THE TRUTH OF CHRISTIANITY? MICHEL HENRY’S *WORDS OF CHRIST*¹

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Christ’s “remarkable discourse contains...statements that inescapably, upon reflection, are without equal in the history of human thought.”² Throughout *Words of Christ*, Michel Henry claims that Christianity is absolutely unique and that it conveys a kind of truth unlike that of any other discourse. This truth is communicated in Christ’s words as they are authentically conveyed in the Christian Scriptures. In the Christian Gospel texts, he argues, God himself speaks directly to and within our hearts, and Christianity is the sole tradition to have such direct access to the truth. But what leads Henry to make such extreme claims? In what sense is Christianity unique for him, and what does this mean for other religious traditions? Moreover, what is this truth that we gain from Christ’s words? In order to answer these questions, I will first provide some of the phenomenological context of Henry’s work in order to investigate the relationship he establishes between Christ and Christ’s words, a connection that is central to his text. Second, I will briefly examine Henry’s claim about Christianity’s uniqueness and apparent “monopoly” on truth. I will close by arguing that Henry’s argument is not primarily about rejecting other religious traditions but is, in fact, far more inclusive than it seems *prima facie*. Therefore, it also has potential for contemporary investigations of the meaning of the biblical texts.

Michel Henry (1922-2002) was one of the most important French philosophers of the twentieth century, whose work is only now being discovered by the English-speaking world. *Words of Christ* is his final work, completed before his death but published just a few weeks after he died on July 3, 2002. Henry’s early philosophical work focused on developing a phenomenology of the body and of materiality, displayed especially in his major work *The Essence of Manifestation* but also in his *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, in several pieces combined as *Material Phenomenology*, as well as in his two-volume work on Marx.³ He has also written extensively on art and is the author of several novels. Near the end of his life,

₁ This paper draws partly on a text I originally wrote as the translator’s introduction to *Words of Christ*, but which was unfortunately removed from the proofs without my knowledge before the text was printed (which is the reason for some of the inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the remaining “translator’s note”). I received a faculty research grant from the University of Scranton to write the original translator’s introduction, which I hereby gratefully acknowledge.

² Michel Henry, *Paroles du Christ* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), translated as *Words of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 7. All in-text citations refer to this work, unless indicated otherwise. [Although I provide the page numbers for the English translation, because that is the standard practice, I would strongly suggest consulting the French original for any serious work with the text. There are a significant number of mistakes in the translation that, although they had been corrected in the copy-edited version, for some reason were not transferred into the final text.]

Henry increasingly turned to Christianity as a way of expressing his earlier insights about materiality, the flesh, affection, and life. His final three works display this emphasis on Christianity most strongly: *I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity, Incarnation: A Philosophy of the Flesh* (which is not yet translated), and *Words of Christ.* Despite this apparent shift to what seems like a religious project, Henry’s fundamental argument remains essentially the same throughout his philosophical career, but it does become explicated in new and stronger paradigms and imagery. Ultimately, as I suggest in this paper, Henry’s argument about the exclusivity of Christianity becomes tempered when situated within his larger phenomenological project.

## I. The Truth of Christ’s Words

*Words of Christ* is a work of philosophy, despite its initial appearance. Henry reflects extensively on biblical passages and makes theological claims; however, he is neither engaging in systematic theology nor in biblical studies, and these reflections always emerge from a strictly philosophical perspective and for philosophical reasons. When engaging Henry’s final “religious” works, it is important to keep in mind that Henry is a philosopher, writes as a philosopher, and has philosophical aims and paradigms in mind—both in his proposals and in his often quite scathing critiques. It is, therefore, helpful to have some sense of the philosophical context in which Henry articulates his phenomenological insights.

Phenomenology, at its most basic level, is a study of phenomena—of reality as it appears to us and as we experience it. Phenomenology’s famous slogan is “back to the things themselves,” seeing things as they really appear to us by suspending any concern about what they might be in themselves and by bracketing the question of their existence. Husserl, one of the earliest phenomenologists, already tries to overcome a separation between the object “out there” and the subject’s act of observation. Consciousness, what it is conscious of, and how it is conscious of it always belong together. Henry’s phenomenology, as a philosophy of immanence, pushes this even further. He accuses Husserl and other phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty of separating phenomena and phenomenality far too much, and he aims instead at a complete identity of the two in which there is no separation between the phenomenon (what is experienced or shows/gives itself) and its phenomenality (how it is experienced or shows/gives itself). This identity is expressed most fundamentally in the immanence of life, which is what we are rather than a phenomenon somehow separate from us. Indeed, it makes phenomenality itself possible, even though it is utterly immanent to us, inseparable from us, and invisible to us. This concern with immanence and the invisible—two terms that go together in his work instead of opposing each other—is probably his most fundamental and enduring concern and the greatest contribution that he makes to the philosophical tradition of phenomenology.

Furthermore, Henry argues that, in going back to the things themselves, phenomenology has been too occupied with “things” and has left aside other, more important and essential aspects of our experience. Phenomenology is thus incapable of dealing with phenomena that are experienced in complete immediacy and where there is no separation between the phenomenon

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and the experience of the phenomenon. The experience itself is the phenomenon, but these immediate phenomena cannot be observed, visualized, or even judged because their entry as “things” into the field of vision would imply their separation from the phenomenal experience. These phenomena are invisible, yet they are invisible not because they are far away and mysterious, like ghosts or gods, but rather because they are so immediate that they cannot be separated from experience in a way that would make them visible. Henry is thus part of a recent movement in phenomenology that might be called “radical phenomenology” because it is interested in extreme, excessive or invisible phenomena that show themselves at the limit of our experience. However, his contribution is in many ways quite different from those of other radical phenomenologists in that he places strong emphasis upon immanence and immediacy. Most fundamentally, the completely immediate and immanent—albeit invisible—phenomenon is life itself as it is expressed in our affects and emotions. Life is the reality of self-affectivity, the fact that phenomena like joy and suffering are experienced in total immediacy and that we cannot separate ourselves from them. This life is completely separate from the false truth of the world, which merely simulates life but does not give genuine access to it. In his final works, Henry identifies genuine life with the Life of God and posits the Truth of Christianity as in absolute opposition to the false “truth” of the world and its mere appearance of life.

If it is true that Henry is primarily a philosophical thinker and not a biblical exegete, why do his final three works focus so exclusively on Christianity and the Christian Scriptures? Henry is convinced that Christianity has unique insight into the human condition and the identity of life as self-affectivity. This identification of true life as self-affective is the central philosophical insight of Henry’s material phenomenology, which he has developed throughout his philosophical career. In his final works, he identifies this truth of life with Christianity. The source of all life is God, and Henry interprets the Gospels as speaking of the divine life that flows in each one of us and generates us within its life as ones who are living. As sons of life, we are sons of God. In *I am the Truth*, Henry outlines how this life and truth is communicated to us via the Arch-son, Christ. In this earlier text, he relies almost entirely on the Gospel of John and uses its terminology of Life, Truth, Way, Word, and Light. After having been criticized for quoting so exclusively from what is deemed by most Biblical scholars the latest Gospel to be written and the furthest removed from any actual eye-witnesses to Christ and from the experiences of the first disciples, in *Words of Christ* Henry relies almost entirely on the synoptic Gospels instead, showing that his arguments can be supported by them equally well. He also formulates Christ’s distinction from all other living beings—all other sons who receive their life through him, the Arch-Son—much more clearly than he did in *I am the Truth*, which does not have a particularly well developed Christology.

In *Incarnation*, Henry carries this argument further. Most of the book is a phenomenological analysis of the flesh, in which he criticizes early phenomenology for its failure to develop a thoroughly material phenomenology and in which he tries to formulate such a phenomenology more successfully (with some inspiration from Descartes). In this context, Henry again develops his argument about auto-affectation (or self-affectivity) thoroughly, showing how the flesh bears witness to the immediacy of life in joy and suffering, pleasure and pain. In the final part of the book, he puts this in the context of Christ’s incarnation, showing what it means for Christ to be incarnate and how we might gain salvation in “the Christian sense.” He also explores the notion of “sin” in greater detail, which stands for our loss of connection with the divine life—or, at least, our refusal to acknowledge this source of our life and to act as if we could give ourselves life independently. We become entirely focused on this world and its things.
instead of fostering and realizing our original relationship to Life/God. Salvation, then, means a recovery and renewed realization of this connection with the divine and a return to this as the center of life. Salvation is, as in the Eastern Christian tradition, theosis/deification. To be “saved” means to “be in Christ,” to return to the source of our life in God, and to become part of the “mystical body” of Christ which sanctifies and restores our flesh. Words of Christ explores this possibility of salvation and restoration in more detail by focusing on Christ’s communication of it to humans, especially as set out by the synoptic Gospels.

As the title indicates, Henry analyzes Christ’s words, but also Christ as the Word of God. His central concern is the fundamental Christian claim that Christ is both divine and human. This implies, of course, that Christ’s words must also be both human and divine words. At the same time, Henry confronts the larger spiritual dilemma of how humans, who are not divine, would be able to distinguish between what is human and what is divine. How do we know when something, such as words or an experience, comes from God? How are divine words different from human words? If God’s words are similar or even identical to human speech and if we can hear them easily, then how can they claim to be divine? And if they are completely different, of a radically strange nature that would mark them as truly divine instead of merely human, how could we hear them considering that we ourselves are only human? One should stress again that Henry addresses this dilemma not primarily for the theological or spiritual concern of how we might hear or even encounter God. Rather he is interested in it for a radically phenomenological reason: if there are indeed divine phenomena, if they have their own kind of phenomenality and if we can have access to this type of phenomenality, then a whole realm of phenomena and of new versions of phenomenality is therefore opened. Phenomenology widens radically: not just new phenomena, but new types of phenomenality are introduced, and if that is so, then phenomenology cannot refuse to deal with these phenomena or to investigate them. It refuses them at its own peril of remaining limited and blind. The phenomenology of life opens a new realm to phenomenology, and this may be its most significant realm as it deals with what is closest to us, what cannot be separated from us, and what, in fact, is us.

Words of Christ proceeds in several stages in order to address these central questions. First, it examines the words of Christ when he speaks clearly as a human being and addresses his human audience, telling them about themselves, about their own condition, and about what is familiar to them (chapters 1-2). At this stage, everything is human and everything is about us so that we can follow it easily, yet not all of it is comfortable. Henry shows that Christ’s talking about the human condition actually serves to challenge it in fundamental ways, turning upside down our entire conception of reality. This human speech about us unsettles and uproots us. It gives us a completely different vision of what it means to be human in this world, one which Henry describes as an “upheaval” (chapters 2-3). Consequently, we begin to wonder who is this man, saying all these peculiar things? Soon we realize that Christ is not only speaking about us, but that he is also making claims about himself, some of them rather strange and outrageous (chapters 4-5). Christ’s challenge to the human condition and critique of the world (represented by the religious establishment) logically leads to questions about his identity, and we find that he claims to be God, to be divine, that he has special access to the divine life. This is where we move from merely human words to what increasingly seems like divine words (chapters 5-8), yet Henry does not engage in speculation about the inner workings of the Trinity or about what constitutes

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5 One might say, in fact, that this is the dilemma of any phenomenology of religion.
divine identity from a theological perspective. He examines divine words primarily in terms of Christ’s claims about the authenticity and validity of his speech. Therefore he returns in the final parts of the book back to the question of human hearing: how can we hear divine words? How do we recognize Christ’s words as divine and how do we understand them? Ultimately, how can we ourselves become divine, realize our divine source, return to the source of our lives in God? (chapters 9-11).

Words of Christ focuses specifically on how Christ’s preaching in the synoptic Gospels conveys this very message. It turns upside down our false conceptions of ourselves and our attachments to the world, which ultimately alienate us from life and from our own affectivity (12). Christianity provides insight about our situation in a two-fold fashion. First, it realizes that “human nature is marked by an evil which is held in the heart. Not improvement but complete transformation is required” (23). Christ’s teaching directly addresses the human condition (25), and his words can recall us to our source in the divine life as we listen and live out his message. Thus, beyond this insight about evil, Christianity also conveys the truth of life: “Reality and truth are held within us, in this flesh, in this life” (25). It provides a unique definition of what it means to be human, and in fact, it is the only true definition because it reveals to us our origin in the divine life: “This is the new definition of the human being and of its true condition, that of a living being engendered in the invisible and absolute Life of God” (41). The “Life” of God is also the “Word” of God. The ambivalence of the title is intentional. When Henry speaks of the “Words” of Christ, he means not only the words Christ speaks then and today, but also the written text, and, even more profoundly, Christ himself as the Word of God: “This Word of Life

Of course Henry’s writings do also have theological implications, even if these are not his primary concern. First, one might argue that Henry recovers (possibly unbeknownst to him) some early Trinitarian formulations that were later often laid aside but have been suggested by recent theological scholars as possibly more useful for expressing Trinitarian relations. In some way, Henry seems very close to some Origenist formulations of relation between Son and Father (and these are not ones that were condemned as heretical, although they are not always used in subsequent reflection). While theological reflection subsequent to the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon often tended to a complete equalizing of the three person in fear of being accused of making one subordinate to the other, the Father as the source of the Godhead and the Son as the only-begotten is a prominent way of explaining Trinitarian relations in Origen and the Cappadocians. Second, Henry’s formulation of life also challenges an often highly simplistic theological conception of time as linear salvation history. At each moment the Arch-Son is communicating the divine Life to us, at each moment the Son is being eternally generated by the Father. Finally, the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit, almost entirely absent from I am the Truth, is mentioned more often in Words of Christ (although still not as often as one might wish). On some level, the Spirit actually seems to be precisely the “Life” of which Henry so often speaks. The Spirit is the Life of the Father that is communicated eternally to the Son in the Son’s generation in the Father. It is also the Spirit that was breathed into Adam, hence turning Adam into a living being. It is the Spirit that speaks through and in the prophets and especially in Christ. It is the Spirit that is finally communicated to the disciples in their new life of re-birth into the divine life. Despite the startling language, these are fairly normal pneumatological claims. Henry treads a very careful balance between monism and tritheism; his Trinitarian language both speaks of God as Life and assigns roles to the Father, Son and Spirit that neither collapses them into each other nor separates them arbitrarily.

Words of Christ, then, constitutes a more thorough reflection on the language of a material phenomenology, but it also affirms distinctly Christian terminology and insights even more clearly than the previous works.
which continually speaks to everyone his or her own life, may also be expressed (or not) in the language of conversation, which is also that of written texts, of books—of the Scriptures” (102). The words of Christ—spoken, written, and lived—then convey to us the very truth about ourselves, about God, and about all of reality.  

II. Christianity’s Uniqueness

In the course of this discussion, Henry repeatedly makes strong claims about the absolute Truth of Christianity and the Christian message. At first glance, Christ’s words seem only particularly important, but not yet absolutely unique: “Nevertheless, as profound as Christ’s words concerning the human condition are—the definition of this condition as living flesh in its opposition to the objective body of the world, the decisive distinction of this visible and the invisible as condition of this opposition, the entirely original conception of action which equally results from this—as true as they must appear today to any individual capable of authentic reflection on him- or herself and on the world in which he or she lives, they are still human words” (18). Yet, Henry says that to stop here “would turn Christianity into a sort of wise insight or even one form of ‘spirituality’ among others” (20).

This already implies that Henry decidedly does not think of Christianity as “one spirituality among others.” Rather, Christianity has unique access not only to “wise insight” about the human condition, but especially to the divine life itself. He argues that no other philosophy or religion knows about this,9 and that Christ’s words “unveil intuitions of such depth” that Western philosophical thought is incapable of making sense of them or assimilating them (18).10 This may be the reason, he suggests, why Christianity is often excluded from contemporary reflection, and yet, in Henry’s view, it is more essential for us than Greek culture is (80). The Christian word is absolutely different from any other, and philosophy and other disciplines are ignorant of it: “Here is why this word in which the immanent self-revelation of Life is accomplished differs in every way from all those in the world. It is not paradoxical in the least to observe one more time that it remains unknown to philosophers, linguists, and any number of exegetes” (86; emphasis mine). While the words of the world are false, Christianity speaks the word of life, but its word remains unrecognized by philosophers and often even by biblical scholars.

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8 Religious experience, then, is essentially verbal in character: “Religious experience, the overwhelming experience of freedom, is thus only given to someone who listens to the Word” (123).

9 Unfortunately, he also at times makes rather negative comments about Judaism. For example, he assumes a fairly simplistic interpretation of the Pharisees, arguing in rather sweeping fashion that Jesus opposes “the ritualistic formalism of Jewish religion” (11). This also seems to go back to his almost complete ignoring of biblical criticism (see below).

10 He contrasts Christ’s words again to philosophical insight (26).
As the previous quotation suggests, despite his focus on the Gospel texts, Henry has no great love for the discipline of scriptural exegesis. In fact, he often makes fairly dismissive comments about contemporary biblical criticism, which he condemns as pagan and atheistic. In contrast to “the falsehoods of the positivistic, pseudo-historical, and atheistic exegesis of the nineteenth century,” Henry claims that the words recorded in the New Testament were indeed spoken by Christ and that these texts are “authentic documents…whose origins are beyond doubt” (6-7). The Gospels do not merely report the kinds of things Christ might have said, but in them we hear Christ himself speak directly: “In actual fact we no longer listen to a story about Christ’s feats and exploits, related by others, by witnesses. Christ himself speaks; we hear his very words” (69). Henry’s dismissal of biblical criticism is linked to his rejection of hermeneutics more generally. Henry is emphatic in *Words of Christ* that Christ’s words do not require interpretation. They are self-validating and self-authenticating precisely because of their immediacy that requires no hermeneutics of any kind. Christ’s words need no proof or validation because they are self-revelatory in that “what Christ says about himself is not a word about life which would still have to prove what it says, but it is Life itself—which reveals itself and speaks in his Word [Verbe] in such a way that, Word [Parole] and revelation of this absolute Life, it is the absolute Truth which bears witness to itself” (115). They are a self-revelation that has no need of interpretation because it has no hermeneutic distance intervening between speaking and hearing. It is absolute Truth, the Truth in person.

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11 He also quotes almost exclusively from the Gospels and occasionally from Pauline letters. The Hebrew Scriptures do not appear in his treatment at all, presumably because he is focused so exclusively on Christ and Christ’s words.

12 See especially *I am the Truth*, chapter 12 and the introduction. Henry also often makes quite disparaging remarks about the discipline of biblical criticism, especially its attempt to date the composition of the Gospels and to trace their authorship. Besides the lack of appreciation for the important research done in this area, the criticism is also quite dated, as biblical criticism has long moved beyond source criticism to various other kinds of critical approaches to the text (such as narrative criticism and reader-response theory). Henry tempers some of these remarks in *Words of Christ*, occasionally acknowledging such issues as dating of authorship, although he still frequently makes polemical statements about the irrelevance of such questions to the content of the text.

13 He makes claims like this repeatedly. For example, he speaks later of “the atheistic and mendacious exegesis of the nineteenth century,” which interprets Christ’s claim to divinity to be a late invention (45-46).

14 Henry also claims that Gospel of John is actually written by the disciple and taken down almost immediately after Christ’s death (81). “The evident relationship of the Prologue and the Gospel that follows it is not merely a fact of historical importance. In the circularity established between them, the truth which flows through them advances in dizzying fashion. And with it, the ability of understanding these decisive texts receives extra power” (86).

15 I have criticized this lack of hermeneutics in my “Can We Hear the Voice of God? Michel Henry and the *Words of Christ,*” in *Words of Life: New Theological Turns in French Phenomenology*, ed. Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010). This still seems to me the most serious problem with Henry’s approach to the biblical texts.
Indeed, that is precisely what Henry sees as the main contribution of Christianity. This rejection of hermeneutics and biblical exegesis in favor of complete immediacy grows out of a particular conception of language, a conception which involves a strong criticism of 20th century philosophy of language. Words of Christ is to a large extent about the language we may employ to speak of the visible and the invisible. Just as he had in earlier works criticized a phenomenology that separates the act of perception from the perceived or the phenomenon from its phenomenality, so he now criticizes a theory of language that separates the act of saying from what is being said.\textsuperscript{16} Henry claims that most of human language is lying, or at least that it always harbors within it the possibility of deception. Despite the diversity of its approaches, all philosophies of language agree on the basic relationship between the utterance (what is being said) and the referent (what is being talked about). Language always refers to something external to itself. When I make a statement about a cat or a table, I am referring to an object separate from the term “cat” or “table.” There is distance and distinction between what is said and what is meant, and in this distance, falsity or deception can intervene. I can say “cat” but the cat may long since have left or never have existed in the first place. The claims I make about the cat are irrelevant to the cat; they take no responsibility for the cat itself.

In Words of Christ Henry explores the possibility of a language in which this distance would not exist and that would therefore also exclude the possibility of lying and deception. It would be a word of Truth, a word of Life, a word that already acts and where there is no separation between speech and act.\textsuperscript{17} The Christian Scriptures, then, speak immediately and from themselves. Christ’s words require no justification of any sort. They speak within us directly to our hearts. No other Scriptures and, indeed, no other texts have this kind of phenomenological immediacy: “An immense gap widens in our culture: a different word, more original and more essential than that of the world, is shown to be completely overlooked” (73). The Christian Bible, then, is unique. At least when it records Christ’s words, the divine life itself speaks in them. This can be true of no other creed, tradition, or text: “Revealing itself to itself, life speaks to us of itself. ... With Christianity arises the incredible intuition of a different Logos—a Logos that is really a revelation. Yet it is no longer the visibility of the world, but the self-revelation of Life” (74; emphases his). The contrast between this Word of Life and the false word of the world is drawn starkly and consistently: “The first thing that differentiates it [the Word of Life] totally from the word of the world such as James’s vivid analysis describes, is the fact that it is a word of Truth” (76). All other words are false and deceptive, “subject to worldly schemes or practiced in pretence and falsehoods” (4).

Henry’s argument, then, seems rather exclusive. Christianity has a monopoly on the Truth. No other religious traditions seem able to provide any access to this absolute Truth, and at times he confirms such an exclusive reading explicitly. Already in I am the Truth, Henry had spoken of

\textsuperscript{16} “Saying” and “said” have become established terminology in philosophy of language and they are also used heavily by Emmanuel Lévinas in his criticism of philosophy; Lévinas attempts to return us to the more originary saying before it becomes solidified in a “said.”

\textsuperscript{17} Thus his rejection of hermeneutics might possibly be read in a more productive fashion as a criticism of philosophy of language rather than as a rejection of interpretation per se. The hearer who decides to put Christ’s words to the test by acting on them surely is engaged in an interpretive endeavor which considers these words truthful and worthy of putting into practice.
Christianity as the only truth: “Any form of truth [passes away], except the truth of Christianity.”18 In Words of Christ, Henry insists even more fully on the singularity and uniqueness of Christianity and its message: “Such is the content of Christ’s words showing to humans the reality and truth of their condition as human. The second thesis [our divine genealogy], which will bestow on Christ’s teaching its unique character in the history of religions, is implied in the first [the rejection of natural genealogy]—as its presupposition” (44; emphasis mine). The dual Christian thesis about the human condition and its generation in the divine life constitutes its absolute truth, which is inaccessible to any other religious tradition. He later puts this even more forcefully: “Because life is self-revelation, it is Truth, the original and absolute Truth, in relation to which any other truth is merely secondary” (116). Only Christianity gives a meaningful account of access to life and it alone speaks the words of God. Henry even goes to the point of speaking of the possibility of apologetics: “Human experience emerges then as the proof of this truth. Starting from this paradoxical correspondence, since it rests on a series of paradoxes, between the word of Christ and our experience, it is possible to conceive a sort of apologetics of Christianity in the manner of Pascal” (57). Yet, cannot other religions also provide an immediate access to life and emotion and speak of them in truthful fashion? Henry seems to exclude this possibility by claiming his insights to be derived from uniquely Christian claims and by arguing that only Christianity can provide such access to life and pathos.

III. Qualifying the Singularity

However, Henry’s absolute claims can be qualified in two ways. First, Henry is not really attempting to provide a phenomenology of religion or even a phenomenology of Christianity. Rather, he is employing insights he draws from the Christian texts (often in ways that are rather untraditional or even controversial) for phenomenological purposes. Inter-religious dialogue is really of no concern to him in this context. The real culprit for Henry is not other religious traditions, but a certain view of science which he identifies with Galileo. The dividing line between the two types of truth—one truthful and one lying or deceptive—does not run between Christianity and other religions, but between Christianity and Galilean science. Henry starkly draws the distinctions between them: one focuses solely on the visible, the other on the invisible. One is lying and deceptive, the other speaks absolute Truth. One exalts in death and artificiality, the other eternally self-generates Life as such.19 Biology, he insists repeatedly, knows nothing about life at all.20 There is no life in the “world” and Christianity and its life are not “of this world,” but provide a stark alternative to it. This seems like a total rejection of science and the material world, and so, two common criticisms of Henry must briefly be addressed here.

18 I am the Truth, 20. The first sentence from I am the Truth is italicized in the text for additional emphasis. He does not mitigate this exclusivity in his later analyses, but instead constantly emphasizes it further: “Transcendental’ life [that proposed by Christianity] is not a fiction invented by philosophy but refers to the only life that exists” (Ibid., 52; emphasis mine). Later he speaks of Christianity’s “very particular physiognomy among other monotheisms” (Ibid., 112).

19 See especially I am the Truth, 35-52.

20 I am the Truth, 38.
On the one hand, Henry’s stark distinction between the “truth of the world” and the “Truth of Life,” his insistence on the invisible over the visible, and his rejection of the “things of the world” in general and modernity in particular, may strike many readers as gnostic or as the age-old supposed Christian aversion to the body or sexuality—a rejection of the “natural” in favor of the “supernatural” or “spiritual.” He certainly has been accused of such dualism, yet any such criticism would rely on a rather superficial reading and fundamental misunderstanding of the divisions he outlines. Henry advocates a material phenomenology, a phenomenology of utter immanence. What is most real is what is most immediate, namely our experiencing ourselves within our own feelings and affections, in our flesh directly. This is not a philosophy of transcendence or other-worldliness. Henry is trying to articulate what is invisible not because it is so far away, but precisely because it is so close and immanent that we cannot gain the distance from it that vision or observation would require. His rejection of the world in favor of the invisible is not a rejection of the “here and now” in favor of an eschatological paradise. Rather, it is the rejection of the fabrications and constructions of modernity and contemporary technology which distance us from ourselves in favor of examining the concrete affective experience of our fleshly living. It is joy and suffering of the body instead of an identification of atoms and molecules with life.

On the other hand, Henry has also been accused of pantheism because he closely identifies human life and divine life, and yet, the life within us is actually the divine life. We experience God within us as this surge of life, as our emotions and affections at their deepest levels. Our life derives from the divine life, but just as Henry does not advocate “mind-body dualism,” so is his argument not pantheistic. Henry does not equate God and the world. He does, at least to some extent, identify God with the material, but only in the sense in which he understands God: namely with life itself as the source of life. But “material” does not mean “stuff” or “things” for Henry, nor does it refer to the elements of science or the usual dimensions of space and time and their attributes. Material means flesh, an immediate experience of self-affectivity. For Henry, God is indeed utterly immanent and in no way an abstract transcendence, and yet God is not identified with the world. The world is what is transcendent, removed, foreign, other, while God is immediate, close, immanent, familiar. I am the Truth does, in fact, occasionally seem to have trouble with drawing clear distinctions between divine and human life, and, therefore, it is also less successful in articulating how humans (or “livings”) might be related to each other within this divine life without dissolving into a general mass of life and losing any sort of distinctiveness or personhood. Furthermore, its distinctions between the “Arch-Son” and all other sons at times elide to complete identification in a way that makes it unclear why an original Arch-Son might even be necessary. In Words of Christ, however, he draws and articulates all of these distinctions much more clearly and carefully. Christ’s role as Son of the Father is laid out far more convincingly and, although articulated in startling and even radically new terms, in a way that preserves Trinitarian relations in a fairly orthodox manner. Also, in no way is Christ collapsed into all (other) humans. Of course, an articulation of Christ’s divine and human nature (and the tension and relationship between them) is precisely the main goal of Words of Christ.

Yet even with these caveats, Henry’s depiction of science still appears rather extreme. At times he seems to make Galileo single-handedly responsible for the entire modern world and all of its ills, of which he sees many. Henry’s condemnation, however, is not a blanket dismissal of all scientific insight. Rather, he is critical of a science that posits itself as the only version of truth and imposes its parameters on all other versions of truth. Like some of his French
contemporaries, such as Jacques Ellul and Jean Baudrillard, Henry is very critical of the excesses of technology, which seem to reduce life to biological data, emotions to bundles of neurons, and humans to machines. This is exacerbated by a context in which science and technology are believed to be the only truth and reality. *I am the Truth* ends precisely on this note after evoking a warning from the book of Revelation. Henry paints a picture of “men reduced to simulacra, to idols that feel nothing, to automatons. And replaced by them—by computers and robots. Men chased out of their work and their homes, pushed into corners and gutters, huddled on subway benches, sleeping in cardboard boxes. Men replaced by abstractions, by economic entities, by profits and money. Men treated mathematically, digitally, statistically, counted like animals and counting for much less ... Men whose emotions and loves are just glandular secretions. Men who have been liberated by making them think their sexuality is a natural process, the site and place of their infinite Desire. Men whose responsibility and dignity have no definite site anymore.”21 It is this attitude which Henry seeks to combat in his trenchant analysis of our passionate interior life—a life that cannot be reduced to statistics or neurological responses but that indeed constitutes our very identity.22

While the division between the two “truths” is less starkly drawn in *Words of Christ*, he does reiterate his criticism of contemporary society by highlighting in the early chapters of the book the disturbing nature of Christ’s words about the human condition. Here, also, it is most fundamentally science that the Truth of Christianity opposes: “The Christian definition, which turns the human into a ‘living being’ [*un vivant*], nevertheless has nothing to do with the current biological interpretation. According to the biological interpretation, what one traditionally calls ‘life’ is actually reduced to a set of material processes consistent with those studied by physics. The scientific view is focused on this realm, which Matthew’s and Mark’s description marks as the ‘outside’—where there is no evil because there is really nothing human” (13). He condemns the “totalitarian dogmatism” of “so-called ‘democratic’ nations” together with its “omnipresent materialism, its sordid ideas of social success, of money, of power, of instant pleasure, its exhibitionism and its voyeurism, all kinds of depravity, its worship of new idols, of subhuman machines, of all that is less than human, the reduction of humans to biology and, through that, to lifeless matter” (8). All of this, he claims, silences the words of truth. Henry is most fundamentally opposed to contemporary techno-science and not to other religious traditions, of which he seems rather oblivious overall.23 His dismissal of other faiths is not central to his

21 *I am the Truth*, 275.


23 This is conjoined with an attack on humanism, which he considers deeply complicit with the Enlightenment elevation of techno-science as the only truth: “And in the accomplishment of that murder [cf. the parable of the vineyard where the tenants kill the son], humanism is born in which humans make the world and themselves their own possession, manipulating everything, including themselves, according to multiple possibilities offered to them in the world and within themselves” (61). The enemy here again is secular humanism not other religious traditions. That is not to say, of course, that ignoring other religious traditions is a good idea.
argument and may be due more to a narrow view of religion rooted in his specific situation in France than to an active opposition to other religious traditions. Galilean science and secular humanism are the enemies, not Islam or Hinduism or any other religion.

This can be supported with a brief look at Henry’s earlier work, which does not yet employ Christianity as explicitly for the articulation of his central phenomenological insights. In Barbarism especially, where his critique of contemporary techno-science is most fully articulated, Henry refers to a three-fold opposition to the false truth of science: art or culture more generally (including university life), religion (in very general and not exclusively Christian terms), and ethics. Those three domains are mentioned together and in opposition to techno-science throughout the book. Here, Henry is not yet proposing solutions, as he will try to do in I am the Truth and Words of Christ, but he is mostly diagnosing the problem by showing how contemporary techno-science destroys meaningful labor, robs art and culture of their significance, empties religion and ethics of their meaning and force, and subverts academic life in its very essence. There is no indication in this work that Christianity only or specifically is under attack; indeed, it is not even mentioned explicitly in the book at all. The argument is much more about art, culture and civilization. Religion is referred to in very brief and general terms and only as an aspect of culture. Although the later works, especially I am the Truth, contrast the genuine Truth and Life of Christianity specifically to the false “truth” and “life” of Galilean science, the arguments against techno-science and for life as self-affectivity are basically identical to Henry’s earlier work in Barbarism and elsewhere.

A comparison of Henry’s argument in Words of Christ with his analysis of Kandinsky’s paintings in Seeing the Invisible makes this particularly obvious. While a full analysis cannot be given here, the parallels to Henry’s final Christian works are striking, except that in this context the exact same claims are made about abstract art instead of the Gospels. Abstract art, but also music and dance, show the invisible as the true locus of life as it is experienced as self-affectivity. Henry explicitly puts this in terms of the distinction between external and internal truth: “Those who enter the path of art will thus never go in the direction of a truth external to oneself, towards which one might return as a stable being existing independently from oneself. Whether one knows it or not, one has made a choice of constituting oneself as the place of the arrival of this truth, of giving one’s own substance and flesh in order to be its flesh—the flesh of Life, which cannot be anything but the life of the individual and its highest degree of fulfillment. Because the truth of art is a transformation of the individual’s life, aesthetic experience contracts an indissoluble link with ethics. It is itself an ethics, a ‘practice’, a mode of actualizing life. This internal connection between the invisible aesthetic life and the ethical life is what Kandinsky calls the ‘spiritual’.” Kandinsky “lets us see, or better, feel, the ‘essence’ of painting in the

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24 See Barbarism, 5, 25-29, 58-59, 95, 126-27. As an example for religion, Henry here mentions only Egyptian religion (126). (As mentioned above, he also earlier examines the scientific destruction wrought at the Byzantine monastery of Daphne, but he seems to think of it as an example of art, not specifically of religion. Of course the text is not concerned with drawing distinctions between art, ethics, and religion—they all together belong to “culture,” which the barbarism of techno-science attacks and ultimately destroys.)

undeniable truth and certainty of the immediate feeling that life has of itself.”
26 Art evokes in us the pathos of life as it expresses our deepest emotions. In this context, Henry proposes art as a response to contemporary ills, as indeed he does in many other places throughout his work. He calls art “one of the highest human activities: life’s own essence is present in art,”
27 concluding the book with the line: “Art is the resurrection of eternal life.”

Only in his final three works does Christianity come to replace art as the solution to techno-scientific alienation from life. The earlier arguments about aesthetics are to a large extent identical to the later ones about Christianity in their phenomenological thrust: the contemporary world has excluded and forgotten about life by destroying our invisible material relation to it. Art and Christianity, respectively, can help us to recover this intimate connection to our own passions and flesh via their immediacy and immanence. Henry highlights in Christianity the same insights about the conflict between visible and invisible, inner and outer, that he had originally stressed in his analyses of art or in his phenomenological project more generally. In Words of Christ, “the invisible concerns the human being itself and his or her true reality. A human being is really twofold, visible and invisible at the same time” (17). In Seeing the Invisible, “the content of painting, of all paintings, is the Internal, the invisible life that does not cease to be invisible.”

This life is the invisible, suffering, desiring flesh, and art both reveals and accomplishes exactly what Christianity does. Henry’s insights, then, apply much more broadly than his final works seem to admit. Henry’s ultimate concern is not with Christianity as a specific confession or as espousing particular theological doctrines, but rather with the invisible, suffering and rejoicing flesh, generated continually in Life’s self-affectivity. This is what Henry embraces, and it does not ultimately matter whether this invisible, material, fleshly, affective interiority is found in Meister Eckhart’s sermons,
30 in Marx’s materialism,
31 in Kandinsky’s abstract paintings,
32 in the

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26 Seeing the Invisible, 26. Later he makes this claim in even more general terms: “The movement of the imagination is thus nothing other than the movement of life, its internal becoming, the tireless process of its coming into itself, an arrival in which it is felt in ever more vast, differentiated and intense experiences” (Seeing the Invisible, 108).

27 “The content of art is this emotion. The aim of art is to transmit it to others. The knowledge of art develops entirely within life; it is the proper movement of life, its movement of growth, of experiencing itself more strongly” (Seeing the Invisible, 18).

28 Seeing the Invisible, 122. He goes on to explicate life as self-affectivity and enjoyment.

29 Seeing the Invisible, 10. Also: “This truth is that the true reality is invisible, that our radical subjectivity is this reality, that this reality constitutes the sole content of art and that art seeks to express this abstract content.”

30 The Essence of Manifestation, §39.

31 See his two works on Marx and his Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body.

32 Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky.
mosaics in the monastery at Daphne,\textsuperscript{33} in Shakespeare’s or Dante’s poetry,\textsuperscript{34} or in Christ’s words as recorded in the Christian Gospels.

Is Henry’s reading of the Gospels, then, entirely arbitrary and devoid of insight? Has he merely imposed a foreign phenomenological question on the texts and twisted them to provide an answer they would never give otherwise? I do not think so. Rather, Henry’s reading is so fresh, and even compelling, precisely because it brings new questions to the texts, opening them to the reader in a new fashion. When did we last notice the texts’ emphasis on joy and suffering so vividly? When did we experience the strangeness of Christ’s words so keenly? When have we heard the Gospels’ message of life in such superlative tones? Even if Henry’s phenomenological reading of the Gospels might not convince in every particular, and although it certainly requires more hermeneutic discernment than he himself is willing to practice, he has done us an immense service by allowing us to see the text with fresh eyes and new vigor.

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\textsuperscript{33} Barbarism, 29-38. See also his article “La métamorphose de Daphné,” in Phénoménologie de la vie. III. De l’art et du politique (Paris: PUF, 2004), 185-202.

\textsuperscript{34} Barbarism, 129.