

Editorial Foreword

The Rhetoric of Icons: From Image to Voice

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At the end of my paper “Aesthetic Theology, or, Theological Aesthetics after Hans Urs von Balthasar” I wrote, “Perhaps we still need to savour carefully the story told by John Damascene.”^①

Now, let us first of all “savour carefully” this story:

When Abgar was Lord [*kurios*] of the city of Edessenes, he sent an artist [*zographon aposteilanti*] to make a portrait [*homoiographesai eikona*] of the Lord [*kurioi*]. When the artist was unable to do this because of the radiance of His face, the Lord Himself pressed a bit of cloth to His own sacred and life-giving face and left His own image on the cloth and so sent [*aposteila*] this to Abgar who had earnestly desired it.^②

This widely-known story tells of the birth of an icon (allegedly the first icon). According to art historian Hans Belting, the appearance of this story in the Middle Ages points towards three issues. “On the one hand, a portrait after the living model, as distinct from one of invented, fictitious gods, gives evidence of Christ’s historical life and of the reality of his human nature. ... On the other hand, the miraculous or, in other versions, mechanical reproduction of Christ’s features prevented any equation with the ‘gods made by human hands’ or idols ... Finally, Christ’s intention in sending King Abgar an image of

^① GENG Youzhuang, “Aesthetic Theology, or, Theological Aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Journal for the Study of Christian Culture*, no. 20(2008): 26.

^② Quoted from Graham Ward, “The Beauty of God,” in *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty*, eds. John Milbank, Graham Ward and Edith Wyschogrod (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 37.

himself would prove that he *wished* to have images made of himself. Thus not only the genuineness of the image but also the appropriateness of venerating it were proved legitimate.”^① The first of these three issues has been subject to long and heated debate in Christian history, while the third one was closely related to the “iconoclastic movement” in the Middle Ages. Seen from a modern perspective, these two questions have lost their immediate significance, but their theoretical significance has remained till today. The second issue constitutes the most significant element of the story and manifests the “logical” significance embodied in paradox and miracle. All meanings that the “rhetoric of the icon” might bear would find their roots in this story. And this is why this story *per se* deserves further discussion even today.

In his paper “The Beauty of God,” Graham Ward analyzes this story in detail. In Ward’s opinion, we can see from the rhetoric of this story that the birth of an icon originated from an act of communication, an action carried out by God, the artist and the beholder in concert. Firstly, John Damascene uses the same word to address Abgar (*kurios*, Lord) and Jesus Christ (*kurios*, Lord), which means that Abgar, like any other human being, possesses to a degree, or at least tried to imitate, certain characteristics of Christ, and that Jesus Christ, as anyone else, possesses certain human characteristics. The evidence here naturally lies in the biblical teachings that human beings were made in the image of God and the great many theological treatises on this question in Christian history. Secondly, it is Abgar who sent (*aposteilanti*) an artist to make a portrait of Christ, and Christ sent (*aposteilai*) a portrait he himself had made to the hand of Abgar. Abgar desired to have a portrait of Christ, and Christ also hoped to participate in the making and transmission of his sacred image. Therefore, it is not reason/rationality that stimulated, operated or restrained the making of

^① Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Images before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 208-209.

an icon, nor even faith, but a desire.^① What is more, the event of Christ making a self-portrait constitutes a certain parallel relation with Christ's incarnation: "'This is my face' the giving of the cloth suggests; echoing the sacramental 'This is my body.'"^② The plot of giving a portrait, and the whole story, tell us that the icon is a gift given by God. Finally, and the most importantly, the icon as a gift from God is not an image, portrait or painting in a general sense, but is constituted by word, speech and the Word of God. Ward quotes a thinker from the Middle Ages who pointed out that, "Is not writing only an icon for audible speech? So, this [God's writing on the tablets of the Law] is an icon for the primordial, talking Word."^③ Therefore, to look at the icon is to hear God's voice. Or, we may say that the icon is not the object of seeing but the object of hearing. It is through seeing-hearing the icon that we can reach the understanding and acquisition of the Divine Word in direct perception. It is as Ward has claimed, "a mode of re-cognition in an operation of desire."^④ In this sense, the real value of the icon lies in that "it *does* something, rather than simply *is* something."^⑤

Here is another issue that should be discussed carefully. As Ward has asserted, in these two actions of "sending," there is one sharp difference. In distinction to Abgar's sending an artist to make a portrait of Christ, the image Christ made himself is to be sent to Abgar. Since there is no definite pronoun appearing in the latter narrative, it is not clear who actually sent the portrait to Abgar, the artist or Christ himself. We will never know the answer. In Ward's view, this might be the deliberate intention of John Damascene. It is right here that we encounter this most interesting and meaningful detail. We know that because of the divine nature of Christ, the artist could not fulfill his mission: to make a portrait of Christ. As a result, Christ himself made

^① Graham Ward, "The Beauty of God," 36-39.

^② Ibid., 43.

^③ Quoted from Graham Ward, "The Beauty of God," 42.

^④ Graham Ward, "The Beauty of God," 39.

^⑤ Ibid., 40.

one by his own hands. Christ finished a work that was supposed to be finished by an artist. However, we do not know whether it was the artist, or Christ, or someone else who sent the portrait to Abgar. If it is true, then, how can we say that this [the begetting of the portrait] was constituted by Christ, the artist and Abgar, who was both a sponsor and a beholder? Ward answers the question in this way: It is the inability of the artist who is a human that has manifested the divinity of Christ, and Christ's behavior manifests the human nature of Christ. In regard to both seeing the self-image and beauty from the other, we may say that the accomplishment of this icon is that it occurs by the hands of all (including other beholders and readers). What is more important is that we see here something similar to the features of textuality: "The authoring is subordinated to the telling."^①As readers, we are told in the story that a portrait was to be sent to the hand of one who desired it. We do not know who this person is. In the same way, the story teller did not intend to explore or express clearly who the giver was because here the most important point is giving, not the giver. Similarly, the telling of the story is more important than the teller of the story. We know that gift and giving, or the being-given is a critical point in contemporary western thought. Jean-Luc Marion explored this issue in a creative way in the second book of his trilogy on theological phenomenology – *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*. It is because of the publication of this book and the debate on gift between Jacques Derrida and Marion that Marion's thought has attained an outstanding position in the so-called post-modern philosophical and theological theories.

In Ward's discussion of the above story of Abgar, he refers to Marion's work and comments on Marion's thought. According to Ward, Marion's idea of the relations between icon and idol, look and gaze were still based on Immanuel Kant's dualistic view of ontology and phenomenology. Therefore, Marion's account of iconicity shares an interior connection with Kant's account of the sublime and Jean

^① Graham Ward, "The Beauty of God," 55.

Francois Lyotard's explicitly Kantian aesthetics of the "unpresentable." Ward claims that his own theological phenomenology has two different aspects: firstly, it refuses to discuss the relation between the subject and the object on the basis of the Kantian dualism; secondly, his theological phenomenology places more emphasis on Christ and incarnation rather than isolating one moment in the *oikonomia* – crucifixion.^① Even so, it is obvious that Ward has been inspired and influenced by Marion. In my opinion, although Ward has realized the significance of Marion's theory, the greater part of his discussion is on Marion's early works, and Ward does not pay enough attention to the developments and changes in Marion's thought which appear in his later work.

Marion is the exceptional modern western thinker who discusses the icon and comes back to the topic frequently. The starting point of his philosophy and theology is the analysis of the difference between icon and idol. The relation between "look" and "gaze" has always been one of the major concerns in his discussion. In his early work *God without Being*, Marion suggested at the beginning that, "'eidolon' presupposes the Greek splendor of the visible, whose polychromy gives rise to the polysemy of the divine, whereas 'eikon', renewed from the Hebrew by the New Testament and theorized by patristic and Byzantine thought, presents the only and invisible One Divinity."^② But this conflict should not be confined within the polemic between so-called "pagan art" and "Christian art"; rather, it should be explored from those aspects that may disclose the differences and relations between these two phenomenologies. What deserves our further attention is that for Marion, icon and idol are not two completely different or contradictory opposites. "The icon and the idol determine two manners of being for beings, not two classes of beings."^③ Besides,

^① Graham Ward, "The Beauty of God," 40-41, note 7.

^② Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7-8.

^③ *Ibid.*, 8.

it is because of the interactive impact of these two “arts” upon each that we are able to establish a kind of relation between the visible and the invisible. As a result, the phenomenon can be presented, and meaning can also be begotten. If we say that the idol provides a kind of image for our vision to look at, then this look could be our own mirror, whereas the icon constructs a kind of calling through the invisible, enabling us to realize the existence of the other in our response to that call. In the simplest sense, we might say that in Marion’s view, the idol is the gaze that can be reduced to “self,” while the icon is the speech of the other and cannot be reduced.

Here again we need to talk a bit more about the issue of the art of painting. Although Marion notes several times that the question of the icon should not be confined within the boundaries of Christian art, the question of idol and icon should not be limited within the controversy between idol and icon in western church history, either. It has gone far beyond the differences between pagan art and Christian art. Marion himself used paintings as examples in his works, and wrote one book that can be called the “art theory” – *The Crossing of the Visible*. In the “Preface” to this book, Marion explains explicitly his view of the relation between painting and phenomenology. For those who are interested in art phenomenology, this book is unmissable. What is more interesting, however, is a paragraph in the “Preface to the Chinese Translation”. Marion summarizes briefly the major content and ideas of the book, and then raises some questions concerning whether his ideas can be effective in a Chinese context:

A directly related issue does not lie in whatever role those concepts originating from theology and Christianity might play (for instance should we insist on the opposition between idol and icon?) but primarily in the relation between the visible and invisible itself. This relation has a general role in western art (including American abstract art)—but does it have the same effect in Chinese painting? For instance, in Chinese painting, should we insist that the significance of perspective (geometric perspective) is to make use of the invisible? Can we include in the topic perspective, and the interlacing of various gazes? What sort of function should we impute to the role of *l'écriture* left on the picture? Does calligraphy prescribe painting, so

that the latter is controlled by *l'écriture* in a certain sense? Or, in the opposite case, if we think of *l'écriture* in the name of calligraphy—is painting re-encompassing *l'écriture*? Or, is the alternative more probable, that these questions are not just coming from westerners' views of art, even if in Chinese painting the visual effect itself never held a central status?^①

We do not have time to discuss in details the related issues in Chinese painting. However, to ask these questions will undoubtedly promote Chinese scholars' thinking on the art of painting. If the issue of perspective and the relation of Chinese characters to calligraphy and painting are not new topics, the issue of gaze and the relation between the visible and invisible has apparently never been seriously reflected or discussed in Chinese theories of painting. (There are a lot of discussions on form and meaning in Chinese art theory, but these have completely different implications.)

Now let us turn back to Marion's philosophical and theological reflection on icons. If we say that in *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, by proposing and explaining the nature of being given, the structure of the call and response put forward by Martin Heidegger has been reexamined and uniquely interpreted, then in the last of Marion's trilogy, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, by explaining and creatively applying the concept of "face" raised by Emmanuel Levinas, Marion's thought on the icon has turned from image to voice. In that work, "face" has gone beyond Levinas' ethical sphere, becoming a "call" in a wider sense. And thus Marion enters into an infinite hermeneutics through our "response". In the end, in this infinite hermeneutics, the waiting of the face and the waiting of God are united as one, and the hearing of the other's voice is reduced to the hearing of God's voice. Thus, not only is Marion's early theory on idol and icon re-interpreted, but the so-called theological turn of French phenomenology is accomplished.

Concerning "face", Marion first of all points out that the "I" as

^① Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. ZHANG Jianhua (Taipei: Chinese Christian Literature Council Ltd., 2010), 13.

the subject cannot constitute the “face” as an objective phenomenon because the ‘face’ pre-exists ‘I’. As an event, face works on me or to me. Besides, “this happens in reverse so that my look is submerged, in a counter-intentional manner.”^① Secondly, unlike physical flesh, the face cannot be phenomenized by senses or by look. This is because when I look at the face of the other, my vision will be directed to the eyes of that face, or to be more exact, to the pupils of the eyes in that face, where there is nothing to be looked at, nor any objects that can be constituted by intentionality. “Thus, in the face of the other person we see precisely the point at which all visible spectacle happens to be impossible, where there is nothing to see, where intuition can give nothing [of the] visible.”^② But the problem is, if this is true, namely that the face cannot provide anything to be seen, why do we still need to look at it? Why not give up the effort of looking for a phenomenon there? Marion believes that we should not do so too hastily because even though the face has not been reduced to an object, even as face does not allow itself to be grasped by intentional purpose, it can still provide us with something.

In his book *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* Levinas has pointed out that if the face could provide anything for us, it would be because the face shows itself in a very unique way, namely “the face speaks”.^③ Besides, when the face speaks, what matters is not what it speaks but that it is speaking. In other words, for a face as expression, the “first content of expression is the expression itself.”^④ Concerning this idea of Levinas, Marion offers both explanation and further clarification. Firstly, “To speak is not necessarily the same here as making use of the physical word and the material sounds that it emits. ... Thus the word is played first in the listening and in the

^① Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 113.

^② *Ibid.*, 115.

^③ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lings (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 66.

^④ *Ibid.*, 51.

silence of the sense [meaning]. In this way the face speaks in silence.”^① In other words, only when we are in the mode of listening, can a face speak, and even then it is a silent speech. Secondly, when a face speaks, the reason that the beholder turns looking into listening is because here stands a counter-look: in the eyes and in the void of the pupils the look escapes my look and envisages my look in return, face-to-face at my looking. Marion even believes that “In fact, it sees me first, because it takes the initiative.” The look, gaze, or even the intent watching of the face compels us not to look but to turn to listen. In this moment, a genuine structure of call and response or a genuine relation of questioning and answering can be established. In order to explain this point more clearly, Marion makes reference to the Commandment – “Thou shalt not kill,” an example used by Levinas in his discussion of “face.” For Marion, the existence of “face” or the possibility of the existence of “face” lies in the promise I give to the other person that I will not kill. But this is not just an ethical question but also a phenomenological question. Because I can kill: it is just that were I to do so, his or her face would immediately disappear, and be congealed into a simple object. More importantly, in this situation, the relation between the “I” and the “face” will end as a consequence. Because “the face in its injunction obliges me to situate myself in relation to it,”^② therefore, the injunction – “You shall not kill” first of all is exercised *as* an injunction, independent of its contents. People can use other injunctions to replace it, as long as they are as strong as this one. The critical point is whether these injunctions can send out a call or an appeal to those who may hear, even if these injunctions are silent calls or voiceless appeals. After all, the face “must appear under the form, not of an object spectacle, but of a call.”^③ Here lies the difference between icon and idol: the former is a call as the object to be heard, and the latter is a spectacle as the object to be seen. In this way Marion

^① Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, 116.

^② *Ibid.*, 117.

^③ *Ibid.*, 118.

turns back to his idea of icon and tries to redefine Levinas' concept of face. For Marion, "The face ... accomplishes the phenomenological operation of the call more, perhaps, than any other phenomenon (saturated or not)... That is why what imposes its call must be defined not only as the other person of ethics (Levinas), but more radically as the icon. The icon gives itself to be seen in that it makes me hear [understand] its call."^① Similar to an icon, the face is invisible (concerning its non-objectification and conceptualization), but it still can work on the beholder. What is more, as icon, the accomplishment of the phenomenality of the face never consists in making itself seen but in its being heard [understood]. Here Marion emphasizes the word 'respect'. Although the root of this word "*-spectare*" shows that it is related to attracting sight and attention, fundamentally, the appearance of respect is "because I feel myself called and held at a distance by the weight of an invisible look, by its silent appeal. *To respect* is also understood as the counter-concept of *to look at*."^② In this sense, we may say that to respect is to hear, or vice versa, to hear is to respect. This reminds us of a phrase favored by Martin Heidegger, "*Denken ist Danken*" (To think is to thank).^③

One unavoidable question is what we can hear from the face of the other? This is a difficult and necessary question for anyone. Marion's answer to the question is that the face that speaks does not express a finite or concrete content. "The expression of the face expresses an infinity of meanings. This infinity is marked first in the fact that the features and movements of face, even accompanied by explicative words, cannot be translated into a concept or a finite proposition."^④ This not only works on me because the experience of the other is definitely outside me, and even for others, this experience is also too complicated and mixed, constantly changing. Therefore, in a

^① Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, 118-119.

^② *Ibid.*, 119.

^③ Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 144.

^④ Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, 119-120.

strict sense, face itself may be unclear about what it speaks. This leads to another question, “Must the face that envisages me remain an unintelligible phenomenon, because without signification?”^① To this question, Marion’s answer is No, which is not surprising at all. The key point is that if the face does not contain the significance of being conceptualized, this is not because of the shortage of meaning but is because of the excess of meaning. It is right here where the uniqueness of Marion’s phenomenology lies. On the one hand, the speech of the face as an infinite stream begetting meaning will never be reduced to a concept. On the other, the “I” who receives the other from the outside, at a distance of alterity, am constantly renewed. Communication with the face of the other is not discovering what the face wants to express, what its expression means or what it exactly wants to say, but to envisage the face that cannot express a concrete meaning, but demands only that I face squarely that visage, face to face, with its unfathomable, imprecise meaning, and that I hope that something which can replace the face will emerge, which can give meaning or significance to it. This replacement is called an “event” by Marion. Thus, “what a face expresses is recognized in what happens to it – the act or the event that happens to it and that contradicts or confirms the spoken word or the silent expression.”^② This is why Marion believes that “To envisage a face requires less to see it than to wait for it, to wait for its accomplishment, the terminal act, the passage to effectivity.”^③ For that “I,” the accomplishment of face is to evoke a call that could be heard by me.

But this does not mean that face in the end will give a definite and specific meaning, but to say that I am put or located in a position to hear and interpret this expression without end. More importantly, even when one is at the end of one’s life, even at the moment when the face of the other is disappearing, one cannot guarantee that the face could

^① Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, 122.

^② *Ibid.*, 119.

^③ *Ibid.*, 119.

disclose its ultimate meaning. Therefore, Christian theology prudently and decently postpones this last judgment to the Last Judgment, leaving it to God. But, we must remember that “while we are unable to accomplish this judgment, the duty to pursue its hermeneutic without end remains to our finitude.”^① Even when the other person dies and his/her face disappears, the hermeneutic is not ending. Rather, “it is starting from the instant of his or her death that the work of mourning begins and, indissolubly, of memory.”^② On the other hand, even after I have disappeared, the hermeneutic to that face will not end because that face also belongs to the public, and other hermeneutics, including those contradictory to mine, remain extant. In any case, there will always be a speech and a hermeneutic between the two face-to-face opposites. For this “I” the infinite hermeneutic means a responding without end, which is based upon a hearing without end.

Now we can see clearly that even though look and gaze have always been the major concern of Marion’s phenomenology, speech and hearing have caught his attention more and more. This can be attested in his later works and from other scholars’ comments. For instance, in his article “The Voice without Name: Homage to Levinas,” Marion makes it clear that

The mode of givenness of the face is determined by Levinas without ambiguity – it gives itself in the mode of the appeal: “It is precisely in this call to my responsibility by the face which assigns me, which commands me, which calls me; it is in this placing into question that the Other is my neighbor.” ... Formally, one might say that phenomenality thus passes from vision to speech, or from a vision which sees, produced by the ego, to speech which is heard, which is to say, received by the ego. One should not underestimate the importance of this turn, since the intervention of hearing

^① Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, 123.

^② *Ibid.*, 123.

in the place and instead of vision breaks with the metaphysical primacy of the gaze ...^①

In fact, in Marion's thought, no matter whether it is called philosophy or theology, the turn from the phenomenology of vision to the phenomenology of voice, from the face of God to the voice of God, has been presented clearly. If we treat the theological turn of phenomenology as a continuous movement, such turn began with Levinas, was made more specific in the arguments of Michel Henri and Jean-Louis Chretien, and is accomplished in Marion's comprehensive explication. This trend in Marion's thought has been noticed by David Tracy, whose comment on it is worthy of attention. After summarizing the three stages of development in Marion's thought (the re-reading of Descartes, a phenomenology of theological language, and the new phenomenology of saturated phenomenon), Tracy points out that:

I suggest that the next step for Marion is not to return to a phenomenology of strictly theological language (Dionysius, St. Thomas, Augustine, Luther, et al.), but first spend more phenomenological time on the original revelation itself, as witnessed in the Scriptures, insofar as Scripture both informs and transforms all later theologies. Hence, my final proposal: once scriptural revelation is more fully described, *a phenomenology of the voice will become at least as necessary as any phenomenology of the visible—face or icon*. No one can see the face of God and live, as Exodus insists. But the voice of God—for Moses, even for Job in the whirlwind, is always there. And in the New Testament, the fact that the Word becomes flesh also means that, in Jesus the Christ, the voice becomes face. A phenomenology and hermeneutics—of voice and face in the God-man, Jesus the Christ—remains the principal task of any fully Christian theology. □

^① Jean-Luc Marion, "The Voice without Name: Homage to Levinas," in *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 226.

^② David Tracy, "Jean-Luc Marion: Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Theology," in *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 64. Emphasis is mine.