
JEAN-LUC MARION'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE ICON AS AN APOLOGIA FOR QUIAPO'S BLACK NAZARENE TRASLACIÓN

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ABSTRACT

The *Traslación* of the Black Nazarene in Quiapo, Philippines conducts its rites and practices as a devotion outside the liturgy of the Catholic Church. As a popular religious practice widely known and attended by millions, it has become considered a religious phenomenon, attesting to the religiosity of Filipinos and their patient endurance for God. However, this religious practice is also condemned as *idolatry*, as one finds with reference to the golden calf in Exodus 32:4. In this paper, I create an apologia for this devotion using Jean-Luc Marion's concept of the *icon*. To do this I will first describe the various critiques of idolatry and iconography within the church and consider some of the negative interpretations of this devotion. Then I will consider the *Traslación* in relation to Marion's project. Finally, I will present the apologia itself. This paper provides a defense of various kinds of Filipino devotion which addresses the idolatry critique and respects the rich religiosity of these devotions.

Keywords: Jean-Luc Marion; Icon; Idolatry; Phenomenology; Quiapo; Black Nazarene; Traslación

Quiapo's *Traslación* and Its Critique

The *Traslación* or “procession” (“transfer”) of the Black Nazarene, celebrated on every 9th of January in the Philippines, points historically to the transfer of the statue from Intramuros to Quiapo. It is a feast attended by millions and is drawing more devotees each year. To make sense of this, we should consider popular devotions as “religious exercises – prayers, methods of meditation, orders of service, rituals, gestures – whose text and rubrics are not contained in the official liturgical books of the Roman Rite.” They are outside of the liturgy *per se*, although they can be maintained as a continuing public work about the people where active participation is expected. The document on liturgy from Vatican II says that devotions should lead the people to liturgy and not move away from it. With that in mind, the *Traslación* begins with a Eucharistic celebration early in the morning, following the vigil and mass on the eve of the 8th.

Despite its solemnity and persuasion to enact a secure and smooth procession, the movement is not entirely safe, making the barefoot parade a risky march for the devotees. In the Black Nazarene *Traslación* of January 2018, one devotee died and more than 800 injured from over 6 million estimated in attendance. But casualties and injuries are considered one of the risks of participation. To engage oneself in the event is considered a religious form of sacrifice. Landa Jocano, in one of his articles, mentioned the Black Nazarene “wiping” ritual when different types of devotees patiently fall in line to wait for their turn to wipe the glass-covered case of the Santo Entierro (Black Nazarene). There is also the kissing ritual – one devotee anoints the statue with Chanel no. 5 perfume first before kissing – and murmuring prayers. This devotion has become both a religious social phenomenon. Fr. Simon Boiser, SVD opined that the social phenomenon of popular devotions, albeit not part of the liturgy, explains the spiritual needs of Filipinos more than the Sunday obligation.

But how might this phenomenon appear to the non-devotee or examined otherwise from another vantage point? The *Traslación* has been critiqued or demonized as an abject portrayal of fanaticism and superstition. Devotees are considered desperate and insensitive to others in their scramble to touch the statue, neglecting consideration of others for the sake of their own salvation. I have even witnessed this myself as a former seminarian who attended the event for seven straight years (from 2010-2016).

Not only do the devotees appear to be unholy in the manner that they approach the statue, but they also appear to be misinformed in their beliefs. Msgr. Sabino Vengco Jr. of the Loyola School of Theology remarked upon the ignorance of many Filipinos concerning the Nazareno, and clarified certain misconceptions, concerning the source of its color, its timing, but especially the kissing ritual, or *pahalik*, to express the extent of one's religiosity. From this perspective the ritual is considered as magic, superstition, and idolatry.

If this phenomenon is then reduced to mere idolatry in the guise of religiosity, it is another instance of split-level Christianization involving a disparity of belief and ethical practice? From the data of 1991 and 1998 surveys asking about religious socialization, Filipino religiosity appeared to be “a private affair – a matter of personal beliefs and devotion – rather than a social force that shapes and transforms public life.” The critique rests on the golden calf verse of *Exodus* 32 when Aaron creates an idol in the shape of a calf, organized a feast providing it with offerings, and worshiped it as a god.

Phenomenology and Apologia

With this problem in mind, we can consider what the Catholic philosopher, Jean-Luc Marion, can offer an understanding of *idolatry*. He is also well known as a theologian whose methods correspond to that of postmodernity. Marion's phenomenology does not focus on the primacy of the subject, so the devotee is displaced from the altar at which he worships. He rather utilizes a phenomenology that provides access to

a revelation beyond what can be described, a “saturated” rather than a diminished perception related to phenomena as mere sense-data. He writes,

My entire project, by contrast [to metaphysics], aims to think the common-law phenomenon, and through it the poor phenomenon, on the basis of the paradigm of the saturated phenomenon, of which the former two offer only weakened variants, and from which they derive by progressive diminishment. For the saturated phenomenon does not give itself apart from the norm, by way of exception to the definition of phenomenality.

This is in contrast to Edmund Husserl. Husserl’s phenomenology stresses the importance of the transcendental “I” considering phenomena as intuited by the transcendental subject. Marion’s phenomenology proceeds to liberate phenomena from the clutch and prejudices of this “I,” allowing the saturated phenomenon to reveal itself.

Seen from Marion’s phenomenological method, the Black Nazarene *Traslación* can be considered not as an *idol* but as an *icon*. By recasting the perspective of the devotee, whose project of worship resembles that of a glorified subject encapsulating God in a wave and wipe of a handkerchief, adoring the gold in which the calf is cast, Marion’s phenomenology points beyond the limitations of these critiques. Lorman Arugay sketches an apologia for Marion by proceeding from Marion’s phenomenological heritage in Husserl, Heidegger, and Kant. But this research neither achieves an apologia as such nor is able to radicalize previous traditional analyses. Instead, this paper proceeds from a short detour of the theological accounts that usually explain the devotee’s relationship towards the statue as an icon and then proceeds to Marion’s phenomenology of the icon to address the same critique.

Idolatry Critique: A Look at Theology

Examining the issue via theology seems to be a preliminary before delving into the phenomenological investigation. For Marion, this points to that which is first given, the way of theology that is, as “revelation” qua *historicity*. His theology contrasts to his phenomenology on the account of revelation but for the latter, as a revelation qua *possibility*.

What is firstly given here is that the statue, the icon of the Black Nazarene, is an image. The Catechism for Filipino Catholics (CFC) understands an image as having the capacity to either represent reality as in the case of devotion *or* to substitute for reality, thereby becoming an object of idolatry. This may then offer an interpretation of the *Traslación* not as the mere adoration of the image as an image, but the adoration of the image as a representation of something else.

The devotion to the statue of the Nazareno then points not just to the statue but to what it represents, Jesus Christ. The waving of handkerchiefs and the wiping of the statue during the procession as a devotion looks to Jesus embodied in the image. The warning is clear in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, that idolatry not only refers to “false pagan worship” but consists of “divinizing what is not God,” (CCC, 2113). But insofar as the procession is giving due to God and not the image itself, the devotee does not commit idolatry and superstition. That is, they do not “attribute the efficacy of prayers or of sacramental signs to their mere external performance, apart from the interior dispositions that they demand (CCC 2111).” The statue of the Black Nazarene as an image is not the object of devotion in itself.

It was Aquinas who originally defended this interpretation of the adoration of images. He writes that “Religious worship is not directed to images in themselves, considered as mere things [...] The movement toward the image does not terminate in it as an image, but tends toward whose image it is.”

But this is a problem much older than Aquinas. It can be found in the early councils of the Church. In the 7th Council, The Second Council of Nicaea (A.D. 787), the non-prohibition of icons, in fact, carried over

some *anathemas* (detestations). examples of which are the following: “Anathema to those who do not salute the holy and venerable images” and “Anathema to those who call the sacred images idols.” This points to the idea that icons are to be regarded as holy but not as idols.

The council’s convention was a response to the iconoclast movement in seventh-century Armenia and in the early eighth century wherein several bishops in Asia Minor, notably Constantine of Nakoleia and Thomas of Claudiopolis, “condemned the veneration of images.” There, this controversy was made more complex by the influences of other religions, namely, Manichaeism that rejected matter as evil and extended this ban to artworks, and icons. The other Abrahamic religions like Islam and Judaism share “abhorrence of any representation of the divine.” The significance of the council was the idea that the perception of an image must not be a form of idolatry but must be informed by faith.

The problem is that theology projects revelation as a given phenomenon *from the perspective of the Church*. That is to say, it lacks the language to articulate the phenomenon *as* a phenomenon apart from anathemas and catechisms. Homilies, exhortations, and exegesis might express phenomena, but they do not give full access since they first proceed from those hermeneutical injunctions before they try to consider the phenomena’s fullness and incommensurability. Fr. Rolando Dela Rosa, OP, for instance, considers the difference of the devotees of the *Traslación* from the usual “convenient and normal ways of linking with the divine.” He contends that it not be dismissed as madness; rather as seen from the perspective of one’s love for God; to consider the believer, in St. Paul’s words, as “fools for Christ.” In addition, Cardinal Tagle’s recent homily in 2018 interprets the *Traslación* as journeying with Jesus, along with carrying one’s crosses. In other words, theology in all its vantage points – e.g. Catechesis, Patrology, Liturgy, Church History, Homiletics, and even Apologetics and Dogmatics – address the phenomenon always in an interpretative light: the Magisterium as the primary authority or office is established precisely on that purpose. This, however, does not undermine theology. Marion’s phenomenology can complement

theology by freeing phenomena from prior conceptions: the religious phenomenon of the *Traslación* must not only be viewed as devotees worshipping Christ but its iconic representation has to be considered as a surprising religious phenomenon in itself.

Beyond the Distance: Marion's *Icon* as Apologia

In *Idol and Distance*, Marion already differentiates theological discussions to phenomenology, although he makes the point of reading one in the light of the other. Leask and Cassidy have described Marion's project "to think a God without Being, a God who is free from any condition whatsoever." The manner by which Marion can attain this is, in their words, "by rethinking the whole problematic in terms of an icon that is not reducible to idolatry."

If theology has distinctly defined idolatry as divinizing what is not God, Marion's initial method has to recast also the parameters of idolizing thought from the revelation of the phenomena. He does this by contrasting this to the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. Husserl's constituting of phenomena and Heidegger's questioning of "being" still retain the limits and conditions to phenomena. The transcendental "I" imposes primacy of its intuition to what appears, and Heidegger makes a similar error in contextualizing all phenomena within the realm of being.

This can be traced back to Cartesian metaphysics and its inability to free itself from the perception of the ego as *res cogitans*. For Marion, the Cartesian ego is inherently connected to the self and cannot free itself from itself. In effect, the cogito reduces phenomena into the perception of the ego's clear and distinct ideas.

This apparent limitation of the ability of the subject as the interpreter of phenomena leads it to label, conceptualize, and digest phenomena as a whole – perceiving it as an object graspable to one's insight. In this sense, God too can be an idol in its conceptualization under a name as an object. To preserve as it were this *divine distance*, Marion proceeds to put God in the realm of love prior to being. The formula in theology is then reversed: if Aquinas says in "apprehending the good" that

one cannot love what one does not know, expressed further by Augustine in *De Trinitate* 10.1: *nullus potest amare aliquid incognitum* (“I cannot love something that which is unintelligible”), Marion stresses the primacy of love in which one can only proceed to know what one loves – a task which gives priority to the givenness of love as a gift that is prior to any knowing. Marion then in explicating this primacy exposes a love without being, retroactively tracing even philosophy’s birthright as the *love* of wisdom with its original erotic rationality.

The interpretation of philosophy and even of theology borders on the interpretation of being (for philosophy) and revelation (theology). Therefore, “rather than hermeneutics being restricted to the interpretations of existence that arise when it is subsequently recounted, human existence is itself considered to be hermeneutic in the very structure of its happening. Consequently, *phenomena are not only interpreted after they have appeared, but are always already interpreted in their very appearing.*” Theology, which grounds in revelation as historicity, is one interpretation, and interpretation is “considered in the domains of a historical event,” or the face of another person. Marion’s phenomenology insists on the primacy of givenness, and this he expounds more on his phenomenology of the *icon*. This phenomenology is stated in Mackinlay’s words: “The actual appearing of the phenomenon is fully accomplished independent of any such interpretations of its meaning.”

What this phenomenology first implies is that the idol, which limits and conditions phenomena, and the icon, which for theology points to something beyond, are for Marion, not identifications by which one can classify beings but manners by which phenomena appear in being. One can, therefore, view being as either an idol or an icon, presenting themselves as manifestations of reality.

In Marion’s analysis, the idol is a limitation of phenomena when it confines perception. Petrified by the manifestation of an idol, the subject is “dazzled” because the idol is first and foremost dazzling (*éblouissant*). Figuratively, this points to how a person idolizes a particular object – money, food – and even abstract concepts such as career and identity.

The extreme in which the perception of the idol suspends reality is when this perception points back to the image of the one perceiving, like a mirror, to which subjectivity plays a major part. In art criticism, a painting is a visible representation of reality, but when a subject interprets the painting, the representation halts, restricts the gaze back to itself. In Marion's words, "the idol thus acts as a mirror, not as a portrait: a mirror that reflects the look's image, or more exactly, the image of its aim and of the scope of that aim." Seen in itself, the painting as an idol is a particular "mode of apprehension" or "reception" constantly reflecting the gaze of the perceiver. The idol then projects the subjectivity of the gaze, as an object of the gaze and is interpreted only on the account of the gaze. As Marion puts it: "The idol with its visibility fills the intention of the gaze, which wants nothing other than to see."

In the case of the Black Nazarene *Traslación*, the condition is clear when, furthering the accounts of the catechism, an image becomes an idol: the idol for Marion's phenomenology is not just an object divinized as if it is God, but it becomes an idol precisely when the devotion to the image is restricted, fixated to the image itself and more so when it reflects the picture back to the devotee. In which case, the more the devotee sacrifices himself through sweat and blood, the more he sees himself worthy of becoming the devotee to the statue. Like the idol in Exodus, the golden calf is dazzling only because it reflects the collected molten jewelry from the community of Jews themselves.

Marion neither limits the gaze of the devotee to the image nor to himself but rather to something else. This is explained in a phenomenology that caters to a further provocation beyond. Escaping from the trap of the idol's dazzling image, the icon as a manner of perceiving being does not stop at the image. The icon, in other words, lets the phenomenon reveal itself that it allows saturation to the point of eluding even the perception of the subject. This saturated phenomena is revealed not as an object but as a "non-object" and is experienced not as an experience but as a "counter-experience" when it "resists the conditions of objectification," to which Marion makes use of the term "irregardable." The phenomenality of the

icon is irreducible since it evokes infinity. In Marion's words,

The icon shows, strictly speaking, nothing [. . .]. It teaches the gaze [. . .] to find in infinity something new. The icon summons the gaze to surpass itself by never freezing on a visible, since the visible only presents itself here in view of the invisible. The gaze can never rest or settle if it looks at an icon; it must always rebound upon the visible [. . .] the icon makes visible only by giving rise to an infinite gaze.

The infinity of this gaze dispels the limited gaze of the looker where the icon does not fully give itself in its resistance to being rendered as an object or a spectacle. The icon,

no longer offers any spectacle to the look and tolerates no look from any spectator, but on the contrary exerts its own look over that which faces it. The looker takes the place of the looked upon; the manifested phenomenon is reversed . . . the paradox reverses the polarity of manifestation by taking the initiative, far from undergoing it; by giving it, far from being given by it.

This resistance, stemming from its *irregardability*, places an operation that crisscrosses gazes. This is what it means when the devotee is displaced from the altar in which he worships and the spotlight that illuminates his gaze – the icon operates as a visible reminder that it cannot be objectified even by the devotee's contemplative attitude towards it.

It is to be cautioned however that the icon's visibility "certainly avoids understanding the icon as an object, but without simply inverting the terms and making the icon a subject that objectifies its viewer." This is the danger that Benson also noticed with the thin distinction between the idol and the icon when icons have tendencies to become idols. In which case, it is easy to say that the devotees are adoring an idol over

an icon, sharing the same fear and perception of the iconoclasts and the religions that abhor them, so that the solution would be to ban them. But this would amount to a totalizing towards the extreme. One must not dismiss altogether a proposition even when it has the tendency to be false as we find in Garcia's apologia to Popper. Here, Marion admits the hazard involved:

What is at stake in the operation of an icon concerns not the perception of the visible or the aesthetic, but the crisscrossed trajectory of two looks; in order for one who sees to let himself be seen and to tear himself away from the status of viewer, it is necessary for him to go back up, across the visible icon, towards the origin of the other look, confessing and thus allowing himself to be seen by it.

But significant here is the reverence the devotee shows. Marion continues that "it may be that only liturgy still summons us to such a *decision*: it provokes the final judgment of every look, which must, before it and it alone, either persist in still wanting to see an idol or else agree to pray. Praying signifies here: letting the other (of the) look-see me." The devotee, therefore, has the decision to venerate the icon or idolize it, but as Mackinlay contrasts: "even though I do not constitute an icon as an object, my affirmation of it as an icon to be venerated entails a conceptual understanding." Will the hermeneutic space, the deciding space that the icon allows for the revelation of God in adoration dispel that notion of the icon's letting-be of transcendence? This is the space that Marion opens.

So we can see the *Traslación* no longer as millions of frenzied devotees worshipping a statue; or as a mass of devotees collected to project their belief as believers of Christ. An icon escapes the image that it represents. It does not fully picture the Nazareno as Christ. It is and is not at the same time. When the devotee touches the statue, paradoxically it provides completeness but also incompleteness. Based on the spiritual longing or the gratitude that motivates the devotee, the Nazareno is

acknowledged as God, in whose perception the devotee cannot fully grasp. That is to say, if the idol works like a mirror, the icon works like a prism in that it “allows the invisible and transcendent to appear without compromising its invisibility and transcendence.” The devotee should recognize that the icon of the Black Nazarene is not wholly God, but through the icon, direct his infinite gaze to God. Marion echoes the words of St. Paul in Colossians: “He is the image (eikon=icon) of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15).”

In the religious phenomenon of the *Traslación*, Marion makes use of a *heuristic* function of phenomenology and not just merely *hermeneutical*: “God really gives God’s self in the phenomenon of revelation; it is not merely my overly spiritualized psyche that thinks this is what is happening.” In fact, such a phenomenon is for Gschwandtner “doubly” saturated when it “*transcends* (especially hermeneutic) horizons together.” The icon then serves as to counter-act, to counter-experience religious phenomena in such a way that it points to something more than its inception and perception. The image although seen still points to an ungraspable experience that manifests itself often in utter surprise. What matters after the event is that the devotee allows himself to let God dwell in his life, and lets his life respond to the call of God, regardless of whether it appears as idolatry. The icon continues to invert and resist the idolizing perception of the devotee, the *Traslación* icon reveals more than what is firstly, actively, and decidedly seen. Revelation, therefore, is not formulaic and God overwhelms the believer.

Conclusion

The Black Nazarene *Traslación* of Quiapo is a popular devotion that caters to the devotees’ creedal faith to God. It has become a religious phenomenon in the sense that it testifies to the inherent *spectacle* of the Filipinos’ faith. This, however, is not the full picture.

Although the event can be considered from the hermeneutical catechism of the Church and its theological distinctions, it nonetheless escapes these determinations even as it reflects an area of humanity aligned

to fanaticism, superstition, and idolatry.

Marion provides important insights into his discussion of the phenomenology of the *icon*. The image of the Nazarene considered from this perspective is not an idol in a sense that the devotees fetishize it as a god in contrast to God, but as an icon that points to the religious phenomenon of revelation: God's act of revealing himself phenomenologically without prior perceptions from the subject or believer. It suggests that workings of God cannot be expected, reduced, and demanded on the side of the believer, even when they encounter the idol. This then provides an apologia to critiques of idolatry when it suggests that the outcome of idolatry is often to allow the ungraspable God to enter the life of the believer. God, as it were, does not become an object of devotion but a non-object, resisting the hermeneutics of the believer and recasting the ideals he has set prior to the revelation of the divine.

ENDNOTES

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