



HORIZON AND EPIPHANY

Horizonte e Epifania

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Abstract: When philosophy consents to working within the range of human finitude, it sets itself on a course toward some difficulty accepting claims for the existence and experience of the God who is said to be one and absolute. Phenomenology is such a philosophy, and Christianity worships such a God. Of course, this difficulty only repeats one that may occur to us in the form of a question already at the level of everyday life, or what the phenomenologists call ‘the natural attitude.’ How does God become known to me, without God ceasing to be God or me ceasing to be my finite self? In fact, the philosophical difficulty is fortuitous, since it brings a sophisticated conceptual reserve to bear on what might otherwise remain only a puzzle or a wound for ordinary believers. What does it mean to say that God appears to us? And by what rigor might we begin to determine the specific nature of such a claim? Phenomenologists propose that this is a question of horizons.

Keywords: Transcendence. Phenomenology. Experience of God. Horizons.

Resumo: Quando a filosofia consente em operar no âmbito da finitude humana, ela se situa em uma via que conduz a certa dificuldade de aceitar afirmações da existência e experiência de um Deus visto como sendo único e absoluto. A fenomenologia é tal filosofia e o cristianismo cultua tal Deus. Sem dúvida, esta dificuldade apenas repete o que pode nos ocorrer em forma de uma questão já no nível da vida quotidiana, ou o que os fenomenólogos chamam de “a atitude natural”. Como Deus se torna conhecido por mim, sem que Deus deixe de ser

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Deus ou eu deixe de ser a minha personalidade finita? De fato, a dificuldade filosófica é casual, já que ela aborda com um sofisticado instrumental conceitual o que de outro modo permanece para simples fieis apenas um enigma ou uma ferida. Que significa dizer que Deus nos aparece? E com que rigor poderíamos começar a determinar a natureza específica de tal afirmação? Do ponto de vista da fenomenologia esta é uma questão de horizontes.

Palavras-chave: Transcendência. Fenomenologia. Experiência de Deus. Horizontes.

I.

It is a teaching of phenomenology that the meaning of a thing does not occur in strict isolation, as if separate or apart from other meanings. Husserl and Heidegger give different inflections to this insight. Husserl concentrates on a sense in which a perception may awaken past recollections that it resembles, and which, coming into contact with that perception, influence the sense that we may have of it into the future. The presence of what is not immediately present is operative in the simplest manner, as when our perception of the face of an object is given with consciousness of its back, so that we have an enriched experience of shape and depth. But it is also present in another way, and with greater complexity, where an entire social and cultural milieu supplies definition to the range of real possibilities for a perception. This a matter of what he calls "horizon." Horizons are "predelineated possibilities" that frame the meaning of the objects that awaken them upon appearing.¹ In plain terms, this accounts for the fact that when we become aware of an object, it is already to some degree and in some way familiar to us, though not without being specifically itself. And this of course could come to pass unless the horizon is already in place to focus our attention. In more specialized terms, the object that we perceive is already saturated with anticipations of its meaning that are supplied from recollection, and what is supplied from recollection is thus co-given with the object itself. This, furthermore, is continuous, according to the temporality of an ego that ceaselessly renews itself and its understanding of a world in each new present moment. Phenomenological research applies itself to precisely this. Its guiding aim is to bring to light the original intentions of the living ego, in relation to the qualifications imposed by the horizon within which they occur. Phenomenology thus never doubts that a present meaning always and already has an essential relation with meanings that are no longer present.

¹ This construal is taken from E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. D. Cairns (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1988), p. 45. My entire paragraph attempts to summarize some important developments of §19.

Heidegger turns away from Husserl's concentration on perception, and radicalizes his sense in which a horizon furnishes a unity where there would otherwise be an inchoate range of possibilities. That is to say that whereas for Husserl, a horizon entails predelineated possibilities that set limits on what a perception can mean, Heidegger has in view an existential unity antecedent to differences among even familiar objects. In *Being and Time*, this is finally a matter of temporality. Dasein is primordially its own temporalizing, and what we delineate as past, present and future stand out against it.² This claim, established late in the text, underlies and furnishes the meaning of what is discovered in earlier, simpler phenomenological work: Dasein projects its understanding of beings from out of care for its own existence, and this caring has the temporality of being toward its own death (§§ 31, 65). Conversely, this temporality is the horizon within which they are given as they are. Things are grasped initially as tools that are suited to tasks and the world is first a milieu in which one dwells. The evident coherence of beings, as tools and world, is grounded in the consistency of a being that cares for its own existence in view of its necessary end.

Now whether we suppose that the present is constituted from through a relation to the past (Husserl) or projected with a view to the future (Heidegger), it would seem indispensable, from the phenomenological perspective, that for anything entering our experience to have meaning that it will appear within a horizon that admits of other meanings to which, furthermore, it would be related. As a matter of fact, we are able to discover this easily enough for ourselves through some consideration of ordinary experience. When in a vast and open field we recognize a line where the fertile terrain meets the blue sky, we encounter a limit for what we are able to see. But is this essentially by exclusion, as if to identify and rule out what otherwise could be seen? The existence and nature of things beyond the horizon is known only by abstraction, and not according to the seeing that unfolds within it. This reminds us that seeing is as such coextensive with limits, and even that limits are essential to the very possibility of seeing. After all, the gaze without limit would be a gaze that never settles onto anything defined and intelligible. Yet this cannot mean that a horizon is itself visible, since as we already know from experience, if we truly see a line we can already see to what is beyond it. What we identify as the line of the horizon is only the internal limit of the visible,

² The position is bold, and plainly insured by the thesis of a primary, though dynamic self-relation (ipseity): "Temporalizing does not signify that ecstases come in a 'succession'. The future is not later than having been, and having-been is not earlier than the Present. Temporality temporalizes itself as a future which makes present in a process of having been." M. HEIDEGGER, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), §68, p. 401.

and not some *tertium quid* between the seen and not-seen. This is evident when one moves toward the horizon as if to inspect it, only to find that it shifts along with the movement. Not that it is impossible to breach a particular horizon: rather, as one does do, one discovers that a new one has emerged, by either expanding upon the previous one or modifying it according to new conditions. We may leave behind this or that particular horizon, but there is always some horizon so long as we see and there is something to see.

This helps us to identify three important features of the phenomenological notion of horizon. Just as the horizon of the field relative to the sky sets the conditions within which various visible things appear in multiple relations (size, distance, color, etc.), so have Husserl and Heidegger led us to think that the distinctive meanings of things are determined within the horizon of their givenness (e.g., for Husserl, a play of familiarity and distinctiveness; for Heidegger, relative usefulness). And just as we learn from efforts to gain new perspective on the horizon that it only shifts with us, so do the phenomenologists show us that the horizon for the givenness of things changes in line with changes of attitude and attunement (existential, cognitive, aesthetic, etc.). This leads to a third point of agreement between ordinary experience and phenomenological principle: it belongs to the horizon that it is secured from our situation and perspective. Or better, its origin is closer to us than are the things that we encounter within it.

We may conclude from this that a horizon is therefore an index of the finitude of meaning. With regard to the things themselves, nothing could be more evident. What appears in a horizon has already submitted to specific limits. Furthermore, whenever more than one thing appears, these things also delimit one another within the field circumscribed by the horizon. When, for example, the field is opened by practical interest, things become known to me according to the degree that they may serve my goals, which is to say through differentiation from the others. But finitude is also a condition of the subject to whom the things appear, as we can easily see in the discovery that as one moves to escape or else grasp a horizon, one finds oneself already at the origin of another one. The horizon, it thus should be noted, is fluid, ceaselessly adaptable relative to our situation, but not in any intelligible sense infinite.

From the simple fact that one horizon always gives way to another, it follows that each such horizon is limited by its difference from others, and that our subjectivity does not have the power to stand over all horizons at once. If perhaps Husserl and Heidegger are not fully opposed in their understanding of this condition for our *natural attitude*, it is Heidegger who radicalizes its implication for *philosophy*. The Dasein who philosophizes is not somehow exempt from the temporality of care and being toward death, but only has grasped his or her own possibilities such as

they are available in the deep reflection opened by resolute attunement to mortality (the encounter with one's own death is also a disclosure of the meaning of one's own life). These possibilities appear fully within the primordial horizon that is our temporality, and grasping them does not place us outside or beyond them but only brings us fully before them. Whether or not Husserl actually considers transcendental phenomenology to have within itself a capacity to inspect consciousness as if it were free of every condition and thus every horizon—it seems to me that this is only a tendency or perhaps an ideal, rather than a robust claim³—it is not until Heidegger that philosophy proposes to grasp meaning within horizons and to proceed by way of investigating them, but without any thought of conducting itself as if from a neutral distance.

The phenomenological conception of horizon as an index of finitude and as an essential feature of our being in the world invites critique along the horizontal and vertical axes of meaning. Along the horizontal axis, one suspects in the thesis of original lived experience unrecognized traces of historical, cultural or gender bias. Yet the very idea that horizons shift and refuse reduction into one another urges against the notion of pure experience that would attract such a charge; one might rather contend that a rigorously consistent phenomenology would come to the aid of ideology critique, including when addressed to problematic features of its own work. Nor can one quite follow the thought, though it is not entirely without reason, that with regard to the things themselves, the notion of horizon domesticates or normalizes, as if differences are suppressed by an orientation to identity. We have already taken note of the fact that a horizon preserves and even brings out difference within itself, and that we constantly move across and among horizons. Nothing prevents us from adding that such movement entails a change of appearance for the things we encounter, and that we are generally conscious of this to some small degree. It is a peculiar feature of this consciousness that it contains within itself a sense that the being of things is not exhausted by their appearing. In a certain sense, Husserl was provoked by nothing more than this.

Criticism along the vertical axis of meaning is motivated chiefly by interest in a religion of the absolute deity, or at least in themes that would be in recognizable solidarity with it. This criticism is made urgent by the fact

³ How, finally, are we to envision Husserl's phenomenological spectator, who would have moved to a perspective from which to contemplate the structures of every mental act, including those by which eidetic and transcendental work has secured the grounds for what transpires in the natural attitude? One might better ask for the relation of that spectator to the language and body in which it conducts itself, or, *pace* Heidegger, its temporality. It is not certain that phenomenology needs to speak for the extraordinary leap away from language, body and time that some might suppose to be possible, rather than contenting itself with further refinements of our capacity to reflect on ourselves while nonetheless bound to ourselves, and even to reflect on that same reflecting.

that its theme—absolute transcendence—is not only limited or distorted by enclosure within a horizon, but necessarily ruled out. Yet it is also difficult to even begin a response, since what phenomenology has discovered about horizons prepares us for the thought that it is a necessary condition for anything to have meaning that it be given in a horizon and differentiated from what is also given there. One anticipates the criticism itself: If, for example, the God in whom one believes does not submit to these conditions, then from the perspective informed by that belief phenomenology must appear limited by an incapacity to admit absolute height or absolute depth, and in that strict sense would be confined to an unfortunate superficiality. But this accomplishes very little unless a case can be made for the possibility that what the phenomenologists are said to exclude from consideration is in fact given in experience and for thought. The general name for such a possibility is *epiphany*.

II.

The word itself calls for some attention. In Ancient Greek theater, *epiphaneia* characterizes the manner in which a god or goddess appears near the end of a play to resolve conflict by the exercise of an unexpected power. In his *Eumenides*, Aeschylus thus has Athena direct events previously in the grip of violence toward the establishment of a cult and tribunal that will henceforth bind and order a people (Orestes goes free, and the gods of vengeance are installed in what becomes the Erechtheion, thereafter to be worshipped as kindly beings). Athena's presence is not in itself entirely surprising; the gods of vengeance (Erinyes, or Furies) had called for her (*Eumenides*, 306). What dazzles is her accomplishment: suspension of a destructive cycle, and salvation for Orestes, both from beyond expectation. In this, we begin to see the outline of a more familiar sense of epiphany: something comes into established conditions in a manner that transforms them without simply annihilating them.

It would be a mark of our distance from Ancient Greece to strictly assimilate epiphany with the kindred notion of theophany. There certainly are biblical passages in which *epiphaneia* has a meaning we might readily assign to *theophaneia*. *2 Maccabees* 15:27 describes a victory won by soldiers who fought "while praying to God with their hearts and rejoicing in God's manifestation [*epiphaneia*]," but this text, written in the late 2nd century BC, is situated well after the consolidation of robust monotheism that many scholars date to the period of *Isaiah*, several centuries earlier. For it is only beginning with *Isaiah* that the God who alone is of interest to the chosen people is invoked unambiguously as not only without equal, but also without any other god who could be truly worthy of the name (Is

45:5).⁴ In short, henceforth, at least for the Jewish and Christian tradition, *epiphaneia* generally means *theophaneia*. This is the sense of the word in 2 *Thessalonians* 2:8, where Paul says of the Parousia that “it will annul by appearing” (*katargēsei tē epiphaneia*),⁵ and 2 *Timothy* 1:10, in which the very appearing of Jesus Christ among us is said to convey salvific grace (*epiphaneias tou Sōtēros hēmōn Christou Iēsou*).

Claims for epiphany as theophany, as the appearing of the one true God, put special pressure on the phenomenological commitment to horizons of meaning. Before attempting to address the difficulty, it is necessary to rule out certain misconceptions. The one true God who dawns in Israelite consciousness by the time of *Isaiah* is not merely distinguished from other gods in dignity and power, but is strictly beyond any possible comparison, which is to say beyond and out of reach of the distinctions by which finite minds operate. It did not take long for the monotheisms to develop this thought with considerable rigor. By the time of Augustine, God is called Selfsame (*idipsum*),⁶ a concept meant to indicate an existence that transcends differentiation. The least that can be said about this is that it imposes severe restrictions on claims that God is ‘no-thing’, ‘acosmic’ or ‘beyond being’ since it is possible to take these expressions as if they only distinguish God from what God is not, which would immediately imply limitation. If one wishes to employ those expressions without contradiction, then it should not be forgotten that, uniquely in the case of the absolute God, the difference must be one of excess:⁷ God’s nothingness must be plenitude, God’s presence in the world surpasses belonging to it, and God is beyond being without becoming the other or supplement of being. And so, the pressure placed on phenomenology is evident enough: how will the God who exceeds any differentiation or comparison enter experience and consciousness without thereby immediately ceasing to appear precisely as God?

Now phenomenology does help us to greater precision about this difficulty. We find our initial bearings by observing that it identifies different senses

⁴ For concise discussion, see MCKENZIE, J.L., “Aspects of Old Testament Thought,” in R.E. BROWN, J.F. FITZMYER, R.E. MURPHY, (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 77:17, p. 1287.

⁵ Paul’s word *katargein* is notoriously difficult to translate. Most often, it comes up when it is a question of faith and law, whereupon he is asked whether the former is brought to overthrow or tear down the latter (*Gal* 2:17, *Rom* 3:31). Those who make the suggestion use the word first and in that negative sense, but Paul uniformly resists by observing that the annihilation will nonetheless uphold and fulfill. I venture to assign it that sense in 2 *Thess* 2:8, though theme of that passage is eschatological rather than soteriological.

⁶ Most famously in Augustine, *Confessions* IX.x.24.

⁷ Working out the logic of creation, Robert Sokolowski calls this “the Christian distinction” with respect to the religions of Greece and Rome that it encounters in its historical movement west. SOKOLOWSKI, R. *The God of Faith and Reason. Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), p. 12.

of 'transcendence.' These are divided first between the movement of going out ahead of oneself, such as Heidegger emphasizes in the temporality of Dasein, and the quality or dimension of exceeding our grasp, such as some religious traditions reserve for the divine. In contemporary thought, Gabriel Marcel has insisted on this distinction as much as anyone else, arguing finally that only the possibility of the latter provides for the coherence of the former. Unless things truly stand first as what they are, over against any assimilation or absorption by our restless movement, there could only be immanence without light, and in an important sense no real experience of the things themselves. More broadly in that case, the movement of our being would never elevate from brute grasping but only circulate, and would never make progress but only digress and defer.⁸ In short, without the transcending of objects over the grasping of subjects, subjects would not properly be subjects but only their undefined urge for an elusive fulfillment. Whether or not one accepts this vision of objectless existence, it does bring into relief a point of cardinal importance for phenomenology: as distinct from an objectless sea that either nourishes us or, as the case may be, threatens to drown us, what we meet in our natural attitude is a world and things that are more than their immediate availability. A desk and a book are more than their perceived qualities, and indeed are given as more than their perceived qualities. This calls for an important decision about vocabulary: since use of the word 'transcendence' to characterize the movement of our being risks confusing or obfuscating our sense of what we truly move toward, we do best to reserve that word for the latter.

But even after suspending any use of transcendence to define the movement of our being, it must still be said that phenomenology speaks of transcendence in a number of ways. We have already observed that a thing is more than its perceived qualities. The thing transcends its appearance. So, too, is the world in which things are available more than its appearance as this or that frame and context. The world that I presently have is given already as more than a temporary and precarious outline; it belongs to a world that it stabilizes as if beyond the cohesion of a singular present vision of things, and that it is assured from elsewhere than what that vision captures. To this may be added the transcendence of others who one immediately senses, in their givenness, are more than the eyes and face or words and gestures from which one presumes to grasp her meaning. An other person is assuredly not a thing, since she uses things and indeed things may testify obliquely to her presence. In this, one may

⁸ See MARCEL, G., *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 1, *Reflection and Mystery*, trans. G. S. Fraser (London: The Harvill Press, 1951), pp. 46-47. As Marcel makes plain in other works, the idea that the movement of immanence which would do without a positive relation to the transcendent is ultimately incoherent implies a sharp critique of any attempt, for him distinctly modern, to live or think as if first and finally the origin of one's own experience.

recognize that her transcendence exceeds the transcendence of things. She is also not a world, but rather has a world just as does the one who encounters her. But what is the relation between her transcendence and the transcendence of the world? This is debated between those for whom one first has a world and in that world encounters an other who also has a world, and those for whom one has a world within the aura and ambit of a prior relation with the other (or others). It is the tendency of Heidegger to consider the relation with a world to be prior to the relation with other Daseins. In order to get free of that claim, Emmanuel Levinas is required to conceive of a relation with the other person that would be before and outside our relation even with a world, and to invest the face of that other with a capacity to break into the relation with the world that we tend naturally to consider primary. The face of the other thus comes as a surprise and even a shock, the self-revelation of a presence that surpasses every measure.⁹ Similar things are said of God in the philosophy of Jean-Luc Marion. Much of Marion's work is prompted by a suspicion that the metaphysics which is worked out in terms of activity and causality is intent first on securing the intelligibility of all that is created, rather than starting from the intelligibility of their Creator. In that case, it is possible that our conception of God would not exceed the minimum that is needed in order to explain everything in by appeal to some anterior cause. Marion finds more promising results from a metaphysics of giving and receiving. The gift that is divine love, love without measure, pours into beings from wholly beyond, as water cascades into a basin.¹⁰ And a gift, we know, is properly received only when one welcomes the gift truly as given. As for the thing itself, as event and experience, the privileged instance in which to encounter this gift is the infinite gaze of the divine persona met in icons, in which Christ looks upon us from beyond the temporal and spatial limits of our being in the world. To be sure, my being in the world is most generally such that everything that I come upon falls under my own gaze with only moderate resistance, yet it is precisely other than this when I come upon the iconic gaze of the divine, in which "*it* visibly envisages *me* and loves me."¹¹ Here of course it is necessary to grant the metaphor of vision the fullest possible extension. The God who envisages me approaches me with all of my capacities in view. To meet that gaze is to meet a divinity that transcends not only things and the world, but the very finitude to which they appear.

⁹ The basic claims are worked out in LEVINAS, E. *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 68-70.

¹⁰ See MARION, J.-L. *The Idol and Distance*, trans. T. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), pp. 166-167. Both the appeal to a metaphysics of gift and the image of cascade and basin are inspired by Dionysius the Areopagite.

¹¹ MARION, J.-L. *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. C. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 47-48 (emphasis added).

These few cursory remarks are already enough for us to anticipate the particular manner in which phenomenology is bound to receive claims for religious transcendence, whether under the more general heading of epiphany or its specific variant as theophany. In at least some cases, what would be revealed to us from beyond our capacities and by an initiative that is not our own, would not merely take its place alongside the transcendences of things and world, and would not simply present itself in a new horizon, but would arrive from beyond each and all of them together and at once, and *without appearing within any horizon*.

III.

Not every epiphany is fully theophany, and the fact that claims for theophany emerge later does not mean that other epiphanies are no longer possible. The difference between the two is sustained by more than history. If we compare the epiphany of Athena in *The Eumenides* with the theophany of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem, we note first that whereas everyone in the play and indeed in the audience immediately recognizes the goddess, Jesus is known as Lord only by those who already possess a necessary understanding—whether it is three kings who have discerned that they should follow a rising star (Mt 2:1-2) or shepherds to whom an angel has been sent (Lk 2:8-20).¹² But we find nothing of lasting importance in this distinction if we understand it only in terms of how many people are able to see what reveals itself. What does seem truly important is the play of recognition and hiddenness that is admitted in the accounts of what is properly called the theophany of the Lord. For those who have eyes to see, the world, its political order, and one's very humanity are no longer what one had previously understood. *For those who have eyes to see*: this transpires only within a particular mode of reception. Not everyone sees Jesus as the Lord, and not only in Bethlehem. Moreover, not everyone who sees and understands commits fully to what it revealed. And these matters complicate our understanding of theophany, whereby divine transcendence

¹² This is also true of the epiphanies James Joyce has Stephen Hero define with reference to Aquinas's aesthetics. For Stephen, it is a matter of sudden beauty, manifest in an experience of wholeness, symmetry and radiance. The fact that Joyce's protagonist finds this in what most would readily call "trivialities" only underscores the fact such epiphanies are not recognized by everyone (though we might suppose that they are nonetheless always there to be seen). The Joycean epiphany "afflicts" a sensitivity that Stephen, for one, is willing to call "spiritual," but which a great many people either do not have or have not learned to heed. See JOYCE, J. *Stephen Hero* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 211. Needless to say, Joyce's very use of the word "epiphany" hearkens to the Christian Epiphany, though the latter is, in the terms developed here, properly theophantic and possesses a uniqueness that is challenged by a relocation in any number of mundane objects or events.

enters human experience and history. As concerns the event itself, one cannot avoid the thought that, in an important sense, it is exposed to the freedom of those who undergo it. After all, even after having understood the meaning of the rising star or the announcement of the angel, the three kings and the shepherds still had to give themselves to its truth by making their way to the manger where the infant lie. It is of course this way with the faith that appears symbolized in the experiences of the kings and the shepherds: revelation does not compel, but only proposes, and is fully transformative only upon the free assent of the believer. Which means that the theophany of the Lord is at once glorious and fragile, since one may choose to close one's eyes to it any time.

As concerns light and seeing, it appears that theophany is not adequately described in terms of excessive or superabundant gift (Marion), if by this is meant that without it the world moves only in darkness. Evidently enough, as one surveys the different responses to it in human experience, there are degrees of light or perhaps forms of seeing that cannot be reduced to a simple distinction between light and dark or seeing and blindness. It is no doubt with this in mind that Jean-Yves Lacoste has insisted that the place of theophany, as it arrives in a world that both precludes and yet admits it, is the "chiaroscuro" (*le clair-obscur*), shot through with light and darkness, each of which in varying degrees.¹³ Complete oblivion in the face of theophany certainly is possible, but so, too, are any number of forms of positivity. There is a certain evidence about this, in the final account: one receives and understands anything according to his or basic disposition, and nothing at all prevents us from thinking that a good many of them do have purchase on at least something of the truth. We are reminded of the scholastic adage, *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*—whatever is received is received in the mode of the one who receives.¹⁴

Now what scholastic theology has affirmed, phenomenology has had difficulty countenancing: the self-revelation of the absolute God goes hand in hand with—and even requires—a particular disposition that is present in only some among us. This is not at all the situation in which the meaning of an epiphany is immediately understood by everyone who sees it. But it is also not the situation in which the range of possible responses to theophantic presence reduces to either full and open affirmation of the divine or some form of failure to do so. Against this, it must be asserted that there is little sense in characterizing as failure the non-affirmation of God by those who do not have the means to recognize its proper meaning. Only those who have been formed in the necessary sensibility and understanding—only those who practice a particular attunement to

¹³ LACOSTE, J.-Y. *Experience and the Absolute* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 66; see also p. 158: "the destiny of the gift lies in the hands of whoever has received it."

¹⁴ Cf., e.g., AQUINAS, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 75, a. 5.

the divine—will welcome and respond to theophany truly as theophany. To be sure, many others will not, and those who do are certain to look upon this with regret. But there are other, subtler words than ‘failure’ or ‘closure’ to account for this difference.

Religious formation practices and, at their limit, symbol and sacrament ground the horizon within which God may appear truly as God. They compose the predelineated possibility within which divine transcendence enters the experience and understanding of finite beings without ceasing to be transcendent. To be sure, the believer addresses herself to an image or name among any number of other names, so that the image or the name of God has an intelligibility constituted by its difference from those others. In that much, the image or name of God remains in the orbit of the believing subject. But the reflective believer knows this, and her prayers aim immeasurably farther.

The transcendence of God is problem for phenomenology not simply because philosophy cannot admit a positive notion of the absolute, but rather because phenomenology has not found a way to recognize the possibility of a particularized absolute. Metaphysical theology has taught us that God does not need human affirmation to be God. But we are still learning what it truly means that God is God only for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

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