

Crossing the Visible or Crossing it Out? Jean-Luc Marion’s Icon as Window into Heaven

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Jean-Luc Marion is often interpreted as a thinker of the purely invisible and apophatic, in tension with the rich forms of mediation found in Christian practice. I will challenge these assumptions through a close reading of one of Marion’s rare concrete examples, the “icon”— not his philosophical use of the term, but the holy image that initially inspired it. Marion defines the sacred image by its “transparency,” “self-effacement,” or “kenosis.” This seems to indicate that the icon must cancel itself out to make room for God, an iconoclastic attitude with troubling consequences for the believer who prays to the icon and for the rest of the finite world. By rigorously developing Marion’s understanding of this word “kenosis,” I argue that, counter to initial impressions, this account of the sacred image is deeply faithful to the essential aspects of the Byzantine icon understood as a “window into heaven.”

Keywords: Jean-Luc Marion, icon, idol, iconoclasm, painting, kenosis, window into heaven

IN his *Third Oration against the Iconoclasts* John Damascene declares, “Since the creation of the world the invisible things of God are clearly seen by means of images (εἰκόνας).”¹ He further explains:

Anyone would say that our inability immediately to direct our thoughts to contemplation of higher things makes it necessary that familiar everyday media be utilized to give suitable form to what is formless, and make visible what cannot be depicted, so that we are able to construct analogies. If therefore the Word of God, in providing for our every need, always presents to us what is intangible by clothing it with form, does it not

¹ John Damascene, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), Oration III.21; PG 1341a-b.

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accomplish this by making an image (εἰκονίζεῖν) using what is common to nature and so bringing within our reach that for which we long but are unable to see?

This passage reflects the privileged use of the word “icon” in the Christian tradition as a rich form of mediation, something that facilitates an encounter with the invisible God by engaging with all of our corporeal senses. Today the word is commonly associated with one such form of mediation in particular, the holy images cherished by the Eastern Christian tradition.

The same word has also been claimed for a now commonplace philosophical use. Although it took inspiration from the same patristic tradition, Jean-Luc Marion’s coinage of “icon” evokes for many readers not the “brilliant refreshment of a verdant meadow” as John Damascene’s icons did, but the barren desert landscape of a harshly apophatic invisible.² The term “icon” was originally meant to open a possible *conceptual* approach to God, in contrast to Nietzschean “idols,” which is Marion’s primary aim in *God without Being*. Although it is not his focus, it is clear from an attentive reading of this text that Marion also meant for this “icon” to extend to other approaches such as art and poetry.³ Yet this might be hard to envision upon a first reading of the texts themselves or the many critiques they have generated, critiques so omnipresent that they are almost banal: that Marion is a thinker of the invisible, the infinite, and the sublime and has nothing to do with the rich mediation of the Christian tradition.

Is this interpretation really so well founded? To be sure, Marion is rarely very elaborate in explicit and practical details. Yet it is worth paying close attention to the advice of Christina M. Gschwandtner: Marion’s *preference* for talking in abstract, paradoxical, or limit-case scenarios must not be confused with a *denial* of other possibilities.⁴ Following this strategy, might we better understand the implications of Marion’s thought on “icons” by bringing it down to a concrete example? In fact, Marion himself has given us a head start with the last two chapters of his *Crossing of the Visible*, where he describes what it means for a sacred image to serve as an “icon.”⁵

² Paraphrased from John Damascene, *On the Divine Images*, Florilegia to Oration 1, 39.

³ See Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 25–29.

⁴ See Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Degrees of Givenness: On Saturation in Jean-Luc Marion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014). This position is also confirmed by a close reading of Marion’s 2004 essay, “The Banality of Saturation,” included in *The Visible and Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 119–44.

⁵ See Jean-Luc Marion, *La croisée du visible* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), trans. James K. A. Smith as *The Crossing of the Visible* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University

Can this rare example from Marion of a rich form of mediation—from the Byzantine tradition he was inspired by no less!—help us to understand with greater concreteness what he means by speaking of the “icon” in a more general and conceptual sense?

For many readers, the answer is no. First of all, because for Marion, what makes an icon is not its visible likeness to the original, but the fact that it allows the invisible gaze of the infinite to transpire it. At least on an initial reading, this is odd: the way a sacred image mediates seems to have nothing to do with its unique features as a visual image. In Jodie McNeilly’s words, we seem to find here a “denial of the aesthetic approach in what appears to be an aesthetic-based undertaking.”⁶ Comparing Marion to the iconophile Fathers, Byzantine art historian Charles Barber concludes that Marion’s icon “becomes a vehicle by which we might be seen, but, ultimately, it does not permit us to see.”⁷ Emmanuel Falque echoes this, critiquing Marion’s icon for “doing away with the image.”⁸ Surely, a sacred image does *show* something, first of all the painted eyes which gaze upon the viewer, but with it the rest of the painting! The Byzantine icon, in particular, is a very rich aesthetic tradition coded with meaning and significance at every level, from its origins to the process of painting to its use in liturgical practice. Must we ignore all of this in favor of “an invisible gaze”? Or perhaps worse, as Peter Joseph Fritz fears: it seems that if these visible details distract us from the invisible, then Marion would have us discard them altogether, along with “all the other visible (historical) elements of Christianity.”⁹

When Marion does at last say something about what kind of actual visual image might serve as an icon, it only makes everything worse. Using nearly identical language in both key chapters of *The Crossing of the Visible*,

Press, 2004). Hereafter cited in English (CV), then French (CdV). Marion has also considered the icon in his early essay, “Fragments sur l’idole et l’icône,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 84, no. 4 (1979): 433–45, and a more recent essay, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen: Nicholas of Cusa’s Contribution in *De visione Dei*,” trans. Stephen E. Lewis, *The Journal of Religion* 96, no. 3 (July 2016): 305–31.

⁶ Jodie McNeilly, “The Moving Icon: Critically Seeking the Aesthetic in Marion and Finding a Phenomenological Alternative with Husserl,” in *Breached Horizons, the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Rachel Bath, Antonio Calcagno, Kathryn Lawson, and Steve G. Lofts (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018), 125.

⁷ Charles Barber, “Defacement,” *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 56 (2010): 115.

⁸ I am grateful to Kyle Kavanaugh for sharing with me an early draft of his translation of this text by Emmanuel Falque, “The All-Seeing: Fraternity and Vision of God in Nicholas of Cusa,” trans. Kyle H. Kavanaugh and Barnabas Aspray, *Modern Theology* 35, vol. 4 (October 2019): 787.

⁹ Peter Joseph Fritz, “Black Holes and Revelations: Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion on the Aesthetics of the Invisible,” *Modern Theology* 25, no. 3 (July 2009): 433.

Marion explains that in order to be suited for God's invisible revelation, an icon must "never [cease] to transgress itself."¹⁰ It "dulls" itself, and "effaces [*se défasse*] its own visibility in order to allow itself to be pierced by another gaze."¹¹ He concludes, "The icon, therefore, is derived from the kenosis of the image."¹² Based on passages like these, one could no longer claim that Marion is merely *indifferent* to the fate of the visible image of the icon. In this essay inspired by the ecumenical council that confirmed the importance of the icon, Marion seems to be suggesting large-scale iconoclasm!¹³

Anyone who finds this troubling is in good company. John Milbank will call it out bluntly: "Marion's account of the icon is in fact iconoclastic." That is, "Beauty does not mediate in its visibility the invisible, but rather forecloses a world of idols or of the merely visible and radically finite as reduced to our representing awareness."¹⁴ Charles Barber affirms this view, claiming that by undermining the visibility of the icon, Marion also undermines the humanity of Christ and "collapses the iconic economy envisaged by the iconophiles of Byzantium, and in doing so becomes an iconoclast."¹⁵ Graham Ward agrees in terms that are nearly as strong: Marion's "bypassing mediation pertains to Gnostic logic."¹⁶ Any icon seems to be "founded upon and produces fissures, ruptures and violence in creation. It works in and through dualisms, struggling to attain a point beyond them, a point beyond the phenomenality of the world."¹⁷ Ward interprets this moment of rupture as a matter of the "Barthian" connection Marion draws between the icon and the crucifixion, which according to Ward leads necessarily to Docetism, Nestorianism, or gnosticism. Essentially, it is a denial of the full truth of the

¹⁰ CV, 78/CdV, 139.

¹¹ CV, 60/CdV, 109.

¹² CV, 62, 86–87/CdV, 111, 152–53.

¹³ The latter of the chapters in question, "The Prototype and the Image," was originally written for a colloquium held at Collège de France to celebrate the 1200th anniversary of Nicaea II. F. Boespflug and N. Lossky, eds., *Nicée II, 787–1987: Douze siècles d'images religieuses* (Paris: Cerf, 1987).

¹⁴ John Milbank, "The Gift and the Mirror," in *Counter Experiences: Reading the Work of Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 272.

¹⁵ Barber, "Defacement," 107.

¹⁶ Graham Ward, "The Beauty of God," *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 52; see also Graham Ward, "The Theological Project of Jean-Luc Marion," in *Post-Secular Philosophy*, ed. Philip Blond (London: Routledge, 1998), 232; Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida and Marion on Modern Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 222.

¹⁷ Ward, "The Beauty of God," 49.

Incarnation by iconoclastically denying God's entry into the world.¹⁸ The icon serves as the sole exception from this idolatrous closure of visibility for Marion only because of its kenotic self-effacement.

The above concerns about the icon's mediation rightly overflow the single case of the image. This is true, first of all, because in phenomenology what is given in an image is always related to the one who sees it. Thus, Kathryn Tanner warns of the "competitive relationship"¹⁹ provoked by Marion in the way he correlates what is given and the one who receives it; the only "initiative" allowed a subject is "the refusal to have its own will," to "wholeheartedly submit to what givenness dictates."²⁰ The apparent passivity of this situation seems to be only heightened in the case of the icon, for not only is the subject emptied of all initiative, but so is the image, in order to make room for the "given" of God. As Marion says, we must pour ourselves out in reverence before it, empty ourselves of our usual epistemological assurance by the fulfillment of our intentions, and instead consent to be looked at by a gaze that we can never grasp or master. Does this not cancel us out too, now deprived of any possibility of intelligent response before an unworldly and invisible revelation that operates outside any visible imaging? Thus, we might suspect, with Joeri Schrijvers, that Marion reduces the viewer to an inert "object"²¹ for God, or agree with Richard Kearney that Marion has eliminated any place for our interpretation.²² Tamsin Jones similarly critiques Marion for cutting out the possibility of any kind of preparatory practice of reception,²³ and Christina

¹⁸ Ward, "The Beauty of God," 40–41n7, 49.

¹⁹ Kathryn Tanner, "Theology at the Limits of Phenomenology," in *Counter Experiences: Reading the Work of Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 224.

²⁰ Tanner, "Theology at the Limits of Phenomenology," 225.

²¹ See Joeri Schrijvers, "On Doing Theology 'After' Ontotheology: Notes on a French Debate," *New Blackfriars* 87 (2006): 313.

²² See Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 117n25; Richard Kearney, "A Dialogue with Jean-Luc Marion," *Philosophy Today* 48 (2004): 12–26; see also Adam Graves, "Before the Text: Ricoeur and the 'Theological Turn,'" *Studia Phaenomenologica* 13 (2013): 359–85; Shane MacKinley, *Jean-Luc Marion, Saturated Phenomena, and Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), takes this argument to a questionable extreme, whereas Gschwandtner shows a more measured criticism in *Degrees of Givenness*.

²³ See Tamsin Jones, *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion: Apparent Darkness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 109–10, 118, 165; see also Gschwandtner, *Degrees of Givenness*, 157–59.

M. Gschwandtner has repeatedly called Marion into question for ignoring the community of believers.²⁴

Further, as is especially emphasized by Milbank, Ward, and Tanner, such iconoclastic logic reaches far beyond a problematic correlation of image and viewer and the corresponding status of the person at prayer: if a finite thing must undermine itself to “make room” for God, we must assume the same logic applies to all other finite things in their relation to God. At its best, we might think that it is simply a matter of refusing excellence to “diminish” or “dilute” oneself: making sacred art mediocre, not beautiful, to be more fitting for God’s presence; a person refusing to cultivate any worldly excellence or talent so God can miraculously shine through. But as “transparency” is the very negation of an image, which by definition must appear (even badly), this tips the balance toward an even more severe interpretation: that not only is the *excellence* of activity threatened, but *any finite activity at all* is rendered impossible when we come before God. Marion seems to require the icon to actively transgress any limit that would prevent the infinite from revealing itself through it—does this not thereby result in the destruction of its very finitude, in short, its very self? We could only conclude that by this logic, all created things, including we ourselves, would share the same fate.

Thus, all things would be discardable before the glory of the original; the world of visibility—all finite things—would be definitively closed to God except through negation and self-destruction.²⁵ A study of Marion’s particular example of mediation would then not defend, but only confirm all the more his stance as a sublime, invisible, infinite thinker disinterested and even hostile to the richly mediated lived reality of Christian history, practice, and tradition.

I contend here, however, that these critiques are *not* an accurate reading of Marion and that the only iconoclasm here is the one that has been smuggled in through assumptions we bring to his texts. In fact, if we read the text very closely, we can see that Marion’s work on the “icon” *actually lays the ground for a richer theological understanding of iconic mediation*. To demonstrate this, (1) I will first of all explain why it is an advantage that Marion refuses to define a sacred image as a visual representation. (2) I will then explain what Marion means when he says the image must “efface itself.”

²⁴ Gschwandtner has especially emphasized this point in a number of places, from early articles, “Praise—Pure and Personal? Jean-Luc Marion’s Phenomenologies of Prayer,” in *Phenomenology of Prayer*, ed. B. E. Benson and N. Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, 168–81), to more recent ones such as, “Marion’s Spirituality of Adoration and Its Implications for a Phenomenology of Religion,” in *Breached Horizons*, 205–07.

²⁵ See Milbank, “The Gift and the Mirror,” 307–08.

The key to understanding Marion's view here is the term "kenosis," which Marion has illustrated at a conceptual level in a recent article. By extending it to the particular and concrete case of the image, I will show that Marion does not, in fact, warrant anyone's self-destruction, but instead proposes something very compatible with the richly mediated religious tradition he takes inspiration from. (3) I conclude with a model for understanding Marion's "icon," in fact, the very term used so often by Orthodox Christians to describe their own holy icons: a "window" into heaven.

Paradox 1: An Image Not Defined by Visibility

Paintings, Icons, and Sacred Images

Marion grants as a starting point the definition of St. John Damascene that icons are "types of that which has no type and figures of what is most without figures" (τῶν ἀτυπώτων οἱ τύποι, καὶ τὰ σχήματα τῶν ἀσχηματίστων).²⁶ The key question is *how*? In what manner is this relation of type to mysterious prototype accomplished? The most obvious response would be that the icon can be defined as a representation of Christ, a visual copy of his likeness. Marion rejects this, however, as a primary definition of what the icon is.

For, he argues, to define the icon's relation to its prototype through any form of likeness of appearing or mimesis will introduce a logic of competition between original and image. Suppose we place the weight on the original over the image that refers to it. This is the approach of dogmatic metaphysics of Plato and Hegel, claims Marion, who each state in their own ways that the artworks are only temporary mediating filters between the mind and intelligible being.²⁷ The image may continue to retain importance, despite this, as a "concession" to our "weakness" as sensible creatures, but these terms indicate that the mediation bears an ineradicable trace of iconoclasm: whatever is possible for us now, it would be *better* to get beyond the image to have the invisible intelligible more directly.

The alternative to this first approach of mimetic logic is to start instead by prioritizing the type over the prototype. In the tradition of Nietzschean nihilism, the image outshines and distracts from whatever original it aims at, to the point that there need be no original at all.²⁸ Although metaphysics

²⁶ John Damascene, *On the Divine Images*, Oration 1.11; PG 94 1241b.

²⁷ CV, 80/CdV, 142–43.

²⁸ CV, 80/CdV, 142–43. See also Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 58. See Nietzsche's notebook entry "end of 1870–April 1871"

at least understood the negated image to be dependent on an inaccessible transcendent origin, here the image is linked to nothing except the spectator who sees it.²⁹ With an eye to the entertainment industry, Marion observes that when the image is solely governed by the conditions of our reception of it, these conditions, too, guide the production of images. That is, without any transcendental truth to point to, the only function of images is to please us, to satisfy our desire to see. The path of prioritizing image over original leads to “self-idolatry.”

At least on an initial reading, the grounds of this rejection of visual likeness is odd. Why would Marion waste his time with such extreme straw-man positions? After all, phenomenology has a rich understanding of aesthetics and figurative art developed by Heidegger, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty, which understands the painting not as a competition but a manifestation that brings the original to presence in a new and vivid self-showing. Marion himself takes up a similar approach to art in his 2014 book on the realist painter Courbet, which may tempt us to rethink Marion’s positions on icons. Gone are these dualities, and instead Marion recounts the power of a painting to show the real thing more fully, even to the point of awarding it the title of “*acheiropoietos*” or “not made by hands.”³⁰ This term is traditionally reserved for icons arising by divine intervention like the Mandylion or the Image of Edessa, the image that appeared on a cloth Christ touched to his face.³¹ Marion uses it to indicate that the painter (here, Cézanne) is so far from the self-replicating idolatry of nihilism that his painting serves as a quasi-miraculous occasion for the original thing to show itself in its truth. Couldn’t this be the grounds for a new account of the visibility of the icon? No, for here again, Marion immediately dashes any such hopes. In the same moment he grants Cézanne’s work the highest title of iconography, he rules it out as a potential icon. Why has Marion consistently made such an extreme differentiation between art and icons?

Despite its cynicism, the nihilistic approach to mimesis in fact recognizes something that phenomenology also affirms: the relation of the painting and its original is essentially linked to the one who takes it up, and whoever takes it up has only a finite intentionality, or conceptual aim.³² In fact, the image’s

in vol. 3/3 of *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978), 207.

²⁹ CV, 81/CdV, 143.

³⁰ See Jean-Luc Marion, *Courbet, ou la peinture à l’œil* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014), 194–95.

³¹ See Mark Guscini, *Image of Edessa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009) for variants on this Eastern Christian analogue to the Western veil of Veronica story.

³² Marion explains this point most notably in CV; see also Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Towards a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford

power will reach its maximum in “the first visible that our gaze can aim at being filled by” and “the last visible it can support without failing.”³³ That is, a visible that stretches our limits just enough to dazzle us, but not enough to subject us to uncomfortable challenges. This maximum is precisely what Marion calls an “idol,” and its effectiveness is only as good as the measure of the viewer’s understanding. Even if we were to bypass Marion’s straw-man account of mimesis, to define the icon by what appears still means to define it against the reach of our gaze and the scope of our desire, yielding only a mirror image of our finite selves. This is fine for a painting, but it will not be enough to capture the incomprehensible, uncircumscribable God.³⁴

A second reason furthers this point. Marion states it clearly in refusing to let Cézanne’s paintings be called icons: “What is missing is not so much the glory of God (which bathes painted creation) nor that God should take a face in visibility (Christ has definitively given his invisible face), but *the very possibility of painting a face.*”³⁵ This response at first seems patently false, as well as a non sequitur. Obviously, one can re-create with paint the visible features of the human face; painters have done this for millennia! But what is important for Marion, following Levinas, is that one cannot paint what is most essential about human appearing: the counter-gaze, or “counter-intentionality.” To see

University Press, 2002); Marion, *In Excess*; and Jean-Luc Marion, “What We See and What Appears,” trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner, in *Idol Anxiety*, ed. Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 152–68.

³³ CV, 67/CdV, 121. See also Marion, *God Without Being*, 9–11. But note the development of this term: in Marion’s early work, the “idol” is spoken of as an inappropriate way of speaking about God; by CV, it is considered an appropriate way to speak about aesthetics.

³⁴ There is much more to say here about Marion’s particular ideas on aesthetics and how the visible image relates to different levels of “invisibility,” but my interest is strictly in the kind of image that can serve as an icon; for more discussion on these questions, see Cristian Ciocan, “Entre visible et invisible: les paradigmes de ‘image’ chez Jean-Luc Marion,” in *Jean-Luc Marion: Cartésianisme, phénoménologie, théologie: actes du colloque international, les 19 et 20 mars 2010 à Budapest*, ed. Sylvain Camilleri and Adam Takacs (Budapest, Hungary: l’Institut français de Budapest, 2010), 93–113. Other helpful sources include Fritz, “Black Holes,” Gschwandtner, “Art and the Artist,” in *Degrees of Givenness*, and Brett David Potter, “Image and Kenosis: Assessing Jean-Luc Marion’s Contribution to a Postmetaphysical Theological Aesthetics,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79, no. 1-2 (2018): 60–79.

³⁵ Marion, *Courbet, ou la peinture à l’œil*, 195–96, translation and emphasis mine. Jean-Yves Lacoste raised this same problem of the visibility of the face with respect to painted icons as well, in his early article, “Visages: Paradoxe et gloire,” *La Revue Thomiste* 35, no. 4 (Oct-Dec 1985): 561–606.

a painting is to see a depthless “facade,” whereas to encounter a “face” is to find oneself seen.³⁶ This is why Marion says that even the best truth-manifesting paintings cannot be “icons” and echoes Rothko’s reluctance to do “violence” to the human form by “crushing it” into the mere visibility of the canvas.³⁷ The name Marion gives to this unique phenomenological structure of “counter-intentionality” is the “icon.”³⁸ Whether used for an encounter with the Divine (as in his early work) or expanded to a human other (as in his middle work), Marion’s “icon” shares this same basic structure throughout his corpus: the exceeding of my horizon and reversal of my initiative by the counter-intentionality of another person.

In Marion’s philosophy, the Byzantine icon thus has a strange status. The icon is a painting and can even be an aesthetic masterpiece. The icons of Rublev or Theophanes the Greek can be experienced as “idols,” in the sense that they may dazzle us by reaching maximum visibility for our gazes. When we come to the icon *as an “icon,”* however, we are not primarily interested in the dazzlingly beautiful artwork or the stylistic representation of painted eyes. The icon in its truest use is not encountered like a painting at all, but like a person. We come before it to enter more deeply into the real and living relation with the God who truly sees us, a relation that we could not attain by our finite human aim and yet has nevertheless always already been offered to us. This is why possibility of moving from “the visible to the invisible” is not a function of the kind of image we see, but a path that opens only through prayer or veneration.³⁹ Simply put, prayer is “letting oneself be seen.”⁴⁰ What makes an image an icon is not that I see the visible likeness of Christ, but that through it I recognize that Christ sees

³⁶ See Marion, *In Excess*, 76–77.

³⁷ Marion, *In Excess*, 75–76; in *Being Given*, 267, Marion suggests that “the portraits painted by Cézanne or Picasso close men’s faces by leading them back to mineral or animal nature.”

³⁸ Marion first discusses these terms in *Being Given*, 232–33, and further develops them in *In Excess*, 104–27. Both texts develop the idea of an “icon” as the “saturated phenomenon,” that is, a phenomenon whose intuition exceeds our intentional grasp and thus overturns objective, conceptual mastery. The “idol” as a dazzling aesthetic experience is another variety of saturation. This precise formulation of saturation, however, is not yet present in CV. Written between 1985 and 1987 and first published in 1991, CV stands as a midpoint between Marion’s earlier work, where the “icon” refers to a way of God’s appearing (especially *L’idole et distance*, 1977, and *Dieu sans l’être*, 1982), and his later phenomenological breakthrough, notably in *Étant donné*, first published in 1997.

³⁹ CV, 75/CdV, 133.

⁴⁰ CV, 65/CdV, 115.

me.⁴¹ The purpose of the icon is not to serve as an aesthetic experience, but to be a “site of reciprocal transition,” an “instrument of communion.”⁴²

Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic Accounts of Icons

Now that we understand why Marion wants to detach the “icon” function from the function of a painting, we can begin to understand how this offers an advantage over those who define the icon exclusively on the plane of aesthetics. For example, Emmanuel Falque argues that Nicholas of Cusa is speaking of a painting, and *not* an icon, in his *De visione Dei*. To support this claim, Falque names several characteristics of the image described that do not seem to match Byzantine painting.⁴³ It is tempting to challenge the accuracy of Falque’s assumptions about Byzantine art; the particular characteristics he isolates are neither universal within this aesthetic tradition nor unique to it.⁴⁴ Yet there is a far greater concern: Falque’s approach demonstrates that he defines an icon by its visible characteristics alone. Essentially, this would make the icon merely a special genre of painting among others, a finite and material human artifact. This is not unlike the suggestion that Christians cherish the Scriptures because of the particular genres of literature there. In other words, Falque fails to distinguish between the phenomenality of the *visible image*, which is still bound to the finite realm of the spectator’s capacities, and the *phenomenality of God’s self-showing*, which comes in the form of an invitation to communion, from an origin beyond our capacity to pin it down. Phenomenologically speaking, a purely aesthetic

⁴¹ CV, 83–84/CdV, 147–49.

⁴² CV, 86/CdV, 152.

⁴³ Emmanuel Falque, “The All-Seeing,” 760–87.

⁴⁴ Falque never lays out these criteria clearly or systematically, as his strategy is to identify elements of Cusa’s description that do not accurately fit a Byzantine icon (by Falque’s own reckoning—his definition does not seem to be based upon any particular theological or aesthetic authority). His primary points of contention are as follows: any icon (a) *must be a direct representation of Christ himself*—thus ignoring the icons of saints, angels, and major events from Scripture or church history; (b) *must be omnivoyant*—to his credit, Falque rightly points out that omnivoyance is found in other aesthetic traditions as well, but he does not recognize that not all Byzantine icons possess it; (c) *must make the invisible visible by an inverse perspective that exclusively pulls us toward it, completely unsettling our subjectivity*—but inverse perspective is only one among several perspective strategies to create a visual relation in Byzantine icons; (d) *must not be placed on walls outside strict ecclesial settings*—to me, the most perplexing of Falque’s claims. Even if we ignore the fact that this is inaccurate (Byzantine icons have often been placed on walls outside churches, including the famous Chalke gate!), it seems very odd to claim that the icon’s identity would be negated simply because of where a group of Roman Catholic monks decide to place it.

“icon,” however theologically informed, remains a self-referencing “idol.” To recognize what makes icons unique requires us to recognize the gap between what appears to me and what arrives from beyond the image, and the communion that results. By his efforts to “save” the visual uniqueness of the Byzantine icon, Falque has in fact neutralized what makes it so important to the Byzantine tradition in the first place.

A more nuanced approach to the aesthetics of the icon begins to bridge this gap, moving beyond visibility to recognize the icon as a site of ruptures, tensions, and paradoxes between what appears and what does not. This is a first step toward exiting the idolatry of visibility. Georges Didi-Huberman for example discusses the icon’s incompatible paradoxes of extreme spiritual subtlety and material weight,⁴⁵ which resembles Archimandrite Vasileios’ description of the icon’s paradox of “humility and magnificence.”⁴⁶ Similarly, Jean-Luc Nancy will say that the sacred is precisely what we cannot touch, and that by preserving distance, a painting does not hide the sacred but is precisely the way that the sacred can “cross” to us.⁴⁷ C. A. Tsakiridou defines the icon’s aesthetic by “*enargeia*” or “liveliness,” which pierces through a static, objective gaze and engages the viewer in a dynamic interaction.⁴⁸ And, sounding almost like Marion, Maximos Constas describes ways that icons disrupt the contemporary world of superficial visibles, “using images to overthrow the power of images, the icon seeks to disrupt habituated ways of seeing.”⁴⁹ These are all fruitful and nuanced ways to consider sacred images and the unique visual aesthetic of Byzantine art and can serve as a first step to understanding iconicity. Yet, if we *limit* the conversation to this, we are still treating the icon as a matter of aesthetic technique, simply a more complicated one.

Whether we try to posit a duality of “inherently secular images” versus “inherently spiritual images” (Falque), classify the icon primarily as a

⁴⁵ See Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’image ouverte: Motifs d’incarnation dans les arts visuels* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2007); Georges Didi-Huberman, “Les théologies entre l’idole et l’icone.” *Encyclopédia Universalis-Corpus*, vol. 3 (Paris: Encyclopaedia Universalis, 1989), 65–73.

⁴⁶ Archimandrite Vasileios of Stavronikita, *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church*, trans. Elizabeth Briere (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 84.

⁴⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 2–4.

⁴⁸ C. A. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity: Orthodox Theology and the Aesthetics of the Christian Image*. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 7.

⁴⁹ Maximos Constas, *The Art of Seeing: Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography* (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2014), 22.

special kind of paradoxical aesthetics (Tsakiridou, McNeilly), or render all art essentially spiritual (Didi-Huberman, Nancy), Marion would argue that we have not really arrived at what makes the icon unique. We need more than an opposition of a “visibility” against “invisibility” understood in its literal sense, of what does or doesn’t register for the eyes; and even more than an extension of “visibility” and “invisibility” to what can fall within one’s intentional aim and what cannot. To truly understand the meaning of an “icon” (including but not limited to a Byzantine one) requires taking the step that Marion has articulated in the phenomenological language of counter-intentionality. The icon is for communion in prayer (as indeed authors like Conostas will ultimately agree).

Thus, the importance of Marion’s position is precisely what initially seemed so problematic: *that he refuses to allow the mediating element itself to be the point of what the icon is*. This does not mean that the icon cannot have a richly designed aesthetic style, but that aesthetics is always secondary. The tradition of Byzantine icons is not cherished primarily as a form of representation, but as a way of praying or entering into a closer relation with God. Certainly, the icon is notable in its aesthetic devices; the ever-changing color of gold, for example, reminds us that Divine activity cannot be grasped or absorbed into any human color spectrum, while inverse perspective places the icon’s vanishing point in the heart of the viewer who comes before it. Yet the primary purpose of its particular aesthetic devices is directing us to relation, at recognizing God’s gaze upon us. This alone can single out the icon and what it means to those who pray to it in its truly unique phenomenality.

Yet we are also left with a question: *What remains of the visible image?* If the icon is defined by the invisible counter-gaze, which requires my prayerful acceptance of it, we might wonder if we can say anything about it at all. Does it not matter that an icon portrays a face that seems to have a visual likeness to Christ or his mother? Would one even need an image at all to have an “icon”? As Christopher Denny suggests, Marion’s move from aesthetics to communion seems to make this “a secondary issue, perhaps even a non-issue.”⁵⁰ Marion gives us very little on this point, and what he offers is mostly negative: seeing a painted face is *not* enough to show us the gaze of God. Yet, Marion does eventually give us some hints of his positive requirements for a particular image to serve as an icon, and on an initial reading they lead us into potentially serious problems.

⁵⁰ Christopher Denny, “Iconoclasm, Byzantine and Postmodern: Implications for Contemporary Theological Anthropology,” *Horizons* 36, vol. 2 (Fall 2009): 202–03.

Paradox 2: An Image That Effaces Itself

The Icon and the Cross

I have already mentioned some of the alarming phrases Marion uses to describe the activity of the image functioning as an “icon” in the sense that he means it. Let us examine one of the key passages at greater length:

Since the icon is defined by a second gaze that envisages the first, the visible image is no longer a screen; on the contrary, it permits itself to be transpierced; but two gazes cross there. Thus the visible surface must, paradoxically, efface itself, or at least efface within it every opacity that would obfuscate the crossing of gazes [*la croisée des regards*]: the icon *dulls* the image in it, in order to there prevent any self-sufficiency, autonomy, or self-affirmation. The icon inverts the modern logic of the image: far from claiming its equivalence with the thing while flaunting itself in glory, instead it removes the prestige of the visible from its face (*elle démaquille sa face des prestiges du visible*), in order to effectively render it an imperceptible transparency, translucent for the counter-gaze. The icon does not expect one to see it, but rather gives itself so that one might see or permit oneself to see through it.⁵¹

This leads to the conclusion, “The icon, therefore, is derived from the kenosis of the image.”⁵² The term “kenosis” is of course taken from the scriptural hymn of Philippians 2, where Christ, though Divine, ἐκένωσεν, “emptied” himself, or “poured out” of himself by taking human form in the Incarnation, even to the point of death.

Marion will use this term to relate the icon to the cross, furthering our cause for concern. For Marion, the cross is an icon *par excellence*: image and cross are both types that bear the same relation to the prototype, which is “the holiness of the Holy.” If neither icon nor cross functions by visible imitation, this is particularly evident in the latter. Marion says this not for the obvious reasons (that the cross gives a symbol rather than a human figure), but because the cross symbolizes an event where the disjunction between the visible world and the glory of God is at its greatest possible height. Marion associates this disjunction with a “mark” of the human rejection of God’s advance. The cross thus appears “not [as] a sacred image imitating the divine ... but the imprint paradoxically received by the invisible in the manifest wound that the invisible imposes on it.” In other words, we recognize the Holy One on the cross only by seeing the marks of violence left by our refusal of it. In a few dense and cryptic sentences, this relation also is

⁵¹ CV, 60–61/CdV, 109. Unless otherwise noted, I will be citing from Smith’s English translation as it stands, apart from an occasional parenthetical insertion of the original French.

⁵² CV, 62/CdV, 111.

extended to justify the icon: “Just as Thomas recognized his Lord in the very type [τύπος] that offered the trace of the nails, so also the faithful can recognize their Lord in the visible types that are drawn by artists.”⁵³ Thus, just like the kenosis of Christ on the cross, the image must empty itself to reveal God: “The image extricates itself from idolatry by constantly destroying the screen of its visibility, in order to become impoverished, as the pure sign of that which marks it.”⁵⁴ As we see Christ’s kenotic love in the wounds of his crucifixion, so we will recognize Christ’s love only in an impoverished, self-effacing image.

Graham Ward, as I have mentioned above, critiques Marion’s appeal to the crucifixion as a “Barthian” rupture.⁵⁵ In fact, he overlooks Marion’s source, which was neither invented nor of Barthian origin; it was cited directly from dogmatic justification of iconophilia, the Horos of the Second Council of Nicaea:

We decree with full precision and care that, like the figure of the honored and life-giving cross (παραπλησίως τῷ τύπῳ τοῦ ... σταυροῦ), the revered and holy images, whether painted or made of mosaic or of other suitable material, are to be exposed (ἀνατίθεσθαι, *proponere*) in the holy Churches of God.⁵⁶

As Marion argues, the Greek “παραπλησίως” here is not so much a question of being “similar” or “like,” as the standard English translation has it (which would lead us back to problems of mimesis), but should be translated as an “approximation” or “approach.”⁵⁷ For like the icon, the cross is not holy because of what it *shows*, but because of *how* it approaches the prototype. That is, the cross is not holy because of what is visibly available, but because it gives itself “with such little reservation that the immediate radiance (*éclat*) of its glory is thereby abandoned.”⁵⁸

⁵³ CV, 75/CdV, 133.

⁵⁴ CV, 86–87/CdV, 152–53.

⁵⁵ See Ward, “The Beauty of God,” 40–41n7, 49.

⁵⁶ I cite here the English translation of the original Greek found in Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 1:135–36. Marion repeats these words on CV, 68/CdV, 123, following C. von Schönborn’s French translation in *L’icône du Christ* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1976), 143, and adds in the original Greek phrases, which I have included here. Note that contrary to Marion’s citation, the text is indeed from the Horos and not the canons, and can be found in Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, ed. XXXVI (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), n600. The chapter in question, once again, was originally written for a colloquium on Nicaea II.

⁵⁷ CV, 69–70/CdV, 124–25.

⁵⁸ CV, 73/CdV, 130–31, translation modified.

The authoritative source for Marion's comparison of icon and cross does not necessarily mitigate Ward's critique, for while Marion takes the words of the iconophile council seriously, he neglects their historical context. This places him uncomfortably close to the camp of the enemy. The iconoclasts of the eighth century had rejected images of Christ, fearing that a visible image would be a liar, as it purported to show the invisible, infinite God who could not be circumscribed in finite line and color. Yet they were strongly devoted to the cross, which was a sign and could appropriately symbolize Christ without showing too much.⁵⁹ By setting the veneration of icons parallel to the veneration of the cross, Nicaea II was simply securing icons a place alongside a practice undisputed by both iconophile and iconoclast Christians. Passing over this context, Marion interprets these words with a theological weight they were not meant to carry. Instead of a pragmatic confirmation of two practices, Marion makes crucifixion essential to the definition of what the icon is and why we venerate it, which leads to such troubling results of the image effacing itself. His position is not exactly the same as the iconoclasts, but it is also quite different from the Church Fathers who find the theological justification for an icon through the Incarnation.⁶⁰

Refining the Term "Kenosis"

Despite this unquestionably violent rhetoric and his uncomfortable proximity to the historical iconoclasts, however, Marion actually says very little about what any of this *means* for the image in the concrete. He even acknowledges as much: "It remains to be seen how the theological paradigm of a kenosis of the image translates into aesthetic principles."⁶¹ And when we pay attention to the suggestions Marion gives, they indicate perhaps his position here is not as harsh as it seems: he admits as kenotic images the paintings of Rembrandt and Caravaggio, as well as the play of light and shadow in Gothic domes, all of which bring us to the mystery of the unseen, rather than merely presenting something wholly visible.⁶² Marion clearly does not intend for his position to be anything like iconoclasm or the undermining

⁵⁹ See Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), esp. chap. 3–4.

⁶⁰ In short, Marion seems to be disregarding the visible image, while the iconoclasts want to destroy it. The iconoclasts are still operating in a mimetic mode, where the visible is in competition with the invisible, intensified by their very narrow and totalizing view of the image. Marion leaves the mimetic plane, as we have seen, and thus the visible neither effects iconicity nor prevents it.

⁶¹ CV, 62/CdV, 111.

⁶² CV, 63/CdV, 112–13.

of sacred art as such. This invites us to take a closer look at his claims here. Is there any way to reconcile these very reasonable examples with his apparently extreme anti-aesthetic stance?

Setting aside the poetic imagery of transparency and self-effacement, let us instead focus on the operative term behind it: “kenosis.” As Tamsin Jones explains, Marion’s earlier work often uses the term “distance” to speak about “the *kenosis* of God” that is, “the withdrawal of God at the very heart of God’s self-revelation ... [which] evokes a response of love and relationality.”⁶³ But Marion does not speak about it at great length until his 2015 essay in *Communio*, “À partir de la Trinité.”⁶⁴ I will first explore what Marion means here by the kenosis of Christ, and then transpose it to the activity of the icon.

Kenosis of Christ

Philippians 2:6–11 (NABRE) states that Jesus, Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped (ἀρπαγμόν). Rather, he emptied (ἐκένωσε) himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness, and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The key to this passage, according to Marion, is not the word “kenosis” in itself, but the contrast set up between “emptying” (κενόω) and “grasping” (ἀρπάζω), which mark two different modes of relation to God. As Marion observes, variants of the latter are used throughout the Scriptures, in contexts of robbery, rape, and spoil.⁶⁵ Ultimately, the term designates what one “seizes with violence in order to possess it by force, and to keep it in this possession as long as one has the power to do so.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Tamsin Jones, “Dionysius in Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Jean-Luc Marion,” *Modern Theology* 24, vol. 4 (October 2008): 749; see also Andrew Prevot, *Thinking Prayer: Theology and Spirituality amid the Crisis of Modernity* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2015), which discusses at greater length the relationship between Marion and Balthasar, and Brett David Potter, “Image and Kenosis,” which focuses on the influence of Balthasar on Marion’s account of art.

⁶⁴ See Jean-Luc Marion, “À partir de la Trinité,” *Communio* 40, no. 6 (2015): 23–38. It is worth noting that the core insights of this article have been taken up at several key moments of Marion’s *D’ailleurs, la révélation* (Paris: Grasset, 2020). I will nevertheless focus here on the 2015 text which is directly centered on this problematic.

⁶⁵ Marion, “À partir de la Trinité,” 27–28.

⁶⁶ Marion, “À partir de la Trinité,” 28.

Christ was equal to God. The kenotic hymn affirms this. But as Marion argues, the question is not of knowing *whether* he was equal with God. The question is understanding *how*.⁶⁷ The Pharisees assume the only way to gain the rank of divinity is to grasp it with violent force, just as they seized as a right their status as children of Abraham (John 8:33, 40, 55). The disciples, too, try to grasp the privilege of sitting on his right and on his left (Matt 20:20–21) and to earn the title of the “greatest” (Mark 9:33–34). But Christ “did not count equality with God something to be *grasped*” (Phil 2:6). Jesus continually counters the idolatrous logic that seeks to grasp or master God: the greatest must make themselves the servants, for the kingdom of God is not gained by possession, but dispossession. It is not an accident, as Marion points out, that everywhere else it appears in the Scriptures the verb “*κενῶω*” means a “radical failure.”⁶⁸ The kenotic attitude is one that does not attempt to earn, claim, or possess a relation to God, but like the one who loses his life to save it (Luke 9:24), it wholly abandons oneself to receive whatever relationship the Father would give. Thus, Jesus’ equality with God is not something he earns by saving himself and establishing his glory, but something given in his perfect abandonment to the Father, even unto death. In fact, this total self-emptying is precisely what manifests the perfection of his relation to the Father as the Son. Kenosis, first of all, is a *kind of relation to God*, one open to receive what the Father gives, rather than attempting to seize it violently.

Building on this, Marion emphasizes that it is a mistake to locate kenosis primarily in the event of the crucifixion, whereby Christ makes a choice to empty himself of his divine life and power to the agony of a violent death. This would lead to the theologically troubling consequences of either removing Jesus in his negation from his divinity or putting such negation of life in the heart of the Trinitarian God.⁶⁹ But understood as the way Christ already relates to the Father, kenosis becomes simply the ultimate manifestation of Trinitarian life:⁷⁰ through the total abandonment of the Son to the Father, the Son receives the Father’s absolute self-gift, in the Spirit. The result of this is that the kenosis of the crucifixion is not a deep, dark wound in the heart of these loving Trinitarian relations, it is the heart of these loving Trinitarian relations introduced into the world’s darkest, deepest wounds of

⁶⁷ Marion, “À partir de la Trinité.”

⁶⁸ Marion, “À partir de la Trinité,” 23; my emphasis.

⁶⁹ Marion, “À partir de la Trinité,” 25–26.

⁷⁰ Marion, “À partir de la Trinité,” 33. This is hinted at in CV, but in a few lines that are very dense and cryptic; see CV, 84–85/CdV, 148–50.

sin. Kenosis is not self-destruction, but simply *the way that God is*: as loving self-gift.

There is an apparent destruction associated with kenosis. The force of this violence is not from the kenosis itself, but *from the idolatrous refusal of kenosis*, the opposing attitude of possession that tries to grasp infinite Trinitarian love. “Crucify him!” was our own command; God has not demanded anyone’s evisceration. Yet even if kenosis is not defined by the cross, we might still say that the cross is the clearest manifestation of it, at least for those who have eyes to see it, as the kenotic hymn declares. It demonstrates the extent of Christ’s abandonment to the Father, in a way farthest outside of any patterns of worldly possession, this gift of himself without reservation into the hands of those who hated him, even to the point of being “a worm and no man,” unrecognizable in his suffering (Ps 22:6). Yet, for Christ, the relation of dispossession is not a lessening of who he is, but the truest expression of who he is as the Son of the Father.⁷¹ It is *because* of the kenotic love that accepts obedience unto death that Christ also appears in glory in the Transfiguration and Resurrection. Such kenosis is one and the same, separated in appearance only in the prism of a world torn by idolatry.

Kenosis of the Image

This same polarity of possession or dispossession is strongly at play in the icon, appearing on almost every page of *The Crossing of the Visible*. The kenotic, dispossessive image is never set in contrast with art as such, but with “the modern tyranny of the image,” which bombards us daily with images manufactured to manipulate us, to captivate our attention by giving us exactly what we want to see, and to train us what to desire.⁷² Blockbusters, pop idols, advertising, clickbait, twitter memes, pornography, and reality television all provide an easy high of stimulation to our inert, addicted gaze.⁷³ We can imagine what short work these kinds of images might make of a divine revelation: whatever could overwhelm us with special effects, cloying emotion, or miraculous drama. They would aim to put the Divine on call for our viewing pleasure, in an appearing that would confirm in itself, without doubt, effort, or struggle, the immediate content of the God we always expected to see.

It is in contrast to this kind of image that Marion discusses the “self-effacement” of the icon. The icon does *not* attempt to grasp revelation, to overwhelm the viewer with a Divine experience initiated by the sole

⁷¹ Marion, “À partir de la Trinité,” 36.

⁷² CV, 58/CdV, 104.

⁷³ See for example CV, 46–54, 81–83/CdV, 85–98, 147–50.

impact of its visible power. Rather, an icon must allow its viewer the space to recognize a relation to God that is freely offered and must be consented to freely. This “transparency” or “self-effacement” is thus not a refusal of *visibility as such*, but simply the refusal to be like the rest of these possessive visibles that would purport to conjure and contain God as immediately accessible.⁷⁴ This is clearer when we read beyond the most extreme statements that have been targeted by critics. Although Marion twice says the icon “dulls” itself, at least once, he immediately qualifies this statement: the icon in fact must dull *whatever in it would give the impression of self-sufficiency or autonomy*, whatever would hinder the communion between the believer and the God she adores by focusing the visibility and glory on itself. Just as Christ did not refuse any equality with God, but specifically refused an equality gained by possessive force, the “aesthetic asceticism”⁷⁵ of the icon does not refuse appearing as such, but only “whatever opacity would obfuscate the crossing of gazes,” the communion of the believer and the Divine.⁷⁶

This helps us to say more concretely what becomes of the visible image. If we adopt the mimetic model, and rank appearances based on their ability to dazzle and delight, we would conclude that idols are beautiful, whereas icons must be ugly and unpleasant. But this holds only if we are still clinging to the idolatrous assumption that beautiful or desirable images can *only* be defined by manipulation. If we follow Marion’s suggestion and abandon the mimetic paradigm that places dazzling as the be-all and end-all of images, we are freed from such a conclusion. Beauty is certainly captivating to attention, but that does not necessarily mean possessive and self-referential. A beautiful image often leaves space for what lies beyond it, and thus could be fitting for an icon. And ugliness can sometimes be totalizing, false, and self-confirming, thus serving as an idol. So there is no need to rule out images that are beautiful or striking or even delightful in appearance from being icons, only images that claim *self-sufficiency* of appearance. Once again, Marion does not want to destroy the image but to liberate us from the conceptual problems that come from placing too much importance in the aesthetics alone: an image is suitable as an icon if it makes its relation to God clear, that is, if it reveals its dependence on a revelation beyond itself and invites us to come through it to communion with God. It is an idolatrous image if it tries to manipulate

⁷⁴ CV, 61, 78/CdV, 109, 139.

⁷⁵ CV, 76/CdV, 136.

⁷⁶ This qualification is added the first time this passage appears in the book, at CV, 60–61/CdV, 109, which is referred to in full in footnote 51; the following chapter uses an abbreviated form that omits the qualification, CV, 78/CdV, 139.

us into believing it grasps the Divine through its own devices and thus merits its own glory.

Similarly, if we can affirm that kenosis does not mean destruction of the image, it may yet be the case that, like Christ, the icon's self-gift may expose it to the violence of idolatry and the hatred of a world that is not always open to the gift. For this reason it will bear the wounds of rejection and misunderstanding; the icon "bears the mark where the invisible Holy is given with such little reservation that the immediate radiance (*éclat*) of its glory is there abandoned," a mark which "takes the shape of the Cross."⁷⁷ It is in this parallel that Marion's most violent and iconoclastic language is found. The problem is that the language used to highlight the similarity of these situations risks setting up a false parallel. First, these are two very different modalities of action, for in one violence is merely accepted, and in the other it is sought out. Christ "receives" the "murderous mark that the visible inflicts on the invisible that loves it";⁷⁸ the image "effaces *itself*," "dulls *itself*,"⁷⁹ "destroying the screen of its invisibility."⁸⁰ Second, the same word, "violence," is used for very different actions, in fact, for actions that are the polar opposites of the kenosis hymn. The violence suffered by Christ is that of our grasping possession against the holy. The other is the "violence" to oneself, which in fact *looks* violent if measured by the idolatrous standards of grasping possession and autonomy but is really a kenotic dispossession toward a love that is the opposite of violence, as we have already seen. Marion's dense and difficult rhetoric here is aimed to highlight the paradoxical similarities between the icon and the cross, but by neglecting to point out these critical differences he risks misleading his readers instead.

If we take care to read more deeply than these apparent contradictions, the larger context can guide us to Marion's primary point, which remains an important one. If destructiveness arises into the picture of kenosis (and certainly it will), its source is not the kenosis itself or the command of God that creatures should have to efface themselves to receive him. Its source is always the violent actions of the possessive and grasping attitude that cannot tolerate kenotic love. For the world that is locked into reproduction

⁷⁷ CV, 73/CdV, 128, translation modified.

⁷⁸ CV, 74/CdV, 130. Here Marion's language seems quite close to the wound of the image spoken of by Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image ouverte*, and Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, trans. Rico Frances (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 92.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 60–61/CdV, 109, emphasis mine. This sense is mitigated in the original, as the French reflexive often has a more passive connotation than the active reflexive of English.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 78/CdV, 139.

of such possessive and grasping images is violent. It has no room to receive. But God was born a vulnerable infant in the visible world to invite us to a relation freely, rather than forcing us to our knees under his raw theophanic power. In keeping with this free gift of revelation, the icon opens a space to respond to its invitation in dispossessive freedom. Submitting itself to our interpretation and cooperation, the icon also renders itself vulnerable to destruction, ridicule, and ignorance, just as Christ did.⁸¹ It is in this sense that we should understand Marion's connection between the icon and the cross.

Thus, Marion's kenotic icon opens a new dimension for us to understand its revelatory value as a mediation: it is not a question only of *what* it presents to us through visible likeness (Christ, a saint, an angel), but the very *way* it presents and the way we must receive it. Marion describes in detail this kenotic propagation of charity in his earlier work: "to receive the gift amounts to receiving the giving act, for God gives nothing except the infinite kenosis of charity."⁸² The gift of God's revelation is not so much an object, but an activity, one that cannot be received or recognized except by taking on this same kenotic stance, as the tiers of a fountain, where each level continues to receive by overflowing: "The basin is not filled up by the cascade from above unless it ceaselessly empties itself into the basin below. Only the abandonment of that which fills it permits that the stream to come should fill it without cease."⁸³ To be in union with God, one must be like him. To be

⁸¹ Of course, if Christ gave freely, he did not eagerly launch into his death; one must certainly consider with prudence exactly how far, and exactly in what way, a kenotic image, or any kenotic thing, ought to expose itself to violence. See Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1990); Sarah Coakley, "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing," in *Swallowing a Fishbone?: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, ed. Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996): 82–111; and Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Person, Kenosis and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation," *Modern Theology* 19, no. 1 (January, 2003): 41–65. It is also worth pointing out Marion's essay "Evil in Person," where he suggests that absorbing evil is precisely the way that Christ can block and vanquish it, in *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 8–11.

⁸² Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 166, which Robyn Horner explains in *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-Logical Introduction*, (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 54–57. Marion's words here serve as an illustration of the title of section §15 in which this text appears, the "Immediate Mediation" of God, a phrase that Marion takes up from Balthasar in his reading of Dionysius the Areopagite. Rémi Brague's "La structure de l'apostolicité: la médiation immédiate" with J.-M. Vignolles, *Résurrection* 45 (1975): 59–77, theologically sketches out the implications of this same patristic, isomorphic structure.

⁸³ Marion, *Idol and Distance*, 166.

like him is to be kenotic. All beings have their own way of being kenotic, whether image or human, and through this isomorphic action they enter into this communion of God: they become part of the overflowing fountain of this kenotic love. This idea is in fact key to patristic accounts of the icon, but now it is refounded in a phenomenological key. The transparency of the icon is thus not just a function of aesthetic mediation, but a finite reflection of the shape of God's kenotic love, which is the content of the icon, the shape of the icon's opening to us, the shape that we must take to receive it, and the shape that we thereby communicate to others.

This can help us better understand the conditions necessary for the role of the viewer in kenotic reception of the icon. God freely offers us a relation to him, and the only thing that could limit our reception of this gift is how far we are willing to pry open our grasping fists to receive it.⁸⁴ This gift cannot be had by those who idolatrously try to seize it on their own terms. It can be received only by those who approach in the abandon of self-gift. This is what the icon teaches us by breaking out of the possessive paradigm and offering itself to us kenotically. Just as the image "empties itself" or "pours itself out" to manifest the divine counter-gaze, we must pour ourselves out to receive it in an act of veneration, rather than resting in the secure grasp of the knowable and visible.⁸⁵ Our kenotic prayer is a condition for recognizing the kenosis of the invisible God, and the kenosis of the image facilitates this relationship.

Does this make us passive objects before God? A full response to the many important critiques of the place of the "subject" would require more careful attention than can be afforded here, yet we might gesture at a few initial implications from this study. It is true that Marion does not say much about prior preparation of human activity, but one cannot therefore conclude that he *opposes* its importance. To the contrary, he does leave some hints at what this might look like, for example, the "purification of the gaze" which can prepare us to see the icon, whether in prayer⁸⁶ or through viewing a certain kind of art.⁸⁷ If Marion does not explain what this means, we can imagine he

⁸⁴ Marion, "À partir de la Trinité," 29–31.

⁸⁵ "Charity reveals that the Father gives himself in and as the Son, that the prototype opens in and as the visible. But these kenotic transitions never testify to anything but charity. Thus, they can only appear for the one who surrenders to them, according to the same kenotic transition by which charity is offered in a paradox." CV, 85/CdV, 150, translation modified.

⁸⁶ CV, 64/CdV, 114.

⁸⁷ Marion is even more explicit about this in his paper on Nicolas of Cusa, saying that a repeated aesthetic praxis can open "a new way of behaving," or *habitus*, that can dispose us more consistently toward the right; see "Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen," 308. For Marion, aesthetics at its highest stage is more than mere spectacle and can

is indicating here not so much a skill gained through practice, but the development of a deeper capacity of action, of a greater kenotic receptivity, which might in turn be associated with a greater range of hermeneutic possibilities.⁸⁸ Yet we must take care not to claim that our actions themselves are sufficient to enact an iconic experience lest we be led back to the logic of *ἀπρόζω*, which attempts to earn and possess on its own devices, while missing that the one thing needed is the full abandonment of the self to God. For Marion, God remains the primary imitator of iconic communion: “I can very well say that I see God, but that can only be if God, this God who remains a hidden God, grants it to me ... In order for a face to see the face of God, it is necessary that God first turn his face toward those who gaze at it.”⁸⁹

By deepening our understanding of kenosis, it becomes clear that despite Marion’s stark language, his position does not support the claim that an image, or anything else, must undermine itself in order to be suited for its role of reflecting its prototype. In fact, Marion turns the tables on us. To assume that a kenotic icon would be thereby self-destructive betrays an idolatrous assumption about what it means to be a “self” and what it means to be destroyed. If all things are in a relation of gift to God, then kenosis is simply the acceptance of God’s gift of love freely offered. The only thing that would need to be destroyed is the possessive, idolatrous attitude that clings to a false view of its finite being as autonomous, which places itself in opposition to the identity that is in truth freely given by God. Thus, the self is not dissolved into passivity, but it is indeed built up by a right relation to God; Marion would surely agree with Tanner’s insistence that “the beauty and the glory of the human form need not rival God’s, since God is the giver of it.”⁹⁰ The self-revelation of the God who is love is echoed in the dispossessive openness that marks every moment of this iconic mediation and binds them together.

Window into Heaven

The Byzantine icon has been proudly hailed as a “window into heaven.” I suggest this title is even more fitting as an illustration of the kenotic transparency of Divine mediation discussed above. Let us conclude

prepare both the viewer and the image for prayerful encounter with the Divine. Ian Rottenberg offers one possible explanation of how Marion’s account of aesthetics itself can suggest to us such a practice, in Ian Rottenberg, “Fine Art as Preparation for Christian Love,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 42, no. 2 (2014): 243–62. Brett David Potter gives a good overview of some of these issues as well in “Image and Kenosis.”

⁸⁸ Marion, *Reprise du donné* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2016), 43.

⁸⁹ Marion, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen,” 315–16.

⁹⁰ Tanner, “Theology at the Limits of Phenomenology,” 225.

our investigation by drawing out this analogy following the description of Saint John of the Cross:

A ray of sunlight shining upon a smudgy window is unable to illumine that window completely and transform it into its own light. It could do this if the window were clean and polished. The less film and stain are wiped away, the less the window will be illumined, and the cleaner the window is, the brighter will be its illumination. The extent of the illumination is not dependent upon the ray of sunlight but upon the window. If the window is totally clean and pure, the sunlight will so transform and illumine it that to all appearances the window will be identical with the ray of sunlight and shine just as the sun's ray.⁹¹

This passage was originally written in the context of contemplating creatures in mystical prayer, but drawing out the logic of this image will clarify both the strengths and limitations of Marion's "icon."

First and most importantly, in John's description the sunlight is not encountered as an object, or even as the form of a friend or stranger on the other side of the glass. It remains mysterious, invisible, and unable to be grasped directly, too bright for us, just as the gaze of God remains beyond the full powers of our comprehension. Certainly, the Incarnation was an encounter with God as seen, and the icon may present us with a likeness of this human form, but this visibility will not guide us to a clear and unambiguous knowledge of who God is. Even if its origin is far beyond our reach, we are nevertheless able to recognize his counter-gaze upon us, just as we can still sense the rays of sunlight that warm our faces through the window.

Second, the transparency of the glass is not a matter of self-negation, but of the basic openness necessary to join the illuminating activity of the light. An image that is too bogged down in its own visibility, that dazzles and captivates our attention, is like a smudgy window that blocks the full sunlight, obstructing our view of what calls to us through it. When it is clean, a window can be perfectly united with the light from the sun, just as the purified icon is permeated with the invisible counter-gaze. In the same way, kenotic transparency is not destruction for Marion, but a positive condition for serving as the vehicle of communion.

A second meaning arises when we expand the original context of Saint John's description of the window. For he himself did not use this description for images, but for persons: "The *soul* upon which the divine light of God's

⁹¹ John of the Cross, "Ascent of Mount Carmel," 2.5.6, in *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2017). This also echoes a patristic image often used by John Damascene: the iron that seems to become one with the fire.

being is ever shining, or better, in which it is always dwelling by nature, is like this window.”⁹² I may also find that I am *myself* a dirty window, full of too many smudgy attachments and stains of possession that block transmission of sunlight. As Marion has explained, the only limits on the gift God offers are the barriers that I myself erect against it, especially my idols of self-possession and self-definition; kenosis clears me of these obstacles to become transparent to the reception of God’s loving gaze.

The idea of a “transparent image” may still evoke the impression of iconoclasm, so we must emphasize the point: strictly speaking, transparency is not negation, but a negative description. Transparency means to not obstruct the light, to refrain from grasping or possessing what God offers. Yet here we can acknowledge that this open-ended character of transparency is not a flaw; it is in fact essential to Marion’s account of the icon. Because God’s revelation is not tied to a specific image of appearing or a particular human practice, because Marion relates it to kenotic openness or dispossession, God can be potentially mediated through everything. Marion has used the specific theory of holy images to defend how all creation could reveal the invisible God. *The transparency of the icon allows it to be a universal possibility.*

Further, this universal potential of mediation is not scattered randomly through the world in isolated objects, and this is where Marion advances the window analogy into a new key. This transparent mediation forms what I call an “*isomorphic chain of iconicity*” that ripples outward through creation. We see this most clearly in *The Idol and Distance*, the only place where Marion makes an explicit connection between “icons” (in the broad sense) with the word “mediation.”⁹³ Explaining again through our analogy, it is the window’s kenotic transparency that allows it to be united with the sunlight, which is the same action that transmits this light to others. Thus, *communion with the light is one with communication of it*; to receive the gift of God’s love is one with its expression. This explains why the icon not only depicts Christ, but also the saints, whose transparency to the light of God makes them living “icons” of his love.

By consequence, to receive this light ourselves, we, too, must respond in kind, becoming transparent to the love that is offered. To the extent that we succeed we, too, will pass on the light to others. The shape required to

⁹² John of the Cross, “Ascent of Mount Carmel,” emphasis mine.

⁹³ Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, §15, “Immediate Mediation,” especially 159n38; see Brague, “La structure de l’apostolicité: la médiation immédiate.” This isomorphic framework also supports the Orthodox belief that the icon has a kind of “hypostatic” or “exemplary” character in its action that exists in parallel to the holiness of the saint. See especially Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 13, 18.

receive the gift of charity is the very shape of passing it along. The gift of God's revelation is not an *object* to be transmitted, but *the very action* that cannot be received or recognized except by taking on this same isomorphic stance of kenosis, as the tiers of a fountain, where each level continues to receive by overflowing into the next. As Marion explains, "To receive the gift amounts to receiving the giving act, for God gives nothing except the infinite kenosis of charity."⁹⁴

Conclusion

Our original concern was that Marion's account of the icon as "transparent" and "self-effacing" refuses visibility as a way of access to God, a claim which is entangled in the dismissal of all other visible, finite, creaturely things. Following its deeper logic leads to a cosmological competition of infinite and finite that ultimately results in gnostic ruptures, denial of the Incarnation, and wholesale self-destruction. I have argued that Marion does not fall into this crude iconoclasm but is in fact deeply congruent with the richly mediating Christian tradition that includes Byzantine icons.

Marion's first paradoxical and apparently iconoclastic move, the disqualification of mimetic art, is not a denial of visibility's *importance*, but of its *sufficiency* to define the icon. Visibility as such is strictly defined according to the limits of what we are able to aim at. What is fundamental about the icon is not the finite expanse of what I see, but that I find myself seen. It is in veneration, which is not an activity required by or strictly limited to the visible, that this communion opens to me. It is true that the visible image may help me in this task, and indeed the Byzantine aesthetic has been developed over many centuries to accompany this kind of prayer. Yet Marion keeps us focused on the essential: that if these artistic devices are valuable to the believer, it is only insofar as they serve this encounter of communion that exceeds them. Otherwise, the icon is only a painting like any other.

Marion's second paradoxical and apparently iconoclastic move, the definition of the iconic image as kenotic, deepens this point. The "transparent" and "self-effacing" icon is not emptying itself to self-destruction. For if the icon's kenosis is rigorously modeled after the kenosis of Christ, this means to empty oneself with total abandon to the Father, which is precisely to receive the gift of one's self in the highest measure. The kenotic icon is not renouncing its beauty or excellence as an image, only its self-sufficiency, and by emptying itself it does not destroy its visibility but clears the way for a dispossessive relation to God. It is only the idolatrous autonomy of grasping possession, and not kenosis, that leads to violence and destruction.

⁹⁴ Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, 166.

Marion leaves most details of this kenosis undefined, which should not be immediately written off as a weakness. In fact, it means that one of the primary *advantages* of his account is the way that it extends beyond the case of the sacred image alone. Thus, rather than an iconoclastic rejection of images, Marion's move away from the image is a move toward a deeper grasp of the roots of the question. Instead of asking what it means for the specific case of a Byzantine icon to bring us into communion with God, Marion has laid out the groundwork for considering the possibility for *anything* finite to mediate God. This includes the icon as well as the one who comes before the image, and other mediations besides, in art or poetry, in the fresh breeze of dawn or a human smile. Because of its transparency, Marion's icon allows us to show this movement of God's love to ripple all the way down. But this may not always be recognized. This is not because God is stingy in doling out his revelation but because he gives himself so unreservedly that he exposes himself to our love as well as our hate, just as Christ did. Indeed, he appears in the light of Mount Tabor, but also in the dust of Golgotha, and as a man like any other.

This study of Marion's "icon" as a window into heaven also helps us to see where work remains to be done. A window cleared of dust is exchangeable, as transparent as any other, and yet we know there are many unique ways for things to be kenotically open to God. Limiting ourselves to images alone, there is a great significance to the different kinds of strategies by which an image might become transparent to God's counter-gaze. As we have discussed, some aesthetic strategies are better suited to this than others, possibly in different ways. To engage in these kinds of detailed discussions is of great theoretical and practical significance for religious traditions—provided we have rooted the reasons for such discussions in the deeper function of mediation. By calling attention to this deeper function, Marion's work on the icon has not foreclosed but has opened and invited such an inquiry. He has broken the hold of an idolatrous logic that too often obscures such conversations and set out the tracks along which such an investigation could run without falling into a naive iconoclasm or covert idolatry. But even in these few concrete studies of the icon, this is not a path that he himself has shown an interest in taking. It remains a course for others to run.