *Divine Names* of Dionysius. “[Mystical theology] is stronger than all discourse and all knowledge . . . and therefore surpasses comprehension in general . . .”⁶³ Prayer itself acts as the motor for the reduction to givenness by cultivating a vulnerable silent opening to the mystery that exceeds our speech and yet gives us the words with which to praise the ineffable. In the prayer of contemplation beyond predication we are “exposed to the point of receiving from this non-object determinations that are so radical and new that they determine and shape me far more than they teach and inform me.”⁶⁴

Marion holds that his phenomenology of givenness and the saturated phenomenon cannot determine the reality of this contemplative practice, but it can delineate its possibility.⁶⁵ There is a surprising affinity then between Marion’s post-metaphysical philosophy of religion and more analytic projects such as we find in Alston and Plantinga. Like those two Reformed epistemologists, Marion’s goal in deploying the concept of the saturated phenomenon is to remove the intellectual obstacles from admitting the intelligibility or plausibility of faith, not least a faith colored by the contemplative experience of God. It is apologetic in a sense, but only inasmuch as it removes the *de jure* argument against such belief. By pushing phenomenology to its limits, Marion shows that there are no *a priori* phenomenological grounds for rejecting mystical practices; we cannot safely dismiss the claims of contemplatives as impossible, for Marion has shown the possibility of the impossible in the contours of the saturated phenomenon.

Certainly this is an exceedingly powerful project, one that I have only been able to sketch in its barest outlines. As a modern attempt to reunite the contemplative and the philosophical, it seems at first promising. Marion wants

62. Marion, “In the Name,” 40.

63. *Divine Names* I.5.593a. Quoted in Marion, “In the Name,” 40.

64. *Ibid.*, 32.

65. *Ibid.*, 39.

a contemplative phenomenology, a Dionysian and Anselmian phenomenology of ecstatic knowing that becomes unknowing, or rather “becomes a knowledge that is capable of acknowledging the incomprehensible, and thereby respects the operative pragmatic, and endlessly repeatable de-nomination of God as *that than which nothing greater can be thought* . . .”⁶⁶ He opens phenomenology to being transformed through its exposure to contemplative practice and in doing so crafts a phenomenology of cognitive transgression and noetic conversion.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to be concerned about Marion’s project. Chief among these is that, for Marion, phenomenology opens the possibility of contemplation but cannot participate in the contemplative event itself. In other words, contemplation succeeds philosophy, but does not transfigure its operations. Not only in contemplative illumination, but in all events of saturation, reason appears as an unwanted guest, barred from entry, watching the feast but never welcomed to the table. This is all too conventional and reminds us of Alston’s autonomous spheres of basic doxastic competence. Marion’s may be the most elegant and rigorous articulation of the late medieval divide between faith and reason, ardor and intellect, contemplation and philosophy, but for all that it is still a reification of this divide, perhaps one that is more pernicious for its admirable eloquence.⁶⁷ Marion’s approach to philosophy and contemplation, a microcosm of his approach to philosophy and theology, is not one of integration but correlation. As John Milbank rightly notes:

If, therefore, Marion continues to develop the characteristic twentieth-century theology of divine word as gift and event, he also effects the most massive correlation of this theology with contemporary philosophy, but in such a fashion that at times it appears that he usurps and radicalizes philosophy’s own categories in favour of theological ones. . . . Compared with Marion, the ambition of a Barth is as nothing, for it is as if, so to speak, . . . Marion seeks to be both Barth and Heidegger at once.⁶⁸

The contemplative event discloses, for Marion, a domain of charity and givenness that exceeds the world’s being and so exceeds philosophy and

66. *Ibid.*, 37.

67. On this late medieval divide, see Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi, 3d ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982); John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

68. John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 36–37.

metaphysics, but this is precisely to cede the world in its ontological thickness and wonder to the disenchantments of a purely calculative because never contemplative reason. The problem with Marion's account is not, in the first place, that he does an injustice to God after the manner of ontotheology, but that he does an injustice to the world. Marion seems to accept that Heidegger has given the last word on ontology and metaphysics and so he knows all too well and all too quickly what the mind and the world are capable of. He seeks to escape this desolate Heideggerian landscape by allowing charity, God, and saturated phenomena a place beyond or outside of being. Ironically, our relation to these phenomena remains rather stereotypically metaphysical: there is no participation or communion but simply an inverse intentionality, a call that gives me to myself while remaining itself always anonymous and beyond my ken. Where Heidegger suggests it is the nothing that gives being and time, Marion argues that what gives is the call, but the call remains as unknown as Heidegger's *nihil*. I stand in relation to the call as the world stands in relation to Aristotle's God: absolute passivity on my part, and a pure divine activity that allows no real relation to be established on the part of God. In such a situation, I am known by God, but God cannot not know me; He only knows Himself.⁶⁹ In Marion, this nonrelationality is compounded in that, without Aristotle's doctrine of the agent intellect, I am also denied any power whatsoever to know God. So while I am known by God, God does not know me nor do I know God. The world is scoured of its ability to raise us to knowledge of God, evacuated of the divine and condemned to futility. We are left with the dilemma: either *ennui* within or flight from the one, necessarily ontotheological, idolatrous world.

What has gone wrong with Marion's account? I argue that Marion's error here lies in his failure to engage the fullness of the contemplative tradition. He remains frozen in the liminal space between purgation and illumination in the contemplative journey and so provides a startling phenomenology of this moment that is, nevertheless, of itself by no means complete. Because, in his theory at least, he cannot cross this threshold, Marion's writings seem to universalize the state of a soul in purgation. John of the Cross describes the

69. This Aristotelian vision of the divine has been roundly critiqued in the twentieth-century, not least by process theologians who have pointed to its inadequacy in the face of both religious practice and pervasive questions about evil. For a representative account, cf. Marion, *God without Being*, 61–138. One needs to be cautious, however, when attending to this process account of this story, which too quickly assimilates Thomas Aquinas to this Aristotelian paradigm. On which, see esp. Charles Hartshorne, *Aquinas to Whitehead: Seven Centuries of Metaphysics of Religion*, The Aquinas Lecture, 1976 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Publications, 1976).

state of such a soul in words that could have come from Marion's pen: "When this flame, since its light is excessively brilliant, shines upon the soul, it shines within the darkneses of the soul, which are also excessive. A person then feels his natural and vicious darkneses, which are contrary to the supernatural light; and he fails to experience the supernatural light because he does not have it within himself as he does his darkneses—and the darkneses do not comprehend the light . . ."70 But for John of the Cross, this is merely a stage—albeit one we never entirely outgrow and constantly return to in the spiral course of the spiritual journey—and this stage is itself overcome in illumination. Marion might agree, but, for Marion, such illumination could only occur after the diremption of cognition. For John, however, illumination does not spell the end of our knowing powers but rather their transfiguration and expansion. So John writes of this same soul:

Once they [the shadows] are driven out, he is illumined and, being transformed, beholds the light within himself, since his spiritual eye was cleansed and fortified by the divine light. An immense light will cause total darkness in a weak and impure eye, for a highly sensible object deprives the faculty. And thus this flame *was* oppressive to the intellectual eye.⁷¹

Here the soul encounters the splendor of divine illumination as a bedazzling, confounding revelation that robs the eye of its virtue just as Marion details in his analyses of the saturated phenomenon. But this anemia of the subject can be overcome. Saturation gives way to divinization so that what was oppressive to the intellectual eye shines diaphanously in the eye of contemplation.

The fire of love and the eye of contemplation are not divorced in John, nor does ardor succeed where vision fails. Love and knowledge are integral to one another and so both must be transfigured, caught up into a participation in God's own life that alone allows one equally to see and to love. Supernatural illumination perfects, completes, and preserves all of the natural faculties: intellect, will, memory, appetite, and even the strength of bodily life. These are all brought into union with God through participation in the divine life, moved by God's own motion. John writes,

70. John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love* 1.22. All translations are taken from W. Norris Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God: A New Thomistic Perspective*, 2d ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 131–50; and Norris Clarke, S.J., *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being—God—Person* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 183–210.

71. *Living Flame* 1.22.

Accordingly, the intellect of this soul is God's intellect; its will is God's will, its memory is the memory of God and its delight is God's delight; and although the substance of this soul is not the substance of God, since it cannot undergo a substantial conversion into Him, *it has become God through participation in God . . .*⁷²

Like damp logs to the fire, says John, we encounter a vision that overwhelms us, and so we sweat and smoke and sputter. But this situation gives way once the flames consume the log; the wood is no longer burned by the fire but becomes a furnace from which further flames leap.⁷³

Because this flame is immense and far-reaching, and the will is narrow and restricted, the will feels its confinement and narrowness in the measure that the flame attacks it. It feels this *until* the flame, penetrating within it, enlarges, widens, and makes it capable of receiving the flame itself. . . . Just as the spirits suffer purification there [after death] so as to be able to see God through clear vision in the next life, souls in their own way suffer purification here on earth so as to be able to be transformed in Him through love in this life.⁷⁴

Divinization and transformation certainly involve a reverse intentionality, and yet they do not leave the subject in a state of incommensurability but, rather, give the gift of increasing adequacy. Surely, outside of the *circumincessio* of the Trinity, there is never perfect adequation of soul to God, but there is a crucial transformation in the direction of adequacy. "With time and practice, love can receive added quality, . . . and become more intensified. . . . There are as many centers in God possible to the soul, each one deeper than the other, as there are degrees of love of God possible to it."⁷⁵ As I will argue in the chapters that follow, these ascending, contemplative degrees of intellection suggest not the end of metaphysics but its radical and perpetual renewal. In the same manner that the contemplative subject is not left to her own devices, the world itself is capable of far more than the Heideggerian ontologist ever dreamt. By ascending to the heights of contemplation, the participatory philosopher sees the grandeur of the world's depths as well. As Henri Bergson says, "To pierce

72. *Living Flame* II.34.

73. *Living Flame* I.22.

74. *Living Flame* I.23, 24.

75. *Living Flame* Prologue, 3 and I.13.

the mystery of the deep, it is sometimes necessary to regard the heights. It is earth's hidden fire which appears at the summit of the volcano."⁷⁶

NEO-PERENNIALISM AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

Alston and Marion represent dominant approaches to the question of contemplation within the analytic and phenomenological schools of philosophy of religion. The renaissance of philosophy of religion, however, is not confined to philosophy departments but is also found in faculties of religious studies where the prevailing questions are somewhat different. Therefore, in order to round out our consideration of contemporary philosophical approaches to the question of contemplation, I want to look at two schools of thought that are prevalent among those philosophers of religion who find themselves situated within the professional orbit of religious studies than within departments of philosophy. On the one hand, we will consider the highly successful and entrenched constructivist school associated with thinkers such as Stephen Katz, Michael Sells, and Wayne Proudfoot that builds upon the philosophical ground gained in the linguistic turn in order to treat contemplative practices and traditions as cultural, political and grammatical constructions.⁷⁷ On the other hand, we will look at a competing tradition, sometimes labeled perennialist or neo-perennialist, associated popularly with thinkers such as Huston Smith and academically with authors including Robert Forman, Anthony Perovich and James Robertson Price III.⁷⁸ The more popular variant of this latter school has close ties to the Traditionalist movement and names such as Fritjoff Schuon, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and James Cutsinger. Traditionalists, though proclaiming their respect for the exoteric diversity of religious faiths, hold that all contemplative traditions variously provide access to an immediate, intuitive knowledge of the transcendent, esoteric unity of religions. A more scholarly version of this "common core" argument can be found in Robert Forman's series of edited volumes, penned initially in response to Katz's program (a different, more Kantian common-core argument can be also be found in philosophers such as John Hick).⁷⁹

76. Henri Bergson, Keith Ansell-Pearson, and Michael Kolkman, *Mind-Energy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 25.

77. Stephen Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

78. See Robert Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," in idem, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3–49.

The common-core neo-perennialist approach has been critiqued not only for failing to do justice to the textual and historical evidence of various contemplative traditions but also for failing to yield intersubjective confirmation over the many decades of intermonastic dialogue that began in earnest with Vatican II.⁸⁰ While Forman and his colleagues have presented provocative evidence for a “pure consciousness event” (PCE) free from symbolic overlay within many contemplative traditions, this is by itself hardly justification for the more robust claims of common-core theorists. That creational existence may allow periodic access to a semantic vacuum is fascinating—and calls into question certain *extreme* forms of the linguistic turn—but *how* one evaluates this void is at least as important religiously (even mystically and contemplatively) as its existence and, in this matter, *pace* perennialism, there is no esoteric or transcendent unity. Indeed, as Jan van Ruusbroec already argued in the fourteenth century against the Brethren of the Free Spirit, the fact that the soul can discover within itself such spaces of (nearly) absolute silence may on occasion hinder or threaten the contemplative journey toward Christlikeness rather than abetting it.⁸¹ As Mark McIntosh argues, the common core position that Forman advocates seems to pay scant regard to the Christian contemplative writers themselves:

. . . for their impression is not that they have been able to achieve a special state of experience prior to all the normal categories of thought, language, or their faith, but precisely that God has spoken to them by the very means of those categories, in complete analogy with (perhaps even extension of) the event of the Incarnation.⁸²

79. See Robert Forman, “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting,” in idem, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3–49.

80. For incisive critiques of perennialism, see Robert Forman, ed., *The Inmate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). Cf. also Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 36–39, 46–59. See also See Jorge Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 71–111, 35–40.

81. Louis K. Dupré, *The Common Life: The Origins of Trinitarian Mysticism and Its Development by Jan Ruusbroec* (New York: Crossroad, 1984); Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan Van Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian of the Trinity*, Studies in Spirituality and Theology (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

82. See Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 139.

Once the question of PCEs is thus dealt with, we discover that contemplation does not provide a path around the normal human situation of contested intelligibility and meaning. Indeed, diversity seems as present in the supposed esoterica of contemplative traditions as in their putatively exoteric mainstream counterparts.

The Katzian constructivist position is less easily dismissed but also appears unsustainable. According to this view, we are locked in a linguistic circle that forbids us any intellectual intuition of either God or the structures of reality and thus permits us only ever to know ourselves and our respective languages.

Mystical reports do not merely indicate the postexperiential description of an unreportable experience in the language closest at hand. Rather, the experiences themselves are inescapably shaped by prior linguistic influences such that the lived experience conforms to a preexistent pattern that has been learnt, then intended, and then actualized in the experiential reality of the mystic.⁸³

Katz suggests that all experience—most especially subtle experiences that one finds in mysticism and contemplation—are constituted by the conceptual supplement the subject provides. The problem is that this sort of dualism between conceptual scheme (subjective supplement) and content (God or the metaphysical *realia*) is itself highly questionable. In “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” for instance, Donald Davidson argues that in order to identify (and thus speak about) conceptual frameworks that constitute and order our experience, we would have to presuppose our own access to larger common ground that would make these frameworks truly “alternative.” However, as Davidson explains, the very existence of such a larger common ground guarantees the intertranslatability of supposed frameworks and thus belies the idea of competing conceptual schemes in the first place.⁸⁴ Davidson’s abolition of “conceptual schemes” has been strongly critiqued by authors as different as Charles Taylor and Nicholas Rescher on various grounds, not least on the grounds that it suppresses our ability to recognize the genuine otherness of those different from us.⁸⁵ Both Taylor and Rescher join Davidson in rejecting

83. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Language*, 5.

84. See Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” in *The Essential Davidson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 183–98.

85. See Charles Taylor, “The Importance of Herder,” in idem, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 83–87; jdem, “Theories of Meaning,” *Man and World* 13, nos. 3–4 (1980): 281–302; Nicholas Rescher, “Conceptual Schemes,” in *Studies in Epistemology*, ed. Peter A.

the “myth of the given” (uninterpreted reality), but hold that Davidson’s criterion of linguistic translatability (conceived as the replication of efficaciously identical propositions in different languages) is inadequate grounds for denying the reality of competing conceptual schemes. Both authors, moreover, suggest that the question is not one of translatability but interpretability, or what Taylor calls the presence of “the linguistic dimension,” the sense of a certain “rightness” or aesthetic fit that particular words and phrases produce.⁸⁶ While Taylor and Rescher are certainly right in this regard, what is important for our purposes is that they agree with Davidson in showing the idea of a conceptual scheme to be unintelligible so long as it remains indebted to neo-Kantian notions of a pregiven, uninterpreted world. This is the critical point as far as Katz is concerned: the problematizing of conceptual frameworks likewise renders the idea of an uninterpreted reality meaningless and so brings into question the putative failure of contemplative experience to provide contact with this reality.⁸⁷

This conclusion cuts both ways inasmuch as both the constructivist and the neo-perennialist common-core approaches to the study of contemplation take the difference between metaphysical realities and their descriptions to be a simple given. But it is precisely contemplation that poses the most significant challenge to this stark differentiation of our language, on the one hand, and the divine, on the other—this dualism of framework and reality—not because contemplation claims to leap over the barrier in a flash, but because it claims a performative anticipation of the beatific vision when we shall know and love God by sharing or participating in God’s own knowledge and love. Rather than describing or representing, contemplative language responds to what Sebastian Moore, in a neglected but important article on contemplation and philosophy of religion, calls “God as pressure.”⁸⁸ No less than Forman, Moore believes that we can have access to a “*contentless* knowing,” a pure consciousness event that Moore calls “knowing as such.”⁸⁹ Unlike Forman, however, Moore discerns within this contentless knowing a noetic quality that

French, Theodore E. Uehling Jr., and Howard Wettstein, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 5 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 323–45.

86. See Charles Taylor, “The Importance of Herder,” 81–82.

87. Abandoning the dualism of scheme versus content allows us, writes Davidson, to “re-establish *unmediated touch* with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences true or false” (Davidson, “On the Very Idea,” 198).

88. Sebastian Moore, “Some Principles for an Adequate Theism,” *The Downside Review* 95 (1977): 201–13.

89. *Ibid.*, 203.

makes theological appellations (preeminently the name “God”) integral to the event. Moore writes:

[T]his contribution of the conceptual to direct knowledge has to be carefully stated. It does not clarify it. It does not give it content. Rather it affirms, at the undeniable level of rational philosophic wonder and discourse, that total mastery of God which the mystic obscurely knows at first hand.⁹⁰

The discovery of interior silence and emptiness is nearly ubiquitous in the Christian contemplative tradition but is not an end in itself. Indeed, it is, rather, something more like a beginning. Whether by grace or by effort, the achievement of silence is part of a process of purgation and ascesis. The contemplative cultivates such spaces within, spaces that are *materially* desolate, in order that they might then be *formally* charged, receiving their intentionality and direction from God. Contemplative silence is contentless but has a trajectory; it is, in the Areopagite’s language, erotic, or what John of the Cross calls “pure faith.”

Erotic and intentional, the contemplative endeavor is therefore supremely transformative, aiming at a conversion or *metanoia* that reorients identity according to the lure of the divine. Moore writes:

To know God directly is to receive a pressure that slowly changes one through and through. In other words, to know God directly is to come into the shaping force of the initiative that God is. The direct knowledge of God is the making of a saint, the building of the Kingdom. It is not the lonely intuition of a genius.⁹¹

Although the contemplative and mystical tradition has often been accused of perpetuating a private and apolitical religion (“what the individual does with his own solitariness,” as Whitehead says),⁹² such charges are singularly unsupported by the bulk of the writings and lives of contemplatives themselves. Contemplation is not properly quietistic, but transformative and engaged. As Moore’s comments make clear—and even a brief study of figures such as Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard of Clairvaux, Meister Eckhart, or Teresa of Avila confirms—the contemplative tradition is most characteristically marked by the

90. *Ibid.*, 204.

91. *Ibid.*, 205.

92. Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing, 1960), 16.

reinvigoration of all of one's action, not as the goal, but as the fruit of one's attachment to God.

Such insights may redeem contemplation for politics and ethics, but what about philosophy? Contemplative writings suggest that the divine exerts more than just a moral call upon us, but a speculative and ontological pressure as well. This is why contemplative literature is filled with accounts of noetic enlightenment or what the Spanish mystics of the sixteenth century called "intellectual visions." Consider Ignatius of Loyola:

Without having any vision he understood—knew—many matters both spiritual and pertaining to the Faith and the realm of letters and that with such clearness that they seemed utterly new to him. There is no possibility of setting out in detail everything he then understood. The most that he can say is that he was given so great an enlightening of mind that, if one were to put it together, all the helps he has received from God—and all the things he has learned, they would not be the equal of what he received in a single illumination.⁹³

Moreover, as Louis Dupré notes, earlier, less affective, and more impersonal contemplative accounts of the highest stages of divine union include even more articulated conceptual content than we find in Ignatius. Not only Ruusbroec and Teresa, but Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, and Dionysius himself include highly enunciated trinitarian theologies and metaphysics as essential parts of their systems.⁹⁴ Indeed, as we noted in the opening of this chapter, in the Christian tradition at least, contemplation and philosophy were born together. What we discover in the Christian contemplative tradition is a simultaneously mystical and philosophical path, an integral ascent that

93. Ignatius of Loyola, *Autobiography*, quoted in Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1960), 16. Quoted in George E. Ganss, ed., *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist, 1991), 81.

94. Although Dionysius, in particular, has often served as a foil for those who suspect the church's contemplatives of being more Platonic than Christian, even in his case, the charges simply cannot stand. On which, see Louis Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection: Excursions in the Phenomenology and Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 121. See also Alexander Golitzin, "Dionysius Areopagita: A Christian Mysticism?," *Pro Ecclesia* 12, no. 2 (2003): 161–212; idem, "'Suddenly, Christ': The Place of Negative Theology in the Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagite," in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard, *Religion and Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 8–37. See also Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (New York: Continuum, 1989).

culminates in the vision of God. The barrenness of contemplative silence is only the staging ground or preparation for the impact of God upon one's consciousness. This impact calls contemplatives beyond themselves, transforming them ontologically and noetically until their very identities become a reverberation, a musical harmony, or occult sympathy between the contemplative self and the divine self-giving. As Dupré writes, "The mind functions here in the different mode of being-with reality, rather than of reflecting upon it. . . . [It is] a unique connaturality—born of identity—between the mind and what could never be its 'object'. . . ."⁹⁵

I will explore the complicated relationship between epistemic speculation and contemplative transformation in later chapters, including the challenges this issues to many of our most axiomatic modern philosophical assumptions. For our present purposes, what matters is that in this *unio mystica* the contemplative receives (or, at least, believes she receives) here and now an obscure share in the beatific vision that is the end of general Christians hope, a sharing that is equally understood as a participation in the divine life. The crux of the matter for a contemplative philosophy of religion, I argue, is not whether *we* add a speculative supplement to our experience, as seems to be the issue for Katz and Forman, but is instead this problem of participation. So much is this the case that if the contemplative tradition is to be allowed a philosophic voice of its own, it will require philosophy of religion to engage in a creative retrieval of the concept of participation.

This shouldn't be surprising. In the conclusion of his study of Christian mysticism, Denys Turner, for example, argues that only a Neoplatonic (and therefore participatory) ontology finally sustains the contemplative's apophatic language and so allows it to function intelligibly.⁹⁶ Contemplative language and participatory metaphysics developed in a complex recursive relationship with one another throughout Western history.⁹⁷ This intertwined history is one of the chief appeals of a participatory turn within the philosophy of religion, particularly when dealing with the problem of contemplation, since the concept of participation already possesses a long and admirable pedigree within both the philosophic and contemplative fields. For over two millennia, Western writers have found the concept of participation crucial to the work of elucidating

95. Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection*, 122.

96. Cf. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

97. See, for example, Jacob H. Sherman, "A Genealogy of Participation," in *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, and Religious Studies*, ed. Jacob H. Sherman and Jorge N. Ferrer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 81–112.

and deepening their respective religious practices, communities, beliefs, and encounters, a fact that has led contemporary theologians as diverse as John Milbank, Kathryn Tanner, and Jürgen Moltmann to argue for a retrieval of participatory language in our own day.

When, therefore, I employ participation to make contemporary philosophical sense of contemplation, I am not importing an alien framework but developing and using a concept that emerges immanently from the semantic field of the Christian contemplative tradition itself. But neither is the concept of participation reducible to *religious* language alone, as if it belonged to theology *tout court*, for participation is also a properly philosophical concept. Participation is, therefore, something of a promiscuous concept able to move between the discourses of philosophy and theology, and to unsettle the chaste distinction between emic (insider) and etic (outsider) approaches to the philosophy of religion. Thus, for example, we find the first technical use of the term in Plato, who employed participation (*methexis*) as a philosophical concept in order to defend, clarify, and make sense of a world he perceived theologically as everywhere suspended and haunted by transcendence.⁹⁸

We need participation in order to give an account of contemplation. But there is more. As I have said, one of my goals in this book is not only to give a philosophical account of contemplation, but also to allow contemplation to pose questions for philosophy. In this regard, I should want to push Turner's conclusion one step further and argue that only contemplative life and practice sustains the intelligibility and rhetorical power of Neoplatonic and participatory ontologies: the two rise and fall together. Historically, the explanatory power of participatory language began to fail at precisely the point that contemplative traditions, once central to church and society, began to be marginalized. Seeds of this were already present in the divorce between monastic and school theology that began even in the twelfth century but the rupture became acute only in the developments of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.⁹⁹ The nominalism and voluntarism of this high scholastic period initiated a *de jure* severance of faith from reason, thereby foreclosing the possibility of an integrally conceptual and mystical path. It is arguable that this foreclosure itself inaugurated modern philosophy by preparing the way for the privatization of faith and the secularization of reason. What is beyond doubt is that much of the most celebrated contemporary philosophy of religion—both analytic and

98. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic–Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

99. For the early history of this separation, see Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*.

continental—stands self-consciously in line with these high scholastic rationalist traditions. Contemplative authors, however, previously rejected and subsequently resisted this move (as Louis Dupré, Henri de Lubac, and others have recognized) by continuing to employ the integrating concept of participation as a central category of their Christian thought and practice.¹⁰⁰ The contemplative tradition thus poses a challenge to philosophy of religion that points us beyond either fideism or ontotheology. But how might we respond to this challenge? Our first step might be to listen to those who responded before us, so with this in mind we turn our attention in the following chapter to the philosophical and contemplative work of Anselm of Canterbury.

100. See Louis Dupré, “Introduction to the 2000 Edition,” in Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroad, 1967).