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To cite this article: David Kennedy (2023) The possibility of a truth-beyond-being and givenness: engaging the work of Jean-Luc Marion in the hermeneutics of religious education, British Journal of Religious Education, 45:4, 334-346, DOI: [10.1080/01416200.2023.2183383](https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2023.2183383)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2023.2183383>



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Published online: 02 Mar 2023.



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The possibility of a truth-beyond-being and givenness: engaging the work of Jean-Luc Marion in the hermeneutics of religious education

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ABSTRACT



This paper argues that an enclosed hermeneutical circle is evident at the centre of modern religious education as a result of its rootedness in the romantic hermeneutical tradition. It argues that modern religious education carries an implicit text-based hermeneutical orientation. It contends that such a hermeneutical approach is limited in terms of its ability to engage with persons' encounter with truth in life itself as it unfolds historically. This paper attempts to move beyond an enclosed hermeneutical circle at the centre of modern religious education, as well as the restrictive hermeneutics that it implicitly promotes, by recognising the givenness of the other in encounters with truth. This is achieved by considering the phenomenological and theological project of Jean-Luc Marion. It argues that Marion has much to offer hermeneutical discourse in religious education by way of his embrace of the possibility of a God-beyond-being, his notion of givenness, and his discernment of four hermeneutical moments of givenness. By engaging with, and introducing, these aspects of Marion's work to hermeneutical discourse in religious education, this paper points to the need for a more dynamic hermeneutic that is open to the givenness of the other in encounters with truth or truth-events.

KEYWORDS

Philosophical hermeneutics; Jean-Luc Marion; givenness; phenomenology

Introduction

This paper argues that an enclosed hermeneutical circle is evident at the centre of modern religious education as a result of its rootedness in the romantic hermeneutical tradition. It is demonstrated that this Schleiermacher inspired hermeneutical circle is limited in terms of its ability to engage with persons encounter with truth in life itself as it unfolds historically. This paper attempts to move beyond this hermeneutical circle, as well as the restrictive hermeneutics that it implicitly promotes, by recognising the givenness of the other in encounters with truth. This will be achieved by considering the work of Jean-Luc Marion. The work of Marion, it is argued, has much to offer hermeneutical discourse in religious education by way of his embrace of the possibility of a God-beyond-being, his notion of givenness, and his discernment of four hermeneutical moments of givenness. By engaging with, and introducing, these aspects of Marion's work to hermeneutical discourse in religious education, this paper points to the need for a more dynamic hermeneutic in modern religious education, one that is moves beyond a textual orientation by way of an openness to the givenness of the other as encountered historically by persons in life itself.

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Modern religious education: an enclosed hermeneutical circle?

In the literature of religious education there has been steady interaction with the theoretical area of hermeneutics. Such engagement arises, at least in part, from the fact that many scholars in religious education have an academic background in theology or religious studies which involved scriptural interpretation (Aldridge 2018). Much of what the religious educator has customarily done, as Aldridge (2018) states, 'has rightly or wrongly concerned scriptural interpretation' (p. 245). Recent work in modern religious education, such as Robert Bowie's (2016, 2017, 2018), emphasises textual hermeneutical considerations by way of focusing on religious education's scriptural content. While the work of Bowie raises important insights for religious educators, such textual hermeneutics, broadly speaking, does not embrace the significant 'coming of age' in hermeneutical theory in terms of 'the opening out of hermeneutical concerns from the understanding of texts to more general interpretive issues' (Aldridge 2018, 245). Such an understanding of hermeneutics, i.e. as scriptural interpretation, is narrow and limited in terms of its account of the field of hermeneutical theory.

Recent research in the area of philosophy of education by Beiste (2016) and in context of religious education by Beiste and Hannam (2016, 2019), particularly their response to the final report of coRE (2018), has called for a non-hermeneutic view of our humanity in the context of the educational enterprise broadly speaking and, particularly, in religious education. They emphasise the existential character of the enterprise of education, and specifically religious education, and in the light of this characterisation suggest that a non-hermeneutic or anti-hermeneutic way of viewing our humanity opens up different possibilities for the educator (Hannam and Beiste 2019, 62).

Although justified in their critique of hermeneutics, the argument offered by Beiste and Hannam (2016, 2019) does not take proper account of hermeneutics. In their critique of hermeneutics, what they are actually criticising is the enclosed hermeneutical circle that is found at the centre of the hermeneutical tradition which has developed along the lines of romantic hermeneutical theory. The critique of romantic hermeneutics is also evident in the work of hermeneutical philosophers whose thinking has developed along the Heideggerian phenomenological line.

Beiste and Hannam (2016, 2019) have falsely taken the enclosed hermeneutical circle of romantic hermeneutics to be characteristic of all hermeneutics. In their rendering of hermeneutics, Beiste and Hannam (2016, 2019) fail to take the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-George Gadamer (2013) into account – or the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (2016) for that matter – who also criticises romantic hermeneutics. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics developed along the Heideggerian line which has a different hermeneutical circle at its centre to that found in romantic hermeneutical theory. The hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur is significantly existential and ontological in its orientation – the epistemological is subordinate to the ontological – '*understanding* ceases to appear as a simple *mode of knowing* in order to become a *way of being* and a way of relating to beings and to being' (Ricoeur 2016, p. 4). From this standpoint, the 'non-hermeneutical alternative' called for by Beiste and Hannam (2016) – where 'educational questions would be considered first and foremost and questions about what it means to live with a religious or non-religious orientation considered in existential terms and not only as beliefs or practices or objectified world views' (p. 62) – presents itself as being more in keeping with the hermeneutical tradition that has developed along the Heideggerian line than a non-hermeneutical alternative. The narrow hermeneutics evident in modern religious education, which is justly critiqued by Beiste and Hannam (2016, 2019), finds its genesis in modern religious education's commitment to post-Enlightenment romantic theology.

Romantic hermeneutical theory

Modern hermeneutics emerged as a response to a particular issue: in what possible manner can a historical text in its reading – be it religious, legal, literary – elucidate its immediate relevance for a reader if the emergence of historical criticism had not consolidated the view that such historical texts are merely of interest in some antiquarian sense? Since the nineteenth century, from the work

of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1977, 1978, 1998), through to Wilhelm Dilthey (2010b, 2010a) to Edmund Husserl (2001a, 2001b), the romantic tradition has attempted to address this question by way of emphasising the centrality of experience.

Developing within a broad Kantian framework which distinguishes between the world of appearance, i.e. the phenomenological, and the world of ultimate reality, i.e. the noumenal world, the romantic tradition utilised a hermeneutical approach that requires the interpreter to move beyond the world of appearance, i.e. the surface appearance of things, with the view to comprehending the world of ultimate reality, i.e. a deeper hidden reality (Wright 1997; Schleiermacher 1977; Dilthey 2010b; Husserl 2001a). In this hermeneutical approach the interpreters task is actually achieved by way of romantic experience which emphasises that aesthetic, moral and religious sensitivity are of greater effect in terms of providing insight into the core of human existence in matters where objective scientific reason is attenuated and blind.

In the process of interpretation, Schleiermacher (1977) makes a distinction between what he refers to as 'grammatical' and 'psychological' stages. In interpreting or reading a text, for Schleiermacher (1977), the interpreter or reader not only understands the language used in a text, but also brings the words to life by way of a sensitivity to the human experience that they express. Genuine or authentic understanding, therefore, requires an experiential sensibility that possesses the capacity to move beyond language towards a sensitive apprehension of the author's original psychological experience. The ultimate meaning of language or a word in the romantic hermeneutical tradition is not rooted in its reference to external facts, but rather in its capacity to express internal spiritual experience (Wright 1997). This basic insight is utilised and reproduced by Dilthey (2010b, 2010a), particularly in his affirmation that culture and history should be interpreted as the expression of lived experience.

Similarly, Husserl (2001a, 2001b) carries this forward by way of his distinction between the objective account of immanent phenomenon and the eidetic vision which enables one to sensitively understand the transcendent noumenal nature of said phenomenon (Wright 1997; Otto 1958). The interpreter must move beyond the surface appearance of the object of interpretation as real understanding must transcend the world of appearance with the view to access the world of ultimate reality. Schleiermacher (1977), therefore, worked towards developing a romantic religious hermeneutic that was capable of transcending the tensions existent between modern and Christian worldviews (Torrance 1968a, 1968b; Carliss 1993). By interpreting the biblical text as an expression of religious experience, he avoids any challenge posed by literalism with the view to arriving at a more meaningful, quasi-allegorical, spiritual interpretation.

The approach of romantic hermeneutics, therefore, can be accounted for as follows: [1] a denial of literalism for a literalist interpretation of religious texts may cause conflict with the naturalism of modern science, and [2] the assertion that any interpretation of a religious text must bring the internal spiritual significance of the object of interpretation – be it by denial, translation or transcendence – into union with romanticism's commitment to the explicatory power and authority of moral, aesthetic and religious experience (Wright 1997). Religious education found the resources it required in romantic hermeneutical theory by way of its denial, translation and transcendence of literalist religious language to address the demands placed by the foundation meta-narratives of modernity. While benefiting from the approach taken by the romantic hermeneutical tradition, modern religious education is also inhibited by its commitment to romantic hermeneutical theory. This is most evident when one considers the hermeneutical circle that is found at its centre.

An enclosed hermeneutical circle in modern religious education

Schleiermacher offers the first comprehensive establishment of a 'hermeneutical circle' (Dilthey 2010b). In his attempted development of a universal theory of the 'art' of interpretation within which there is a movement between the 'parts' and the 'whole', Schleiermacher (1978) provides a model of textual interpretation. Thus, a central tenet of Schleiermacher's work is the move towards understanding a text on its own terms, 'seeking to account for its meaning only with reference to the

intentions and life history of its author or the linguistic tools he would have had available to him' (Aldridge 2017, 1).

In this Schleiermacher inspired hermeneutical circle, which has influenced the approach of contemporary religious educationalists such as Bowie and Coles (2018), one amends their provisional understanding of that which is disclosed in their ongoing analysis as one moves towards an occurrence of empathy with the author – striving to comprehend the text 'at first as well as and then even better than its author' (Schleiermacher 1978, 112). This formula has contributed significantly to the theory of textual interpretation. The hermeneutical circle proposed by Schleiermacher, however, is criticised by Hans-George Gadamer (2013) in his account of self-understanding. Gadamer (2013) ascribes to his teacher Martin Heidegger the more significant step or 'decisive turning point' (p. 293) in the move towards providing a philosophical description of what he refers to as the 'event' of understanding (p. 208).

Gadamer (2013) claims that Heidegger's circle 'breaks right through the circle drawn by romantic hermeneutics' (p. 296). While Schleiermacher's circle 'runs backward and forward along the text' (Gadamer 2013, 293), Heidegger's contribution is to stress the inescapable and enabling role that 'the interpreter's "fore-conception" plays in the event of understanding' (Aldridge 2017, 2). This Heideggerian circle includes both the reader and the text, as opposed to the parts of the text and the whole. Rather than emerging from the disintegration of one's own prior prejudices in favour of the author's intention in writing the work, for Heidegger, understanding emerges from 'the play or tension between the text and the reader and its familiarity' (Aldridge 2017, 2). For example, Gadamer (2013) outlines that 'the true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between' (p. 295), and therefore, understanding necessarily encompasses 'sharing in a common meaning' (p. 292).

From this perspective, it becomes clear that for Gadamer the primary concern is not that one acquires an 'objective' interpretation of an object of knowledge and its otherness. Rather, the 'in-between' essence of the event of understanding implies that it resists being characterised as either a subjective or an objective process. No method or process can be offered for correct understanding as the interpreter 'cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstandings' (Gadamer 2013, 296). Instead, Gadamer states that 'this separation must take place in the process of understanding itself' (p. 296).

Self-understanding is established by [1] one's specific time and place in history, and [2] the language one speaks and thinks in. Established in this manner, self-understanding is forever growing by way of continuous assimilation of one's experiences of 'other' types of self-understanding in and through one's everyday participation in the world that surrounds them. Truth, therefore, is best understood 'as relational, dynamic, and above all else, participatory' (Kennedy 2021a, 227). It is always encountered in an embodied state, within a living faith or tradition as well as in the praxis of a faith or tradition and in the teachings of a particular religion or tradition (Kennedy 2021a). Such a conception of truth carries strong connotations of Heidegger's conception of truth as *aletheia*, i.e. disclosure. Gadamer's conception of truth, however, cannot be understood from an exclusively Heideggerian perspective. Rather, there are significant Platonic overtones evident in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, particularly in relation to his account of the imaging of truth (Kennedy 2021a). On this point, Gadamer's understanding of the person as 'entangled' in truth is significant, particularly in terms of the manner of participatory knowing that is operative therein and the consequent inescapability of prejudice. In taking up this Heideggerian-Gadamerian conception of truth, it is evident that hermeneutics should not take up an exclusively textual-orientation, but rather foster an openness to persons encounters with truth *in life itself* as it unfolds *historically*.

From this discussion, it is clear that the romantic hermeneutical tradition, within which modern religious education is rooted, offers a restrictive hermeneutical foundation by way of its exclusively text-based orientation. It has an enclosed hermeneutical circle that is found at its centre and fails to embrace the fact that 'hermeneutics raises a broader set of questions for students of religion than simply those around the interpretation of revealed texts' (Aldridge 2018, 246). It emphasises the need for understanding to be rooted in a union between the interpreter and the text (Bowie and

Coles 2018), i.e. the object of interpretation. Knowledge, in this context, necessitates that the essence of the text, i.e. the object of interpretation, be reinterpreted for the purpose of aligning it with the interpreters pre-existing interpretive framework (Bowie and Coles 2018). In taking up this romantic hermeneutical approach, modern religious education leaves little, if any, space for transformative understanding as it requires the interpreter to alter their experience to align it with that which they strive to understand.

It can be argued, therefore, that modern religious education moves towards a limited and restrictive mode of understanding which ultimately leads to the closing of one's mind. This paper contends, therefore, that the hermeneutical tradition which has developed along the line of a Heideggerian-Gadamerian conception of truth offers a more dynamic hermeneutical orientation for religious education by way of its openness to, and recognition of, persons encounters with truth in *life itself* as it unfolds *historically*. From this standpoint, the phenomenological and theological project of Jean-Luc Marion, which develops along this Heideggerian-Gadamerian line, offers significant insights for the hermeneutics of religious education.

The phenomenological and theological project of Jean-Luc Marion

Jean-Luc Marion has made a number of significant contributions to a variety of fields, including theology, history of philosophy and phenomenology. To fully grapple with the interconnectedness of these areas in Marion's work, or to offer a sufficient reconstruction of his contribution to these fields, presents far too great a task than what is achievable within this short paper. For the purpose of this paper, therefore, Marion's embrace of the possibility of a God-beyond-being and his conception of givenness are considered with the view to opening up conversations in the hermeneutics of religious education, particularly in relation to the four hermeneutic moments of *givenness* that are characteristic of persons hermeneutical encounters with the otherness of the other.

It is important that 'phenomenology' in the context of this paper is not understood along the same lines as in the work of Ninian Smart (1968, 1973, 1975). 'Phenomenology' in the context of Smarts work, and the engagement with the phenomenological tradition that followed his work, is not understood along the same lines as the work of Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, or Ricoeur. Liam Gearon (2014), in his book *On Holy Ground* makes this point rather well: 'Smart took a complex discussion in philosophy, as it had filtered through "phenomenology" and applied it very loosely to the understanding of religion as a phenomenon' (p. 107). This reception of phenomenology has exerted significant influence on the way in which the phenomenological tradition is commonly understood in the context of religious education. Phenomenology is, more often than not, understood in this context along the lines of approaches to the study of religion that were imported to religious education from the academic field of religious studies through Ninian Smart's (1968, 1973, 1975) work – particularly the typology of the dimensions of religions. In the light of this reception, discourse in religious education commonly interprets 'phenomenological' pedagogic practice in the light of only fragments of Husserl's thought (Aldridge 2017, 54–59). Gearon (2014) also emphasises this point noting that Husserl would have been surprised by the way in which his phenomenological method has come to be utilised in the study of religion.

While the nuances surrounding understandings and treatments of the phenomenological tradition in religious education noted above require a more detailed treatment than is possible in this paper, it is necessary to offer this distinction here to ensure clarity in terms of the way in which this paper interprets and engages with phenomenology and the phenomenological tradition. This clarificatory point is not a signal to a claim of innovation, but rather serves as an attempt to redirect discourse in religious education to understandings of 'phenomenology' and the 'phenomenological' that are more in keeping with the phenomenological tradition as encountered in the work of Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, or Marion.

The possibility of a god-beyond-being

If one is to begin to truly appreciate the theological and phenomenological contribution of Jean-Luc Marion (1991; Marion 1986, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2002a, 2002b, 2011, 2013, 2016; Marion 2017, 2018) it must be recognised that his theological reflection is primarily a response to two fundamental challenges issued by Derrida (1976, 1978, 1981, 1992): [1] that there is nothing beyond the text, i.e. there is no true set of references to which text's point and offer access, and [2] that the entire concept of *gift* is impossible both in theory and practice (Bracken 1998; McCabe 1999, 1994; Mudd 2008). Of particular importance to Marion's project are: [1] his distinction between icon and idols – which is, perhaps, best engaged and apprehended in the context of a critique of metaphysics, and [2] his transposition of the Heideggerian concepts of *Ereignis* and *es gibt* in his theological treatment of the withdrawal of the Christian God.

Although heavily influenced by Heideggerian insights, Marion is critical of Heidegger. This is most evident in Marion's treatment of the withdrawal of the Christian God, for the withdrawal and the giving of Heidegger's Being-present are distinct from Marion's. The greater part of Marion's theological project is concerned with a critique of traditional Western metaphysics, or what Gerald Loughlin (1996) refers to as the *refusal* of metaphysics. Marion (1991) attempts to liberate theology from what he designates as 'the second idolatry' which, as David Moss (1993) notes, 'is the idolatry of inscribing God according to Being' (p. 99), i.e. the domestication of the reality of God [Truth] by means of reason and being. This emancipation of theology can only be achieved, according to Marion (1991), by rejecting any strategy of appropriation that is solipsistic and moves towards determining the meaning of every 'other', including God [the Wholly, Supreme Other], by offering an account of its relation to oneself (Mitchell 2000). In considering the 'self' as the focal point of reality, as the centre of the universe, such a solipsistic appropriation turns all language into speech about the self and, therefore, abolishes or erases 'otherness' (Marion 1991).

Marion (1991) upholds his commitment to the phenomenological method by making his distinction between idol and icon within the context of 'seeing'. For Marion (1991, 2017), one's gaze makes something an icon or an idol as the idol is totally subject to, or an object of, a self-interested human gaze. The idol is the manifestation or visible term of the *human gaze* which, as Marion (1991) notes, reflects the anthropocentric source of its gaze like a type of one-way mirror. The idol is a human product, according to Marion (1991), not just because it is shaped by human hands, but as a result of the manner in which it is perceived. Manifested idols are capable of dazzling the person and, therefore, one can become transfixed by their superficial appearance (Marion 1991). The idol can become, in the worst case, a focal point of one's attempts to validate or legitimise, or even sacralise, their cultural prejudices and biases as well as that for which they yearn. In the best case, however, an idol may in fact demonstrate something of the divine but, being an idol, will ultimately defile the divine in its apprehension of the divine in human terms (Ambrose 2012).

Marion's greater project, therefore, moves towards delivering the circle, i.e. the self, from this pre-eminent place. A theology of a God-*without-Being*, i.e. the affirmation that God does not *exist*, therefore, assists in reducing the risk of falling for an idol. The critique of western metaphysics offered by Heidegger (1962), as understood by Marion (1991), is a wakeup call for all thinkers who utilise such philosophical concepts when attempting to explicate the essence of God. For Marion (1991), the conceptual idol is of central significance to his understanding of a God-*without-Being*. The effort to subvert the Promethean Self is characterised by Marion as an emphatic confrontation between idol and icon (Moss 1993).

For Marion (1991), the icon 'does not result from a vision but provokes one' (p. 17). Contrary to the idol which draws one's vision only to the visible, the icon elicits a vision of the invisible for in it there appears to be a semblance of the divine. Whilst one's interest is initially fixed on the visible, the icon *calls* one to see something more – one encounters the invisible for it is not stagnated in the visible. There is a transparency *given* to the icon in that the invisible shines forth through the visible both dynamically and continuously. If this transparency is clouded in any way, however, the visible seizes for itself an element of the invisible. The human gaze does not 'aim past the surface and is not open

to the gift [icon] and the giving Giver [the invisible]' (Ambrose 2012, 24). Every icon, according to Marion, can only be understood within the context of the relationship between Christ and God. In this way, for Marion, Christ is the pre-eminent icon 'the icon of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15).

There is a parallel to be drawn between Marion's critique of idols and Heidegger's critique of the understanding of beings as present. For Marion, the idol is a sign or religious figure made present, i.e. it manifests when there is a failure to let-be and see the Other in its 'ownmost' being (Ambrose 2012). In a manner akin to the poet who, as accounted for by Heidegger (2001), listens to or allows the river to speak, and is responsive to the call of Being, the religious person allows the icon to speak, and heeds God's self-revelation. Unlike a self-interested gaze directed to an object, the religious gaze *is directed* by the visible icon to the invisible. Hence, for Marion, there are two different types of 'seeing' as opposed to two different objects – idol and icon. The first gaze is an 'idolic gaze' which goes beyond the surface and observes only the object. With an idolic gaze the object can be only for its 'master' as it fixates on the visible, the 'it' of the sign itself, rather than the invisible, the 'given' which is mediated by the sign. An idolic gaze, therefore, is one that is self-interested or egocentric. The second gaze is the 'iconic gaze'. Unlike the idolic gaze, the iconic gaze is *open to* and *opened by* the invisible, the *given* and infinite depth of a sign, event or figure.

The two ways of seeing outlined above are also representative of different attitudes. The iconic gaze, for example, is governed by an attitude of letting-be and is, therefore, open and able to receive the gift shown in and by the icon. The status of being an idol [the 'given'] or icon [gift], however, is contingent on the attitude and intention of its observer. Every icon, therefore, has the potential to become an idol, yet simultaneously, an idolic gaze – similar to a metaphysics of presence – can be shattered by the appearance of the invisible. When attempting to understanding this rich insight in Marion's theology it is useful to consider the analogy of a light and a one-way mirror, for example, when a bright light is placed behind a one-way mirror it causes the mirror to become transparent.

If the conceptual idolatry of metaphysical theology is to be avoided theologians must begin to think of God *without being*. To think God-*without-being*, for Marion (1991), 'is to replace idol with [. . .] icon' (p. 47). For Marion, the most powerful revelation for countering the idolic gaze of humankind is the Crucified God, Jesus Christ. If theologians are to avoid the dangers of idolatry, according to Marion, they must sustain a state of *openness* to God's *self-revelation* [the cross] and consistently foster an iconic gaze.

For Marion, the Crucified One is the ultimate icon where at the one and the same time, the gift of God's love as well as the assentation of the distinction between God and creature are given witness (Ambrose 2012). Classical metaphysics is subverted by the Cross and God appears in human speech *under erasure as not God* (Mitchell 2000). As outlined by Moss (1993), for Marion 'it is only the Cross that can signify pure Gift whose name is Love [. . .] Only Love gives without any expectation of return' (p. 395). For Marion, the Cross is witness to the divine agape, it reveals that God's 'love', loves without restriction because it loves for no other reason and no ulterior stimulus. On this point, Marion implicitly argues against Derrida (1992) and his insistence on the impossibility of the gift (Mitchell 2000; Champetier 2001).

It is precisely in the context of this insight that the matter of contention between Heidegger and Marion emerges concerning the *es gibt* [it gives]. In particular, the issue in question arises as Marion (1991) attempts to move beyond both metaphysics as well as Heidegger's reprise. The self-giving of *agape*, for Marion, is something totally distinct from Heidegger's *es gibt*. On this point, Marion is working as a Christian theologian and, therefore, contemplates *es gibt* in the context of grace and creation. Unlike Heidegger (1962), for Marion (1991) there is a separation between giving and gift. This point presents a problem for Marion as he moved to see beyond Heidegger's ontological difference, a further difference (Ambrose 2012). This difference is developed by Marion (1991) theologically, as Graham Ward (1995) notes, through a Trinitarian theology which emphasises the distance of the Father and philosophically utilises Derrida's concept of *différance*. Marion (1991) develops an 'irreducible difference which cannot be abridged by separating the Giver [Donator] and the visible gift [Being/beings]' (Ambrose 2012, 25). In constituting this irreducible difference, Marion

(1991) enables an understanding of the Heideggerian concept *Ereignis* to emerge in line with creation [Being and beings] as well as God's act of creation. On this point, it is evident that Marion's theological reflection situates God-*beyond-Being*.

Four hermeneutic moments of givenness

Since Marion's larger theological program has been outlined it is possible to engage with his discernment of four hermeneutic moments of *givenness* which inevitably lead Marion (2013) to assert that there is a need for a properly phenomenological hermeneutics in the context of any consideration of the phenomenology of *givenness*. No given, as Marion (2013) notes, instantly gives itself. Neither, is the given mediated as an object already established as the given does not give or show itself merely because it gives itself up. This central principle has 'nothing sufficient about it' (p. 53). While the phenomenon manifests itself only if it transpires as a given, this is not sufficient for the phenomenon to manifest as *showing itself* in total phenomenality. If the entirety of that which is disclosing itself must initially give itself, as Marion states, 'it sometimes happens that what gives itself does not succeed at showing itself' (p. 53). It is exclusively in its reflection that the given discloses itself, 'in its reflective return [. . .] in the response of the *adonné* [the gifted], who sees it, but only as it receives itself from this given' (p. 53).

It is possible to see the finitude of phenomenality in the context of givenness specifically as a result of the fact that the condition of 'what gives itself, shows itself' remains uncorrupted. As Marion explains, 'for what gives itself shows itself only as much as it is received by the "gifted [*adonné*]", whose proper function is to give back to the given, the possibility of showing itself' (p. 53). If the given gives itself as an intuition or a call, if it manifests itself solely in the response of the gifted, and if the gifted is necessarily finite, then what is disclosed forever endures in comparison to that which gives itself. The finitude of the disclosure, i.e. of the self-monstration of phenomenon, presents itself, therefore, against the infinity of the hidden givenness of that which remains obscure.

The gap between that which gives itself and what is disclosed about it definitively characterises the phenomenality of the givenness precisely as a result of the fact that it is a direct outcome of the finitude of the gifted. The necessary context and role of hermeneutics is, according to Marion (2013), the management of 'the gap between what gives itself and what shows itself by interpreting the call (or intuition) by the response (concept or meaning)' (p. 55). The call or intuition, which is given and received, remains blind – it discloses nothing – as long as the gifted fails to identify in it the concept/meaning or concepts/meanings that ultimately enable phenomenon to disclose justly itself. The hermeneutic authority of the gifted, therefore, principally evaluates the possibility or potentiality for what gives itself to show itself – it ultimately 'calibrates the scale of phenomenalisation of the givenness' (p. 55). Marion further explains this point:

Not only does the unconditional universality of givenness not invalidate the recourse to hermeneutics, but, on the contrary, a phenomenology of the givenness reveals phenomena as given only as far as there is in it the use of a hermeneutics of the given *as shown and showing itself, as visible and seen by the *adonnés* [the gifted]* (p. 55).

In fact, the efforts made towards a phenomenology of givenness have continued to utilise the support of hermeneutics. In this context, it is possible to identify at least four hermeneutic moments in givenness:

[1] the intuition or call is determined by its sensible or semantic obscurity. Such anonymity arises not merely as a result of the silence of the call or intuition – not everyone hears voices, at least not always as a result of a lack of its physical sound – but principally as a result of the fact that the call or intuition includes 'the intention and assignment of a signal (sonorous or other, silent or visible)' (Marion 2013, 57). These sounds or non-sounds must initially be interpreted as calls or intuitions – and not merely as background noises, etc.

Following from this initial interpretation, the calls must then be interpreted as a call addressed to such and such *adonnés* [the gifted]. Lastly, it is necessary to discern the identity of the partly who is

called, i.e. to consider the call or intuition as mine, as sent towards one's self, which will ultimately make a response possible (Marion 2013). Interpretations again assert that the call is only heard in the response. This answer or response, as Marion (2013) outlines, does not merely define 'the content of the call, but also its reality (or its illusory character)' (p. 57). This point holds true concerning the phenomenon of the gift, i.e. as opposed to exchange or trade: 'no being or object offers itself as a gift; it can be only about the unrefined state of thing, a something ventured or available, of something which is available or ventured, without any intention which would destine it to anyone' (p. 57). While it is precisely this that is determined by interpretation, i.e. that it is something that is destined to be received by someone as *gift*, one must still interpret what recipient must benefit from it (Marion 2013). Any decision regarding whether or not there is a given is made possible solely by way of interpreting if *that* discloses itself.

[2] Whilst there is a noted intrinsic value in phenomenon, if the intuitive height associated with a saturated phenomenon is to be appreciated, which is of higher value, it is necessary to take up a hermeneutical approach that will thereby assign various meanings and concepts to said phenomenon (Marion 2013). The gap must be lived between saturated phenomenon and the inadequacy of concepts or meanings for it cannot be bridged any, if not all, of the potential interpretations of intuition (Marion 2013). The insufficiency of *noesis* to its *noema*, i.e. understood as intended by Levinas (1969; 2009), is generally assumed and thereby becomes the necessary condition of saturated phenomenality. It can be assumed that the saturated phenomenon of the icon requires an infinite hermeneutics (Marion 2013).

[3] How ought one make the distinction between degrees of intuition or givenness – 'between poor phenomenon, phenomena of common law, and saturated phenomenon?' (Marion 2013, 59). Is it necessary to make the distinction between these three cases, i.e. as established, definitively different and forever irreducible? Or, should movement betwixt and between these categories be considered with the view to safeguard saturation from being restricted to rare and minimal cases, that potentially are inadequate in terms of qualifying or legitimising outside norms? One must concede, therefore, the banality of saturation precisely because the same given may disclose itself, i.e. 'to appear, to phenomenize itself, as more or less saturated depending on the hermeneutics that looks at it' (p. 61). The gifted is far from passive in this context. In its hermeneutic response to the call or intuition the gifted, as Marion outlines, permits it and exclusively it, 'to what gives itself to becoming, only partially but really, what shows itself' (p. 61). It is evident, therefore, that the movement betwixt and between the categories outlined above, i.e. poor, common law to saturated phenomenon, continues to be a matter of hermeneutics. This point is further explicated by Marion (2013) by way of analogy:

[. . .] the three horizontal stripes of a flag and a painting by Rothko, sound as signal (information, communication, concept, meaning) and sound as music (meaningless concert), wine in its taste and its chemical formula, odour and perfume (p. 61).

From this standpoint, therefore, the saturated phenomenon also necessitates a hermeneutics, one in which the existential *as* permits itself to the exposure of itself to 'the counter-experience, and to thus enter into battle with the inevitable objectifying experience expressed by the apophantic "*as*"' (p. 61) – both of which circle in a conversely measured manner.

And, finally, [4] the foundation of the final differentiation of every phenomenon into the category of object or event finds its genesis in the hermeneutic function, which, 'by radicalising banality (already hermeneutic) of the saturation, transforms the object into event and return' (p. 61). On this point, Marion (2013) takes his lead from the infamous examination of the difference between the phenomenality of *vorhanden* [the present-at-hand] and of *zuhanden* [the ready-to-hand] constituted by Heidegger (1962), principally by way of his hammer analogy (p. 157). Marion (2013) is 'generalising it [the hammer] to the inversion of objecthood into its hidden "*événementialité*"' (p. 63). Yet, as Heidegger (1962) makes clear, it is primarily about the hammer as that which is available and beneficial as opposed to some inert subsisting object. Rather, it is about allowing the hammer to

play the existential 'as', that Dasein's 'as', that is susceptible or open to the world, which sees the hammer as it is used, in a radical hermeneutics (Marion 2013).

Although the distinction between these two types of phenomenality, generally speaking, may provide other aspects, the fundamental remains: the differentiation between types of phenomenality, i.e. between object and event, can be rooted in hermeneutic variations, that possess and exert their power over the phenomenality of *being*. The phenomenology of givenness therefore, according to Marion (2013), resides in the governance of the gap that exists between what gives itself and what shows itself. Its challenge establishes the *self* of the phenomenon exclusively by way of a properly phenomenological hermeneutics.

The act of giving is understood as a particular *event* by Marion. *Events* captivate Marion, as Shane Mackinlay (2005) notes, precisely because contrary to an object which persists in presence events *happen*. O'leary (2005) claims, however, that this event of giving does not appear to possess 'the universal reach that Marion ascribes to it' (p. 151). For instance, Marion utilises the *happening* of events to bolster his emphasis that phenomenology must ascribe the initiative in appearing to phenomena as opposed to a *cause* that may in fact explicate 'them metaphysically, or any consciousness for which they appear' (Mackinlay 2005, 169). Marion inverts the common apprehension of 'both causality and intentionality in the appearing events' (p. 169). Marion (1991), therefore, sees events as phenomenological facts that possess priority over any cause, i.e. events are uncaused, for he presents them as being autonomous of any cause. Similarly, Marion argues that as events are the 'objects' of a subject's intentional exercise of consciousness, events therefore impose themselves on a perceiver, and hence show the 'self' of a phenomenon. In this way, Marion ultimately determines the *adonné* or the *gifted* in terms of receptivity.

On this point, thinkers such as Mackinlay (2005) are critical of Marion for his swift ascription of 'selfhood' to events. In particular, Mackinlay claims that contrary to Marion's (2013) assertion that the gifted 'has nothing passive in it' (p. 61), in constituting the above inversions the role of the gifted or *adonné* is essentially passive. Furthermore, he argues that in being constituted as such, this passive receptivity is also mirrored in the confinement of hermeneutics by Marion (1991, 2013) to 'acts of interpretation *after* an event has actually happened' (Mackinlay 2005, 170). It can be argued that Marion's theology overlooks a fundamental hermeneutical dimension – the need to situate the happening of events in the sphere of their happening to a human subject while at one and the same time recognising that events happen of their own initiative (Mackinlay 2005).

In spite of these criticisms, these four hermeneutic moments of *givenness* have much to contribute to the hermeneutics of religious education, particularly the recognition of the event-like character of *givenness* that is so characteristic of persons hermeneutical encounters with the otherness of the other. In taking Marion's conception of givenness seriously one must accept that the phenomenon 'shows itself in itself and from itself' (Marion, 2016, p. 48). This also implies that it 'gives itself from itself' (Marion, 2016, p.48). This point implies that one ought not assume that all that is given does not find its cause in some 'big giver in the sky' (Beiste 2022, 65). Marion challenges the conception of God as the first cause of everything but, as outlined above, remains open to the possibility of God-*beyond*-being. This conception of givenness also challenges certain ideas of teacher, particularly the idea of the teacher as the 'one who is in control, and more specifically, the teacher as the cause of learning' is challenged (Beiste 2022, 65). Marion's conception of givenness also points to the fact that one's engagement with truth in religious education, as a hermeneutical activity (Kennedy and Cullen 2021), is never a purely objective or purely subjective exercise. Religious enquiry, as a valid pathway to human knowledge (Kennedy 2021b) possesses both subjective and objective characteristics as truth, especially religious truth, is always encountered in an embodied, relational, dynamic and participatory manner (Kennedy 2021a).

Conclusion

In no sense is the case being made in this paper that Marion's theological project offers *the* definitive answer to the way in which one ought to relate to Truth, i.e. truth understood beyond the confines of

being, nor did it propose that such an emphatic acceptance of a de-ontological approach is conclusively advantageous. Rather, this paper has demonstrated that the significance of Marion's position rests in the fact that his theological project takes seriously the insights of postmodernity, and in his attempt to meaningfully integrate said insights into his theological thinking, his theology opens up the *possibility* of God/Truth beyond the confines of being and, that God/Truth conceived as such, ultimately requires that one approach God/Truth from a radically hermeneutical perspective.

Of particular importance in the analysis of Marion's phenomenological project, therefore, is his understanding of the act of giving as a particular *event*. Events, as discussed above, *happen* as opposed to objects which merely persist in presence. A recognition or openness to *givenness* interrupts, or breaks-open, the Schleiermacher inspired hermeneutical circle that is found at the centre the approaches of contemporary religious educationalists such as Bowie and Coles (2018). This interruption unfolds by way of a receptivity to the *givenness* of the other in encounters with truth. Such truth-events *happen* in life itself as it unfolds historically. It also highlights the importance of remaining open to the possibility of a God-*beyond*-being in the hermeneutics of religious education. Marion's theological and phenomenological project points to the need for a more dynamic hermeneutical orientation in religious education, and as such, has much to offer religious education in terms of attempting to grasp the *happening* character of education (Kennedy 2021a; Aldridge 2017, 2018). It opens up space to consider religious education as a hermeneutical activity within which the *happening* character of education manifests by way of a hermeneutical orientation towards meaningful encounters with God/Truth, i.e. truth-events.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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