

Wissenschaftlicher Beirat / Scientific Advisory Board

Ehrenmitglied / Honorary Member

Richard Schaeffler (München)

Mitglieder / Members

Bernhard Casper (Freiburg i. Br.)

Ingolf Dalgerth (Zürich)

Hermann Deuser (Frankfurt a. M.)

Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz (Dresden)

Jean Greisch (Paris)

Juan Scannone (Buenos Aires)

Jörg Splett (Frankfurt a. M./München)

Bernhard Uhde (Freiburg i. Br.)

Amador Vega Esquerra (Barcelona)

Joao J. M. Vila-Cha SJ (Rom)

André Wiercinski (Warschau)

Reiner Wimmer (Tübingen)

Jahrbuch für Religionsphilosophie

Band 16

Philosophy of Religion Annual

Volume 16

2017

Herausgegeben von / Edited by

Markus Enders & Holger Zaborowski

Verlag Karl Alber Freiburg / München

Micaela Szefel

Literatur

- Philippe Capelle: *Fenomenologia francesca actual*, Buenos Aires 2009.
Meister Eckhart: *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate* (Hrsg. J. Quint), München 1955.
Meister Eckhart: *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate* (Hrsg. F. Schulze-Maizier), Leipzig 1927.
Michel Henry: *»Ich bin die Wahrheit«*. Für eine Philosophie des Christentums, Freiburg/München 1997.
Michel Henry: *Phénoménologie de la vie*, Band IV: *Sur l'éthique et la religion*, Paris 2003.
Michel Henry: *Inkarnation: Eine Philosophie des Fleisches*, München 2004.
Michel Henry: *Christi Worte. Eine Phänomenologie der Sprache und der Offenbarung*, Freiburg/München 2010.
Michel Henry: *»L'essence de la manifestation*, Paris 2011.
Michel Henry: *»Notes préparatoires à L'essence de la manifestation: la subjectivité«*, in: *Revue internationale Michel Henry 3* (2012), S. 93–279.
Michel Henry: *Radikale Religions-Phänomenologie. Beiträge 1943–2001* (Hrsg. Rolf Kühn/Markus Enders), Freiburg/München 2015. Dt. Übers. von Rolf Kühn.
Grégoire Jean: *»La subjectivité, la vie, la mort«*, in: *Revue internationale Michel Henry 3* (2012), S. 15–92.
Sébastien Laoureux: *»Von ›Das Wesen der Erscheinung: zu ›Ich bin die Wahrheit. Die Bezugnahme auf Meister Eckhart in der Phänomenologie Michel Henrys«*, in Kühn, Rolf (Hrsg.): *Erkenntnis und Mystik des Lebens*, Freiburg/München 2008, S. 103–134.
Jean Reaidy: *Naissance mystique et divinisation de l'homme intérieur chez Maître Eckhart et Michel Henry*, Paris 2015.
Karl Heinz Witter: *Meister Eckhart: Leben aus dem Grunde des Lebens*, Freiburg/München 2013.

Joseph Rivera

Christian Life and the Phenomenology of Life

Michel Henry's phenomenology of life incorporates explicit Christian theological motifs; his later work attempts to reinterpret the doctrine of the Incarnation in particular. Christ assumes flesh, and it is the type of manifestation of this flesh that Henry brings to light with the intellectual tools of phenomenology. He associates it with the invisible disclosure of auto-affectation, a form of manifestation independent of the exterior body on visible display. In his late work, *Inkarnation: une phénoménologie de la chair* (2000), Henry attempts to highlight that the phenomenology of life is compatible with the framework of Christian life as it was articulated by some of early church fathers such as Tertullian, Augustine and, most often, Irenaeus, in order to show that his doctrine of the Incarnation was not vulnerable to being elided with Gnostic doctrines of Incarnation. This essay brings into conversation Irenaeus of Lyons and Henry, and it interrogates the degree to which Henry departs or fails to depart from Gnostic interpretations of the flesh of Christ.

1. Introduction: Christianity and Life

In an attempt to ally his phenomenological interpretation of the Incarnation of God in Christ with Irenaeus of Lyons's work, Michel Henry reaffirms his commitment to the reality of the »flesh« Christ assumed. If Christ assumes flesh, then it follows it must be a living flesh that he possessed in first-century Palestine, and not a Gnostic counterfeiter. And yet, even though Henry's contrast between an interior flesh and exterior body-object may directly challenge Cartesian dualism, it does not exactly overcome Gnostic dualism, at least as that category was conceived by Irenaeus.¹ What is at stake, we

¹ Gnosticism is of course a term of abuse and subject to much interpreta-

shall see, is the nature of human flesh that Christ assumed. Where Henry and Irenaeus intersect is the point at which Christology and anthropology intersect in the early church debates about the person of Christ. Do these two paradigms of theological anthropology mutually illuminate or mutually exclude one another? Is the Christian life a species of the phenomenology of life?

Henry's focus on theological anthropology is reflective of a trend born of the decades-long climate in Continental philosophy. The question of the embodied »self« continues to exorcise contemporary philosophy, and French philosophy of religion in particular has explored not only conceptions of the body, temporality, otherness and being-in-the-world, but it has also renewed interest in the concept of life. Often known as *Lebensphilosophie*, and going back at least to Nietzsche and Dilthey, the principled study of life continues to transpire and advance across disciplines. Scholars in fields, as diverse as cognitive science, biology, philosophy and theology, have employed the vocabulary of life in order to reimagine the inner logic of subjective structures, be they concepts of soul, mind, body or temporal movement.² Michel Henry has attended to such

tion, given that we have little of their own writings, although the Nag Hammadi discovery rectified that in part. For the sake of delimiting the interpretive challenge of Gnosticism, I will focus on Irenaeus, while not concluding that all Gnosticism is accurately portrayed by his work. On the continued utility of the term Gnostic, as a signifier for a set of writings in the ancient world, see David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

² See Nietzsche's analysis of decadence in the *Ecce Homo* as one example among many of his analyses of life, which are often discussed in contrast to Christianity, a religion whose theology represents a »crime against life« in that it seeks to »suck the blood out of life itself, to make it anaemic« (S. 148–50). Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Other early sustained treatments of the conception of life appear in the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, in for example his *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, Rudolf A. Makreel and Eriythof Rodi (Hrsg.) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). I won't rehearse here the main lines of inquiry in current literature, but indicative examples are found in the work of Evan Thompson, Francesco Varela, Hans Jonas and Mark C. Taylor.

subjective structures of life with unparalleled phenomenological rigor; he has set himself the task of explicating the affective character of life, whereby he argues life unfolds entirely within the domain of self-feeling or self-affection, in which one's experience and the content of one's experience coincide.

This internal experience of the »living present« (Henry's vocabulary borrowed from Husserl) connects to what Henry describes in meticulous detail as a domain of pure interiority. It dwells inside me and occurs in dramatic fashion as a self-feeling and self-suffering of myself in union with absolute life, which is felt as pure presence because it eventualizes and materializes itself independent of all exterior signs usually associated with experience, such as bodily sensation, language, reflective or intentional thematization. These external signs, it should be emphasized, can in no way disclose the essence of life. For Henry, the domain of the living present, and its invisible drama, eludes the appearing of the world in all of its forms, because life illustrates a domain immanent to itself, oriented wholly by a pathos of feeling that feels itself, a pure impressionality, so that it »draws its substance from the very substance of life ... whose impressional character and affectivity never result from anything other than the impressional character and affectivity of life itself.«³

While Henry draws on the phenomenological tradition, and Edmund Husserl in particular, to express the technical philosophical foundations of this type of anthropology, he also enlists and modifies key categories in Christian theology. Using the Johannine tradition that originates in the gospel of John, Henry argues that theology represents a complementary vocabulary, which provides him with a crucial repertoire of theoretical skills to develop further the invisible depths of the living present. Henry ultimately concludes that the cogito each of us possesses enjoys the self-same relationship with the divine that Christ enjoys with the Father.⁴ Thus

³ Michel Henry, *Incarnation: A Philosophy of Flesh*, trans. Karl Helty (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), S. 121. All references to this volume will refer the reader to the English translation, unless otherwise stated.

⁴ See Michel Henry, *I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emmanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), chapter 7.

my life, as I experience it inside myself, is a gift I receive from elsewhere. I do not actively elicit myself but I undergo myself passively; my subjective being is not an accomplishment my ego brings about. That is, and this is the radical leap Henry initiates in his work on Christianity, I am given to myself by that which can self-generate all of life, the invisible and non-worldly First-Living, whose name is the absolute Life of God in Christ. But does the Christian life and the phenomenology of life, as two distinct vocabularies, contain identical grammars? Do their idioms overlap so seamlessly?

To put the point directly: how is Christ non-worldly if he assumed flesh in order to dwell among us? Because Henry insists on the acosmic or non-worldly character of the Incarnation, questions about the extent to which Henry adopts Gnostic motifs persist.⁵ Henry's Christology is therefore not without controversy. He acknowledges this controversy by offering a compact, and telling, reading of Irenaeus in his final systematic study of Christ, in *Incarnation: une philosophie de la chair* (2000). If each of us is an invisible »son within the Son,« then it follows Henry must make the Incarnation of Christ, a doctrine fundamental to Johannine literature, the epicentre of his non-ecstatic and otherworldly anthropology. The question of Gnosticism haunts Henry's work, and the question of how Irenaeus can be invoked in favour of the invisible domain of the living present equally haunts Henry. Should the re-configuration of Incarnation of Christ according to the phenomenology of life isolate the Incarnation from the light of the world, the question of a Gnostic abdication necessarily ensues. The following pages will examine the confrontation between Henry's understanding of the Incarnation and the anti-Gnostic formulation of Christ in Irenaeus in *Adversus Haereses*. What complicates, and finally what

shows their differing grammars of Incarnation, is that Henry unreflectively aligns Irenaeus with the non-worldly logic of phenomenology of life.

For Henry it is in the figure of Irenaeus that a »Christian cogito« is accomplished in the face of Gnostic flight. While Henry in his earlier *C'est moi la vérité* appeared to espouse what Philippe Capelle called a »scriptural exclusivism,«⁶ the later *Incarnation* serves the purpose of a corrective in this regard by opening up a dialogue with patristic theology, in the figures of Tertullian, Irenaeus and Augustine. Proceeding to elaborate a Christology informed by scripture and tradition, and framed by absolute Life, Henry connects the »true reversal of Gnosticism« [*véritable renversement des positions de la gnose*] to with the »reversal of phenomenology.«⁷ I wish in this essay, however provisional it may be, to determine the extent to which Henry is successful in reversing Gnosticism, whereas other essays in the present issue will examine other fertile and challenging vistas in phenomenology Henry opens up for interreligious dialogue. In the concluding remarks, I suggest that Henry instead succumbs to the trappings of a Gnostic disjunction between this world and the interiority of life, a disjunctive space that fosters the body's tragic estrangement from the world (a conclusion not irrelevant for strictly phenomenological analyses of Henry's work).

II. Johannine Phenomenology

Henry's relationship to theology goes back to his early tome, *L'essence de manifestation* (1963), most evident in his constructive analysis of the figure of Meister Eckhart. In the 1970s and 80s, theological topics recede altogether from Henry's oeuvre, presumably so that he may focus on other disciplines such as politics, art, psychol-

⁵ See Jad Hatem, *La sauveur et les viscères de l'être: sur le gnosticisme et Michel Henry* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004); Kevin Hart, *Kingdoms of God* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), S. 174; Joseph Rivera, *The Contemplative Self after Michel Henry: A Phenomenological Theology* (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2015), chapter 4. Rolf Kühn is acutely aware of the Gnostic problem associated with Michel Henry's phenomenology of life, see his *Lebensreligion: Unmittelbarkeit des Religiösen als Realitätsbezug* (Dresden, Germany: Verlag Text and Dialog, 2013), S. 68.

⁶ Philippe Capelle, »Phénoménologie et vérité chrétienne: Réponse à Michel Henry.« in *Phénoménologie et christianisme chez Michel Henry: Les derniers écrits de Michel Henry en débat*, Philippe Capelle (Hrsg.) (Paris: Cerf, 2004), S. 48.

⁷ Henry, *Incarnation*, S. 132–33. In the French original, see *Incarnation: une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), S. 190. The connection between the two reversals is made explicit in §33 of *Incarnation*.

ogy, modern culture and phenomenological method. Henry then returns in the 1990s to treat Christianity in light of a finely-grained phenomenology of life.

I give pause here to note that, even with that gap in his oeuvre, the trajectory of Henry's theological inclinations spans several decades, originating in his earliest work only to culminate in his final work, *Paroles du Christ* (2002). The trilogy in other words, published during the twilight of his career does not generate a novel stage in his thought, but belongs to an overall arc consistently developed, an extension of the foundation laid in 1963 tome *Essence de manifestation*. Whether Henry's work is intrinsically theological is not so much a point of interest for the present essay.⁸ I do not think Henry's phenomenology is methodologically atheistic.⁹ The late trilogy on Christianity clearly shows how phenomenology and theology share a common object of study: absolute Life, or God. Strict separation between the two disciplines, therefore, never may finally hold, given both disciplines often evolved in relationship with each other in Henry's framework.

From what has just been said, it follows that some may detect illicit theological claims in his work, and that others may find the object proper to theology itself jeopardized by an unwarranted imposition of phenomenological method on the part of Henry. Whether or not his interpreters and critics can accept the complex arrangement of phenomenology and theology in Henry, it still remains for theology to continue engaging Henry's thought as it has developed over several decades, from his *Lessence de manifestation* up to his trilogy on Christianity.

⁸ I have addressed this elsewhere, see Rivera, *Contemplative Self after Michel Henry*, §§15–16.

⁹ Rolf Kühn also highlights this point about the intrinsically theological nature of Henry's work; see his *Wie das Leben spricht: Narrativität als radikale Lebensphänomenologie: Neuere Studien zu Michel Henry* (Switzerland: Springer, 2016), S. 24–32. Also, atheism is not so much a question of method as it is a metaphysical decision. Dominique Janicaud's suggestion that atheism is about strict rigor that throws off all prejudice fails to account fully for Jean-Luc Marion's critique that atheism is itself funded by metaphysics. See Marion, *The Idol and the Distance*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), §1, The Idol.

Before any such theological engagement may take place, I shall outline in more detail the complex relationship between phenomenology and theology in Henry. Some of Henry's readership appears to assert that Henry reads Christianity, and the gospel of John in particular, in a phenomenological manner, exempting him from theological presuppositions.¹⁰ I would argue, in contrast, Henry professes faith in God, and moreover, he assumes Christianity must be received as a gift, and this starting point is not to be contrasted with a strict phenomenological method that suspends religious faith, as it is in for example in Jean-Luc Marion.¹¹ For Henry, no cut-and-dried distinction between phenomenology and theology may obtain because both theoretical paradigms receive their data from the same source. Life generates philosophy and theology, not vice versa.

I name his particular style of thinking a Johannine phenomenology because Henry takes God to be the principal object of investigation, and only derivatively, does Henry treat the human condition. Because he adopts a theology from above, which is emblematic of the mystical theology of the gospel of John, the understanding of the human condition begins with what Christ said about his condition as Son of God and ends with the affirmation of Christ's substantial unity with God the Father. Language, and human reflection that employs language such as philosophy or theology, fails to see the truth of God and the human condition, without the aid of divine revelation. It is only from above, by way of experience initiated by God that a living soul may finally vouchsafe the speech of theology, whether and to what degree it is inflected in a phenomenological vocabulary.

¹⁰ See, for example, Frédéric Seyler »Michel Henry«, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/michel-henry/>; Christina Gschwandtner (accessed August 30, 2017), »The Truth of Christianity? Michel Henry's Words of Christ.« *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 13 no. 1 (June 2014): S. 1–14; Paul Audi, *Michel Henry*. (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2006), S. 222 ff.

¹¹ Marion insists that phenomenology and theology are strictly separate. See his *Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology* trans. Thomas Carlson, *Critical Inquiry* 20 no. 4 (1994): S. 572–91.

It is little surprise that he subjects all disciplines and forms of thinking to critique, insofar as they function as boundary discourses that permit the reader to glimpse, not exhaust, the divine mystery that is Christ's absolute Life. Henry, by the same token, is explicit about the limited utility of any discipline, theology or otherwise, to grant access to divine Life. The emergence of life arrives according to no particular disciplinary method or speech act, but rather »is the original revelation that carries out the work of revelation with respect to itself.«¹² This original revelation is known, in Henry's vocabulary, as auto-affection, in which God's self-disclosure reveals nothing other than itself, and is invincibly joined to itself and never ceases being joined to itself in its self-embrace.

Non-theological readers may be tempted to claim that Henry's work presupposes that philosophy is distinct from theology, as if philosophy remained an autonomous discipline whose arguments do not depend on the acceptance of divine revelation. Some may say, to continue in this vein, that the presence or absence of religious faith is incidental to phenomenological descriptions as such, since phenomenology intends to construct a cartography of subjective experience, concerning the *how* of a thing's appearance, and nothing more (the content may be filled in with various disciplines, such as politics, psychology, theology etc.). That may be the case with the phenomenological project of Marion, and certainly with those projects developed by Husserl and Heidegger (the latter of whom says phenomenological theology is tantamount to a square circle). The upshot of Henry's unique programme is that the *how* of experience and the *content* of experience coincide in the lived ex-

pression of pure affection and pathos, since »affectivity is both the impression's mode of givenness and its impressional content.«¹³ The subjective self-manifestation of the subject who appears to itself apart from the world is given in such a way that the impressional form by which it arrives dictates the modality and ultimately the content of its own fulfillment, understood as a *pure* self-revelation – in that what reveals itself in revelation is nothing but the revealing itself.¹⁴ Henry is quite clear that the primal self-revelation of absolute Life designates a non-cognitive and non-intentional self-revelation of God in Christ that does *not* require philosophy and theology to function as discrete disciplines that reveal its logic in fundamentally different languages; rather the primitive self-revelation of Christ is the »common presupposition« of both disciplines.¹⁵

How is God the common presupposition of philosophy and theology? God is for Henry characterized by the radicality of self-revelation, whereby God reveals himself and nothing other than himself in the person of Christ, admitting in the self-manifestation of Christ no content that is foreign to its own self-revelation. In other words, Life is the relation that itself »generates its own terms. The content of Christianity is the systematic, and moreover unprecedented, elucidation of this relation between Life and all the living.«¹⁶ Such an interrelationship between the primal self-revelation of absolute Life in phenomenology and the doctrine of the Incarnation in theology means that the two disciplines overlap because of the paradoxical logic of Life's self-manifestation.

In one sense, this indicates in no uncertain terms for Henry that the aspiration of philosophical method or theological reflection to attain the truth of life by the »*force of its own thinking* goes up in

¹² Henry, *Incarnation*, S. 255. Another programmatic statement by Henry: »There where God originally arrives in himself, in the phenomenalization of phenomenality that is his own and is thus like the self-phenomenalization of this phenomenality that is his own and is thus like the self-phenomenalization of this phenomenality proper—there alone is access to God. It is not that thought is lacking and so we cannot accede to the Revelation of God. Quite the contrary, it is only when thought defaults, because the truth of the world is absent, that what is at stake be achieved: the self-revelation of God—the self-phenomenalization of pure phenomenality against the background of a phenomenality that is not that of the world.« Henry, *I am the Truth*, S. 27.

¹³ Michel Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, trans. Scott Davidson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), S. 17.

¹⁴ Henry writes, in his own inimitable words, »Access to God, understood as his self-revelation according to a phenomenality proper to Him, is not susceptible of being produced except where this self-revelation is produced and in the way self-revelation does so.« S. 27, *I am the Truth*.

¹⁵ Henry, *Incarnation*, S. 255.

¹⁶ Henry, *I am the Truth*, S. 62.

smoke» [*part en fumée*].¹⁷ In another sense, the arch-intelligibility of life's elementary self-presence unfolds in a primitive manner of givenness independent of theoretical understanding, which mysteriously and paradoxically in turn gives rise to and forms the ground of possibility for reflective thinking (pre-eminently in philosophy and theology). I can thematise Life as a theologian or a philosopher only because Life is already there giving itself to me, so that it makes itself felt as an antecedent experience. »before the opening of the world and the unfolding of its intelligibility, absolute Life's Arch-intelligibility fulgurates, the Parousia of the Word in which it is embraced.«¹⁸ I am able to think about and ultimately thematise life in a particular vocabulary (e. g., Parousia of the Word) because Life is there first giving itself to me, and joining me to itself, apart from reflective consciousness, indeed, apart from the light of the world as such. Theory »goes up in smoke« only when it presumes produce or generate Life itself, whereas for Henry theory serves its purpose when it submits to the reality that Life is condition of possibility of all theory.

I may pose a critical question at this juncture: If absolute Life, if God in Christ, is a self-disclosure who is manifest in a domain independent of the world, then how does Henry make sense of the Incarnation using a Christian theological vocabulary?

Henry does not refrain from asking in *C'est moi la vérité* the simple question, »did Christ really come into the world?«¹⁹ For Henry, as it was for Irenaeus, the question invokes the debate about the nature and truth of Christianity itself. Henry, as we shall presently see, will focus like so many before him in the history of theological discourse, on the prologue of the gospel of John.²⁰ Such theological readings of John do not nevertheless lead him to prioritize visibility of divine self-revelation of God in Christ in the world, but rather to formulate in its place a non-worldly domain in which Christ may appear exactly as he gives himself to appear. To

prioritize the structure of appearing that the world opens up is, for Henry, to betray the true self-manifestation of Christ. If the truth of Christianity proposes a more original or primitive form of truth, one that occurs under the tutelage of absolute Life as such, then Christianity must be liberated from the horizon of visibility that is the world itself. The question of Henry's Gnostic proclivities now becomes acute and unavoidable.

III. Auto-affectation: Gnostic or Living Christ?

Henry echoes much of the Christian tradition concerning the fundamental importance of the Incarnation. The »Word made flesh« in John 1.14 is in point of fact an event of such epic and unprecedented proportions that it consists of »an entire spiritual and cultural development perhaps without equivalent in the history of humanity.«²¹ Some in twentieth-century theology have challenged the long-standing belief that Christianity cannot exist without the economy of redemption worked out in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ.²² But the preponderance of the Christian tradition, prompted by debate with Gnosticism in the second-century onward, has insisted on the indispensability of the Incarnation; without the »Word made flesh« there is no Christianity: the second person of the Trinity entered the human condition and therein assumed real flesh, »for it was this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God.«²³ The fate of one's

²¹ Henry, *Incarnation*, S. 5.

²² Ingolf Dalferth highlights the shift away from the Incarnation in modern theology that undermined belief that Christ was a God-man, a movement underway in Europe and N. America in the 1960s. See Dalferth, *Crucified and Resurrected: Restructuring the Grammar of Christology*, trans. Jo Bennett (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), chapter 1.

²³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in the Ante-Nicene Fathers, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe (Hrsg.) (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885), III, 19, 1.

¹⁷ Henry, *Incarnation*, S. 255. In the French, S. 364.

¹⁸ Henry, *Incarnation*, S. 255.

¹⁹ Henry, *I am the Truth*, S. 22.

²⁰ Rolf Kühn and Markus Enders, »Im Anfang war der Logos ...« *Studien zur Rezeptionsgeschichte des Johannesprologs von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*. Freiburg 2011).

place in the economy of redemption is inexorably bound to the fate of Christ's body, in which the union of two natures occurs in a single body, a doctrinal principle anticipated in Irenaeus (in Christ occurred the »blending and communion of God and man«²⁴) and in Niceae, finally to be established in 451 at Chalcedon in the more precise language of two natures unified in a single hypostatic union in the person of Christ's flesh (against Eutyches and Nestorius).

Hence, for Henry as much as for the patristic tradition, »Christianity situates its salvation in the body.«²⁵ Moreover, what is at stake in the phenomenological determination of the body of Christ is the ground and possibility of salvation: how can we take part in this filiation towards God if we had not through the Son received this adoptive communion with God by means of the Incarnation? Christ must have really and genuinely assumed flesh, otherwise the salvation of the body wrought in the work and person of Christ becomes vain and abstract, which I would argue (and Irenaeus, too) mitigates the gospels' attempt to tell the story of God's gracious dwelling among us.

Henry, without question, accepts the Incarnation as an indispensable article of faith. He observes it is the Gnostics who question the reality of the flesh Christ assumed in the Incarnation. Henry will contend that arguments against Gnosticism lead to the »categorical affirmation of the reality of the flesh of Christ.« Yet in immediately pausing to reflect on the nature of flesh as such, Henry pursues a related question: »in what does the reality of the flesh consist, what allows us to speak of a real flesh?«²⁶ A full-scale reversal of Gnosticism therefore requires of Christian faith (1) to affirm in its profession the reality of the Incarnation of Christ and (2) to describe the kind of reality of this flesh. To address both of these sub-points, I turn now to Irenaeus, before I conclude with Henry's idiosyncratic and problematic reading of the Incarnation in Irenaeus.

Gnostics like Valentinus argue that Christ only *appeared* to take on flesh. Irenaeus on two separate occasions indicates that Valentinus and his heirs think Christ was untouched ontologically by the

flesh of Mary, the mother of Jesus, so that when he was born he appeared in the form of human nature without truly assuming human nature. The fact that Jesus was mediated through Mary not by birth but by transport is reason enough for the Valentinian school to reject the Incarnation. Mary, in this Valentinian framework, was a tube and Jesus »passed through Mary just as water through a tube.«²⁷ Irenaeus counters this thesis on several fronts. He wonders, first of all, why Christ would arrive through Mary if not to adopt the traits and characteristic of Mary's human flesh. Birth appears »superfluous:« to come at all through the body of Mary is strictly unnecessary if human flesh is not assumed.²⁸ Irenaeus further notes, on the level of ontology, mediation between God and humanity depends on genuine flesh being assumed by Christ. Thus

»Unless man had been joined to God, he could never have become a partaker of incorruptibility. For it was incumbent upon the Mediator between God and men, by His relationship to both, to bring both to friendship and concord, and present man to God, while He revealed God to man. For, in what way could we be partaken of the adoption of sons, unless we had received from Him through the Son that fellowship which refers to Himself. Unless His Word, having been made flesh, had entered into communion with us? Wherefore also He passed through every stage of life, restoring to all communion with God.«²⁹

Irenaeus continues with this train of thought so that he may make the following theological conclusion, namely, that without a genuine Incarnation, no salvation is possible: »Those, therefore, who assert that He appeared putatively, and was neither born in the flesh nor truly made man, are as yet under the old condemnation, holding out patronage to sin.«³⁰ The doctrine of recapitulation, for which Irenaeus is well-known, appeals to a real unity between Christ's flesh and our flesh.

In other words, Christ had to become what Adam defiled, so that Christ may »furnish us, in a brief, comprehensive manner, with salvation.« The theological reason for this is that only God can re-

²⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV, 20, 4

²⁵ Henry, *Incarnation*, S, 6.

²⁶ Henry, *Incarnation*, S, 128.

²⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, 7, 2; and 3, 11, 3.

²⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, 22, 3.

²⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, 18, 7.

³⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, 18, 7.

store what was lost, since the power of sin conquered human nature, and »destroyed it through disobedience.« No human, Irenaeus argues, can »reform himself and obtain the prize of victory.«³¹ Thus the relationship between human nature and divine nature embodied in Christ ensures salvation: »so that what we had lost in Adam – namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God – we might recover in Christ Jesus.«³²

Much of Book III of *Adversus Haereses* consists of a study of the Incarnation that links the suffering of the flesh of Christ on the Cross to the reality of suffering that humans undergo in a fallen world (without implicating Christ himself in the sinfulness of humanity). Irenaeus goes on, in books IV and V, to expand on the nature of flesh as living flesh. This is the juncture in Irenaeus' narrative where one may distinguish most clearly between the phenomenology of life and the Christian story of the Incarnation.

To say that flesh is the domain in which the human condition finds its capacity to live is to say it is the domain Christ assumes in becoming one of us in the Incarnation. The designation of flesh as living appears in several texts of *Adversus Haereses*, especially in book V. For example, Irenaeus claims that flesh is capable of both death and life. Even though life and death may not remain in the same place at the same time, because they »mutually give way to each other,« they nevertheless occupy the same terrain, the terrain of flesh. The point here is, to be clear, that flesh is capable of life and death, and receives the former from God in an attempt to extricate the latter. Thus: God, who is the fount of life, restores flesh to life, and in the process »drives out death.«³³ Irenaeus writes, »for the breath of life, which also rendered man an animated being, is one thing, and the vivifying Spirit another, which also caused him to become spiritual.«³⁴ And it is precisely for this reason that Irenaeus makes flesh the locus not only of life, but of the rivalry between life and death. What is it that dies and suffers due to sin? It is the substance of flesh that has become dead in the fall of Adam. What then

becomes alive? To wit: flesh is »vivified« by God in the Spirit, in the Incarnation of the Son. So, flesh »was what the Lord came to quicken, that as in Adam we do all die, as being of an animal nature, in Christ we may all live, as being spiritual, not laying aside God's handiwork ...«³⁵ in which handiwork signifies flesh. It is therefore flesh's capacity to suffer, die and live that makes it a site worthy of the drama of salvation itself. Henry and Irenaeus, I would claim, privilege this marriage of suffering and life, and their differing vocabularies notwithstanding, they would be in agreement on this point.

The Gnostics, as Irenaeus understood their theology, rejected this theological paradigm of flesh. They categorically refused to grant to flesh the capacity to live. He observed that a verse by St. Paul is »adduced by all the heretics in support of their folly,« which reads »Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God« (1 Cor. 15.50). Irenaeus noted that the Gnostics point out that this passage supports the fact that God cannot make flesh and blood live, and thus, »the handiwork of God is not saved.«³⁶ As if to dismantle the argument from the outset, Irenaeus simply claims that in 1 Cor. 15 St. Paul is referring to »fleshly works« not to flesh as such. Flesh, as long as it inhabits the living Spirit of God, can be inherited by the kingdom of God. In that same chapter of 1 Corinthians St. Paul claims that God will enable the mortal flesh to put on immortality and the corruptible flesh to put on incorruptibility. How may this be possible if flesh and blood cannot, in principle, inherit the kingdom of God?³⁷ Flesh, too, Irenaeus does not hesitate to emphasize, is that which is humbled to the earth. Flesh, to be certain, represents the earthy dust and the suffering that attends such humility.³⁸

This prompts a return to the topic of the virgin birth: why would Mary give birth to Jesus if he were »to take nothing of her,« including her capacity to suffer? If he had taken nothing of her, no human flesh, then it follows »he would never have availed Himself of those kinds of food which are derived from the earth, by which that body

³¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, 18, 2.

³² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, 18, 1.

³³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, 12, 1.

³⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, 12, 2.

³⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, 12, 3.

³⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, 9, 1.

³⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, 13, 2–4.

³⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, 15, 2; and V, 14, 2.

which has been taken from the earth is nourished; nor would He have hungered, fasting those forty days. « But obviously, according to the gospel narratives, Jesus did inhabit all those »tokens of flesh.« Irenaeus belaboured the point by observing that the gospel writers only pointed out that Jesus needed rest, that he wept over Lazarus, that he sweated drops of blood before the Cross, that his side was pierced after his bodily death, in order to make clear the Son assumed real flesh. These are unequivocal »tokens of the flesh which had been derived from the earth,« so that Christ could be understood to have reworked human nature within the economy of the Incarnation, in the form of recapitulation, the dramatic renewal of human nature in himself, which is an act that bears »salvation to His own handiwork.«³⁹ Fatigue, suffering, hunger, thirst, that is to say, all traits of flesh's capacity to suffer arise from within the economy of visibility, the »nerves and bones« that form the »common dust of mortality.«⁴⁰ Irenaeus's conception flesh suffers and enjoys, and it thus lives; flesh counts as flesh only in terms of the elementary tokens which constitute the conditions of visibility, the common dust of the earth, whereby the invisible vivifying Spirit apprehends itself only properly in the indissoluble bond it enjoys with the visible body, seen on display in the world (to use an ocular metaphor for which western thought is so famous).

Nowhere does the difference between a phenomenology of life and Christian life appear more starkly delineated than in their distinct interpretation of flesh, and as a consequence, their interpretations of the flesh of Christ. As if to ignore the above admonishments Irenaeus levies against the Gnostics, Henry undertakes a phenomenological analysis of flesh according to the opposition between two narratives of manifestation: one that argues flesh appears in the living present independent of the world (invisible), and one that regards the world to have illuminated flesh it in its most proper form (visible). Henry denies and condemns the visible in favour of the invisible. In the process, Henry attempts to assimilate select statements gleaned from Book V of *Adversus Haereses*. This final section of the ancient manuscript occasions what Henry

calls the fundamental subjective site of the spiritual self, the »Christian cogito,« the vocabulary of theological anthropology that insists on the essentially invisible disclosure of flesh, in which its form and content appears outside the confines of the body in the world. In the mind of Henry it is Irenaeus who »deepens in an extraordinary way the unconditional assignation of flesh to life, from which it draws its pathos-filled effectiveness.«⁴¹ Henry, like Irenaeus, recognizes that Gnosticism denies the concrete reality of flesh, since Gnosticism rules out flesh on the grounds that flesh is too humble as a form for a transcendent and living God to assume. Gnostics speculated about the nature or structure of another kind of flesh Christ could have assumed; for example, an »astral« flesh out which the stars are made, or a lighter flesh not of this world, to be characterized by pure intelligible mind.⁴² Henry refuses to see these Gnostic variants of flesh as concrete affective structures of life.

Henry, nevertheless, diverges sharply from Irenaeus. Even while Henry enlists Irenaeus as a proponent of a phenomenology of life because Irenaeus focused on the capacity for flesh to suffer as the grounds for calling it a »living« [*vivant*], it is nevertheless the kind of flesh to which suffering yields forth that singles out Henry as vulnerable to Gnosticism. For Henry, the impact of suffering makes itself felt inside me, but it never may appear in the world. How is this so? Do we not see suffering around us, as we look out onto the world? Henry suggests that the real root of suffering lies in self-suffering, a self-embrace that is named auto-affection. Here, in the domain of self-suffering, the self-giveness of God's very life is received, and in this the power of God is made manifest in the weakness of flesh, its suffering, its depth dimension, whereby my pain and life is lived, not seen. I may see the tears or hear the exclamation, but I do not feel the suffering or joy of the other. Suffering, in its dialectic with joy, assumes a mode of appearing that is »foreign to the phenomenality of Ek-stasis.«⁴³ Ek-stasis, as readers of Henry well know, is tantamount to the world. The world is illu-

³⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, 22, 2.

⁴⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, 2, 2; and V 7, 1.

⁴¹ Henry, *Incarnation*, S. 132.

⁴² Henry, *Incarnation*, S. 132.

⁴³ Henry, *Incarnation*, S. 134.

sory, and as a domain of appearing it expresses itself at a remove from the original pain or joy itself, a mere representation of suffering and joy can be but faintly discerned »in the ›outside itself‹ of the world ... [where] nothing touches itself, feels itself, or experiences itself in any way.«⁴⁴ We return to Irenaeus. Reduced to a species of the calculus of the phenomenology of life, Irenaeus' Christian cogito mutates into the invisible site of self-affectation, and in an unorthodox reading, doing great violence to the careful critical treatments of Valentinus, the Christian cogito emerges »not through the material of the world but through suffering and thus through life's phenomenological material.«⁴⁵

What of the world's materiality? Henry offers nothing but counsel of despair concerning the world *simpliciter*. For life, if it not be marked by manifolds forms of estrangement, must remain within life itself, the absolute arch-Life of God, if life is to live at all. Indeed, only Life generates Life, and thus living flesh: »There is no flesh that is not self-affirming and self-legitimizing as to its existence through exactly what makes it flesh (or rather living flesh) – no flesh that does not bear Life within it and the Arch-intelligibility that makes it an unshakable foundation.«⁴⁶ Indeed, flesh's inner cogito, its living centre, is God. Declaring that in its night, in its invisible living present, flesh overlaps in every way with Arch-Flesh, Henry does not leave us with a question mark concerning what happens in the living present: God arrives ceaselessly inside the ego, giving the ego to itself, just as the self-presence glory God in Christ is given, in very realization of the Parousia.⁴⁷

Should I be forgiven for speaking momentarily on behalf of Irenaeus, the most frequent protest he may advance against Henry's doctrine of the Incarnation is that it is a Gnostic rendition of divine subjectivism, which in turn must abandon any doctrine of participation of the world in God. Irenaeus, to return to book V of *Adversus Haereses*, will sound like a phenomenologist of Life, when he admits happily that the »glory of God is a living man; and the life of

man consists in beholding God.«⁴⁸ Irenaeus will also claim, again sounding like Henry, that »it is not possible to live apart from life, and the means of life is found in fellowship with God.«⁴⁹ But the ray of critical reflection must be cast also in the direction of the earlier parts of Irenaeus' argument, specifically in book I, where he describes the many traits of Gnosticism. Central to the logic of Gnosticism was a particular relationship between God and Christ, and this was inaugurated by Valentinus. Christ, so understood in his unity with the Father, could not escape the »Pleroma« or the presentation of the Divine realm to itself. For if Jesus escaped or were released from the Pleroma, even in the Incarnation (assuming it happened), then the subjective integrity of the Pleroma would be violated by way of an outward venture into the land of alienation known as the world. The Pleroma remains always intact for Gnosticism, as does the inner unity of Life for Henry. And yet, Irenaeus suggests a simple counter-thesis, rooted in the biblical narrative itself: »Flesh is that which was of old formed for Adam by God out of the dust, and it is this that John has declared the Word of God became.«⁵⁰ From this fact Irenaeus indicates that we as human creatures, made from dust, draw our life from God because God kenotically descended from the Godhead and became one of us; the result is that properly Christian life in the world is a life nourished by faith in God's visible creation, the visible display of an order that is not the same as God but crafted in his image. Only the Gnostics claim that the inner soul is divine, and redemption is guaranteed by looking inward.⁵¹

Henry confirms how close he may come to classical Valentinian Gnosticism by picking out arguments in Irenaeus that appear to challenge his phenomenology of life. Henry admits, in his dialogue with Irenaeus, of the Christian linkage to the Gnostic imagination: a secret gnosis animates Christianity from within. Such is the truth of Irenaeus's work itself, who apparently (according to Henry)

⁴⁴ Henry, *Incarnation*, S. 130.

⁴⁵ Henry, *Incarnation*, S. 131–32.

⁴⁶ Henry, *Incarnation*, S. 134–35.

⁴⁷ Henry, *Incarnation*, S. 374.

⁴⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, 20, 7.

⁴⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV, 20, 5.

⁵⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, 9, 2–4.

⁵¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, 20, 5–7. On the notion of a divine particle having been deposited in the human soul, as it appears in some Gnostic teachings, see II, 19, 3.

never argued against gnosis but only »gnosis falsely so-called«. Thus Henry can declare with confidence that »We must recognize that Christianity is an Arch-gnosis.«⁵² Henry's critiques of the Gnostic position, justified as they may appear, make available aspects of Henry's own thought of which he is unaware, aspects themselves I argue which are vulnerable to Gnosticism.

What this may suggest is that Henry's work continues to generate debate about the nature and scope, not least the working vocabulary of theological anthropology, ever ancient in its ontological basis. Hans Urs von Balthasar, while he never wrote on Henry specifically, has published much material on Christianity, modernity and Gnosticism, depicting Gnosticism as a pernicious promethean pathos, one of escalation Godward. The Gnostic aspiration escalates endlessly into an aspiration for the human to become divine. While Henry has challenged this particular version of Gnosticism (my auto-affection is different than God's absolute auto-affection), what has often escaped Henry's attention is the deeper topology which gives the unnoticed context for both the original (i. e. Valentinian) version of and the challenges of Gnosticism. Henry's overrealized eschatology, his commentary on the eternal now of the Parousia, both of which unfold in an acosmic drama within the interior soul in its pure identity with God (Henry rejects that human nature is different than divine nature⁵³) apart from the visible horizon of the world, have the net effect of pointing up the possibility that Henry's thesis may be an evocation not so much of Christian truth as of pagan »myth«.⁵⁴

⁵² Henry, *Incarnation*, S. 261.

⁵³ Henry, *Paroles du Christ* (Paris: Seuil, 2002) S. 146, in which Henry rejects the Chalcedonian claim that Christ has two natures. This is because humans have the same nature Christ has.

⁵⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama, Bd. II*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), S. 417–29. Hans Jonas also ascribes as a central motif in Gnosticism the idea of an interiorized eschatology. See Hans Jonas, »Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought,« *Journal of Religion* 49 no. 4 (1969): S. 315–29. Both call this mode of overrealized eschatology mythic. Balthasar uses his concept of »Gnostic escalation« to describe the errant impulse to want to be divine, *Theo-Drama, Bd. II*, S. 418–20.

Bibliography

- Audi, Paul. *Michel Henry*. Paris: Belles Lettres, 2006.
- Brakke, David. *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Dalferth, Ingolf. *Crucified and Resurrected: Restructuring the Grammar of Christianity*, trans. Jo Bennett. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015.
- Dilthey, Wilhelm. *Introduction to the Human Sciences*. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Erichjohf Rodi (Hrsg.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Geschwandner, Christina. »The Truth of Christianity? Michel Henry's Words of Christ.« *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 13 no. 1 (June 2014): S. 1–14.
- Hart, Kevin. *Kingdoms of God*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014.
- Hattem, *La sauveur et les viscères de l'être: sur le gnosticisme et Michel Henry*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004.
- Henry, Michel. *Incarnation: une philosophie de la chair*. Paris: Seuil, 2000.
- . *Incarnation: Toward a Philosophy of Flesh*, trans. Karl Helwig. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015.
- . *I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emmanuel. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- . *Material Phenomenology*, trans. Scott Davidson. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- . *Paroles du Christ*. Paris: Seuil, 2002.
- Irenaëus, *Against Heresies*, in the Ante-Nicene Fathers, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe (Hrsg.). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885.
- Jonas, Hans. »Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought,« *Journal of Religion* 49 no. 4 (1969): S. 315–29.
- Kühn, Rolf and Markus Enders. »Im Anfang war der Logos ...« *Studien zur Rezeptionsgeschichte des Johannesprologs von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*. Freiburg 2011.
- Kühn, Rolf. *Lebensreligion: Unmittelbarkeit des Religiösen als Realitätsbezug*. Dresden, Germany: Verlag Text und Dialog, 2013.
- . *Wie das Leben spricht: Narrativität als radikale Lebensphänomenologie: Neuere Studien zu Michel Henry*. Switzerland: Springer, 2016.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. »Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology« trans. Thomas Carlson, *Critical Inquiry* 20 no. 4 (1994): S. 572–91.
- . *The Idol and the Distance*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson. New York: Fordham University Press, 2001.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Rivera, Joseph. *The Contemplative Self after Michel Henry: A Phenomenological Theology*. Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2015.
- Seyler, Frédéric. »Michel Henry«, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (Hrsg.). URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/>

Joseph Rivera

ford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/michel-henry/: Christina Geschwandner
(accessed August 30, 2017).
Von Balhasar, Hans Urs. *Theo-Drama, Bd. II*, trans. Graham Harrison. San
Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

Abhandlungen