

CHAPTER FOUR

MYTH AND RELIGION:
THEOLOGY AS A HERMENEUTIC OF
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE



Langdon Gilkey¹ (1919–2004) was a prominent Protestant theologian. Interned in a Japanese camp during World War II—he was teaching English in China when war broke out—Gilkey’s thinking was heavily influenced by that internment and by his studies with Reinhold Niebuhr, one of two or three of the most important Protestant theologians of the twentieth century. Gilkey once said, “I believe in God because to me history precisely does not represent . . . progress.”² But he recognized that he lived in an age when, though there were crises to which religion was relevant, such as the civil rights movement in the United States, many could not see how it was. One can understand much of his work as an attempt to show how the language of religion is relevant to the secular society in which we live.

Gilkey tells us that theology has moved from the question of the nature of religious language to the more radical question of the possibility of meaningful religious language. The question is not just, “How is religious language relevant today?” but “How can religious language even be meaningful?” He suggests that if religious language is no longer a possible mode of meaningful discourse, it is because religious

1. Though Gary Dorrien is the author of the piece to which this was a response, Dorrien writes about Langdon Gilkey’s theology. As shorthand, therefore, I will refer to Gilkey, assuming that Dorrien’s portrayal of Gilkey’s position is correct. Dorrien’s piece is “Langdon Gilkey’s Myth-Creative Liberal Theology: Synthesizing Tillich, Niebuhr, Schleiermacher, Ricoeur, Eliade, and Whitehead,” in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, ed. David L. Paulsen (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 385–410.

2. Quoted in Adam Bernstein, “Langdon Gilkey Dies: Theologian, Author, Educator,” *Washington Post*, 22 November 2004, page B06.

language is no longer related to experience and life. The undeniable and irreversible triumph of secularism in the modern world has meant the loss of religious meaning. In response to that loss, Gilkey proposes to disclose “the meaning of religious language . . . by developing a hermeneutical phenomenology of experience,”³ and he argues, quite reasonably, that in rejecting the importance and meaningfulness of the conceptual/symbolic order that religion offers, secularism is unable to recognize or explain the order that makes secularism itself possible.⁴ Secularism cannot understand its own possibility, so Gilkey proposes to give an interpretation of human experience that shows how religion offers strategies for understanding and coping that we need but do not have in the merely secular world.

Explaining Gilkey’s thought, Gary Dorrien says the secular mind “invariably resorts to mythical language in expressing its ‘anti-mythical’ world view,”⁵ but it remains tone-deaf to the mythical character of its own language. Examples from secular myth are “the image of the critical, scientific ‘man of reason’”⁶ and the assumption that “the realization of freedom is always a moral good.”⁷ With the triumph of secularism, the theologian’s job cannot be to cast out secularism. Rather, says Gilkey, the theologian must give a better interpretation of myth for secular consciousness. He or she must reawaken secular consciousness to the mythic rather than argue against secularism per se. Thus, Gilkey’s general strategy is to reinterpret Christian understanding in light of the myth of secularism, but at the same time to show the inadequacy of the latter. Secularism, for example, cannot deal adequately with the inevitability of change. That requires reference

3. Dorrien, “Myth-Creative Liberal Theology,” 389.

4. Gilkey collapses the terms *myth* and *symbolic* or *conceptual order*. Though I think there are not only useful but important distinctions to be made between the two, to make the connection to Gilkey, I follow him here, using the term *myth* to refer to both myth and symbolic/conceptual order. It is important to note that, as used in these kinds of discussions, *myth* does not mean “false story.” Instead, it means “an organizing story.”

5. Dorrien, “Myth-Creative Liberal Theology,” 397.

6. Dorrien, “Myth-Creative Liberal Theology,” 94.

7. Dorrien, “Myth-Creative Liberal Theology,” 397.

to ultimacy, something missing in the secular myth but available in Christianity.

Following thinkers like Mircea Eliade and Paul Ricoeur, Gilkey argues that myth shapes human existence by giving us a structure on which we hang our understanding of society and the world: “The purpose of myth is to organize the total ‘world’ of one’s desire, environment, and social situation into a reflective form that makes sense of the world.”⁸ Theology is a response to myth: “The purpose of theology is to explore reflectively the meaning and validity of mythical discourse”⁹ in order to “disclose the latent sacral elements of experience.”¹⁰

Consider Gilkey’s claim that both myth and theology are reflective. In a broad sense, as a response to the human condition, of course myth is reflective. However, if by “reflection” we mean “taking up something as an object of conceptual or intellectual inquiry” (and, presumably, that is the way theology is reflective), then given Gilkey’s understanding of myth, it cannot be reflective in the same way that theology is. To say that both are reflective is to equivocate. As a framework that makes understanding possible, the symbolic realm of myth and ritual is broader than that of philosophical and theological reflection. Given Gilkey’s view, as a conceptual framework, myth makes intellectual realms possible and, so, makes intellectual reflection on myth complicated. We can never have the whole myth before us as we reflect on it, unless it is not the framework that we use for understanding that upon which we reflect.¹¹ Thus, if myth is an organizing framework for understanding, it cannot also be the uncomplicated

8. Dorrien, “Myth-Creative Liberal Theology,” 399. Here is a place where I believe that the distinction between myth and the symbolic order would be useful. The latter is the structure that organizes our concepts. Myth is the narrative in which we find that structure displayed.

9. Dorrien, “Myth-Creative Liberal Theology,” 399.

10. Dorrien, “Myth-Creative Liberal Theology,” 391.

11. This point is important to a criticism I make later in the paper. There is another objection, one that is related to my concern about myth and conceptual or symbolic ordering: If myth is not a conceptual ordering (it could be either a symbolic ordering or, more likely, a kind of narrative), then it is not the kind of thing that is concerned with reflection. Reflection involves at least conceptual analysis and myth is not conceptual.

object of reflection except on the basis of some other myth or through a work of immanent critique. Gilkey's criticism of secularism is a form of such immanent critique, showing that secularism depends on the very thing it rejects. Presumably theology can also perform such a critique within a particular religion, but that is not how Gilkey deals with religion.

Given Gilkey's position, there can be no standpoint from which to analyze myth that does not depend on myth, but his assumption that myth is reflective tempts him to go beyond immanent critique. Gilkey says:

What makes modern theology distinctive in religious history is the fact that modern theologians know that their myths are myths. Theology no longer claims to be able to make indicative statements about matters of fact. It is only as broken myth that Christianity's mythical inheritance can be appropriated.¹²

Given Gilkey's understanding of myth, this claim about theology must depend on some conceptual structure. Which one? Is this a claim made possible by a position within religious myth or by a position within the myth of secularism? The fact that religious myth is said to be broken is evidence that the claim has its basis in secularism. Since Gilkey sees secularism as having completely triumphed over religion that is not surprising. If the world is, indeed, irredeemably secular, then one can do theology and talk about religious myth only from a secular framework and one must, as Gilkey proposes to do, give a new interpretation of religious myth for secular consciousness.

To do so, however, is to undo the mythic function of religion, to rob it of its status as a way of understanding the world. Consider the biblical story of creation as an example. It is common to understand religious creation accounts as reflections on the origin of the cosmos, answers to the question "Why?" that are in some sense parallel to the scientific question "Why?" That is a mistake. There may be cases in

12. Dorrien, "Myth-Creative Liberal Theology," 399.

which myth functions as a kind of primitive science, but the biblical story of creation is not one of them.¹³ Of course, secularists are not the only ones to assume that the Bible story of creation is a case of primitive science. Some religious people also make that assumption, especially those who consider themselves literalists. Ironically, when people argue for creation science or for what is usually called a literal reading of the Bible, they are agreeing with the secular understanding of things.¹⁴ They use conceptual structures taken from secularism, such as the necessity that explanations have a scientific form, to try to understand the Bible. Some give up or metaphorize the Bible when faced with the project of making the Bible and science answer the same questions, but some keep the Bible and insist that its account can be brought within the secular myth, though of course they would not say that is what they are doing. But both those who metaphorize and those who would make the Bible scientific do essentially the same thing: they begin from a secular understanding of the Bible. Thus, Gilkey shares the view of those we often refer to as “biblical literalists.” Both assume that secularism gives us the basic structure of understanding and that all accounts must be hung on that structure. They disagree about what conclusions that leads one to, but they agree that the secular myth is the one that must be used for understanding.

When the Bible tells us how the world was created, however, it does so with interests, goals, and basic assumptions so different from those of science that we ought to be suspicious of claims that both are answers to the same question, “How did the world come to be?” Such claims equivocate, for the question does not mean the same thing in a biblical context that it means in a scientific one. The great temptation

13. Those unfamiliar with this view should see, for example, André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), and Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

14. I quarrel with the description of “fundamentalist” readings of the Bible as literal readings. Such readings are exactly *not* literal—by the letter—readings; they are secularized readings, though in disguise. For more on this, see my “Scripture as Incarnation,” chapter 8 in this volume.

is to assume that mythic accounts of creation are cases of primitive science. Perhaps some are. Surely we do not want to claim that all myth has the same goals. But it is far from obvious that all creation myths are primitive science. In fact, in the case of the Bible, those who take it to be a scientific or quasiscientific account have the considerable burden of proof. The interest of the biblical origin stories is much more on things like how the human condition came to be what it is, how evil came into the world, and why the covenant applies to each person than it is in the physical processes involved in creation. It is not clear that the biblical stories of origin has any interest in the latter at all.

The result of this difference between the biblical story of origin and the scientific story is that comparisons of the two, comparisons we find made by those who wish to argue for creationism, on the one hand, or those who wish to treat the biblical story as, at best, metaphor and poetry, on the other, are problematic.¹⁵ It is not a simple matter to ask which of them is true. In fact, it is generally an impossible matter. If I assume that the conceptual schema for deciding truth is the scientific, secular one, then I assume that the questions and purposes of science are the relevant ones. Having done so, if I compare the claim that God created the heavens and the earth to a secular claim about the origin of the earth and then ask which is true, I will conclude that the secular account is true. On the other hand, if I assume that the relevant schema is that of the scriptural story with its questions and purposes, then when I compare the two claims about creation, I will conclude that the scriptural account is true.

But to say that the scriptural account is true is not to say that the scriptural account is a good scientific account. It is not to assume that the two accounts are the same kinds of explanation and, therefore, that the scriptural account is better than the scientific one. Rather, it is to say that the scientific account doesn't deal with the questions of

15. For perhaps the best discussion of this issue available, see Peter Winch, *Trying to Make Sense* (New York: Blackwell, 1987), 132–39.

the biblical text in a fashion adequate to the project of the narrative in Genesis, assuming that the scientific account deals with them at all. Both accounts claim to tell us how things are, so they both make truth claims; I am not arguing for a naive relativism. To the degree that the differing accounts make truth claims about the same things, they are comparable. It makes no sense to speak of a different kind of truth in one than in the other (as some, though not Gilkey, are tempted to do), unless by doing so one is covertly denying the truth of one or the other, perhaps by metaphorizing it. However, at least for biblical religions, it is far from obvious that myth and science make claims about the same things. Therefore, it is far from obvious that we can compare the truths of the scientific and the biblical accounts in order to decide which is superior, though Gilkey gives secularism the ability to decide truth and requires that religious truth find a way to fit within the secular schema.

Gilkey is willing to cede secularism the authority it demands and, so, to accept it as the story that determines truth. Thus, he says that although “myth refers to both the finite and the transcendent . . . its references to the finite must be understood to have no normative meaning as historical or scientific information.”¹⁶ This can only make sense if he assumes that religious myth makes claims about matters of fact that are the same as the fact-claims of modern science. Though that assumption is common, it is incoherent. Gilkey recognizes the problem of assuming that myth is a primitive form of science, but he falls prey to the temptation when he accepts the secular assumption that the mythic claims of secularism are the ones by which we will understand all claims to truth, in other words, all facts.

Secularism tries to insist that there is no myth at all. Gilkey shows that to be self-contradictory. In other words, he shows that, in spite of what seems to be the case and in spite of the claims of secularism and its domination of our thought, it has not completely triumphed over religion because it shares religion’s reference to a background myth.

16. Dorrien, “Myth-Creative Liberal Theology,” 398.

Why, then, grant the myth of secularism in thinking about religion? Doing so robs religion of its claims to truth and, so, of its power to have real effects. It makes religion only metaphorical. If only secularism can yield facts, then religion is an untrue though sometimes useful fable. Such a position takes the word *myth* to mean exactly what Gilkey denies that it means: merely a fable. Thus, the question is whether Gilkey has not given up too much, continuing Bultmann's demythologizing project without intending to. If his critique of secularism's rejection of myth is valid, as I believe it is, then the revelation of secularism's broken, self-contradictory character opens a space in which religious myth can be considered, not from the secular point of view, but from out of itself. Within a secular consciousness that considers itself whole, Christianity can be appropriated only as broken myth. That is at the heart of Gilkey's thought. But the break in secularism to which Gilkey points opens a space for considering religious myth differently.¹⁷

One way to do so is to show, as Gilkey has tried to do, how the sacred manifests itself in and through the finite. The problem is how to deal with a phenomenology of religious experience in a way that will yield valid claims about divine transcendence. Though Gilkey has passed over that issue, at least two contemporary philosophers come to mind who have dealt with it extensively, Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry, the latter a late-twentieth-century French Catholic thinker, the former a contemporary one. To illustrate what attention to the issue might allow, let me briefly describe Marion's work as well as the criticism of it.¹⁸ Then let me suggest an alternative that I believe takes up the insights of Marion's project and avoids the criticisms.

17. This possibility is one that might be undertaken in a deconstructive theology, something that Gilkey has, understandably, been unable to do.

18. Marion has made his case in work after work, from *L'idol et la distance* (Paris: Grasset, 1977); *The Idol and Distance*, trans. Christina Gschwandtner and others (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001) to *Du surcroît* (Paris: PUF, 2001); *In Excess*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004). For an excellent version of the argument, see his "The Saturated Phenomenon" in Janicaud and others, *Theological Turn*, 176–216. Marion's primary work on transcendence is *Being*

The German thinker Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is one of the most important thinkers of Western philosophy. He argued that, because reason is limited in what it can do, we cannot know about anything transcendent. As part of making that argument, Kant gave us a rich and carefully argued account of how our experiences of phenomena are possible. Edmund Husserl, another German, who lived in the last half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, also gave a rich and carefully argued account of phenomena. Husserl's analysis was based on the observation that consciousness is always intentional—directed at something—and that the understanding of phenomena would require an analysis of this directed consciousness rather than a pure consciousness existing independent of the world.

For both Kant and Husserl, a phenomenon must be understood within a horizon and according to an I. In other words, there are bounds within which the phenomena appear and they always appear to someone. My desk is here in my office when no person is, but it is not appearing, “showing itself,” unless there is someone to whom it appears. All phenomena are, therefore, conditioned by the horizon within which they appear and the person to whom they appear. The impossibility of an unconditioned phenomenon, the impossibility of a pure experience of transcendence, results from this fact about phenomena.

The problem, as Kant's first critique argues, is that to the degree that we deal only with conditioned phenomena we do not deal with what is transcendent. That is, in a nutshell, Kant's argument: we cannot deal with what is transcendent because to do so we would have to experience an unconditioned phenomenon, and that is impossible. Marion's response is to argue that an unconditioned phenomenon is

Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Someone with little background in phenomenology would do well to begin with a secondary source, such as Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

possible.¹⁹ His strategy is to argue for “saturated phenomena” (phenomena of which we have an intuition but that are not constituted by the horizon and the ego) rather than the “impoverished phenomena” of Kant and Husserl—impoverished because they are constituted by their horizon and subject, with little or nothing given by intuition.²⁰ Marion points out that his suggestion of this possibility is not as wild as it may seem at first glance. After all, we find something like this in Kant’s aesthetic, in which the aesthetic idea is an intuition for which no adequate concept can be formed. The fact that there is no adequate concept of the aesthetic idea means that it is not constituted.

In Kant’s aesthetic, the concept is impoverished (limited) not the intuition (raw experience) for the intuition gives more than we can conceptualize. Kant says this excessiveness of intuition is *inexposable*; Marion uses, instead, the word *invisible*. The invisible phenomenon is “invisible, not by lack of light, but by excess of light.”²¹ The saturated phenomenon is invisible to the categories of understanding because it exceeds them. We don’t have to think that excess in terms of enormity. All that is necessary is that it be impossible to apply a successive (in other words, additive) synthesis (of the elements of our intuition) to the phenomenon in order to gather those elements together as a conceptual whole. The invisible is excessive of understanding because no successive synthesis is possible.

Marion argues, however, that in spite of the impossibility of performing a successive synthesis and, thereby, coming to a knowledge of the whole, it is possible to have an *instantaneous* synthesis of the saturated phenomenon. Amazement and bedazzlement are examples of such instantaneous syntheses. We look toward something when we are amazed or bedazzled, but it exceeds our understanding. What I

19. Marion makes this argument in various ways in the body of his work, but for our purposes, I will refer to the short essay mentioned earlier, “The Saturated Phenomenon.” It is perhaps the best abbreviated version of his argument.

20. In philosophy, the word *intuition* refers to immediate knowledge of any kind. Perhaps the most common example is sense perception: under normal conditions, I know that I feel something cold immediately on touching it.

21. Marion, “Saturated Phenomenon,” 197.

see in the vision of the saturated phenomenon is not darkness, but something so bright that it blurs my vision, something I cannot see clearly: “Because the saturated phenomenon, due to the excess of intuition in it, cannot be borne by any gaze that would measure up to it ‘objectively,’ it is perceived ‘subjectively’ by the gaze only in the negative mode of an impossible perception, the mode of bedazzlement.”²²

For Marion, we do not find amazement and bedazzlement only in the exceptional case. With Martin Heidegger, Marion believes that such experiences are the fundamental modes of our experience with the world and, so, determinative of phenomena. We can—indeed, must—“cover over” our amazement at and bedazzlement with things in order to get on in the world. I live most of my life as “one” lives life,²³ seeing what others see and speaking of those things as they do. I do not see each thing in its uniqueness. Instead, I see each thing as a member of a class of things. This thing on which my fingers are tapping is a keyboard, like many other keyboards, not a thing unique in itself. The person who brings me my dinner at a restaurant is a server. Even if he tells me his name I do not treat him as someone absolutely unique. Rather, we interact as customer and server interact, according to moral and social codes that dictate what each is to do. We live by general rules for behavior with regard to things and persons rather than taking each thing or person up as a new and unique entity.

Heidegger calls this way of living *inauthenticity*, literally “non-individuality” (*Uneigentlichkeit*) because in ordinary life I cannot treat each entity I encounter as new and unique. To try to do so would be madness, for it would be completely disordered. When we behave authentically, we cover over the world’s uniqueness; we each behave in the same way—according to social and moral norms. This covering

22. Marion, “Saturated Phenomenon,” 201. Note that the words *objectively* and *subjectively* are between quotation marks in the quotation because bedazzlement is exactly not something constituted by the subject; in other words, not an object of a subject. Thus, the language of subjectivity and objectivity is inadequate.

23. Cf. Heidegger’s discussion of “the they” in *Being and Time*, trans. John McQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), §§26–27.

over is a way of proceeding that is not mine, that I have been given by my history, culture, and context, and it is necessary to my existence as a person among other persons. Inauthentic behavior is not necessarily wrong and is often absolutely right.²⁴ Nevertheless, the covering over of ordinary life and experience is possible only on the basis of a “prior” encounter with things in which amazement and bedazzlement are essential. Marion’s way of saying this is to say that because the saturated phenomenon is always “disfigured” by the horizon(s) in which it appears and the knowing subject who apprehends it, it is not recognized as what it is. Nevertheless, even this disfiguring (in other words, inauthentic apprehension) is a manifestation of the thing itself.

Marion argues that because the experience of the saturated phenomenon is an experience of what I do not and cannot constitute, of what is excessive of understanding, it is an experience of my finitude and impotence. It is an experience in which I find myself constituted rather than constituting because I no longer have a dominant point of view over that which is intuited. Instead the intuition overwhelms me: “The *I* loses its anteriority and finds itself, so to speak, deprived (*destitué*) of the duties of constitution, and is thus itself constituted: it becomes *me* rather than *I*.”²⁵ In the experience of the saturated phenomenon—of transcendence—I become a witness rather than a subject. Pointedly, Marion calls this event, in which I become a witness of what overpowers me, “revelation.”²⁶

For Marion’s critics, this is where the problem arises. According to Marion, since the intuition of a saturated phenomenon is an intuition in which the *I* is constituted as *me*, that intuition is a pure

24. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. McQuarrie and Robinson, §27. Note that he says: “The ‘one’ is an existential and belongs as a primordial phenomenon to the positive constitution of *Dasein*” (p. 121; emphasis in original, translation modified).

25. Marion, “Saturated Phenomenon,” 211.

26. It is important to note that revelation is not the only kind of saturated phenomenon and that revelation is not only the revelation of the Divine. Historical events are also saturated phenomena and revelation includes the picture as spectacle (the “idol”) and the particular face that bedazzles me (the “icon”), as well as the intuition of a gaze that envisages me and loves me (theophany). Marion, “Saturated Phenomenon,” 214–15.

intuition of transcendence, one unmediated by concepts and without structure.²⁷ But a pure intuition is, arguably, impossible. The idea of a pure intuition is the idea of an intuition with no content whatsoever because there is neither horizon within which it can gain meaning relative to other things nor ego to which it can be meaningful; it is the idea of an experience to which no thought at all is attached, not just the experience of the overflow or excess of one's concepts but an experience in which all concepts are absent. As thought-provoking as Marion's analysis is, the argument is that it goes too far. Quoting Marion, Dominique Janicaud asks, "What remains phenomenological in a reduction that, 'properly speaking, is not,' and refers back to a 'point of reference [that is] all the more original and unconditioned as it is more restricted'?"²⁸ Janicaud's answer is pointed: nothing. A phenomenon requires that which makes it a phenomenon. It requires the I. A pure phenomenon is unintelligible.²⁹

But Marion's case is not as difficult as Janicaud's criticism makes it seem. In "The Event, the Phenomenon, and the Revealed,"³⁰ Marion addresses the question directly, arguing that the pure phenomenon is an analytic concept derived by a phenomenological reduction of the event in which something is given to intuition. In point of fact, the given never occurs apart from a *given-to*, a *me*. Marion says, "One can take the risk of saying that the given . . . projects itself onto the given-to (consciousness, if one prefers) as onto a screen; . . . immediately provoking a double

27. For examples of criticisms that focus on this point, see the piece by Janicaud in *Theological Turn* and his later work, *La phénoménologie éclatée* (Paris: L'Éclat, 1998). See also Marlène Zarader's "Phenomenology and Transcendence," 106–19, as well as Beatrice Han's "Transcendence and the Hermeneutic Circle: Some Thoughts on Marion and Heidegger," 120–44, both in James E. Faulconer, ed., *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

28. Janicaud, *Theological Turn*, 62.

29. Zarader's piece in *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion*, 106–19, makes this point very clearly.

30. Marion, "The Event, the Phenomenon, and the Revealed," in Faulconer, ed., *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion*, 97–105.

visibility,”³¹ namely the visibility of the phenomenon giving itself and the visibility of the me receiving it. But we cannot analyze this event of given-and-given-to using its two terms, *given* and *given-to*. That division allows us to speak of the given, a pure intuition of transcendence, apart from the given-to.

Nevertheless, even if Janicaud’s criticism holds—that there is no pure intuition of transcendence—that does not mean, as Kant and Husserl argue, that every reference to transcendence remains trapped within the world of subject and object, remains constituted and, so, does not at all refer to transcendence. To deny that there are unconditioned phenomena is not to assert that there is never anything of the unconditioned in phenomena. Intuition does not disappear. We experience the overflow of our concepts, the excess of intuition. As mentioned, without reducing transcendence to a phenomenon and without arguing for pure intuition, Heidegger has already shown that transcendence is revealed in immanence. For example, he argues that the work of art reveals transcendence in immanence, revealing more than itself.

Of course, Heidegger is hardly the only philosopher to have dealt with this problem or to have argued that we experience transcendence in immanence. The problem is how to talk about those experiences, for, at first glance, we seem unable to speak without speaking merely immanently and categorically. Our concepts are concepts of the phenomenal. How, then, can we use them to speak of what transcends the phenomenal, of overflow and excess, the unconditioned aspect of experience? This problem is an ancient one. Pseudo-Dionysius responds with negative theology. Plotinus speaks of the *trace*, a term that has been picked up and used in contemporary work, such as that of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. Heidegger uses a variety of terms, among them words clustered around the word *Riß*: *rift*, *tear*, and as a root in words meaning “sketch,” “design,” “outline,”

31. Marion, “The Event, the Phenomenon, and the Revealed,” in Faulconer, ed., *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion*, 101–2.

“boundary.”³² Those in literature, such as Roland Barthes, speak of *subversion*, a term that Marlène Zarader borrows. Finding a way to allow the subversion, interruption, supplementation, or tracing of the unconditioned to show itself in what we say is the “solution” to the problem of whether Marion is ultimately right or wrong.³³ Though there are interesting and important differences between these thinkers of interruption and subversion, one can make the general observation that all such talk points to the fact that we always find ourselves in a world that we constitute and, at the same time, we find that something unconstituted disturbs the horizon (context) and the I (consciousness), which implicitly claim to account completely for things and the world.

Heidegger’s discussion of the work of art and his frequent references to poetry are one way to understand such speaking: art and language cannot be reduced to their categorical content, and phenomenological analysis shows that. Marion has also used phenomenological analyses of the work of art to talk about our experience and communication of transcendence.³⁴ However, given that the experience of transcendence is not necessarily the experience of divine transcendence, being able to talk about transcendence is not enough. The work of art reveals what we might call the transcendence of things, but that is not necessarily the same as divine transcendence. In what do we find divine transcendence?

Like many, perhaps even all religions, biblical religions call us to live in a certain way.³⁵ They may do so conceptually, but they need not.

32. See, for example, Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 188.

33. This solution has much to do with the difficulty we find in reading such thinkers as Levinas and Derrida, though it is not the only explanation.

34. See, for example, Marion, *La croisée du visible* (Paris: PUF, 1996); *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. James K. A. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004). Also, Marion, *Du surcroît* (Paris: PUF, 2001); Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham, 2003).

35. There is considerable discussion of biblical religion as response and call. See, for example, Ricoeur, “Experience and Language in Religious Discourse,” in *Theological Turn*, 127–46; and especially Marlène Zarader, *La dette impensée, Heidegger et l’héritage hébraïque* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 56–69; Zarader, *The Unthought Debt: Heidegger and the*

They can also do so by means of scripture and ritual and, especially, in their practices. As Kierkegaard points out, “The Christian thesis goes not: *intelligere ut credam* [Think in order to believe], nor *credere ut intelligam* [Believe in order to think]. No it goes: Act according to the commands and orders of Christ; do the Father’s will—and you will become a believing-one.”³⁶ On this view, the religious experience of transcendence is to be found in acts more than in concepts, whether those concepts are mythic or rational. Just as works of art testify of the disruption of the ordinary world by transcendence, the acts, rituals, and scriptures of the religious testify of the disruption by divine transcendence. They testify of a call from beyond themselves and their horizon that the religious are bound to hear and obey.³⁷ Because it accepts the secularization’s triumph over religious language, Gilkey’s understanding of religion seems to leave no room for such a call, for being called or chosen rather than choosing. But if there is no room for the call, then there seems to be no room either for testimony and witness.

The theologian is the person who responds to religious testimony reflectively. The materials for that reflection are the revelations of divine transcendence in religious immanence, namely acts, rituals, and scriptures. And the method of that reflection must be hermeneutic. As Ricoeur says, in the presence of revelation and the absence of universal religious phenomena we are left “to run the gauntlet of a hermeneutic and more precisely of a *textual* or *scriptural* hermeneutic.”³⁸ Unlike Ricoeur, I include religious ritual and practice among the things to be examined hermeneutically, but I do not think my inclusion changes

Hebraic Heritage, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006). Zarader’s discussion is replete with references both to biblical texts and to other authors.

36. *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 3:363. I am grateful to Keith Lane for this reference.

37. Of course, false and misleading or misunderstood testimony is always possible. That religious experience testifies of the divine is no proof of the divine. Neither does it follow that all testimony is of equal worth.

38. Ricoeur, “Experience and Language in Religious Discourse,” in *Theological Turn*, 130.

Ricoeur's point much. A hermeneutic of these texts and practices can awaken us again to the witness they offer, the witness of a divine call.³⁹ Thus, faced with the "triumph" of secularism, the theologian can stand in the break opened in secularism by Gilkey's critique and read the rituals, practices, and scriptures of his or her religion reflectively, testifying hermeneutically of the divine transcendence witnessed in those texts, of the disruption of secular reality that they demonstrate. Testimony makes it possible for the secularist to hear something of the call to which the religious respond.

An understanding of theology as a hermeneutic of texts and practices is particularly appropriate in biblical religions, religions in which response and call rather than doctrine and dogma are fundamental. A theology that offers a hermeneutic analysis of the scriptural call that initiates religious practices, and of the practices themselves, not only analyzes the texts and practices to which it attends—its analysis also testifies of the call of the Divine heard in those texts and practices. Hermeneutic theology is, therefore, among the acts appropriate to religious life. It is testimony. The testimony of the hermeneutic theologian is a second-order testimony, for it testifies of the bedazzlement of the divine transcendence that reveals itself in religious life. Theological testimony can be meaningful in a secular world, as Gilkey's critique of secularism shows. Hermeneutic theology cannot serve as the proof for God's existence that some may demand. Neither will it make biblical religion fit comfortably into a secular understanding of the world nor make it obvious to the secularist that religious language is meaningful. We do not escape the difficulty of being religious (and Kierkegaard is right that we should not). Nevertheless, a hermeneutic theology can speak in the space of secularism's self-contradiction. Testimony and attestation of religious experience, of the experience of

39. Paul Moyaert's "The Sense of Symbols as the Core of Religion: A Philosophical Approach to a Theological Debate," in *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion*, 53–69, is an excellent example of such a hermeneutic. In that essay the Catholic understanding of the sacrament of the Eucharist is the object of his analysis. Moyaert's argument is important to chapter 1 as well as to chapter 8 in this volume.

divine transcendence, calls both to those who are presently religious, helping them hear the divine call again, and to those who are not religious, seeking to open their ears to the call of the divine. Like quotidian life, secularism washes everything in gray. Like art, hermeneutic theology can remove some of that gray, perhaps allowing light to shine through once again.