

How to Think about God in the Context of Postmodernism

Cómo pensar sobre Dios en el contexto del posmodernismo

Juan José Sánchez-Altamirano
Universidad Iberoamericana Puebla
juanjose.sanchez.altamirano@iberopuebla.mx
Orcid.org/0009-0003-0578-6292

DOI:

doi.org/10.23924/oj.v16i38.674

Fecha de recepción: 12/01/2024 • Fecha de aceptación: 09/07/2025

Abstract

The “death of God” is probably one of most famous phrases ever to have been uttered by any philosopher. Its pronouncement is undoubtedly surrounded by a certain aura of mysticism and mysteriousness. On the one hand, it has been stated repeatedly that the “death of God” is an established fact in light of which our cultural, social, and religious lives should be lived out. On the other hand, it is not always as easy to pinpoint what that fact is and what its nihilistic and postmodernist entailments are. What we do know is that it must be dealt with seriousness. Indeed, I suggest that this can begin to be done if one appropriates some of the concepts in the thought of Marion and Ricoeur that enable us to think through the implications of the “death of God”.

Keywords

“Death of God”, Marion, nihilism, Ricoeur, saturated phenomenon.

Resumen

La “muerte de Dios” es probablemente una de las frases más célebres que hayan sido dichas por cualquier filósofo. Su pronunciamiento es indubitadamente circunscrito a una cierta aura de misticismo. Por un lado, ha sido afirmado repetidamente que la “muerte de Dios” es un hecho establecido a la luz de lo cual ha de habitarse el mundo cultural, social y religioso. Por otro lado, no siempre es sencillo caracterizar ese hecho y determinar las implicaciones nihilistas y posmodernas. Lo que sí se puede señalar cabalmente es que ha de ser tratado el tema con seriedad. En efecto, sugiero que esto puede comenzar a llevarse a cabo si uno se apropia de algunos de los conceptos clave del pensamiento de Marion y Ricoeur, los cuales posibilitarán que pensemos las implicaciones de la “muerte de Dios”.

Palabras clave

Fenómeno saturado, “muerte de Dios”, Marion, nihilismo, Ricoeur.

Introduction

John Caputo said once that “the place to start in any account of the fortunes of God in postmodern thought is Friedrich Nietzsche’s notion of the «death God», for Nietzsche more than anyone else is responsible for the atheistic side of postmodern thought” (2007: 270). Indeed, in aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche vociferously and famously (or maybe infamously) proclaimed, through the words of the madman, the “death of God”. Coming from the words of a madman, one would think it could hardly be taken at face value not only by the people listening to him, but also by the people reading Nietzsche’s work. But what could it possibly mean that “God is dead”? Does it mean that there was a time in some proximate or remote past in which some *being* named “God” existed but now has ceased to exist? If that were the case, it could be said indubitably that Nietzsche had an odd and naïve idea of what God is. But nobody really believes that is what Nietzsche was suggesting. Does it mean, maybe, that Nietzsche had found a “knock-out argument” against God’s existence? Maybe he found the Anselmian argument lacking; maybe he foresaw what the potential Plantingan, Gödelian, Harts-hornean, and Malcomian reformulations of the ontological argument would entail, and he found them lacking *avant la lettre*. Could it be that he thought the cosmological and teleological arguments for God’s existence, in the context of natural theology, had been dismantled for good? No? If this is not the case, then how should Christians, other theists, and even atheists understand and respond to such a bold and bizarre proclamation?

In what follows, two objectives will be pursued. First, I will attempt to disentangle, in general terms, what I deem to be a plausible interpretation of what the German philosopher meant by the “death of God”, suggesting some sort of equivalence *lato sensu* with the polysemic, ambiguous, and problematic term “postmodernism”.

I will suggest that the “death of God” comports with the demise of a certain kind of metaphysical outlook, a death which—one could say retrospectively, referring to the Heideggerian term—relates to the “onto-theological” framework from which Nietzsche begins to reflect. Nevertheless, even though there are potential problems with Nietzsche’s underlying premises, I would like to underscore what I think are some positive and legitimate strictures that surface in his assessment of the cultural and social milieu in which the West finds itself historically situated, as a result of a certain uncritical attitude towards the traditional philosophical understanding of God and metaphysics. As Hall suggests, “the most profound of 20th century theology has taken the challenges of Feuerbach and Nietzsche (not to mention Marx, Freud, and others) seriously” (2015: 167). Consequently, following both Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Luc Marion’s evaluation of the “God is dead” proclamation, I submit that the Nietzschean pronouncement ought to continue to be considered with the utmost seriousness even now. Certainly, even if it happens to be the case that the German philosopher is *completely* mistaken in whatever he was trying to say (which seems *prima facie* improbable), it would amount to a degree of dogmatic stupidity to disregard his thought completely without analyzing critically what he is stating so vehemently, especially in light of the postmodern culture that we inhabit nowadays.

The second objective will, then, be to attempt to reflect upon *God* as the “object” of religious experience, not apart from the Nietzschean assessment, but as a consequence thereof. Indeed, in order to do this, the thought of both Jean-Luc Marion and Paul Ricoeur will be considered carefully (yet broadly), especially insofar as they discuss some of the implications of the Nietzschean assessment of the West. My reading of both authors suggests that a circumspect consideration of some of the entailments of the “God is dead” statement should prompt us not so much to reject the author of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*’s understanding *in toto*, but to welcome and appropriate it critically so as to re-signify the traditional understanding of “God”. On the one hand, Marion’s phenomenological reconceptualization of God, in light of the Nietzschean analysis, opens up the

possibility of rethinking one's own metaphysical, religious, and hermeneutic presuppositions, showing that the cognitive and epistemic categories that inevitably configure the way we understand reality might not ultimately be capable of perfect *adequatio ad Deum simpliciter*, precisely because God is not a thing (*res*) or a being (*ens*) in the ontic sense of the word. On the other hand, Ricoeur's understanding of the refiguring power of the text helps us to see not only new inhabitable socio-religious worlds but also new ways to experience God individually and collectively.

"God is dead" and "the problem of God"

The problem of God seems to have always been with humanity not only in theoretical terms but especially in practical and performative terms. Furthermore, God as a theoretical problem has always been posterior to the profound lived experience of the religious person, the experience of the sacred: "It is not a matter of theoretical speculation, but of a primary religious experience that precedes all reflection on the world". (Eliade, 1959: 21). As one can surmise, throughout most of the history of the West, it has been a minority of people who have cared at all for the Uncaused Cause, the Unmoved Mover, and the Necessary Being. Most people in western history have had a far bigger interest in the sacred experiences (hierophanies, theophanies, etc.) that institute and found sociocultural and symbolic realities. Collective experiences of the sacred found new horizons of meaning and new inhabitable worlds through myths. Eliade points out that "the manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world. In the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no *orientation* can be established, the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a center" (Eliade, 1959: 21). In this sense, the primary hierophanic and theophanic experience that has radically marked and configured the western mind has been fundamentally encapsulated in the Judeo-Christian myth.¹

¹ See Holland (2019).

Myths, as stories that tell the origin, end, and direction of societies have an inexorable instituting function. As Ricoeur recognizes: “Here, we shall hold, with Mircea Eliade, that the myth as a story of origins essentially has an instituting function” (Ricoeur, 2016: 161). In other words, the West has been more far more interested in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob —and the sociocultural world that it creates for people to existentially inhabit— than in Aristotle’s First Cause. Thus, myths, symbols, rituals, and the affective experience accompanied by them have always preceded metaphysics as such, which makes it harder to determine what the “problem of God” ultimately means. It leaves us wondering, then, what the Nietzsche’s proclamation, touted so boldly, yet tragically, really entails.

Even though whatever constitutes the “problem of God” in the context of postmodernity might be quite an intricate issue in and of itself, it shall be suggested that the “God is dead” statement —with its cultural and anthropological connotations— is intimately related to that problem, at least insofar as it relates to the religious person of the XXI century. At any rate, it is also necessary to underline what the “problem of God” is *not* in the horizon of postmodern societies. Spanish philosopher Xavier Zubiri envisions the “problem of God” as not formally coinciding with the theoretical possibility of *proving* rationally God’s existence or nonexistence. The “problem of God”, as Zubiri (and arguably Nietzsche) understands it, must not be expressed exclusively in formal propositional terms. It would be an illegitimate reduction of a much more complex issue to reduce the problem to whether the proposition “God exists” is true or not (Zubiri, 2002: 216). Instead, one must assert that the problem itself has some major implications not only for a theoretical “assessment of the evidence” in favor or against God’s existence, but especially for the practical, sociocultural, symbolical, and existential juncture in which human beings find themselves inscribed. Zubiri’s comment underlines *ex profeso* the anthropological consequences of the problem of God by stating that “the question about God goes back to that of human beings themselves. And the philosophical possibility of the problem of God shall consist in discovering the human dimension in which that question *must* be asked” (Zubiri, 2002: 219; my

translation).² Consequently, in line with this sort of characterization, I submit that it is this kind of questioning the one that begins to elucidate what the “problem of God” is at the juncture of postmodernism.

When Friedrich Nietzsche announces the “death of God”, he must be understood as ultimately assessing both the onto-theological, the anthropological, and socio-phenomenological conundrum that has inevitably led from modernity to nihilism and, ultimately, to postmodernity at the societal, cultural, and even philosophical level.³ The atheism that Nietzsche (and other masters of suspicion, like Feuerbach, Freud and Marx) proposes is quite different from the atheism advocated by Graham Oppy, J. L. Mackie, Michael Martin, and other philosophers of religion in the analytic tradition; and it is most certainly quite different from the one advocated by the fading movement of the so-called New Atheists and their acolytes.⁴

2 “La cuestión acerca de Dios se retrotrae así a una cuestión acerca del hombre. Y la posibilidad filosófica del problema de Dios consistirá en descubrir la dimensión humana dentro de la cual esa cuestión *ha* de plantearse”. (Zubiri, 2002: 219).

3 Throughout this work, for simplicity’s sake, I will link *nihilism*, *postmodernism*, and “the death of God”, sometimes using them interchangeably, understanding that the “death of God” describes the nihilistic milieu in which we find ourselves, knowing also that nihilism constitutes the very possibility of postmodernism (whatever that means) and postmodernism cannot be understood apart from the nihilism it entails. Certainly, it would be quite hard to define what “postmodernism” means. Part of the problem is that the very issue that postmodernist thinkers want to deal with is the radical impossibility to postulate a clear and distinct language that applies independently of the hermeneutical context. It might be better to understand postmodernism as a certain attitude of suspicion (maybe towards *grandes narratives*, as Lyotard had suggested). At any rate, we could take Caputo’s general description for brevity’s sake. He sketches postmodernism by proposing three main ideas: “(1) the affirmation of radical and irreducible pluralism (of what Lyotard calls «paganism»), (2) the rejection of an overarching, metaphysical, or foundational schema (of what Lyotard calls “monotheism” and Derrida calls “theology”), and (3) a suspicion of fixed binary categories that describe rigorously separable regions (typically characteristic of “structuralism”) (Caputo, 2007: 268).

4 “For Nietzsche and Freud have created a kind of hermeneutics which is completely different from the critique of religion that is rooted in the tradition of British empiricism and French positivism. The problem for them is not that of the so-called proofs of the existence of God, nor do they criticize the concept of God as something devoid of meaning. They have created a new kind of criticism, a critique of cultural representations considered as disguised symptoms of desire and fear” (Ricoeur, 2000: 442).

Therefore, one must distinguish between *skepticism* and *suspicion*. The former refers to the logical and metaphysical analysis of the proofs of God's existence and nonexistence; this is an analysis that has traditionally inscribed itself at the juncture of natural theology.⁵ The latter refers, in general terms, to the hermeneutical models that relate to the anthropological, psychological, and sociocultural origin of belief in order to expose the illusion and implausibility of the referent of religious experience.⁶ While these distinct kinds of atheism can relate to each other and are, in effect, sometimes intertwined with one another, the atheism that Nietzsche seems to be propounding is more hermeneutic in nature (*suspicion*), for it is directed at certain social, legal, moral, and cultural structures that seem to be conditioned by a previous narrative, a mythico-symbolical representation collectively projected and unconsciously assumed and internalized in the process of socialization.⁷ Such a narrative has had traditionally the function of creating and legitimizing social realities.⁸

In that sense, the “problem of God”—especially insofar as it relates not so much to “God” as “an abstract entity”, but to the God that gives and reveals himself in the context of religion and the religious rituals and manifestations—must not be understood independently of both the numinous experience of the sacred and the symbolic structures that constitute the hermeneutical context of justification.

5 See, for example, Moreland and Craig (2009); Feser (2017); González (2008).

6 See, for example, Wesphal (1998).

7 “For both of them [Freud and Nietzsche], the cultural dimension of human existence, to which ethics and religion belong, has a hidden meaning which requires a specific mode of interpretation, a stripping-away of masks. Religion has a meaning that remains unknown to the believer by virtue of a specific act of dissimulation which conceals its true origin from the investigation of consciousness. For this reason, religion demands a type of interpretation that is adapted to its own peculiar mode of dissimulation, i.e., an interpretation of illusion as distinct from simple “error”, in the epistemological sense of the word, or as distinct from “lying”, in the ordinary ethical sense of the word. Illusion is itself a cultural function. Such a fact presupposes that the public meanings of our consciousness conceal true meanings, which can be brought to light only by adopting the attitude of suspicion and cautious critical scrutiny” (Ricoeur, 2000: 442); see also Berger (1967).

8 See Berger (1967).

In that sense, very much in line with Freud's own method, these unconscious structures ought to be deciphered, through the genealogico-philological model, as if they were a *text*. Thus, Nietzsche himself must not be understood as a proponent of nihilism *per se*, but as a witness to a historical reality (the advent of *nihilism*) that develops as a consequence of the socially generalized unconscious rejection of the mythico-symbolic structure of justification that had constituted the very foundation of the Judeo-Christian worldview in the collective imaginary of the West for a long time.⁹

In *The Conflict of Interpretations* (2000), Paul Ricoeur characterizes Nietzsche's thought quite well in this regard, beginning from an analysis of how the German philosopher understands the advent of guilt and condemnation from *nothing*. Nietzsche indicates that there is a certain realm of the ideal, a realm whose underpinning Platonic ancestry is always underlined by the thinker. This realm is beyond, extrinsic, and superior to that of the human will. It is precisely from that realm of this "beyond and transcendent ideal reality" that condemnation and prohibition come down to human beings in the form of "morality". This otherworldly "realm" has been shown to be *nothing*, precisely because, through a genealogical and philological model, one can see that it originates from weakness, from a will to be slaved: a slave morality. What is present here is a "conception [that] expresses nothing other than scorn for life, calumny of the earth, hatred of the vitality of the instincts, resentment of the weak against the strong" (Ricoeur, 2000: 443). This slave morality is then projected into the heavens. The hermeneutical method that Nietzsche

9 One should understand here *myth* as a "narrative about origins", which has an instituting or founding function: "In the strict sense of the word, every myth is a myth of creation: once upon a time, the first time, god or the gods create. Hence the origin and the cosmogony coincide. But the myth stops being cosmogonic, in the precise sense of the term, if we consider the other creative acts, the beginnings and institutions, subsequent to the creation, like a continued creation. Bit by bit the anthropogony prolongs the cosmogony, itself incorporated into a narrative about origins... Everything that begins in this world is the beginning of a world. We understand creation only through a re-creation, but, in return, every creation has the solemnity of what once began, *in illo tempore*. All the figurative and imaginative power, all the ritual exemplarism, and the profound feeling of the sacred are in this way displaced toward a new creation". (Ricoeur, 2016: 165).

employs in order to disclose the “nothingness” constitutive of this alleged ideal reality is precisely the context through which one can appreciate this bearing witness of the advent of nihilism. The ideal world becomes *nothing*; we lose the center, orientation, and foundation of our collective existence, and the concepts of truth, goodness, and beauty are radically questioned. Consequently, the “God is dead” proclamation refers back to this very event, *i.e.*, the “God” that is the *ideal* source of prohibition has been shown not to have any warrant or justification for being part of the moral, cultural, and social imaginary.¹⁰ As Paul Ricoeur points out:

This nonexistent realm is what traditional metaphysics has described as the intelligible, as the absolute good, as the transcendent and invisible source of all values; but since this realm is essentially empty, insofar as it is ideal, the destruction of metaphysics in our own era must take the form of nihilism. Nietzsche did not create nihilism, nor did nihilism create nothingness. Nihilism is a historical process to which Nietzsche bears witness, and nihilism in itself is only the historical manifestation of the nothingness that pertains to the illusory origin. Thus, nothingness does not emerge from nihilism; even less does nihilism emerge from Nietzsche. Nihilism is the soul of metaphysics, insofar as metaphysics posits an ideal and supernatural origin. (Ricoeur, 2000: 443).

This hermeneutically reductive diagnosis naturally applies to the Judeo-Christian tradition, insofar as it is a sort of “Platonism for the

10 Before one dismisses this argument as nothing more than an instance of the genetic fallacy, it should be noted that the Nietzschean arguments (along with the arguments of other “masters of suspicion”) have a very similar structure than the Lewis-Plantingan evolutionary argument against metaphysical naturalism. See Plantinga (2000). Indeed, if it can be proven that the hidden origin of belief in God in the Christian West is ultimately imbued with the symbolic and volitive significance that Nietzsche proposes with his interpretation, then, even though it would not amount to a knock-out argument against the existence of “some god” *per se*, it would probably constitute grounds for concern about the religious significance of the Judeo-Christian traditional narrative in general. At the very least, it would oblige us to rethink our motives.

people” that propounds an ethical supernaturalism with the features criticized by Nietzsche. This is where the famous *Umwertung* of the traditional values takes place, given that it must be understood as a sort of going back or reversal to the origin of value: the will to power. This seems to be the sense in which the German philosopher so boldly states that “God is dead”. The question then becomes, quite clearly, whether “God” refers here really to the Judeo-Christian God, Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or to some other “god”. As a matter of fact, according to Ricoeur’s understanding of Nietzsche’s criticism, this is precisely one of the three questions that must be asked in order to distinguish clearly Nietzsche’s (and the other masters of suspicion’s) atheism from that of the “British empiricism or the French positivism”, whose ways of understanding atheism have regularly been taken up *mutatis mutandis* by most of the atheist philosophers in the analytic tradition.¹¹ The first question is, then, supposing *ex hypothesi* that “God is dead”, which “God” is the one dead “God”? The second question would deal with the actual killer of this “God”: who has murdered this God? Finally, the last question pertains to the authority that belongs “to the announcement of this death” (Ricoeur, 2000: 445).

Concerning the first question (“which god is dead?”), Ricoeur suggests that the dead “God” is “the god of metaphysics and also the god of theology, insofar as theology rests on the metaphysics of the first cause, necessary being, and the prime mover, conceived as the source of values and as the absolute good. Let us say that it is the god of onto-theology, to use the expression that was coined by Heidegger, following Kant” (Ricoeur, 2000: 445). Indeed, the Kantian God represents the sort of “God” being taken up to task by Nietzsche. It is well known that Kant makes the connection between morality and God. Religion has the function of understanding the commands that come from consciousness (*e. g.*, the moral imperative) as commands of God. Furthermore, religion also enables human beings to be free

11 This tradition can be represented, in my estimation, by many of the atheist contributors (except for some like John D. Caputo [2007], who propounds a “postmodern theology” very much in line with Kearney, Ricoeur or Marion).

vis-à-vis the natural world. However, since Kant understands God as the supreme lawgiver, due to the original link between God and morality, Kant could be said to belong ineluctably to the dichotomy between the intelligible-ideal realm and the here-and-now-world, the sensible realm.

In this sense, Nietzsche's proclamation is ultimately a criticism that is aimed at the Kantian formal principle of obligation that has been crimped indefectibly with God, specifically with the "moral God". Nietzsche directs his genealogical, philological, and reductive hermeneutical strictures to the Kantian principle of obligation, indicating how it is ultimately deprived of the *a priori* character that it allegedly had. What was thought to be an *a priori* necessity must now be understood as being part of a hidden and somewhat unconscious process that can ultimately be traced back to the volitive condition —rather than a cognitive one— of human beings from which accusation and prohibition emerge, namely: the will to power. As Ricoeur explains: "Reductive hermeneutics discovers behind practical reason the functioning of instincts, the expression of fear and desire. Behind the so-called autonomy of the will is hidden the resentment of a particular will, the will of the weak" (Ricoeur, 2000: 446). That is the God that is dead: "the moral god", the god of accusation and condemnation.

As far as the second question ("who is the murderer?") is concerned, it should be categorically stated that it is not the atheist herself who has "murdered God", nor was Nietzsche the responsible one. Rather, it is the nothingness that is inextricably linked to the intelligible ideal what has brought about the infamous murder. As it has been previously stated, the murderer of the "god of morality" has been no other than the cultural and historical process itself that uncovered the sociological and ideological origin of the moral horizon previously assumed as valid; it is nothing but the history of onto-theology brought to its logical consequences, as Gianni Vattimo has stated.¹² The cause of this death was precisely the self-destruction of

12 See Rorty and Vattimo (2006).

metaphysics through nihilism,¹³ the slow realization that the groundless ground which constituted the very roots of Western civilization no longer was considered plausible neither in theory nor in practice by society as a whole. There was no longer any *central metaphor* capable of structuring society and orienting it towards one unified and hegemonic goal.¹⁴ The pluralism of views and interpretations of reality, which are a common place in the postmodern mindset, began to question the alleged unanimity of the inherited tradition, along with the social institutions, values, ideals, expectations, and norms that were founded upon it.

With regards to the third question (“what sort of authority is invested in the words that proclaim this death of the god of morality?”), Ricoeur is very perspicuous when he asks it. If one thinks of the “God is dead” proclamation, it must be asked who has the authority to proclaim such a statement. Who can live up to such a proclamation? Nietzsche, the madman, Zarathustra? Is Nietzsche himself endowed with this kind of authority to make this proclamation? Well, the German philosopher himself is *not* the *Übermensch* that he aspires to become: “His aggression against Christianity remains caught up in the attitude of resentment; the rebel is not and cannot be, at the same level as the prophet. Nietzsche’s major work remains an accusation of accusation and hence falls short of a pure affirmation of life” (Ricoeur, 2000: 447).

This entails, among other things, that the “problem of God” remains with us. Nothing has been decided definitely. The only path that seems to have been closed off is that of an onto-theological understanding of God that culminates in the “moral God”. That is the God that seems to have been put into question. What this does mean is that some new way of understanding God must be sought out, along with brand new ways of reinterpreting Christendom’s collective ethos. Consequently, one can gladly accept Nietzsche’s critique insofar as it entails that the violent *use* of the concept “God” is out of place. That sort of *use* proceeds from a projection, the

13 See, for instance, Habermas (1992).

14 See Corbí (2007).

product of a certain tacit weakness and rationalization. Indubitably, the Christian narrative has been historically used to legitimize and justify pernicious power structures, dehumanizing political regimes, and alienating social and personal realities.¹⁵ This is precisely when one can find Nietzsche's strictures as quite fruitful, due to the fact that they allow religious theists (particularly those that adhere to some form of Judeo-Christianity) to reconsider the implications of certain traditional interpretations of their own religion.

But then the questions become the following: can society no longer believe in God? How can one rethink the God of faith in light of these and similar critiques? Can we continue to uphold the same metaphysical and symbolic structures that have been criticized by Heidegger, Nietzsche, and other masters of suspicion? The "problem of God" ought to acquire different nuances. As it has been stated, the postmodern situation in the context of theology emphasizes that nowadays it not so much a task related to *proving* God's existence but a matter of *understanding* how to think of "God" in the horizon of the advent of nihilism. And this is precisely when the thought of French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion becomes pertinent, for he sees brilliantly what the issue is:

It no longer concerns, as it did under metaphysics, the establishment or even the demonstration of the existence of God: that is no longer a concern in this time of nihilism, where not only the "death of God" seems a settled fact, but, above all, where the notion of existence itself becomes generally problematic for every being without exception, precisely because "beings" succumb in general to nihilism. The difficulty, more obscure and also more worrisome, lies in our inability to define the least concept of the essence of God: in wishing to say "God" (well before we've come to the point of seeing him *or not*), we do not even succeed in knowing what we are talking about, or what we are aiming at. This aporia clearly goes beyond the first one. The first one remains metaphysical, since it doubts the existence of

¹⁵ Holland (2019).

God without ever contesting the possibility or the legitimacy of producing God's essence, and thus of inscribing him in a concept; for atheism itself not only never refuses itself a concept of "God", but always presupposes one, precisely in order to be able afterward to exclude God from existence. This is so because essence remains, in metaphysics, the royal and unique road for reaching (God's) inexistence as much as existence (in general). In contrast, the second aporia wrenches itself free from the metaphysical horizon by contesting that one might ever or must always use of a concept of "God", and therefore make use of it as an essence among others (however privileged it proves to be) (Marion, 2015: 51-52).

Jean-Luc Marion's thought: icon vs idol

The "problem of God" can then be thought through in different terms at the juncture of the characterization of what has been called "saturated phenomena", which is a view that has been defended Marion himself. According to him, philosophers such as Kant and Husserl have been decisive in problematizing and defining the concept of "phenomenon".¹⁶ In general terms, a phenomenon can be defined as "the adequacy in it of an intuition (giving or fulfilling) to a concept or a signification (empty or to be validated)" (Marion, 2015: 52). Thus, according to Marion, a phenomenon can appear in two distinct ways. The first one is this: one can determine a received intuition as subsumed in a signifying concept, in which case one would "no longer [be] dealing with a simple lived experience of consciousness (or a manifold of intuition) but instead precisely with a lived experience assigned to the case of a particular object or being, which then becomes describable" (Marion, 2015: 52). The

¹⁶ "[Marion] claims that these phenomena give so much intuition that they exceed any concepts or limiting horizons that a constituting subject might attempt to impose on them. Therefore, saturated phenomena are given simply as themselves, and are exemplary instances of the givenness of phenomena. Indeed, Marion proposes the saturated phenomenon as the «one and only [unique] paradigm»" (Mackinley, 2010: 11).

second way would be that “the concept that I could form of my initiative (through the spontaneous understanding or conscious intentionality) ends up finding empirical validation in an intuition, which comes subsequently to fill it and to qualify it as a particular object or being” (Marion, 2015: 52). In both cases, it would be an instance of a phenomenological sort of *adaequatio rei et intellectus*.

It is this the context in which Marion propounds, through a long process of phenomenological description, his conceptualization of the saturated phenomenon. While the space is insufficient to thoroughly sketch out the implications of what a saturated phenomenon is, it could be said, in general terms, that the saturated phenomenon would be a phenomenon whose appearing, in the horizon of a fulfilling intuition, would overwhelm and surpass the signifying and conceptual intentionality of the knowing subject. Thus, Marion distinguishes mainly five saturated phenomena: the icon, the idol, the flesh, the event, and revelation (Mackinley, 2010: 11). Insofar as the “problem of God” concerns us here, I will direct my attention only to the icon and the idol. However, it is important to point out some general features of both so as to have some *prima facie* knowledge of the particular context in which these concepts arose. Both the concept of idol and icon have aesthetic and religious origins, but the distinction cannot be reduced to the distinction between a “true God” (icon) and the “false gods” (idol),¹⁷ nor should one understand the distinction between icon and idol in ontological terms, but rather in phenomenological terms: “The idol does not indicate, any more than the icon, a particular being or even class of beings. Icon and idol indicate a manner of being for beings, or at least for some of them” (Marion, 2012: 7). In that sense, one and the same phenomenon can

17 “Indeed, a determination that would limit itself to opposing the «true God» (icon) to the «false gods», in extending the polemic of the vetero-testamentary prophets, would not be suitable here. For the Christian iconoclasts of the eighth century gave the name «idol» to that which had been conceived and venerated as icon of the true God, and the Jews of the Old Covenant rejected all representation as idolatrous, even representation of the God of the Covenant (the «Golden Calf», it has been argued, perhaps only personalized the God of the Covenant, and the very Temple of Jerusalem could have been deserted by the divine *Shekinah* only insofar as it foundered in idolatry)” (Marion, 2012: 8).

be phenomenologically constituted as idolatrous or as iconic. How, then, should the terms *icon* and *idol* be understood in this context?

On the one hand, the idol is the first visible (εἶδω), and it is there to be seen.¹⁸ Being seen is precisely what captivates and fascinates, which makes it an idol. If the gaze to which it satisfies does not comprehend it and exhaust it, then it would be no idol. The idol withholds the gaze, piercing through other *visibles* that did not deserve the withholding of the gaze. Once the gaze finds the visible that is worth its attention, then it stops, and it reflects the gaze towards itself as in a mirror, filling the image and the gaze completely. This, of course, can have some implications not only for *art* in general, but also for *concepts*. Marion will suggest that this process applies *mutatis mutandis* to concepts; an idolatrous concept would then be one that exhausts completely the intentional mention or thought. On the other hand, the icon, while it is also looked upon, never allows the gaze to be exhausted, but rather it always sends back to some *other* that is unfathomable. This “other” can be another neighbor or a Totally Other, similar to how French philosopher Levinas would understand “the face”.

Having said this, let us attempt to understand how this applies to the “problem of God” at this juncture. Whenever one intends to reject God’s existence, one will have to resort inevitably to some *concept* of God within the framework of a logically rigorous demonstration that has this as the object of the discourse or thinking. What is required is “a conceptual thinking that is compelling” (Marion, 2001: 2). Conceptual atheism will generally reason hypothetically with a concatenation of logical premises that incorporate inferential *modus tollens* elements of sorts. As Marion points out: “if «God» is *x*, while *x* is *y* (contradictory, illusory, dangerous, unhealthy, alienation, etc.), then «God» is *y*; therefore, if *y* suffices to disqualify that which it connotes (and we admit this), «God is dead»” (Marion, 2001: 2). In this sense, the Nietzschean announcement can also be reinterpreted as somewhat equivalent to the affirmation of self-referential

18 “The idol never deserves to be denounced as illusory since, by definition, it is seen—*eidolon*, that which is seen (*eido*, *video*)” (Marion, 2012: 9).

incoherence in the discourse about God, but the incoherence does not refer to propositions that can be found only at the level of denotation, but also at the level of connotation, as in Nietzsche's case, for example. It could even imply some sort of strict conceptual contradiction that takes place at the heart of the philosophical-theological thinking of the one who propounds God as "existing".¹⁹ Such a hypothetical confutation, nonetheless, would require two observations by Marion.

Regarding the first observation, it is important to state that the "demonstration that refutes «God» demands from him one last service: to furnish the object that supports and nourishes the refutation" (Marion, 2001: 2). This observation turns out to be quite interesting insofar as the term "God" suggests a certain defined semantic range that, while potentially infinite, is limited *in act* to that which pertains to its discursive, pragmatic and referentially signified extension.²⁰ Therefore, the success of any potential refutation that begins from such a concept will be subject to the defining limits imposed on itself, such that, if the demonstration were to be successful, it would have to assume the effective refutation of *that* conception of the divine without its meaning necessarily confuting God's being as such, but only the sense of the "God" that the conditional syllogism has aimed at rejecting. This observation should not be overlooked, for it crystallizes very patently the difficulties that would face the person that defended some sort of dogmatic and radical atheism of the modern sort. Marion writes in this regard that "to refute the Absolute absolutely, it would be necessary, as it would be, moreover, to demonstrate a nonexistence in general, to enumerate exhaustively all the possible concepts of «God», in order to rely on them to the point of

19 This is a little more similar to what happens in the analytic tradition nowadays. While it is true that one could hardly reduce the "death of God" to this aspect, for the sake of Marion's analyses at this point, we will insist on maintaining for now this as another possible nuanced implication of such a concept, knowing that there are also some ethical, sociological, cultural, and symbolic corollaries that result from it as well.

20 "L'athéisme peut prétendre, ici, à la rigueur d'un statut conceptuel, précisément parce que sa dénégation de Dieu s'opère en fait par la dénégation d'un concept, auquel Dieu se trouve, par hypothèse, réduit et identifié" (Marion, 1985: 26).

rejecting them all” (Marion, 2012: 9). In this sense, the Procrustean beds would have to continue to multiply potentially *ad infinitum*, or risk losing the conceptual univocity demanded by the refutation of the initial conception. Certainly, the strict conceptual atheism could only maintain the alleged formal rigor that tends to be vigorously touted in certain philosophical contexts under the assumption that it remains regional in terms of its legitimate discursive scope.²¹ Thus, if conceptual atheism can only remain such insofar as it finds itself circumscribed to its defined scope, the alleged confutation does not seem to have as its true mentioned or thought object the Absolute in itself, but an idolatrous concept made to the measure of certain categorial, conceptual, and discursive instruments proper to the human epistemic constitution.

It may be relevant here to point out that Marion’s argument could potentially be objected given the methodological proceedings of the school of suspicion. One could argue that one does not need to refute every single concept of God to refute a God that is relevant of the traditional understanding of the big monotheistic religions of the world, especially Christianity. Why not take the multiple criticisms of the masters of suspicion as a case against traditional Christianity, for instance, regardless of whether other interpretations might turn out to be competent alternatives? While this objection might have some merit when taken along with some classical definitions of God provided in the catechisms of different Church traditions, it is important to underline the fact that the apophatic tradition has always been part of Christian thought. Human beings know better

21 “Which means that an atheism (conceptual, naturally, and not every atheism – even though the tie between conceptual atheism and sociological atheism may be of consequence) is worth only as much as the concept that contains it. And, as this concept of «God» accedes to the precision that will render it operative only by remaining limited, one must say that a conceptual atheism can assure its rigor, demonstrativeness, and pertinence only because of its regionalism; not *in spite of it*, but *indeed because of it*: regionalism indicates that for the term, by definition undefined, of *God*, the concept substitutes some precise definition, «God», over which, through the determining definition, understanding will exercise its logic. Thus the conceptual atheisms imply the substitution for *God* of a given regional concept – called «God»; therefore they bear only on concepts each time fostering this «God» that they announce” (Marion, 2012: 29-30).

what God is *not* than what he *is*. Both Pseudo-Dionysius and Thomas Aquinas would agree that philosophically one needs to approach God analogically through the *via eminentiae*. No matter what one says about God, He is always more. One could say that God is not being, but supra-being (beyond being) or *ipsum esse subsistens* (being subsistent), but it is precisely for that reason that one will never be able to speak of God in non-analogical terms. The triple analogical way of knowing God (*via causalitatis sive via affirmativa, via negativa, via eminentiae*) has been present in some way in the Christian tradition all along. As Aquinas states:

Therefore, according to Dionysius's doctrine, God can be named in three different ways. First, by affirmation, when we say, "God is wise", which certainly can be said of him because in him there is a similarity to wisdom, which flows from him. Nevertheless, wisdom is not in God in the same way in which we conceive and name wisdom. Indeed, the second way would have us negate wisdom of God; one can say that God is not wise. Again, wisdom is not negated of God because He lacks wisdom, but because wisdom is supereminently in God, beyond our saying and understanding. Consequently, it is convenient to say that God is beyond wise [*supersapiens*]. Thus, Dionysius explains perfectly by these three ways of attributing wisdom to God how these qualities are to be attributed to God. (*De potentia*, q. 7, a. 5, ad. 2).²²

This leads to a second observation by Marion, which is that, before the demonstration, "the concept «God» neither permits nor mobilizes a refutation unless it attains, in one way or another, God,

22 "Et ideo, secundum doctrinam Dionysii, tripliciter ista de Deo dicuntur. Primo quidem affirmative, ut dicamus, Deus est sapiens; quod quidem de eo oportet dicere propter hoc quod est in eo similitudo sapientiae ab ipso fluentis: quia tamen non est in Deo sapientia qualem nos intelligimus et nominamus, potest vere negari, ut dicatur, Deus non est sapiens. Rursum quia sapientia non negatur de Deo quia ipse deficiat a sapientia, sed quia supereminenter est in ipso quam dicatur aut intelligatur, ideo oportet dicere quod Deus sit supersapiens. Et sic per istum triplicem modum loquendi secundum quem dicitur Deus sapiens, perfecte Dionysius dat intelligere qualiter ista Deo attribuantur".

whether the true God or the supposedly such. It is necessary that the concept merit the attention of a polemic – in a word, that «God» be God” (Marion, 2001: 3).²³ It is, then, required that the concept “God” corresponds factually with God extraconceptually. Accordingly, when it is suggested that “God is dead” in a metaphysically robust sense, *i. e.*, when it is stated in the analytic tradition that the proposition “God exists” is false as the corollary of some sort of inferential reasoning, the term “God” itself is being wrenched from its originally religious, mysterious, mythico-symbolic, and ultimately ineffable horizon by reducing it to propositional reasoning to such an extent that the inference itself is deprived of both its inner logic and foundational utility. This destroys self-referentially the reasoning of conceptual atheism, insofar as it mines the active semantic potency and polysemic that the term possessed originally—in virtue of the multilayered and polyphonic religious experience that brought it about— before the demonstration.²⁴ In this sense, if the

23 Marion also states elsewhere the following: “One therefore must add quotation marks to what is thus named God —«God»— that indicate less a suspicion than a delimitation: the «death of God» presupposes a concept equivalent to that which it apprehends under the name of «God». It is on the basis of this concept that the critique exerts its polemic: if «God» includes alienation in its concept (Feuerbach, Stirner, Marx), or a nimble figure of the will to power (Nietzsche), then it will —to the point of absolute disappearance— undergo the consequences of this concept. Which implies, obviously, the equivalence of God to a concept in general. For only this equivalence renders «God» operative as a concept” (Marion, 2012: 29).

24 “If the rigor of symbolic logic seems more exclusive than that of traditional formal logic, the reason is that symbolic logic is not a simple prolongation of the earlier logic. It does not represent a higher degree of formalization; it proceeds from a global decision concerning ordinary language as a whole; it marks a split with ordinary language and its incurable ambiguity; it questions the equivocal and hence fallacious character of the words of ordinary language, the amphibolous character of its constructions, the confusion inherent in metaphor and idiomatic expressions, the emotional resonance of highly descriptive language. Symbolic logic despairs of natural language precisely at the point where hermeneutics believes in its implicit «wisdom» [...] In our attempt to justify the recourse to hermeneutics that are already constituted [...] we suggested that their conflict might well be not only a crisis of language but, deeper still, a crisis of reflection: to destroy the idols, to listen to symbols – are not these, we asked, one and the same enterprise? Indeed, the profound unity of demystifying and the remythicalizing of discourse can be seen only at the end of an ascesis of reflection, in the course of which the debate dramatizing the hermeneutic field shall have become a discipline of thinking” (Ricoeur, 1970: 50 and 54).

inferential reasoning ends up condemning the concept of God to semantic vacuity and inanity, then it would follow that the argument itself could not have started off to begin with without the accusation of some sort of *circulus in probando*. Such a procedure, nonetheless, shows manifestly the consequences of thinking about God as such. As Marion points out, echoing his initial argument:

“God” is dead only if “God” can die, that is, if in the first place it was not a question, in the demonstration, of God. This reasoning highlights the contradiction of its object only by showing the emptiness of its success: only the shadow of God, “God”, remains prey to it. The prey rewards it only with a skin. The demonstration locates, enumerates, and authenticates shadows, which in return disqualify it: the more the demonstration triumphs over so many indefinitely pursued “Gods”, the more it betrays the emptiness of the self-critical procedure that both qualifies and disqualifies it. Conceptual atheism remains rigorous only by remaining not only regional but irrelevant [...] Progress belongs to conceptual atheism as intimately as suicidal humility characterizes it. Hence its indispensable theological function, as we shall see, and the respect that it is suitable to show it. (Marion, 2001: 3).

In this sense, one could go back to Ricoeur’s first question. Again, what concept of God —rigorously regional in terms of its intentional primary logic— has been the underlying object of the Nietzschean “death of God” criticism? The answer that had been established was “the moral God”. Following this Nietzschean understanding, Jean-Luc Marion explains that it is precisely the “moral God” of Kantian ancestry the one that Nietzsche has as object of his proclamation: “Only the «moral God» can die or even be discovered as already dead; for he alone, as «moral God», is amenable to the logic of value: he himself operates and is comprehensible only in the system of values of morality as counternature; thus does he find himself directly hit the moment that, with nihilism, «the highest values are devalued»” (Marion, 2012: 30). The nihilism attested

by Nietzsche affects so overwhelmingly the “moral God” precisely because this “nihilism” is a nihilism that aims at morality, which, in turn, configures the only domain in which the fullness of this idolatrous concept —conceived as “the last figure of Platonism”— would be exhausted. Consequently, this idolatrous correspondence between the Nietzschean “moral God” and the axiological scope from which the author of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* reflects is precisely not only that which grounds the conditions of possibility to talk about the concept-object that is trying to be refuted, but also what justifies retroactively the Marionian critical inference of a regional logic of Kantian origin that fosters a conceptual opening up in which it will now be possible to redirect the search towards a new “dawn of the divine”:

We can fix its scope, provisionally, by reference to what it does not exclude: the “death of God” as “moral God” leaves intact, even more opens and provokes, the coming of the “new gods”, whose affirmative function upholds this world, which becomes the only world. Thus even within the Nietzschean argument, the death of God is valid only as far as the idol that renders it thinkable aims, since, beyond the *Götzendämmerung*, there is another dawn of the divine... As to the origin of this idol, it is easily located. Feuerbach, in construing the whole of philosophy of religion as an idolatry —not in order to denounce its bankruptcy, but indeed to consecrate in it a finally legitimate appropriation— remarks that in it idolatry deploys all of its rigor in thinking “God” as moral [...] But, here as often, Feuerbach is hardly valid except as a relay in the direction of Kant, who explicitly thinks of God as “a moral author of the world” (Marion, 2012: 31).

Naturally, both observations are vital for the understanding of the problem that motivates Marion to attempt to think God as iconic, “beyond being” (and morality), especially because the criticisms that can be made to Nietzsche can also be made *mutatis mutandis* to Heidegger, who conditions any potential appearing of God to the

realm of the ontic.²⁵ Indeed, independently of the assumed position regarding the effective reality of God (without quotation marks), one should direct one's own efforts concerning the problematization of such an effectiveness towards the horizon of a thought that renounces to "the defined security of the quotation marks" (Marion, 2001: 4), for "the concept, when it knows the divine in its hold, and hence names «God», defines it. It defines it, and therefore also measures it to the dimension of its hold" (Marion, 2012: 29). One, then, must surrender the doomed concept-object "God", deploying thus the possibility of the paradoxical reconceptualization which belongs more properly to God as *conceptual indefinability* not capable of being exhausted, *i. e.*, an absolute Other that always exceeds and surpasses us in the *distance*.²⁶

This is where we can begin to see that the more one delimits "God" (idol) with conceptually rigorous definitions, the less one is reaching out intentionally towards God; the less one delimits conceptually and intentionally the object of religious experience (icon), the closer one is from reaching God somewhat deictically, but it would be a God that "is understood" through the ineluctable and inescapable *distance*, which is not subject to phantasmagoric distorting intermediaries. What is needed, then, is a tremendous effort to try to think, in this horizon, a new concept of the "concept"—especially

25 Here it might be useful to remember the distinction made in the Heideggerian context between ontic (related to *Seiendes/ens*) and ontological (relating to *Sein/esse* as such). It is very interesting that, according to Marion himself, the one medieval philosopher —apart from Pseudo-Dionysius— that does not construct a conceptual idolatrous "God" is Thomas Aquinas, insofar as he understands God to be not an "*ens summum*", but *esse ipsum subsistens*. See Martis (1996).

26 "Distance can be defined in several equivalent statements; among others, alterity alone allows communion, and nothing of that which distinguishes separates without, by that very fact, uniting all the more. Or again, between God and man, incommensurability alone makes intimacy possible, because withdrawal alone defines the Father, just as the paternal withdrawal alone saves for man the sumptuous liberty of a son. O finally, that which makes "God" available either to qualify or disqualify him offers only an idol of the spectator and is confused with the spectator in a phantasmatic [*sic*] identity. Distance as di-stance therefore means: duality alone allows recognition, communion progresses with the separation wherein gazes are exchanged. Di-stance: only he can become my neighbor who remains forever outside of me and my doubles". (Marion, 2001: 198).

the *concept of God*— such that it will not become reductive, dominant, and, ultimately, violent:²⁷ a concept that opens up the possibility for the radical alterity to give itself as irreducibly Other, totally inexhaustible by the various traditional onto-theological articulations that do not do justice the object of their reflection, a concept that can present itself as a saturated phenomenon *par excellence*. In this context, one can easily appreciate the icon-idol distinction that Marion makes insofar as it opens up new possibilities of rethinking and re-signifying religion apart from tired onto-theological schemes, and more in line with the pristine symbolic and affective nature of the religious phenomenon. Indeed, Santasilia's reflection in this regard invites further investigation on the actual positive contribution of Marion on how affectivity—in a similar line to that of Schleiermacher and the mystic tradition— relates to the religious phenomenon itself:

It seems to us that by assuming the idol-icon counter-position, what is being established is precisely the very possibility of something that could be defined as “the feeling of God”. Clearly this does not look like the feeling of any other feeling, yet here, as opposed to a mere reduction of the question of the divine to a subjectivistic and “sentimentalist” direction, it is a matter of showing briefly how the problem related to the manifestation of the divine—i.e., the fundamental core of religious

27 A good explanation of this conceptual violence can be found in Smith's work, in a similar context than the one that is being dealt with here: “The violence of the (modern) concept raises the question of whether language and concepts are inherently reductive and violent. In short, is theory possible? Or rather, is it possible to do theory and employ theoretical concepts without doing violence to that which is «seen»? If the «object» of theoretical articulation is in some way radically exterior to language (God, *différance*, pretheoretical experience), then every unveiling of it within language will fail to produce the object: the phenomenon will fail to appear, precisely because of the failure of the concept to grasp that which necessarily exceeds its comprehension. Or rather, the object will be forced to appear otherwise than itself, forced to play by the rule of the concept and thus suffering the violence of conceptualization [...]. And in an important way, this methodological question is fundamentally a question of *justice*: how do we do justice to that which is other (where «doing justice» means respecting the other as other, rather than reducing it to a relation of identity), particularly in our theoretical descriptions and articulations?” (Smith, 2002: 5-6).

experience— opens up a dimension of the phenomenon that needs an affective basis upon which passivity plays a fundamental role in terms of appeal (Santasilia, 2022: 117; my translation).

The Hermeneutic Problem, the Postmodern Problem

Marion's solution will, then, be directed at trying to reconceptualize God in terms of the icon, rather than the idol. If one thinks of God in terms of the icon, its saturation will be such that any strictly defined concept will be impossible and always lacking; the otherness of the Other will be such that no concept will be able to grasp it. The question of God, nevertheless, begins to become quite problematic. If one cannot hold onto a concept of God, what is it then that the word *God* is referring to when one utters it? In an interview, Richard Kearney asks Marion a related question.²⁸ If the iconic concept of God is so saturated that it always transcends our conceptual and hermeneutic categories, then can we speak at all? What is one talking about when God is mentioned? Furthermore, what shall one say to the regular churchgoer? Is she condemned to the radical unintelligibility of God? If so, what does she do when she worships, sings, and dances? If not, how can one think of a concept of God that is neither empty nor idolatrous?

28 "I would pass from phenomenology to hermeneutics more rapidly than you would. It strikes me that your approach is more strictly phenomenological, since for you the saturated phenomenon is fundamentally *irrégradable*, a pure event without horizon or context, without «I» or agent. As such it appears to *defy* interpretation. You do of course make some concessions to hermeneutics, as when you say —on the very last page of your essay «The Saturated Phenomenon»— that this phenomenon is communal and communicable and historic. Here you do seem to acknowledge the possibility of a hermeneutic response, but my suspicion, and please correct me if I'm mistaken, is that the example you privilege —revelation— requires a *pure phenomenology of the pure event*, whereas I would argue that there is no pure phenomenon as such, that appearing —no matter how iconic or saturated it may be— always already involves an interpretation of some kind. Phenomenological description and intuition, in my account, always imply some degree of hermeneutic reading, albeit that of a prereflective, preunderstanding, or preconscious affection for the most part. My question, then, would be: How do we interpret —and by extension, how do we judge— the saturated phenomenon without betraying it?" (Kearney, 2004: 15).

It is here important to point out that the philosophical currents that have been deemed “postmodern” in general have been frequently associated with hermeneutics and interpretation in general.²⁹ Indeed, what philosophical hermeneutics has emphasized is that the human experience is always an *interpreted experience*: “The existential analytic (first section of *Sein und Zeit*) makes us realize that knowledge is always interpretation and nothing more” (Vattimo, 2005: 66). Thus, since Heidegger and the advent of hermeneutics, it is quite hard to avoid the conclusion that religious experience itself is always indefectibly interpreted from certain previous ontological and anthropological schemes, schemes which are pre-thematic, pre-reflective, and pre-conscious, in a similar fashion to Heidegger’s pre-comprehension model. In this sense, our historical, symbolic, economic, and life conditions contribute ineluctably to how one interprets God. However, the question remains: what would it mean to *discursively* reach out to God in iconic terms? Is it possible?

Two different proposals come to mind in this context. First, given Frege’s sense/reference distinction, one could simply say that to speak iconically of God means that the reference will never be exhausted by any possible sense of God. Whatever one says about God will always be partial, incomplete, and perfectible. There is, then, a radical need to rethink conceptuality as such, what a concept is. As Caputo states: “What breaks down in the breakthrough is the spell of conceptuality, the illusion that we have somehow or another managed to close our conceptual fists around the nerve of things, that we have grasped the world round about, circumscribed and encompassed it. Breakthrough is the countermetaphorics to the metaphorics of the concept: *be-greifen*, *con-capere*, *con-ceptus*” (1987: 270). This should give both philosophers and theologians a profound humility when talking about God, knowing that God is always more than what one can talk about, think of or imagine about him. Indeed, it has already been pointed out by Heidegger, Marion, and even Aquinas himself that to talk about an “object” one needs to talk

29 Vattimo, Rorty, Ricoeur, Derrida, and other would be considered to be part of this category.

about a definite “object”; but to do that the object needs to be a definite being (*ens*). However, God is not a being (*ens*), nor is God a thing (*res*). One could gladly (yet partially) join the Thomistic tradition at this point (as Marion himself realizes at the end of *God without Being*) stating that God needs to be understood as *esse ipsum subsistens*, as being beyond being, and as *agape*, that is, “something” that transcend the traditional *quiditas* categories.

Second, it should be noted that the religious traditions in general, and the Christian tradition in particular —especially insofar as it relates to the rich tradition of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures— contain a polyphony capable of naming God in different ways from myth to poetry to laws to stories. The actual experience of the religious person has very little to do with the idolatrous “God” of onto-theology, which simply means that the mystery of God remains a mystery and a lived experience for the person on the street. Certainly, the narratives we tell each other at the juncture of religious narratives, rites, and the consequent symbolic structures that configure our societies —especially our postmodern ones— are profoundly mediated by the inherited religious experience that the traditional religions deliver to their acolytes. In that sense, contrary to the Weberian secularization thesis, it is not the case that society does not participate in the appropriation and reproduction —both discursively and performatively— of religious myths and rituals. On the contrary, myths have been multiplied in such a way that the previously hegemonic and self-confident Enlightenment narrative has been put radically into question. Indeed, “objective reason”, which would be *ex hypothesi* independent of any interpretation, no longer seems to be a viable option for anyone nowadays.³⁰ An ever-increasing realization has been taking place in the philosophical imaginary, namely, that there is no “point of view from nowhere”. Human beings are always conditioned and structured by their contingent cultural, historical, economic, and symbolic situation, which ultimately means that one needs to proceed cautiously whenever one encounters the religious phenomenon in different contexts.

30 See Smith (2001).

Can one really state dogmatically that the God experienced by millions of people daily in the context of their rituals and prayers is absolutely nonexistent? Can one legitimately say that the myths and religious narratives that inaugurate and found the worldly horizons of collective and individual existence, the sociocultural imaginaries, and the ever new and different inhabitable worlds are completely unimportant for XXI century people? Perhaps the “God” of onto-theology —the moral God, the First Cause, etc.— shall be impugned as nonexistent (or socially irrelevant), but that hardly does anything to refute the numinous experience of God for millions of people: the God of Isaac, Abraham, and Jacob, the God of the poor and oppressed, the God who suffers with the people, the Crucified Christ so real and alive for all Christians around the world that resurrects every day in the lives of so many people. Certainly, this God is not object of apologetic proof or demonstration; this experience of God can only be properly accounted for in phenomenological and hermeneutical terms, in terms of a distance, withdrawal, of self-giving and self-abandonment, and in terms of looking at the face of the other, which is, indeed, the gist of postmodern theology (Mendoza-Álvarez, 2010: 334). But, in this context, Marion, being himself a Christian, states this magnificently saying the following:

The paschal mystery in itself is neither the question nor the object of a discourse: the Christ manifests his divinity all the more perfectly insofar as, in the unreserved abandon of his being placed on the cross, put to death and in the tomb, he plays absolutely the play of the withdrawal that unites him to and distinguishes him from the Father. The cross manifests the withdrawal as distinction, and the Resurrection, the same withdrawal as union. The distance of the withdrawal shows its two faces in these two events, whose chronological succession should not hide the theological and conceptual inherence. The question that here awakens the poet does not consist, trivially, in demonstrating (or dismantling), critically or apologetically, the paschal

triduum. The believer [...] avoids this ridicule. What gives rise to the question is something else: can the disciples, who misunderstand the withdrawal in the approach of Christ—that is, we, Hesperians, who ignore the mediating measure of our relation to the divine where, nevertheless, our most native destiny summons us—can they conceive that the divine manifests its highest glory precisely in the paradoxical withdrawal of the Cross/Resurrection? Obviously not: the profound sadness of the disciples does not even suspect the triumph of the paschal joy of Christ. The hermeneutic of the decisive and decided event would demand, so that occidental man locate it, that he penetrate the double withdrawal of the approach and the reference; he misses it, moreover, only because he wears its mask, destinally (Marion, 2001: 118-119).

What sort of discourse is, then, appropriate for experiencing God? According to Marion, *praise* is what is left after one has stopped trying to name God in idolatrous terms (Marion, 2001: 188). However, for Ricoeur, God has already been named before we name him in law, in hymns, in the Gospels, in historical and mythical narratives, etc. God has already been experienced and named in different ways in the biblical record, in the religious tradition and texts inherited by us (Ricoeur, 1977). The ancient wisdom that different religious traditions bring to the table configure a certain mode of existence, transform our being in the world; the myths, symbols, and rituals that inexorably appeal to the religious person create collective identities, goals, and values shared by the community. Sometimes religious narratives create and legitimate alienating realities, whereas other times they help to bring about social change, wrenching people from pernicious and alienating institutions. Indeed, in terms of the sociology of knowledge, one can find a double dialectic: human beings constitute intersubjectively the nomic structure of the world in terms of myths and narratives that configure the sociocultural and religious world as such; but the mythic and

narrative structures are also capable of refiguring the world itself.³¹ Indeed, societies are created and recreated thanks to the power of narratives, myths, metaphors, religious texts, and symbols. In that sense, religious narratives are capable of resignifying and refiguring our collective existence by offering new horizons of meaning, new inhabitable worlds. For Ricoeur, “metaphor and narrative are revelatory because of their power to offer up redescrptions of reality that a reader can imaginatively inhabit. Through the employment of metaphor and narrative, poetic fiction offers new possibilities for renewed life” (Hall, 2015: 173).

Certainly, if one is to believe Lyotard, postmodernism implies the incredulity towards metanarratives, but that by no means entails the death of the religious narrative in general nor the Christian narrative in particular (Smith, 2001). On the contrary, it means that religious experience no longer must adhere to the allegedly rational canons of the Enlightenment in order to be reasonable; religious experience must not adhere to the modern, instrumental rationality that brought about the problems that gave rise to postmodernism.³² Religious people must attend to the religious texts and traditions to continue to enrich their experiences, to transform their horizons, and even to creatively reinterpret and enrich their own tradition *vis-à-vis* the contemporary challenges that our societies face at large.

Concluding remarks

31 “One may say, therefore, that religion appears in history both as a world-maintaining and as a world-shaking force. In both these appearances, it has been both alienating and delineating – more commonly the first, because of intrinsic qualities of the religious enterprise as such, but in important instances the second. In all its manifestations, religion constitutes an immense projection of human meanings into the empty vastness of the universe – a projection, to be sure, which comes back as an alien reality to haunt its producers” (Berger, 1967: 100).

32 “La racionalidad moderna es solipsista, objetivista, cientificista. De entrada, está incapacitada para lo inefable, para lo que está más allá de sí misma. La racionalidad moderna se queda en el mundo de lo ilusorio. Confunde lo ilusorio con lo real. La racionalidad ilustrada desemboca en el nihilismo” (Balderas-Vega, 2003: 65). See also Rorty and Vattimo (2006).

At this point, one can just begin to visualize incipiently different ways of approaching God in the context of postmodernism: from the Marionian distinction between idol and icon that could potentially found a radically new way of understanding the “problem of God” in the hermeneutical context of postmodernism, hermeneutics, and phenomenology to the retelling, recontextualizing, and reappropriating of traditional myths, narratives, and symbols. Indeed, starting from Marion’s reflection, it could be said that God extraconceptually is neither object of refutation, nor is he object of strict apologetic demonstration.³³ If this were the case, then the concept of “God” used would still be bound to a regional logic, and then that would not be God, but some conceptual “God”. This is what the logic of postmodernism has tragically compelled us to understand, both to theists and atheists alike. As Caputo states:

But while it is perfectly true that in some of its incarnations postmodernism makes life difficult for traditional believers, it is no less true that it complicates the life of modern atheism... Theology reaches further than the divinity schools; it has to do with the very idea of a fixed center. That is why, on closer examination, postmodernism turns out to be not a particularly friendly environment for atheism, either, not if atheism is a metaphysical or an otherwise fixed and decisive denial of God. Thus, a version of postmodern thinking has emerged recently that unnerves the religious right and a lot of secularizing postmodernists alike, neither of whom saw it coming, one that identifies “modernity” with “secularization” and sees in “postmodernity” an opening to the “postsecular” and even to a “postmodern theology”. (2007: 267).

33 “Such continuity between dogmatics and apologetics stands out, then, all the better because the same negative index, at times, seems to affect them; in what we are considering here, this point says much, for it signals a new status for apologetics. The aim would no longer be (but has this ever been the goal?) to develop an argumentative machine, which would claim, like well-executed propaganda, to force an intimate conviction by force of reasons, or rather of popular slogans, an approach that testifies more to a will to dominate and strengthen an apparatus, than to a gesture of love revealing Love” (Marion, 2002: 55).

Can one then continue to think about (and believe in) God in today's postmodern society? I certainly believe so, but not without having undergone some heavy criticism. We should acquire what Ricoeur has called a *second naïveté*: "The contrary of suspicion, I will say bluntly, is faith. What faith? No longer, to be sure, the first faith of the simple soul, but rather the second faith of one who has engaged in hermeneutics, faith that has undergone criticism, post-critical faith" (1970: 28). In fact, it seems likely that postmodern thought, as represented by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and other masters of suspicion, has opened up new horizons of possibility, new ways of inhabiting the world in a more poetic manner. The postmodern strictures prompt us to think in less rationalistic terms about God. Have historical religions not often reiterated the very mysteriousness and ineffability of God himself? Can the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, described by Eliade, and others, be expressed in first order logic, modal logic, or any other logic that does not belong to the logic of God himself and his self-revelation?³⁴ Indeed, one could ask what good it is for the person who longs for a religious experience to ascertain that the ontological argument "works" on the S5 system of modal logic, or that the kalam cosmological argument "has (not) been successfully refuted". No actual existential good seems plausibly obtainable from this sort of reasoning as long as one continues to leave the traditional symbolic structures and narratives untouched.

I certainly believe it is now time to return to a more limpid, primordial, and pristine experience of God, an originary experience that is mediated by iconic, non-dominant concepts of God. Interpreting and reinterpreting God in iconic ways entails not only a never-ending task, but a radically new comprehension of the symbolic and world-opening possibilities that structure and condition our understanding of our social, political, cultural, ethical, and religious realities. The understanding that one has of God has, in turn, innumerable existential consequences for the religious believer herself. In this sense, maybe it is time to destroy our conceptual idols and begin to reconstruct a new mythico-poetical understanding of who

34 See Eliade (1959).

God is *vis-à-vis* the polyphony of excess proper to ancient religious traditions and writings.³⁵ The risk is, nonetheless, radical: one could potentially encounter a truly Other that cannot be domesticated and reduced by our gaze, our mention, and our thought.

■ References

- Balderas-Vega, G. (2003). *Filosofía y religión. Una hermenéutica desde la crisis de la racionalidad moderna*, Universidad Iberoamericana.
- Berger, P. (1967). *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. Doubleday.
- Caputo, J. (2007). Atheism, A/theology, and the Postmodern Condition. M. Martin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*. Cambridge University Press: 267-282.
- (1987). *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*. Indiana University Press.
- Corbí, M. (2007). *Hacia una espiritualidad laica: sin creencias, sin religiones, sin dioses*. Herder Editorial.
- Eliade, M. (1959). *The Sacred and the Profane*. Harcourt, Brace, and World.
- Feser, E. (2017). *Five Proofs for the Existence of God*. Ignatius Press.
- González, A. L. (2008). *Teología natural*. EUNSA.
- Habermas, J. (1992). *Postmetaphysical thinking*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Hall, W. D. (2015). On the Possibility of (Un) naming God: Thinking Theologically Along the Lines of Literature. *Literature and Theology*, 29(2): 166-182.
- Holland, T. (2019). *Dominion. How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*. Basic Books.
- Kearney, R. (2004). *Debates in Continental Philosophy. Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers*. Fordham University Press.
- Mackinlay, S. (2010). *Interpreting Excess. Jean-Luc Marion, Saturated Phenomena, and Hermeneutics*. Fordham University Press.

35 See, for example, Ricoeur (1977: 489-508).

- Marion, J.-L. (1985). De la “mort de Dieu” aux noms divins: l’itinéraire théologique de la métaphysique. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 41(1), (février) : 25-41.
- (2001). *The Idol and Distance. Five Studies*. Fordham University Press.
- (2002). *Prolegomena to Charity*. Fordham University Press.
- (2012). *God without Being*. The University of Chicago Press.
- (2015). *Negative Certainties*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Martis, J. (1996). Thomistic *Esse* – Idol or Icon? Jean-Luc Marion’s God Without Being. *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies* 9(1): 55-68.
- Mendoza-Álvarez, C. (2010). *El Dios escondido de la posmodernidad. Deseo, memoria e imaginación escatológica*. SUJ.
- Moreland, J. P., and Craig, W. L. (eds.) (2009). *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Plantinga, A. (2000). *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1970). *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation*. Yale University Press.
- (1977). Nommer Dieu. *Études théologiques et religieuses* 52(4): 489-508.
- (2000). *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*. The Athlone Press.
- (2016). *Philosophical Anthropology. Writings and Lectures*. Vol. 3. Polity Press.
- Rorty, R. and Vattimo, G. (2006). *El futuro de la religión. Solidaridad, caridad, ironía*. Paidós.
- Santasilia, S. (2022). Desenmascarar el ídolo. Sentir a Dios como auténtica posibilidad de pensar la religión. J. L. Roggero (ed.), *El rigor del corazón. La afectividad en la obra de Jean-Luc Marion*. SB Editorial: 109-118.
- Smith, J. K. A. (2001). A Little Story About Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion, And Postmodernism Revisited. *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* (Article 6), 18(3): 353-358.
- (2002). *Speech and Theology. Language and the Logic of the Incarnation*. Routledge.
- Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*. *Corpus Thomisticum*: Thomas de Aquino, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, q. 1-2.
- Wesphal, M. (1998). *Suspicion and Faith. The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism*. Fordham University Press.
- Zubiri, X. (2002). En torno al problema de Dios. *Sobre el problema de la filosofía y otros escritos (1932-1944)*. Alianza Editorial, 215-242.