The Verwendung of Secular Philosophy in Luc Ferry and Jean-Luc Marion

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Introduction

Can a secular philosopher do Christian theology, or any other form of theology, in the way that a Christian theologian, or any other theologian, can do philosophy? There is some way, it seems, in which the former is not really possible while the latter is. Why? Don’t we find the idea of a secular philosopher doing Christian theology incoherent—not for theoretical reasons, but because Christianity’s theoretical discourses are tied to a specific and unique form of life and set of lived axioms? Is the identity of philosophy, on the other hand, more malleable? Is it that philosophy is synonymous with ‘the practice of reasoning’ and with its products ‘rational discourses’, or at least that it became so at a certain point in its history\(^1\)—perhaps quite recently in the 20\(^{th}\) century, as I would maintain? If philosophy is equated with the practice of reasoning and the production of rational discourses, then any form of life and its axioms may be wedded to philosophy. If, however, philosophy is also a form of life with its own specific and unique lived axioms, then this would make the idea of a Christian philosophy, or any philosophy linked to another set of axioms and form of life, more complicated and in need of careful elaboration as to its meaning and possibility.

Luc Ferry, the contemporary secular humanist philosopher, claims that philosophy is not reducible to a thought-practice and form of discourse. The practice of reasoning and the production of rational discourses are necessary but not sufficient

\(^{1}\) Pierre Hadot argues that the limitation of philosophical practice to theoretical practices is related to philosophy’s incorporation into Christianity. He claims that when Christianity subordinated philosophy to the Christian revelation, it retained those aspects of it that were congruent with Christian theory and practice. Christianity appropriated philosophy’s theoretical resources and reconstituted some philosophical non-theoretical practices, such as the examination of conscience, by emptying them of their philosophical content and reinvesting them with Christian ideas and ideals. Eventually, in the middle ages and then later, in the modern era, philosophy was transformed into a university discipline and reduced, by and large, to a theoretical practice and discourse. But as Hadot shows, the idea and practice of a philosophical form of life has never really disappeared. See Hadot’s *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004), chapters 10 and 11. It also should be pointed out that Hadot believed the possibility of a purely theoretical form of philosophy was a possibility inherent in ancient philosophy. For this point, see Hadot’s *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, trans. Marc Djaballah and Michael Chase (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 60. John Cooper makes a stronger claim, arguing that already in antiquity there were philosophers for whom the practice of philosophy was strictly theoretical and so unconnected to the form of life to which they adhered and according to which they formed themselves. See Cooper’s *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 26-28.
conditions of being-philosophical. Ferry argues that what distinguishes philosophy from other traditions is related to the solutions it gives to those enduring and historically-specific theoretical and practical problems which may be posed at any given time and place to human beings. I think that he is right. Philosophy, as much as the religions, is born out of and borne along by criticism, critique, and negation in a variety of senses, not all of which are purely discursive. But philosophy is also about giving certain kinds of answers to basic questions related to basic problems of human life, on whose basis reason reasons in both theoretical and practical contexts. The specificity of this conjunction of reason with a particular set of axioms constitutes philosophy. More precisely, its solutions involve certain ideas, practices, and institutions which together constitute specifically philosophical forms of life, tradition, and community. I would only add that the kinds of solutions it gives and the forms of life, tradition, and community to which they are related have a provenance that can be located in the emergence of the pre-Socratic philosophers in ancient Greece. Since I do not have time to support the more narrow and, in my view, more historically accurate idea of philosophy which I am suggesting, I will qualify the aforementioned claim by emphasizing that, like the religions, secular philosophy is a specific form of life, tradition, and community.

In this regard, I want to elaborate briefly upon the ways in which a secular humanist philosopher, Luc Ferry, and a Christian philosopher and theologian, Jean-Luc Marion, may be understood to be reforming how secular philosophy does what it does in connection with those basic axioms from which it reasons and on whose basis it articulates and enacts a specifically secular philosophical form of life, tradition, and community. My point of departure will be the Verwindung of the secular philosophical tradition as it can be discerned in Ferry and Marion. Verwindung is a practice developed by Heidegger and, under his influence, by the recent hermeneutical philosopher Gianni Vattimo. It refers to a simultaneous acceptance and transformation. The later Heidegger contrasted Verwindung with overcoming (Uberwindung): with setting something aside, pure and simple. It was meant to acknowledge the need to both retain the secular philosophical tradition and, rather than abandoning it, to reform it in certain ways, but it was also more generally a practice intended to institute an alternative relation to tradition—both one’s own and, presumably, the traditions of others, since no tradition is purely and simply itself.

The use of this practice, whether explicitly in Heidegger and Vattimo or implicitly in Ferry and Marion, also may be seen—and, I argue, ought to be seen—as a response to the kind of triumphalism displayed recently in secular philosophies like ‘speculative

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2 “As for ‘critical reflection’...in no respect whatsoever is it the prerogative of philosophy. Every human being worthy of the name reflects upon his work, his love life, the newspapers, politics and the places in which he finds himself, without thereby becoming a philosopher.” Luc Ferry, A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living, trans. Theo Cuffe (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2011), 221-222.
realism’ or in popular forms of secularism such as the New Atheism. These sorts of secular philosophies and secularisms can be understood as a recurrence of that virulently anti-religious form of secular philosophy associated with the radical Enlightenment. In my view, the most important aspect of this response is not related to its theoretical motivations, aims, or accomplishments. Rather, it lies in its express desire to set forth and live non-triumphalist forms of secular philosophy (the later Heidegger, Vattimo, Ferry) and Christianity (Marion). What is at stake, among other things, is the meaning of a democratic order (intellectually, socially, and politically) and the form of life most consistent with it. While that form of life will of course be different depending on the tradition in question, since every tradition does and must arrive at it on its own per the meaning of democratic ideals themselves, it must be possible to isolate a form of the democratic ethos as such. Doing so, or doing so again, is one of the needs of our time.

This need presents secular philosophy with a twofold task: first, to locate shared concerns, ideas, and ideals that can link democratically-minded secular philosophical sub-traditions to other, analogous secular sub-traditions within a particular democratic order, and second, to fashion a form or a grouping of related forms of the secular form of life that is democratic and which, as such, can enter into dialogue and work with the democratic sub-traditions of the traditional religions. It seems to me that the secular philosophical form of life articulated and lived by Ferry retains some of the limitations

3 Peter Sloterdijk in effect assigns certain forms of secular philosophy to this typically religious category. See his You Must Change Your Life, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 95. The issue, in a sense, is not supersessionism per se, since most would agree that certain forms of thought and life should be superseded. The issue, I think, is the supersessionism of anti-democratic forms of thought and life, including those which inher in the history of secular philosophy.

4 Historians like Margaret C. Jacob and Jonathan Israel distinguish between moderate and radical Enlightenment-era philosophies. See Jacob’s The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981) and Israel’s Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002). As the qualifying term ‘radical’ suggests, the radical Enlightenment designates philosophies that carried out a more thoroughgoing departure from then-existing forms of religion and culture. In particular, it refers to those forms of philosophy that sought autonomy relative to existing religious forms of thought and life. These philosophies tended toward atheism, materialism, toleration, and democratic ideals but also included within their compass anti-religious secular philosophies. It does seem to me that popular secular movements like the New Atheism and secular humanist associations are a recurrence of this form of secular philosophy, albeit for the most part without an awareness of their origins in the radical Enlightenment secular philosophies or secular philosophy more generally. The renewed interest in ancient philosophy during the Enlightenment, especially its appropriation of Epicurean, Stoic, Cynic and Skeptical traditions, was as much practical as theoretical; the two, in fact, were closely linked. These philosophies enabled those who constituted the radical Enlightenment community—representative figures included Baron d’Holbach and Denis Diderot—to develop secular philosophical forms of life that included what might be called secular experiences and ideas of the Sacred. D’Holbach’s paeans to ‘Nature’ in his The System of Nature, volume 2, are emblematic in this regard.
inherent in the modern form of secular philosophy. For secular philosophy, the challenge since the Enlightenment has been correlating the ideal of tolerance with the reality of actual acceptation of the other in practice, whereas for post-modern Christian and secular philosophers such as Marion, the challenge is perhaps the reverse: starting from a position of radical acceptance (agape, charity), how does one delimit the horizon of the actual?  

Ferry and Marion share several concerns, ideas, and ideals that could contribute to a democratic ethos. These commonalities can be understood in the following way. Both evidence a mutual desire (1) to further the universalization of the idea that humanity is sacred, and (2) to make possible an experience of the Sacred (das Heilige) that comes, universally, through the idea. These two related desires motivate those aspects of Ferry’s and Marion’s respective philosophical projects that I want to bring out and briefly examine. It is ‘humanity’ and ‘the Sacred’ in their secular philosophical forms which, I claim, Ferry and Marion accept and transform (Verwindung), but as these formulas suggest, what they want to transform is how secular philosophy relates to humanity and the Sacred. Thus, these desires motivate practices that modify the person who practices them. The practice of sacralizing humanity—the practice of experiencing the Sacred ‘through the idea’—affects the mode of being of the self. Presumably, in the first instance, these desires motivate Ferry and Marion themselves to sacralize humanity and experience and to comprehend the Sacred ‘through the idea’, but this portion of their work is ostensibly also intended to motivate others to take up these practices. It is in these senses that Ferry and Marion can be said to Verwindung secular philosophy—a philosophy which has not always loved well or widely enough, and not always well enough because it has not loved widely enough—and its idea of the Sacred which, in its modern form at least, has generally been constructed in such a way as to deny that the idea of the Sacred includes secular philosophy’s ideas of Nature, the cosmos, or the universe.

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5 As in the case of the Marxisms of the 20th century in their relations to other secular philosophies. Here I mean not only the intolerance displayed by Marxist philosophical theorists toward other secular philosophies, but those Marxist-constituted societies — that is, those philosophical societies — like the U.S.S.R. that were intolerant of religious traditions and other forms of secular philosophy, even other forms of Marxism, up to and including the most destructive forms of intolerance.

6 Luc Ferry, Man Made God: The Meaning of Life, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 30-31. Ferry, with specific reference to Jean-Luc Marion’s idea of a saturated phenomenon, acknowledges the possibility of a revelation of God or another figure of the Sacred; 148n30.
The Sacralization of the Human and the Humanization of the Sacred

Let me begin to clarify these claims by examining briefly Luc Ferry’s *Man Made God*. The title is not promising, but more promising is the possibility of seeing *Man Made God* as a secular philosopher’s effort to reconcile himself to the reality and dignity of traditional religions. In a more straightforward sense, however, it is also an attempt to renew secular humanism’s commitment to humanist ideals. The book organizes this effort around two modern phenomena: the sacralization of the human and the humanization of the Sacred.7

The polysemy of the book’s title directly suggests the meaning of the first phenomenon and the concept that makes sense of it: “the sacralization of the human.” This phrase refers to that process which, over the course of modernity, has won rights, dignities, goods, and protections for greater and greater portions of the human population. This process is manifest in the emergence of modern love, in the valorization of romantic love, in the centrality of filial love, and in the instantiation of universal concern for ones fellow humans in modern political documents like the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Ferry’s intent in elaborating the sacralization of the human is not only descriptive. He is making the normative claim that the sacralization of humanity should be our goal. Thus, this first phenomenon points to an *aim or aspiration* that could serve both to renew the secular community’s sense of purpose and to join it in common cause with those sub-traditions of the religions that are themselves humanist in the senses included in the concept and practice of the sacralization of the human, as these are found in analogous concepts and practices in the traditional religions.

The second concept and phenomenon, “the humanization of the Sacred,” can be taken as an indirect Feuerbachian claim to the effect that the Sacred is a projection of human ideals. This would be consistent with the second sense of the book’s title. Ferry does devote a considerable amount of time and energy to showing how religious texts have come to be seen, by some modern religious thinkers, less as history and more as symbolic expressions of various aspects of human life. This second concept and phenomenon, however, can also be taken as a claim that, over the course of the modern era, it becomes clear in secular philosophy and related traditions that the Sacred only becomes intelligible to us through the ideas we articulate of it.8 For modern secular philosophers, like Ferry, who think that “the Sacred” or “God” refers thought and life to a genuine phenomenon, then the Sacred or the God comes through the idea to the degree

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7 Ferry uses the phrases “the divinization of the human” and “the humanization of the divine” in his *Man Made God*. I have chosen to use alternative formulations, the second of which—‘the humanization of the Sacred’—is a modification meant to bring the process and practice it names into congruence with the process and practice of “making sacred of the human,” a phrase Ferry employs in *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*, op. cit., 245.
that it enters into human life.\textsuperscript{9} Ferry’s idea of the humanization of the Sacred can be understood in relation to his self-avowed agnosticism.\textsuperscript{10} The agnostic hesitation regarding the existence of God implies an affirmation of the reality of a phenomenon that transcends human being and requires an effort of thought to comprehend it. The implication is that this effort has historically yielded different ideas of the Sacred. Elsewhere, Ferry argues that Husserl’s claims regarding the perpetual movement of human comprehension—intentionality’s constitutive ‘transcendence within immanence’—presuppose “that all consciousness is…limited by a world external to itself.” Due to the finite, partial character of the human comprehension of that world, this aspect of human being in turn requires both the admission that “human knowledge can never attain to omniscience [of the world]” and the “rejection of all forms of ‘absolute knowledge’.”\textsuperscript{11} This reading is consistent with Ferry’s claim that secular philosophy is a finite thought and a life lived in light of finitude.\textsuperscript{12} What needs to be added is that secular philosophy is a finite thought and life lived in relation to the world, which humanity attempts to understand through its ideas. It is not just that human being is limited; it is that it is limited relative to a phenomenon that transcends human being. To the extent that this interpretation is sound—and such experiences and ideas arguably do inform secular philosophy from its inception—a \textit{mysterium tremendum} can be said to become visible within secular philosophy in and through the experience of the world.\textsuperscript{13} One

\textsuperscript{9} Luc Ferry, \textit{Man Made God}, 35.

\textsuperscript{10} Luc Ferry, \textit{What is the Good Life?}, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), op. cit., 43.

\textsuperscript{11} Luc Ferry, \textit{A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living}, op. cit., 234-236.

\textsuperscript{12} Luc Ferry, \textit{What is the Good Life?}, 18.

\textsuperscript{13} To my knowledge, neither in \textit{Man Made God} nor elsewhere does Ferry himself outline a secular experience and idea of the Sacred and explicitly identify it with the \textit{mysterium tremendum} of the world. He might be seen as acknowledging something like it in his discussions of ancient, especially, Stoic cosmologies. He comes very close to doing so in a discussion of the phenomenological concept of horizon where he argues that by “its infinite mobility, the notion of horizon includes an element of mystery: the reality of the world … is never granted to me in perfect transparency or perfect mastery.” \textit{What is the Good Life?}, op. cit., 269. For these reasons, I believe such an experience, idea, and identification are consistent with those of his positions which I have examined here. A more direct and explicit affirmation of a specifically secular philosophical experience and idea of the Sacred, although again without an explicit avowal of such, can be found in the work of Andre Comte-Sponville with whom Ferry has collaborated on several writing projects. In Comte-Sponville’s \textit{The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality}, trans. Nancy Huston (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2007), 134-201, Comte-Sponville recounts his experiences of what he variously calls ‘nature’, ‘the all’, and ‘the absolute’. Significntly, he also discusses why he does not believe in what he refers to as the ‘personification of the absolute’ (68). This phrase suggests that there are impersonal (such as his own) and personal (the traditional theisms) interpretations of one and the same phenomenon—the absolute. Though Comte-Sponville, like Ferry, does not go as far as saying that the religions and
might say that, for Ferry, the question that remains a question is whether or not the experience of the numinous is an aspect of the luminosity of the God of the Abrahamic religions or of the God of the philosophers. That is, the issue is not whether a phenomenon exists that transcends human being and to which human being is subject, only how and through what idea that phenomenon should be interpreted. However that issue is decided, if the first concept—and phenomenon—identified by Ferry indicates a goal common to humanist forms of secular philosophy and the traditional religions, this concept and phenomenon points to an axiom or basis shared by the religions and by secular philosophy as a whole.

In relation to these descriptive and normative claims concerning secular philosophy, part of the interest of Ferry’s work lies in its attempt to further the reform of philosophy initiated by Pierre Hadot, the ultimate goal of which is, in both cases, to reconstitute the secular philosophical form of life. But, and in spite of whatever weaknesses do, in my estimation, continue to be found in Ferry’s attitude toward the religions, what is especially welcome is that Ferry both accepts and transforms his radical Enlightenment heritage rather than continuing it in an even more heightened and polemical manner, as do the speculative realists or the New Atheists. What he stigmatizes is the radical Enlightenment’s tendency to disavow and denigrate the traditional religions. This aspect of his philosophy is part and parcel of his worry over the “relative withdrawal of religion [and] the great utopian schemes that once set our actions within the horizon of a sweeping design.” Where previous eras (including the modern secular era, especially in its European form) possessed a unity of life related to a shared cultural project, the successes related to the democratization of intellectual, social, and political life have left secular persons with the sense that there are few pressing and higher aims to pursue, as if the project of sacralizing humanity had been accomplished. As Ferry puts it, the projects of secular persons can sometimes appear to have narrowed to the necessary—to the intrinsically good but nevertheless insufficient—projects of secular philosophy both experience and think the Sacred, here too that seems to me to be a conclusion that can be drawn. Comte-Sponville also comes to conclusions similar to those arrived at by Ferry in relation to ethics and politics, namely, that there are many principles of conduct that religious and secular persons can and do and should recognize as being held in common which could serve to constitute—and in some way already do constitute—a shared democratic ethos. Comte-Sponville argues that to cohere a society must maintain a fidelity to certain commonalities in which the members of the society ‘commune’. He believes that a democratic society can cohere without communing in an idea of the Sacred to which they are faithful, but that they need to bear a fidelity to ethical values like sincerity, courage, generosity, gentleness, compassion, justice, love (22). At the personal level, for secular persons there is in Comte-Sponville’s way of being an atheist an example to be considered here too: he describes himself as “a nondogmatic atheist – that is, I do not claim to know that God does not exist, but I believe he does not exist” (69).

14 In this regard, see, for example, Hadot’s What is Ancient Philosophy? op. cit. and Philosophy as a Way of Life trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995).

15 Luc Ferry, Man Made God, op. cit., 7.
mundane daily life. To Recollect secular humanism’s commitment to the sacralization of humanity, in connection with the pervasiveness of negative attitudes toward the religions within the secular community, is one way of asking secular persons whether or not they have adequately fulfilled the ideal of the sacralization of the human.

Ferry does not say as much, but in my view, his desire to accomplish these goods for secular philosophy and secularisms is attended by a belief that what is good for them will be good for those traditions with whom they share the various socio-political spaces in which secular philosophy and the various secularisms are today operative and with whom they must forge common cause if the sacralization of humanity is to be sustained, extended, and deepened. While people, whose lives are constituted in and through traditional religious communities, still have and live according to such projects, they become less effective the more the gulf between them and the secular community widens.

I have the feeling that, like most secular humanists, Ferry is not entirely comfortable with the Sacred, not entirely at home in the region where “God” might appear. Whether or not this is true, the aspects of his philosophy examined here do reconfigure the meaning of secular philosophy by returning it to the practice of life: a practice of life structured by the ideal of the sacralization of humanity and, however obliquely, of humanity’s—and indeed the world’s—basis in something resembling the Sacred.

The Saturated Phenomenon and the Call to Charity

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly and/or improbably, this is also one way of seeing Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenological project. There is, however, an important difference that is existential in its origin: namely, that his phenomenology is ultimately placed within the context of a Christian philosophical and theological project and so within the context of a Christian form of life, tradition, and community. Some understanding of Christian concepts, especially those related to the Christian idea and ideal of love (agape), for example, are necessary in order to understand his phenomenological work. It is the horizon of agapic love that informs his claim in Reduction and Givenness regarding the convergence and identity of Husserl’s ‘principle of principles’17 and

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16 Luc Ferry, Man Made God, op. cit., 6-7.

17 Jean-Luc Marion, Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 17-19. The ‘principle of principles’ states “that every primordial dator Intuition is a source of authority (Rechtsquelle) for knowledge, that whatever presents itself in ‘intuition’ in primordial form (as it were in its bodily reality), is simply to be accepted as it gives itself out to be, though only within the limits in which it then presents itself.” Edmund Husserl, Ideas: General
Nietzsche’s radical “Yes” to all that is as it is. Less obvious, but also significant given what is being addressed here, is that Marion’s writings and interviews sometimes reference the existential motivation of his work. While his phenomenological work can be accepted (or not) on strictly secular and philosophical grounds, one of his ambitions, as he himself says, is to articulate a Christian philosophy that “restores the principle that it knows not only from Christ but also in order to attain him and beatitude.” What I would like to note and comment on are several acceptations and transformations of secular philosophy, operative in varying degrees of explicitness in his phenomenological work and relevant to the practice of a secular philosophical form of life: the renovation of a secular philosophical idea of God through the concept of the saturated phenomenon par excellence, the recollection of love in secular philosophy, and the reformation of the secular philosophical form of life by way of the articulation of such a life within the saturated phenomenon par excellence and in relation to the other whom one is called to love.

Marion’s phenomenology takes its point of departure from the nexus of insights, problems, and methods associated with the phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger. Marion thematizes a phenomenon of concern to both Husserl and Heidegger: the giving that is required for the appearing or manifestation of phenomena. This giving attends every moment of a phenomenon’s existence. Every being is given and is being given so long as it exists, so long as it continues to be given. Marion refers to the fold of giving and what is given as givenness (donation), and Marion’s effort to renew the secular philosophical discourse on God and, by extension, secular philosophy’s relation to God, arises out of his thematization of heightened forms of givenness. More specifically, it is connected to his thematization of what he calls ‘saturated phenomena’. Saturated phenomena saturate intuition with sense, exceeding, inhibiting, and even barring, at least momentarily, adequate conceptualization(s). Though the saturated phenomenon in a sense reveals itself, it is the failure of the idea to encompass such a phenomenon that discloses the saturated phenomenon as a saturated phenomenon. Marion’s originality in relation to the idea of a saturated phenomenon “consists only in paying attention to a … possible relation between intuition and concept—that in which

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19 One could mention here Levinas’s thematization of the idea of the infinite. The experience of the infinite overflows the idea that thought articulates as it struggles and fails to comprehend the infinite. In doing so it reveals the ordinarily invisible mediation of the experience of the world by ideas, which, ordinarily, articulate a kind of ‘lived adequation’ to the things of the world that implicitly regards the comprehension that ideas bring about as exhausting what they are ideas of. Insofar as that lived adequation holds, the idea’s comprehension of the world remains invisible and is presumed, precisely, to be adequate in its comprehension of the world. Raising that invisible mediation to visibility is the precondition to overcoming or at least recognizing totalizing forms of thought and life.
intuition would surpass the concept by inverting the common situation where the concept exceeds intuition and the exceptional situation of an equality between them.”

Revelation is, Marion claims, the preeminent form of the saturated phenomenon; it is the saturated phenomenon par excellence. As I understand it, revelation is preeminent for a simple reason: it gives to human thought and life a phenomenon that encompasses and articulates not only a particular region of being, but the totality of what exists and the processes that generate and sustain it. The experience of the saturated phenomenon par excellence is the experience of losing one’s self in the givenness of the universe. As Marion acknowledges in an interview with Richard Kearney, however, due to the factuality and universality of this form of the saturated phenomenon, one can assume that its disclosure occurs not only in other Abrahamic religious traditions but in non-Abrahamic religions as well, since they too mark and articulate ideas that interpret the visible emergence of the totality of what exists and the processes that engender it.

Does secular philosophy experience and know the saturated phenomenon par excellence? Marion seems at times to equivocate. In his essay “Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology”, he sketches out a phenomenological idea of God. The God of phenomenology which he outlines is characterized as a possibility that requires acceptance of a religious idea of God in order for it to pass over into an actual experience of revelation, yet in his remarks in Being Given, he affirms that Plato and Spinoza record experiences of the saturated phenomenon par excellence, experiences which suggest that they recognized and inhabited the modality in which it is given, namely as a saturated phenomenon. This should not be surprising. It is an affirmation that Marion must concede in principle. If the saturated phenomenon par excellence is universally available and yet interpreted within multiple horizons, then secular philosophy cannot a priori be excluded from the history of its reception and articulation.

Why then limit the reception and comprehension of the saturated phenomenon par excellence to the merely possible in phenomenology, especially since his interest in phenomenology seems in part to be related to its ability to recognize and remain faithful to the givenness of saturated phenomena? Certainly, the God of the monotheistic religions can only be affirmed in phenomenology as a possibly true interpretation of the world and the powers that generate and sustain it. But isn’t this to say that within the immanence of the world—which is actual, which is a phenomenon—an event of being gives this possible way of understanding the mysterium tremendum of the saturated phenomenon par excellence? And isn’t the mysterium tremendum in some way, or at the very least, the mystery of the being of the world in its actuality? Is it that

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20 Ibid., 120.


phenomenology is a secular philosophy which, as a secular philosophy, is restricted to immanence, and immanence is usually understood to be restricted to human being? Since Heidegger, however, phenomenology can understand immanence to refer not only to transcendental subjectivity or Dasein, but to being which is not reducible to human being. Is it that secular philosophy, including secular forms of phenomenology, often interprets being as the manifestation of an anonymous, impersonal power immanent to the world and in some sense coextensive with the world? Why, though, isn’t an experience of the saturated phenomenon par excellence, as immanent and impersonal, genuine? As Herman Philipse argues in relation to Heidegger’s own denial that Aristotle’s idea of God derives from a genuine experience, it may rather be that God (or the saturated phenomenon par excellence, or the Sacred) can be experienced and understood via the contemplation of the cosmos—the “heavenly rotations”—as well as through the experience and idea of the person or personas of God. In any case, Ferry’s agnosticism indicates that secular philosophers can also hesitate between impersonal and personal ideas of the Sacred, the point being that however secular philosophers experience it, they too experience the saturated phenomenon par excellence, or what I have been calling the Sacred. The Sacred, by its very nature as a saturated phenomenon, admits of different ideas within secular philosophy, in other forms of philosophy, and in the different religions.

Marion’s concern appears to be that the secular philosophical comprehension of the phenomenon at issue has been historically problematic insofar as secular philosophy has sometimes occluded, dissimulated, or attempted to overcome its mysterium tremendum. This is one way of understanding his work on the end of metaphysics. Marion assigns privilege to phenomenology at least partly because he thinks it allows for a more adequate idea of the Sacred—more adequate because inadequacy is an intrinsic feature of the phenomenological idea of the saturated phenomenon par excellence itself. Still, I am not sure that Marion sufficiently acknowledges or accounts for secular philosophy’s experience and understanding of the actuality of the saturated phenomenon par excellence. This fact needs to be examined, in part in order to comprehend what secular philosophy is, but it also needs to be recognized and considered because its recognition would open a space for dialogue among the different contemporary secular philosophies and between secular philosophy and the religions in relation to the primordial basis of life itself.

Marion’s redirection of secular philosophy toward the religious phenomenon—the saturated phenomenon par excellence, God, the Sacred—also includes the sacralization of the human. This is one of the consequences of the unique opening to the ethical dimension of life in phenomenology effected by Levinas and continued in Marion, especially through the latter’s work on love. There is even reason to believe that Marion wants secular philosophy to carry forward its efforts to rehabilitate itself as a form of life. In an essay on what he argues that philosophy can learn from Christianity, he calls “any thought that would want to constitute itself as philosophy back to its forgotten ambition

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of loving wisdom.”

In relation to this forgotten ambition, is Marion calling on secular philosophy to transform the love of wisdom by forming it according to agapic love or to some analogue of it? To articulate and live a wisdom, a form of knowledge and know-

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24 Jean-Luc Marion, “Christian Philosophy: Hermeneutic or Heuristic?” op. cit., 79.

25 I think that Marion’s work can be seen as accomplishing, or enabling one to accomplish, a different way of opening up religious and secular traditions to one another. For example, in this paper I have referred to God as a figure of the Sacred, ‘the Sacred’ thus serving as the standard by which analogues are located in other traditions of this particular term for the basic axiom of life in secular philosophical traditions. But this process of locating analogues, opening thereby onto other traditions, while remaining within ones tradition, could begin from God, such that ‘God’ would serve as the standard by which analogies are drawn, with ‘the Sacred’ or ‘the Absolute’ or ‘Nature’ then regarded as figures of God. This approach bears a resemblance to one aspect of actor-network theory, which has been developed by Bruno Latour and others, in that Latour regards actor-network theory as “a social theory that would not claim to explain the actors’ behaviour and reasons, but only to find the procedures which render actors able to negotiate their ways through one another’s world-building activity.” Bruno Latour, “On recalling ANT,” in Actor Network Theory and After, ed. John Law and John Hassard (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 21. Though some degree of explanatory work is being done by ‘the Sacred’ and ‘God’ in these examples, the function and aim of the process of analogization is not to reduce the analogues to the standard of comparison in an ultimate way. In the case of these specific examples, the convertibility of the terms indicates that they both do and do not define the saturated phenomenon par excellence. They do delimit it relative to other phenomena but neither exhausts this form of the saturated phenomenon since inexhaustibility is part of its definition and, first of all, of its experience and comprehension. The function and aim of the practice of drawing analogies is instead to understand the cultural worlds created and maintained by other traditions and to enter into living relations with the people who constitute those cultural worlds. One of the factors arguably inhibiting a more substantial and consequential dialogue between secular philosophy and other secular forms of life, on the one hand, and the religions, on the other, is that until recently systematic reflection on the sources and meaning of secular forms of life as forms of life has been lacking. As a result, in the dialogue between the two emphasis has been placed on their respective forms of thought and ideas, which, as regards ideas at least, are genuinely dissimilar in certain respects, especially regarding the constitution of the world and the various regions that constitute it (though what I have said here about the Sacred suggests how the dissimilarities are in other ways perhaps more apparent than real). Thus it has seemed that there is a difference in kind between secularisms and the religions. A significant portion of Pierre Hadot’s and Michel Foucault’s later work was devoted to analyses of ancient secular philosophical forms of life. If read with a view to secular philosophy’s ‘world-building activity’, Foucault’s work during his early and middle periods can shed some light, indirectly, on secular philosophy’s role in constituting modern societies. Foucault’s work on the constitution of modernity suggests that the processes that generated the Enlightenment involved conversions, in varying degrees of completeness or radicality, to secular philosophical forms of life, tradition, and community. More recently, Peter Sloterdijk and Bruno Latour have gone some way toward filling in this lacuna as it pertains to modern secular philosophy and other modern secular forms of life. See Sloterdijk’s You Must Change Your Life, op. cit., and The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as a Practice, trans. Karen Margolis (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012); and Latour’s An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). What is missing in the work of
how, a skill in the art of knowing and living as and through love in its various senses, through agapic love first of all. If Ferry is right, there is a real sense in which modern secular philosophy has already heard and responded to this call in its own way; it only, perhaps, needs to hear it anew.

**A Concluding Question**

There are two acceptations and transformations: a secular philosophical form of life that reasons from the Sacred, and one that resolves to sacralize all humans— not merely the part of humanity that is secular and philosophical. A more adequate account of the specific character of secular philosophical ideas of the Sacred and charity in connection with the practice of a secular philosophical form of life would need to work out some historical and conceptual issues. It would need to show that the basic axiom of secular philosophy is the concept and phenomenon of a *mysterium tremendum* that is both impersonal and immanent to the world, without necessarily foreclosing the possibility that it also transcends the world. It would need to think charity from the impermanence and suffering that are among the Sacred’s most troubling effects, and it would have to conceive the secular philosophical form of life from within this immanence and impersonality in a way that facilitates its adherents’ abilities to negotiate and cope with the life that the secular philosophical form of life forms, up to and including the moment that marks its passing. Most importantly, one can hear and see in Ferry’s and Marion’s texts distinctive answers to the question of what it means to be a secular philosopher.

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Foucault, Sloterdijk, and Latour, and, to a lesser extent, in Hadot as well, is the recognition that secular philosophy and other secular forms of life meet the religions not only at the level of ethics or spiritual practice (e.g., a shared humanism or functionally analogous spiritual exercises) but at that basic, ‘originary’ level of experience and life indicated by the term the Sacred. Once this recognition is taken into account the conclusion to which the confluence of this work points is that it may be time to speak not of ‘secular philosophy (and other secularisms) and the religions’ but of ‘secular philosophy (and other secularisms) and other religions.’ The implication would be that the study of secular philosophy and secularisms per se can and should be incorporated into religious studies.