

**ABRAHAMIC FIGURATIONS
OF RESPONSIBILITY:
RELIGION WITHOUT RELIGION IN
JACQUES DERRIDA AND
JEAN-LUC MARION**

While continental philosophy of religion has, in large part, become a response to and continuation of the death of God movement,¹ this is only part, or perhaps half, of its development. In the history of the death of God, the death of God is said in many ways. Nevertheless, in the new dawn after the death of God in continental philosophy of religion, we find a striking similarity amongst different philosophers. For example, though Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Marion may disagree over the meaning of the death of God, they all agree as to its significance: we are the one's responsible for making the world a better place. For the logic of the thinkers in continental philosophy of religion moves from the death of God, in some sense, to the birth of

¹ This movement of the death of God really begins with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* where God becomes nothing more than an idea of reason that we have a tendency to posit when examining the world in terms of cause and effect. Of course, this movement of the death of God has become more popular in light of the announcement of Nietzsche's madman in the *Gay Science* along with the death of God theology of T.J.J. Altizer and William Hamilton in the 1960's. Since then, the death of God has made a resurgence not only among the new materialist critiques of religion in Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou but also among the even more orthodox religious thinkers, such as Jean-Luc Marion.

human responsibility. For each figure, the survival or living on (*sur-vivre*) after the death of God entails an increase in responsibility for those who survive this eventful death of the other. By examining two figurations of responsibility engendered by the scene in Genesis 22, the binding of Isaac, I argue that we come to learn about not only this logic at play in what has been called continental philosophy of religion but also the status of responsibility in the wake of the binding of Isaac. Though Derrida and Marion engage this narrative of the binding of Isaac from different philosophical perspectives, both of their engagements highlight the ethical impetus that the structure of sacrifice brings to bear on our ethical life. Through both of their readings, we learn that the ethical impetus of such a structure includes but extends beyond the face of the other or the various modalities of alterity — be it divine, human, or animal — because this impetus includes a comportment to phenomenality itself. And, in this, we find that our ethical life can never be whole or complete but abides always as finite: our responsibility always harbors irresponsibility.

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RELIGION WITHOUT RELIGION

In order to understand the significance of the approaches to responsibility from both Derrida and Marion, we must first understand the way that they engage religion philosophically. We must begin with what Derrida calls religion without religion in order to establish how both he and Marion similarly approach religion. This statement may sound shocking considering Marion's proximity to Catholicism and Derrida's more distant relation to Judaism. So before getting to each figure's reading of Genesis 22, I want to show that both of their readings are aimed at developing a similar approach to religion.

Derrida's approach to religion in *The Gift of Death*, where he offers his reading of Genesis 22, revolves around three major thematics. He develops, what he calls, an account of "sacrificial responsibility" (GD 68)² in the shared narrative of the binding of Isaac as found in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sacred texts. With this, his account of responsibility turns on a largely neglected

2 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* Second Edition, trans. David Wills, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008. Citations appear parenthetically as GD followed by the page number.

view of death in the history of philosophy, namely the death of the other. Here he is taking his lead from Levinas's critique of Heidegger's *Sein zum Tode*. For both Levinas and Derrida, in contrast to Heidegger, the originary experience of death is not my own death or personal death but the "the possibility of dying of the other or for the other" (GD 48 emphasis his). This possibility of the death of the other—even, for Derrida, the actual death of the other—"institutes responsibility as giving oneself death, putting oneself to death, or offering one's death, that is to say one's life, in the ethical dimension of sacrifice" (GD 48). So his account of sacrificial responsibility turns on the death of the other where all of the senses of *donner la mort* are at play: to give a gift of death to one other, even oneself as other, for another other. Such a polysemy of giving death will become the site for Derrida's description of *the fix*—the difficult, complex, and messy situation—we are in with regard to responsibility.³

And all of this is developed in an effort to develop a "religion without religion" (GD 50). The logic of the *sans* is of utmost import here, not only for Derrida but also, we shall soon see, for Marion. Derrida explains that his approach to religion is *without* religion because he is concerned only with the *possibility* of what gets itself actualized in a particular religion. As he says, this religion without religion "has no need of the event of a revelation or the revelation of an event" (GD 50). The actuality or historicity of the revelations in a religion are less important to him than are the various conditions that possibilize such actualities. As he even says of Genesis 22, "Whether or not one believes the biblical story, whatever credence or credit one gives to it, ... it could still be said that there is a moral to this story, even if we take it to be a fable" (GD 67). This means that while he is interested in religious themes and texts, such as love, sacrifice, salvation, God, etc., his relation to these religious themes is "without reference to religion as institutional dogma" (GD 50). Religion without religion repeats these religious themes but without the belief or credence (*croyance*) given to them in a particular religion. In other words, religion without religion occupies the slash between a/theism, which means that

3 This focus on the fix of ethical life follows John D. Caputo's notion of radical hermeneutics understood as "an attempt to stick with this original difficulty of life, and not to betray it with metaphysics" (*Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1987, p. 1).

it will constantly be negotiating the space between atheism and theism at times sounding like a particular religion while at times sounding like sheer atheism.⁴ Consequently, religion without religion is a “nondogmatic doublet of dogma” (GD 50) that describes the ways in which existence, particularly ethical life, is rife with religious undertones.⁵

Though Marion’s approach to religion is markedly different than Derrida’s on account of Marion’s strictly phenomenological approach to the givenness or phenomenality of phenomena, his concern with religion remains similar to Derrida. And Derrida himself even admits that Marion belongs “to this tradition that consists in proposing a nondogmatic doublet of dogma” (GD 50). Marion most clearly develops this nondogmatic doublet in his essay “Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology.” For in this essay, Marion is, in part, providing an apology for *why* phenomenology should engage the question of God through givenness and *how* this use of phenomenology is not a hidden theology or a colonization of phenomenology for merely theological purposes.

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4 On account of the way that religion without religion occupies this space between theism and atheism, how to characterize it has become contested territory particularly with the recent text from Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*. John D. Caputo and Richard Kearney both offer their responses to Hägglund in *The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion*. Caputo insists in this volume, as he has elsewhere, that that religion without religion is interested in a deeper faith (*foi*) as a quasi-transcendental for theism and atheism, both of which are dogmatic beliefs (*croyances*). Kearney develops, in a vein critical of Derrida, what he calls Derrida’s “messianic atheism,” which is another way of talking about the negotiation between theism and atheism at play in religion without religion. Caputo’s interpretation of Derrida follows closely Derrida’s notion of messianicity without any messianism, thereby admitting that the religious hope for the messiah is structurally always to come. Kearney’s criticism of this structural to-come in both Derrida and Caputo concerns, what Kearney calls, the lack of particularity and carnality of this approach. Kearney writes, “[T]he messianic universality so dear to deconstruction is only guaranteed, it seems, at the cost of particularity; it forfeits the incarnate singularity of everyday epiphanies” (Edward Baring and Peter E. Gordon (Eds.), *Trace of God: Derrida and Religion*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2015, p. 205).

5 All of which sounds close to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls “religionless Christianity” in his *Letters and Papers From Prison* as well as to what Paul Tillich means by a theology of culture.

According to Marion's overall phenomenological project, phenomenology has been concerned since its beginnings in Husserl and Heidegger with the givenness of phenomena. Yet, Marion maintains that while both Husserl and Heidegger have been concerned with givenness, they both fail in their phenomenological approaches to make givenness their centerpiece.⁶ In Marion's view, the proper phenomenon that should concern phenomenology is the very givenness or phenomenality of phenomena, that is, the ways in which phenomena give themselves. To return to the things themselves means to return to givenness. Thus, the question for Marion's phenomenology concerns the being-given (*étant-donné*) where the being of a thing is in transit, underway, and on its way in the thing as given. In other words, the being of the given is its very givenness or the way in which it is being given. For Marion, then, wherever we may find givenness, this givenness is the concern of the phenomenologist.

And Marion maintains that this principle holds for religious phenomena, especially God. In this, he distinguishes his phenomenological approach to religion from theology. For he says, "[T]he figure of 'God' in phenomenology ... still concerns the 'God of the philosophers and the scholars,' and in no way the 'God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob'" (VR 64).⁷ The "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" is the concern of "revealed theology," that is, the theology that *needs* the event of a revelation or the revelation of an event in order to exist. Revealed theology needs the "historicity" (VR 64) of that with which it is concerned; it needs the historicity of God's revelation. However, for Marion, phenomenology needs no such historicity but can identify the givenness of religious phenomena "only as a possibility: not only a possibility as opposed to actuality

6 See Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998 for Marion's critiques of both Husserl and Heidegger. In short, while Marion thinks that Husserl is correct to broach the topic of givenness for phenomenology, he thinks Husserl fails by focusing phenomenology of the structures on consciousness in experience. Moreover, while Marion thinks that Heidegger thinks givenness in more detail than Husserl, Marion ultimately thinks that Heidegger's insistence on the *Seinsfrage* prevents him from probing the depths givenness.

7 Jean-Luc Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner, et. al, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. Citations appear parenthetically as VR followed by the page number.

but, above all, as a possibility of givenness itself” (VR 64). Thus, Marion claims that if we start with givenness in our approach to any phenomenon, then phenomenology can describe the *possible* phenomenality or givenness of religious phenomena, even the *possible* givenness of God. Consequently, Marion characterizes God’s possible givenness, not in onto-theological terms as a *cause sui* being who transcends the material world, but in phenomenological terms as “the being-given par excellence” (VR 62). Marion turns to this phrase for the givenness of God in order to avoid characterizing God as The Giver because this characterization would be a move back into onto-theology, a move about which Marion from the beginning of his corpus has warned. He develops the significance of this givenness of God by saying that if all phenomena are determined by their givenness or their being-given, then God “is given and allows to be given more than any other being-given” (VR 62). In fact, and this is the weakening of God in Marion’s phenomenology, God’s givenness is so excessive that nothing seems to be there at all when God gives Godself. God “shines by absence” to such a degree that God’s “status as phenomenon might never be acknowledged. The phenomenon par excellence on account of that very excellence lays itself open to not appearing—to remaining in a state of abandon” (BG 63).⁸ Far from the omni-being of metaphysics and medieval theology rests the God of Marion’s phenomenology who can be ignored to the point of abandon.

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This account of the possible givenness of God is non-dogmatic because this account is not an account of the God of the religions of the book around which dogmas have been and are being written. Even the apophatic theologians are unwilling to admit that the purpose of mystical union with God is to abandon God.⁹ The God who comes to mind for Marion is a non-dogmatic repetition that concerns itself with describing only the possibility of the givenness of God around which the religions of the book have based their dogmas. The God of

8 Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002. Citations appear parenthetically as BG followed by the page number.

9 Meister Eckhart’s famous prayer, “God, rid me of God,” is not saying that he wants to abandon God. Rather, the purpose of the prayer is precisely mystical union with God so that between he and God there would be no distinction.

phenomenology as the being-given par excellence would then be a God without any religious dogma attached. Therefore, Marion's own phenomenological approach to religion provides us with a religion *without* religion.

And yet we must not forget that both Derrida's and Marion's religions without religion have different birth certificates. While both are a kind of religion *without* religion, they both draw predominantly from one religion more than any other. Derrida's religion without religion is markedly Jewish or Hebraic, but Marion's religion without religion is markedly Christian and Catholic. Derrida has even told us, in what he calls a kind of "post-script" to *The Gift of Death*, that his concern with possibilization, a concern that has been the concern of his deconstruction from the beginning, has been influenced by his being born a Jew in El Biar and the anti-Semitism that he experienced in the educational system on account of this cultural identity.¹⁰ And Marion's approach to phenomenology through his third reduction to the givenness of phenomena has been influenced by medieval, Christian mystical theology and especially the notion of the effulgence of the divine in worldly things.¹¹ Considering these different birth certificates of their respective religions without religion, we will not be surprised to find differences amidst their similar accounts of the responsibility that the figure of Abraham engenders.

DERRIDA'S ABRAHAM

Derrida's non-dogmatic doublet of religion in *The Gift of Death* revolves around his reading of Genesis 22 in response to both Søren Kierkegaard's reading of this narrative and Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy in general. With this, he allows these other two figures to help guide his own reading of the narrative. I claim that he shows in his reading how Abraham's relation to God in this narrative is *structurally* the same as our relation to any other. Thus, Derrida exposes the religious structure of our ethical life based on the kind of responsibility that Abraham

10 Jacques Derrida, "Abraham, The Other," in: Betinna Bergo and Michael D. Smith (Trans.), *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, p. 2.

11 See Tasmin Jones, *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion: Apparent Darkness*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011.

exemplifies toward his God. Yet Derrida does not require belief (*croyance*) in the historicity of Genesis 22 in offering this reading. Hence, this religious structure of ethical life belongs to a religion *without* religion as delineated above.

Derrida describes this structure of our ethical life by highlighting how, at least, four different aspects of Abraham's relation with God provide the structure of our relation to any other. Through these four aspects, Derrida develops his description of the Abrahamic, sacrificial responsibility that makes all of ethical life difficult, complex, and vertiginous.

First, just as Abraham's relation to God is a relation with the wholly other, so too is our relational with any other a relation with the wholly other. When Derrida turns to Genesis 22 in light of Kierkegaard-Silentio's reading of this narrative in *Fear and Trembling*, Derrida offers a characterization of the transcendence of God based on God's silence in this narrative. Drawing on one of the sources for the title of Kierkegaard's text, Derrida comments that God instills fear and trembling because "God is himself absent, hidden and silent, separate, secret, at the moment he has to be obeyed. God doesn't give his reasons . . . Otherwise, he wouldn't be God, we wouldn't be dealing with the Other as God or with God as wholly other [*tout autre*]" (GD 58). God's transcendence for Derrida is based not only on the singularity of God but also on the fact that God is *abscondus*, hidden, or secret at the moment when God demands obedience. God does not say *why* Abraham must do this. God commands it, as if requesting in a prayer Derrida notes (GD 72), without saying *why*. And Abraham obeys this singular request without asking for a *why*. God knows in the text that this is a test, but this reason remains secret from Abraham. Abraham only learns that this is a test *after* he is willing to show absolute responsibility to God in sacrificing Isaac. So the wholly other is wholly other or transcendent precisely because from out of his or her singularity, his or her reasons remain absent, hidden, or secret at the moment when we must respond, that is, be responsible, to this wholly other.

Derrida plays on these two aspects of transcendence—singularity and secrecy—when he deconstructs Kierkegaard's text with the seemingly tautological phrase: *tout autre est tout autre*. If "every other is wholly other," this means that the singularity and absence of reasons that defines God's alterity in Genesis 22 are the same structural features that define the alterity of any other.

Drawing on Edmund Husserl's "Fifth Meditation" in his *Cartesian Meditations*, Derrida says, "[S]ince each of us, every one else, each other is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary, transcendent, nonmanifest, originarily nonpresent to my *ego* ..., then what can be said about Abraham's relation to God can be said about my relation ... to *every other as wholly other*" (GD 78 translation modified). Every other, be it God, humans, non-human animals, places, or languages, says Derrida (see GD 69–71), is wholly other or transcendent like God in Genesis 22 because every other is a unique singular who calls to us for obedience without granting us access to the why of his or her demand. For this reason, the name "God" for Derrida no longer signifies a "someone, over there, way up there, transcendent." In other words, "God" is not the God of onto-theology. Rather, "God" now signifies a "structure of conscience" marked by "the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior" (GD 108). Therefore, our everyday ethical life consists of relations with multiple wholly others, that is to say, Gods.

Second, just as Abraham is absolutely singular in his responsibility to God, so too is each of us absolutely singular in our responsibility to any other. To be responsible from out of his absolute singularity means, says Derrida, that Abraham "assumes the responsibility that consists in always being alone, re-trenched in one's own singularity at the moment of decision. Just as no one can die in my place, no one can make a decision ... in my place" (GD 60). Abraham is absolutely singular in his responsibility to God because only Abraham is tested. So only he can respond to God. Abraham is unsubstitutable in responding to the command or prayer of God. Isaac, Sarah, and the ethical community cannot help him by responding for him.

Derrida draws the structural similarity to our relation with any other when he says that our responsibility to the other "binds me in my absolute singularity to the other as other. God is the name of the absolute other as other and as unique ... As soon as I enter into a relation with the absolute other, my singularity enters into relation with his on the level of obligation and duty" (GD 68). So I too am unsubstitutable in my relation to any other, that is to any wholly other. Therefore, our everyday ethical life consists of multiple relations with the wholly other in which each of us is unsubstitutable in our responsibility to this wholly other.

Third, just as Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac to God entails silence and secrecy, so too are our decisions to sacrifice one other to another other marked with silence and secrecy. In the final chapter of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard-Silentio repeatedly insists that Abraham cannot speak or tell others what he is doing because he has no universal reason or no universal, ethical standard to give for what he is doing. And considering that such reasons or standards are the currency of the ethical community in *Fear and Trembling*, without these, Abraham's actions would not be understandable were he to try to explain it to the ethical community. Kierkegaard-Silentio insists that the one thing that he could say that would make the whole *ordeal* understandable would be: *this is a test*. However, Abraham does not know this is a test until much later in the narrative after he has passed the test, so to speak. Only God, and we the reader, know from the beginning that this is just a test. Abraham responds to God not out of knowing what will happen but out of faith, which means, for Derrida, deciding without knowledge. Thus, Derrida highlights that Abraham must keep this secret that it is a test "because at bottom he can only keep it: he does not know it, he is unaware of its ultimate rhyme and reason. He is sworn to secrecy because he is in secret" (GD 60). Thus, Abraham's decision to respond to God's call or prayer is a decision made without knowledge or without calculative rationality (see GD 78). This lack of knowledge means, for Derrida, that Abraham is about to give a gift. He is about to make the impossible possible. Abraham (the giver) is going to give a gift (of death) to Isaac (the givee) and to God (the givee) without this economy being ruled by knowledge, calculation, or expectation of a reward. Abraham responds "absolutely ... without hoping for a reward, without knowing why yet keeping it secret" (GD 73). The economy of Abraham's sacrificial responsibility is an an-economy, an economy without circular exchange or reciprocity.

And Derrida draws a structural parallel to our decisions to choose to help some others while also choosing not to help other others in our ethical life. He maintains that all of our decisions in our ethical life are like Abraham's decision to follow God's command out of faith, that is without knowing why or deciding without calculative rationality. My decision to help one particular other, which is a sacrificing of myself or a giving of a gift of death to myself, and not to help other others, which is a gift of death to these others, is a deci-

sion that I cannot justify with universal reasons or universal, ethical standards. He writes, "I can respond to the one ..., that is to say to the other, only by sacrificing to that one the other ... And I can never justify this sacrifice, I must always hold my peace about it ... I will always be in secret, held to secrecy in respect of this, for nothing can be said about it" (GD 71). For if every other is wholly other, I am bound by absolute responsibility in my absolute singularity to every other. So I cannot justify why I choose to help one while choosing not to help another. My decision is "always secret" and, thereby, an exercise of faith. All decisions in our ethical life are structured by faith insofar as we, like Abraham, know not to know why we choose to be responsible to the wholly other. Therefore, our everyday ethical life consists of multiple relations with the wholly other in which each of us is unsubstitutable in our responsibility to this wholly other, and our decision to respond to one other over other others is a leap of faith to give a gift outside of the economy of calculative rationality and circles of exchange.

Fourth, just as Abraham's responsibility toward God harbors an irresponsible core toward Isaac and his family, so too does our responsibility harbor an irresponsible core. Abraham's silence in *Fear and Trembling* marks, in part, what Kierkegaard-Silentio calls the teleological suspension of the ethical by religion. Abraham suspends his ethical responsibility to Isaac in order to respond to his absolute, religious responsibility to God. Derrida draws on this to show that responsibility, then, is double-headed. General responsibility and ethics, the ethics of the community, demands an accounting of my actions, namely that my decision have known and universal reasons and principles that are substitutable among different subjects. Yet absolute responsibility, the responsibility that Abraham has toward God, demands "uniqueness, absolute singularity, hence nonsubstitution, nonrepetition, silence, and secrecy" (GD 61). Moreover, to act responsibly to one requires acting irresponsibly toward the other. This is the aporia of ethics for Derrida, or what he calls "ethics as 'irresponsibilization'" (GD 62). For Abraham to respond to his absolute responsibility toward God requires that he act irresponsibly toward Isaac and the ethical community. This is to act just like a hateful murder in the eyes of the ethical

community—a point that Kierkegaard-Silentio is unafraid to highlight.¹² Likewise, if Abraham were to act responsibly toward Isaac, then he would act irresponsibly toward God. Responsibility, then, harbors an irresponsible core.

This tension within responsibility itself continues, says Derrida, in our ethical life. If every other is wholly other, is just as much God as any other, then we are *absolutely* responsible to every other. This means that we can never have a clean conscience because responsibility always harbors irresponsibility at every instant when we make a decision to give a gift of life to one other and, concomitantly, a gift of death to every other other. Derrida writes, “I am responsible to any one (that is to say to the other) only by failing in my responsibilities to all the others, to the ethical or political generality” (GD 71). Therefore, such is the fix that we are in with responsibility in our everyday ethical life where we are bound by absolute responsibility to every wholly other. The choice to respond, that is, responsibility, does not lead to nice, neat, and always good outcomes because responding to the other entails, as we can see, complexity, messiness, and aporia.

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Through these four structural parallels, Derrida offers his *de*-scription, not *pre*-scription, of our ethical life. This is a description of ethical life that embraces the finitude of our responsibility, namely, the reality that being responsible and doing the right thing cannot be appropriated to and programed as an ethical system. The responsibility of our ethical life requires making unjustifiable decisions in responding responsibly to some while irresponsibly to others. In this, the demands of ethical life and responsibility in relation to any other are demands that structurally mirror Abraham’s religious duty to his God—a duty, Kierkegaard-Silentio argues, that resides outside the ethical. In this, Derrida is problematizing the distinction between the ethical and the religious that *Fear and Trembling* wishes to uphold with strict boundaries and gate keepers. In the end, Derrida wants to extend the Levinasian face of the other beyond just

12 Kierkegaard writes with regard to Abraham’s relation to the ethics of the community, “[T]he reality of his act is that by which he belongs to the universal, and there he is and remains a murderer” (Søren Kierkegaard, trans. and eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 74).

the human other. He wants more than the human other to take on a face.¹³ He wants even animals, places, and language to take on a face or to have the face of God. As we turn now to Marion's reading of Genesis 22, he too is concerned to let other things take on a face. In fact, he wants all phenomenality to take on a face.

MARION'S ABRAHAM

In Marion's reading of Genesis 22, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is emblematic of a phenomenologically radical account of responsibility. For Abraham's willingness to sacrifice is a willingness to render "givenness visible by re-giving the gift" (RoG 84). In this sense of a phenomenological account of responsibility, *all* phenomena, not just the other, call out to us to respond to them or call out to us to responsibly receive them. The result of this for Marion is that our responsibility goes all the way to *how* we make the givenness of phenomena visible. In order to understand Abraham's exemplification of this responsibility in Marion's reading of Genesis 22, we first need to understand who "the subject" is for Marion in his phenomenology of givenness.

As we have seen, Marion determines phenomenality or the givenness of a phenomenon to be the proper focus of phenomenology. For him, he agrees with Heidegger's definition of a phenomenon as "what shows itself from itself."¹⁴ But Marion maintains that before a phenomenon can show itself, it must first give itself. This difference between givenness and manifestation or givenness and showing is crucial for Marion. Phenomena give themselves without reserve and of their own accord, but they do not manifest this givenness or manifest themselves of their own accord. Only when "the subject," which Marion names *l'adonné*, receives the givenness of a phenomenon is

13 In 1951, in Levinas's first *explicit* critique of Heidegger's philosophy after returning from the POW camp, Levinas asks a question to which Derrida and Marion are responding, "Can things take on a face" (Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" in: Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Eds.), *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 10)?

14 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh and Dennis J. Schmidt, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010, p. 21.

this givenness brought to visibility or manifestation. In a sense very close to Heidegger's *Da-sein*, *l'adonné* remains the *there* where givenness can show itself. We have givenness without *l'adonné*. But without *l'adonné*, we have no *manifestation* of this givenness. Moreover, Marion maintains that the givenness of each phenomenon *should* be received in the way that it gives itself. This indicates that *l'adonné* is the subject without subjectivity for Marion because *l'adonné* is meant to be freed from any constitution of, which is to say, constraining of, the givenness of phenomena. Thus, *l'adonné* is placed "between the given and phenomenality" or "between the given—which never ceases to be imposed on it and to impose itself on it—and phenomenalization."¹⁵ *L'adonné* is placed between the given and its givenness in order to receive this givenness and make it manifest. *L'adonné* receives the givenness of the phenomenon and lets this givenness show itself by submitting to it "without interfering or causing a disturbance" (BG 264).¹⁶

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Therefore, the responsibility of *l'adonné* includes, while extending beyond, the face of the other or ethical responsibility. *L'adonné* must be responsible in how he or she receives the givenness of *any* phenomenon.¹⁷ He writes, "Responsibility belongs officially to all phenomenality that is deployed according to givenness: what is given (the call) succeeds in showing itself as a phenomenon only on the screen and according to the prism that *l'adonné* ... alone offers it" (BG 293-294 translation modified). The responsibility of *l'adonné* is grounded not merely on responding to the call of the face of the other but also, more generally, on "having to respond in the face of the phenomenon as such, that is to say, such as it gives itself" (BG 294). This is Marion's phenomenologically radical account of responsibility in which *l'adonné* remains responsible to the very givenness of phenomena in being the site where this givenness can come to manifestation.

15 Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud, New York: Fordham University Press, 2002, p. 49.

16 Marion does think that this reception of givenness is inherently hermeneutical. But his understanding of the hermeneutic process here is riddled with problems and unanswered questions.

17 In *Being Given*, Marion extends this responsibility primarily to the saturated phenomena. However, in light of his essay "The Banality of Saturation," we can see how Marion thinks that this responsibility extends to all phenomena because all phenomena can potentially be received as saturated phenomena.

So when Marion turns to Genesis 22 to establish a phenomenological concept of sacrifice, he has working in the background of his reading this notion of phenomenological responsibility. With this, Marion offers his concept of sacrifice by examining this phenomenon, like Derrida does, in terms of the an-economy of the gift. His aim is to reduce, in the phenomenological sense of lead-back, the gift of sacrifice to givenness. He admits that in sacrifice a giver (the one who sacrifices) gives a gift (the something or someone sacrificed) to a givee (the one for whom the sacrifice is made). What is most important for Marion in this an-economy is not the destruction of what or whom is sacrificed nor the reception by the givee of the sacrifice but the reduction of the gift that is sacrificed to its givenness. This reduction of sacrifice enables Marion to provide an account of the an-economy of sacrifice because the reduction to givenness avoids the circle of exchange or reciprocity. When the content of the gift is bracketed, as it is in Marion's understanding of sacrifice, then the gift itself is no longer of concern but its givenness becomes the focus. The gift's givenness understood both as the originary gesture of a *giver* and as receivable by a recipient becomes the focus, not the economy of exchange, when the gift is reduced to its givenness. In this an-economy of sacrifice, the responsibility rests on the giver to reduce the gift to givenness so that the sacrifice is not ruined by reciprocity. For Marion, the issue at stake in sacrifice is "the suspending of the gift given so that it would allow the process of its givenness ... to appear in its own mode, instead of crushing it in the fall from the given into a pure and simple found object" (RoG 82).¹⁸ The one who sacrifices, the giver, then, has the responsibility in sacrifice of not merely destroying the gift but of "making this gift transparent anew in its own process of givenness" (RoG 82), that is, in letting the gift's givenness manifest itself. This account of sacrifice presupposes, then, that the gift given in the sacrifice has already been a gift given to the one doing the sacrifice. Sacrifice "presupposes a gift already given" (RoG 83). And the responsibility of the giver is to let this givenness of the already given gift manifest itself in the giver's own re-giving of the gift through sacrifice. Thus,

18 Jean-Luc Marion, *The Reason of the Gift*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis, Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011. Citations appear parenthetically as RoG followed by the page number.

Marion writes, "Sacrifice gives the gift back to the givenness from which it proceeds, by returning it to the very return that originally constitutes it" (RoG 83).

Marion finds all of this confirmed in his reading of Genesis 22. To begin with, Isaac, the gift to be given in sacrifice, has already been a gift given by God to Abraham and Sarah who were both too advanced in their years for child bearing (Genesis 18:11). In the first of a series of passages that begin to identify God as The Giver, a point, recall, that Marion wants and *needs* to avoid in order not to slip back into an onto-theological determination of God, Marion comments that Isaac belongs "from the beginning and as a miracle to God alone" (RoG 86). Marion further maintains, in his interpretation of Genesis 21:3 and 21:7, that Abraham and Sarah both forget this givenness of Isaac after his birth when they claim or appropriate Isaac to be *their* son. Isaac had become Abraham and Sarah's possession rather than the gift given them by God. Consequently, the binding of Isaac occurs according to Marion so that Abraham can re-give Isaac back to God thereby manifesting Isaac's originary givenness as a gift from God. Marion writes, now identifying God as the originary, masculine giver, "The demand for a sacrifice opposes to this illegitimate appropriation, which cancels the gift given in a possession, the most original right of the giver to have *his* gift acknowledged as a gift given, which is to say, simply acknowledged as an always provisional, transferable, and alienable usufruct" (RoG 87 emphasis mine). And Abraham himself, "who already reasons according to the phenomenological concept of sacrifice," accomplishes this reduction of Isaac to his originary givenness (RoG 87). The climax of this reduction occurs when Isaac recognizes that Abraham has no lamb for the sacrifice and Abraham tells him, "God will provide himself the lamb" (Genesis 22:8 in RoG 87). For Marion, this statement means "that every gift made to God comes first from God as gift given to us" (RoG 87). Far from the Kierkegaardian-Derridian Abraham who fears and trembles with a secret that he knows not, Marion's Abraham is one who seems to know or recognize, like any good phenomenologist of givenness, that the point is not to destroy Isaac but to receive Isaac, "for the first time" (RoG 89), according to his own givenness as a gift from God, the originary giver. According to Marion, Abraham seems to realize early in the narrative that this really is just a test. Abraham recognizes that it is no longer important that [he] kill, eliminate, and exchange his son for God's benefit in

order to accomplish the sacrifice demanded ...; rather, it matters exclusively (according to the phenomenological concept of the gift) that he acknowledge his son as a gift, that he accomplish this recognition of the gift by giving it back to its *giver*, and, thus, that he let God appear [as giver] through his gift (RoG 88, emphasis mine).

Thus, Abraham exemplifies the phenomenological responsibility that *l'adonné* has in receiving the gift according to its givenness and manifesting this givenness visibly. Thus, following Marion's account of phenomenological responsibility, Abraham's responsibility in Genesis 22 provides the structure for our own responsibility in our ethical life.

What is explicitly lacking from Marion's reading of Abraham is the finitude of responsibility. Yet this may not be surprising, to draw on *Fear and Trembling* and the book of *Hebrews* from the Christian New Testament, if we recall that Abraham has been called the father of faith or the figure who exemplifies what obedience to God means. This understanding of Abraham would explain why Abraham gets it just right for Marion while the best any one else can do is come close to Abraham. After all, Marion does describe the finitude of the responsibility of *l'adonné* in receiving the givenness of phenomena. A phenomenon may give itself without reserve, but *l'adonné* is itself determined by finitude. This finitude of *l'adonné* prevents him/her from adequately receiving "the given such as it gives itself — namely, without limit or reserve" (BG 309). Thus, despite our responsibility, on Marion's accounting, to receive a phenomenon in the way that it gives itself and to let this givenness manifest itself, this reception and manifestation remains always limited and inadequate to the givenness of the given. Consequently, as with Derrida, but for deeply different reasons, as we have seen, the fix that we are in with our ethical life is that even when we act responsibly toward phenomena, our responsibility harbors irresponsibility because our finitude prevents us from receiving the phenomena perfectly according to the degree of their givenness.

CONCLUSION

We have seen, then, how the structure of sacrifice found in Genesis 22 has spurred both Derrida and Marion to emphasize the ethical impetus that this narrative places on our life. In this, they both emphasize how responsibility or ethical life itself is rife with religious undertones. For the religious figure of Abraham is emblematic of our responsibility for ethical life, despite how frightening that may be at times. Both, then, are calling us to be Abrahamic in their two versions of religion without religion but not without warning. Derrida and Marion, but Derrida more explicitly and abrasively so, warns us that while being more like Abraham may be a call to responsibility, it also inherently entails irresponsibility. Such is the messiness of our ethical life. Such is the fix we are in with the flux of life. Our responsibility interminably remains finite harboring within itself irresponsibility.

152 Despite Marion's extension of Derrida's account of responsibility to include not just iterations of alterity but also the givenness of all phenomena themselves, Marion does misstep in this development. He has claimed that the God of phenomenology is not the God of onto-theology, which he says his account avoids by not calling God the giver of all gifts but, rather, calling God the being-given par excellence. With this, Marion belongs as part of the tradition of religion *without* religion. Nevertheless, as we have seen, when Marion provides his phenomenological account of sacrifice, he explicitly identifies God as the originary giver. Thus, though he may extend Derrida's notion of Abrahamic responsibility, he does so by stepping-into the God of onto-theology. A step that does not seem necessary. A step that Marion has warned against from the beginning. A step that moves outside of the logic of a weakening of God in order to heighten our responsibility. Even though Marion may do the latter, he ends right back at the position that continental philosophers of religion have been trying to avoid all along: the strong God of metaphysics. For this reason, continental philosophers of religion can only go so far with Marion *if* they want to continue doing something philosophically different with religion.

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