

The Christian as a ‘Son in the Son’. Michel Henry and Josemaría Escrivá Compared

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1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

At first sight it might seem strange to compare a philosopher like Michel Henry, who argues in abstract terms and with a rigorous phenomenological methodology, with a religious writer like Josemaría Escrivá, whose aim is to provide concrete advice, pious admonition, offering a pastoral approach of a narrative kind. But before declaring it impossible let us have a second look at this strange enterprise — in the clear knowledge that some methodological questions still have to be dealt with. To propose our thesis in advance: Henry can be read as giving a kind of ‘metatheory’ to the theory of Escrivá. And the possible advantage may be that the latter can be seen in the horizon of a contemporary philosophy stemming from the great questions of the 20th century, including post-modernism.

Before attempting this synthesis, a short introduction to Michel Henry’s thought may be in order. Twenty years younger than Escrivá, Henry was born in 1922 in Vietnam, the son of French colonists. He grew up in the far Eastern world which provided him with a deep insight into Buddhism and the Asian way of considering humanity and the world, life and death. Back to France, he studied philosophy, paying particular attention to Husserl’s phenomenology and Heidegger’s existential philosophy, both of whom were transformed in France, especially by Sartre, into existentialism. Husserl and Heidegger were always the great eye-openers for Henry, as well as his great adversaries, especially the latter. In his penultimate monograph “C’est Moi la Vérité”¹, Henry attempted to radicalize

¹ Seuil, Paris 1996; German translation by R. KÜHN, *Ich bin die Wahrheit. Für eine Philosophie des Christentums*, Alber, Freiburg/München 1997, 1999². Cfr. also M. HENRY, *Radikale*

phenomenology with the help of John's Gospel; in that way he counteracted Heidegger's 'world' as a distinct and close realm of philosophical interpretation. Furthermore Wittgenstein and Levinas are also present in his thought, as are, of course, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard and other French postmodern thinkers. This goes to show the ample range of Henry's attempt to philosophize in a contemporary context. His last publication is entitled 'Incarnation'², and seems to aim at a 'new somatism' and gender discussion where the human body in both sexes is reduced to a mere social or egocentric construct. Counteracting again, Henry shows the meaning of 'flesh' (being even more elementary than 'body') as the center of Christian thinking.

2. METHOD AND CONTENT

This paper concentrates on the topic of 'sonship' as the nucleus of the message of both Henry and Escrivá. I take it that sonship means "correlative fatherhood", and the possibility of being 'adopted', of being 'son in son'. From the methodological standpoint these three elements will be considered as a religious reconstruction in Escrivá, and as a philosophical 'horizon' or metatheory in Henry.

3. SONSHIP IN HENRY

Let us start first with Henry's approach because it is the more complex one. If properly understood it will facilitate our understanding of Escrivá's thought. In the already mentioned 1996 monograph Henry quotes in the title the Johanneine *logion* applied to Jesus, "I am the truth"³. This quotation offers a heuristic idea in the search for truth, and, of course, can easily lead to a whole world of philosophical skepticism. Among many contemporary researchers the question either is transformed into linguistics, as a matter of rightly used words, or to

Lebensphänomenologie, Alber, Freiburg/München 1992; J.-M. LONGNEAUX (Ed.), *Michel Henry. La vie: entre l'oubli, la négation et l'épreuve invisible*. Colloque international Namur, Faculté universitaire Notre Dame de la Paix, 17-18 Mai 1999 (to be published); J. GREISCH - A. DAVID (edd.), *Michel Henry - L'Épreuve de la Vie*, Cerf, Paris 2000; R. KÜHN, *Studien zum Lebens- und Phänomenbegriff*, Junghans, Cuxhaven/Dartford 1994.

² Seuil, Paris 2000; German translation by R. KÜHN, *Fleischwerdung*, Alber, Freiburg/München 2002.

³ Jn 13, 6.

semantics, as a matter of 'Sprachspiel' and self-reference of signs. Beyond this level of 'signs for signs for signs' truth can hardly be communicated, especially not as truth correlated to things ('ontological truth'), since the (post)modern understanding of truth places it in the field of a purely mental construction.

Henry attacks this position outright. For him all these attempts of reducing phenomena to signs (without real meaning) cannot reduce one last position: the position of life itself. Life shows itself as living: it is its own revelation, indeed, its self-revelation. One cannot prove that life is living but by itself. Speaking about life means to speak *about*, to be somewhere beyond, but life is not *an accident of something else, it is just primarily life*. Precisely this context is throws light on the character of truth: truth cannot be proven from outside, it shows itself as truth, it is self-revelation, self-speaking, self-illuminating.

When the Bible speaks about the 'living God', it speaks not about his life proved by the world or by other living things, but about him as showing himself as what he is. He is the entry to himself, evident, without words, without affirmation through somebody else. "In Christianity 'life' defines pure self-revealing that cannot be reduced to the manifestation of the world; an original self-revelation that is not the revelation by something else and that does not depend on something else, but is just revelation of itself, just that absolute self-revelation which is exactly 'life'"⁴. "Before the light is able to illuminate everything else it shines in its own brightness"⁵.

Furthermore, when we regard living beings around us, their life seemingly stems from previous life, they are all 'children of children' and so on. On the other hand their life is their *own* life, not a borrowed one, and it is so strong and self-standing that it can transfer itself further to the next generation again without loss. Life is not diminished by generation; in other words, it is not a quantitative possession, but rather qualitative self-possession. So in the phenomenon of life we find a double feature: the *receptive* character of life taken from previous life, and the *active* character of life generating new self-possessive and self-spreading life. Nobody may be said to be his or her own origin, and nevertheless each one stands by themselves, being origin for others. The following image may illustrate the matter. A burning candle ignites other candles, but does not lose its own flame. As a result, there must be an original all-inflaming fire burning on its own.

To speak about the living God according to Henry means to speak about the origin of all life — otherwise reflection will move in the senseless circle of

⁴ M. HENRY, *Ich bin die Wahrheit...*, p. 52.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

infinite regress. The mere origin of life is, in anthropomorphic terms, not generated, it is the 'father'. And as life is defined by an essential self-spreading or generating quality, the father is fertile, or to be even more precise, he is fertility itself. The living God the Bible speaks about is active *and* receptive, is giving *and* being gifted, is affection *and* pathos, is self-donation *and* perceptibility. In personal terms: He is the everlasting 'play' of father and son and of their infinite relationship. The son is heteronomous in receiving his father's life, but he receives it as his *own* autonomous life. To be generated as son means to be generated as an *autonomous* son — also in the sense that this autonomy enables him to love with his own power, for example to love the origin of his own life, the father. To understand the process of life means to understand that life is neither copying nor cloning nor determining its offspring in any way, but to the contrary, setting it into freedom. And this, by the way, is essentially the freedom to love⁶.

4. SON IN THE SON

According to Henry the logion "I am the truth", that John refers to in his gospel (13, 6), is the self-denomination, the self-expression of life. The connection of life and truth is based on the unveiling character of life itself. The living God is not hiding himself but gives himself fully and without restriction to further life, first of all in the inner circle of Trinity which is pure life. Life is self-revealing truth, and includes all truths. Truth is nothing abstract, primarily it is not words corresponding to things; rather it is the evident performing (more than informing) of what life is: self-donation and self-reception. For humans, this means being given to myself, receiving my life as my own, stemming as I do from the 'immemorial' origin of life itself. The term 'immemorial' is chosen by Henry to show that the moment of receiving life from life is not a reflected or actively reminded moment (then it could also be refused) but that it belongs to the pure character of the origin to act before the activity that it wakes up or implants. Our existence cannot be denied before it exists, or, what comes to the same thing, the origin cannot be thought about before it originated thinking. So the act of the origin is 'immemorial', it can be thanked for, it can be condemned afterwards, but it cannot be 'remembered'.

To keep to the truth of the son, who is life from his father's life, means to enter this immemorial, this 'forgotten' origin. The truth about human life opens

⁶ THOMAS AQUINAS, *In III. Sent.*, d. 29, q. un., a. 8, q. 3, s.c.: "Quanto aliquis plus habet de caritate, plus habet de libertate" - "The more love somebody has the more freedom they

within the 'light' of the son: perceptive, even passive, affective, given to being humans stand on their own feet, are able to autonomous response. Life is communication — not by words only, but already by phenomena, by shining, enlightening, by being seen and wishing to be seen. It might be added that the divine representative of this communication is the Holy Spirit.

So in the terms of the Apostle Paul, we are 'adopted as children'⁷, we become children in the Son: life from his life, implanted into the truth of the payoff between life-taking and life-giving. Existentialism in the specifically philosophical sense of being lost or being thrown into a senseless, unknown world is — according to Henry — not aware of the self-giving character of life, of the truth of visible revelation of world, of its readability in reference to its origin. And postmodernism in the sense of disconnected pluralism is not aware of the self-connecting character of life, of its self-certainty, identity and intrinsic relationship. 'Alterity' (*Andersheit*) understood as alienation, strangeness, uncommunicative addition of monads is a category of the 'world', but not of life.

For Henry the gospel of John is based on this message: the truth about life is exactly that truth *is* life, self-giving, self-receiving, self-communicating life - in contrast to the 'world' which tries to stay in fragmentary, sterile identities, selfish differences, and in separation from its origin. Those who understand John's message should be reminders of the immemorial truth of sonship in this disconnected world.

5. SONSHIP IN ESCRIVÁ

Escrivá seems to aim at a comparable context, although in a more familiar religious terminology. While Henry moves in the theoretical field of an impressive, though complex, phenomenological analysis, Escrivá clearly attempts to maintain a specific attitude, the *conscious habitus* of being a son or, more general, of being child of God⁸. He enters the field of individual effort, of *realizing* truth by doing. There is a lifelong tension within which the Christian moves: the tension of perceptibility, even passion, on the one hand, and of active intervention on the other, that is to say, the tension of the *fiat mihi* of the Gospel (Lk 1,28) and creative enterprise. For Escrivá, as for Henry, the *basic* attitude is a receptive one, more specifically, the contemplative one. A clear and strong hint of contem-

have".

⁷ Gal 4, 5.

plation is already to be found in the programmatic title of the institution he founded, Opus Dei: *Work of God*. This certainly cannot be read as a kind of self-authorization, or even as a self-enthroning in God's place. God's work is done by Himself, not by humans, however capable they are. Often Escrivá stresses that human fragility does not hinder the 'work of God'. Quite to the contrary: the reflection of one's own 'nothingness' is even a better condition for this work than self-reliance. "Some day, in the silence of a church in Madrid, I seemed to be to myself like nothing — not poor, because that would still have been something —, and I thought: 'You, my Lord, want me to do this miracle of a Work?' And I elevated the chalice, without distraction, in a divine manner"⁹.

At the same time and with the same intensity it is stressed by Escrivá that this awareness of 'being nothing' is not a form of self-degradation or of masochistic dis-engagement. 'Nothingness' means precisely that co-workers in the vineyard should listen first to the engaging call and should answer to it in readiness, and not to their own imperatives with their own plans, intentions and judgments. God's initiative is before the human incentive to say 'yes' or 'no' or 'perhaps'. In a charming image Escrivá describes the infancy of a one or two year-old child which is not yet able to place itself in the foreground. Older children, although still innocent in comparison to adults, want too much, judge too much, build themselves up too much¹⁰.

The metaphor of the child leads directly to sonship. The balance of heteronomy and autonomy in Henry's conception of life is to be found in Escrivá as the balance of obedience and creative responsibility. This balance is remarkable insofar as obedience (to one's vocation) develops one's own identity and personal profile. In other words: the heteronomous will (God's) leads to the autonomous will (of the human being). "God does not abandon any soul to a blind destiny. He has a plan for all and He calls each to a very personal and non-transferable vocation"¹¹. In this very sense — when moving within this call — we do not work *for* the kingdom of God, but *in* this kingdom, we are not working *for* God, but *in* Him, *out of* Him. This small shift involves a decisive difference, namely between the anti-religious challenge of the 19th century on the one hand (according to which it is *we* who should change the earth by ourselves into a bet-

⁸ *The Way*, 852-874 (Spiritual Childhood); 875-901 (Life of Childhood); *Christ is Passing By*, 65.

⁹ Meditation, 27-X-1963, in P. RODRÍGUEZ, «*Omnia traham ad meipsum*». *El sentido de Juan 12,32 en la experiencia espiritual de Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer*, en «*Romana*», *Estudios 1985-1996*, p. 261. My translation.

¹⁰ *The Way*, 868.

¹¹ *Conversations*, 106.

ter and even divine kingdom), and on the other, the Jewish-Christian conviction that involves living and working already *within* the kingdom of God, which has not yet been fully revealed. Even more: it will not be revealed without human cooperation with God. It belongs to the greatness of grace that it must be asked for — for it to be welcomed by man.

To show the meaning of this ‘already within’ more clearly, Escrivá stresses that a specific danger in this welcoming and co-working with grace may arise, and it should be kept attentively in mind. Even Christians may fall into the mistake of thinking that whenever they lead a social, intellectually high, noble, human life, he they are promoting the kingdom of Christ. But the fact is that, even if it is a Christian and social life, they feel enriched by the feelings and peace in their own heart. So it is with those who are practicing goodness and social virtue; it is they who let all others participate in their rich, cultured atmosphere. But the world will neither be changed nor redeemed by that type of engagement; because on its own, ever more shining glory, no place is being made for Christ’s coming. Christians who engage in helping themselves and others engage all their effort for this existing world — instead of opening it for a different empire, where Christ alone lives, reigns and organizes the new life with those who have become one body with him. Only this life in Christ and out of Christ is redemption.

Because of this radical change of view, it is not we who judge the importance of our work; decisive, rather, is the way in which we live our everyday life. Escrivá said that our life consists in the heroic steadiness of custom, in that what happens every day¹². The question is whether or not we are working ‘in Christ’, not whether we are fulfilling special or important obligations. ‘Being in Him’ is a clearly Johannine way of speaking — and here Escrivá touches ‘sonship’ in the same strong way as Henry. “Anyone who does not realize that he is a child of God is unaware of the deepest truth about himself. When he acts, he lacks the dominion and self-mastery we find in those who love Our Lord above all else”¹³.

This charisma of being a son in the Son, of being *ipse Christus*, means in consequence the annihilation of the loud and unimportant ego that tries to stay in the full light of public attention. To be a son or daughter can be described as redemption from that driven ego, and the encouragement of the latent, real ego. Passion and resurrection are a reality, once and for all - as real as everyday life. To stand on this underlying ground means for Henry the ‘simple’ challenge, as it were, of John’s gospel, compatible with postmodern, radicalized phenomenolog-

¹² Cfr. for example *Forrow*, 496 y 955.

¹³ *Friends of God*, 26.

ical thinking. To act out of the mighty force of sonship means for Escrivá the world-changing work of the sons in the Son.

The difference between both ways of living, if one is to compare them with precision, is certainly in the grade and type of abstraction: Henry argues completely in philosophical terms without an overt 'practical' intention, Escrivá in a religious and didactic language, with the clear intention of changing and informing everyday life. The first one gives an analysis of what it means to be children of God in the 'world', forgetting and dismissing their origin, and of their self-shining light which is actually dwarfed to darkness by the light of the origin. The latter one provides a therapy, namely the consequences of sonship for acting.

The difference between the two positions lies in the first place in the distance of recognition and of realization. Besides, they are characterized by slightly different models of sonship in this world. In interpreting one side of John's truth-logion Henry sees sonship in real enmity to the self-related 'world', remaining in a non-compromising distance to it, revealing its non-authenticity against all (philosophical and other) attempts of mundane self-foundation. Conversely Escrivá sees sonship as an imperative of changing the world by penetration into its basic structures, with the patience of unspectacular acts, losing or winning not being the prime question. Henry stresses the necessity of the death of Christ and of all his real followers in the enemy's territory, the cruel exclusion of the light by the darkness, the expulsion of sons into the homelessness by this non-sufficient world — a world which does not want to be reminded of its preliminary character, which sees no need of redemption. Escrivá seems to stress the possibility of regaining this territory, of co-working for its redemption, unfrightened even by one's own darkness.

So Escrivá asks for both distance from *and* participation in this world — a strong contrasting postulate. "This poverty should be [...] a sign that the heart is not satisfied with created things and aspires to the Creator [...]. On the other hand an ordinary Christian is and wants to be one more amongst his fellow men, sharing their way of life, their joys and happiness; working with them, loving the world and all the good things that exist in it"¹⁴. This way of loving goes through a specific dangerous tension, finally through death; death (also in its less spectacular form of everyday death) is the price of loving the existing world in this effort. Escrivá always again stressed another logion of John's gospel: "And when I am lifted up from the earth I shall draw all things unto Myself" (Jn 12, 32, Vulg.). By His death on the Cross, Christ has drawn all creation to Himself. Now

¹⁴ *Conversations*, 111.

it is the task of Christians, in His name, to reconcile all things to God, placing Christ, by means of their work in the middle of the world, at the summit of all human activities”¹⁵. We are “all cooperators in the work of salvation which God carries out in us and in the entire world”¹⁶, is Escrivá’s decisive motto.

Henry, instead of that, analyses the end of a totalitarian philosophy where the ‘world’ becomes the totality of all projects and aims of human beings, where ‘heaven’ represents the falsehood of an unlived life, an “imaginary and empty topos”¹⁷ deriving human energy from work. Work became a self-feeding circle, feeding itself by its activity, whose end is “to borrow a fictitious life to the monument of the beast”, as Henry quotes the Book of Revelation (13, 15). Between God and the world remains the empty simulation of life by machines and robots to which people will accommodate their culture; they will learn to regard themselves as less than animals, as particles and molecules, “their eyes empty like those of a fish [...]. They will desire to die, but they will not desire the ‘life’. It is not some kind of god who will be able to save us today, but — if all over the world the shadow of death is growing and expanding — ‘the One who is the Living One’”¹⁸.

Henry sees the Johannine Apocalypse growing in the unredeemable pride of the world, spitting out sonship and fatherhood together. Escrivá — perhaps seeing the same shadows — stresses the humble way of never giving up the lost case, stresses the image of children gathering up other sons. Both are readers of John, although they read him from opposing angles. But the inspiring core, the attractive center of their life work is seemingly the same.

¹⁵ *Conversations*, 59.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 112.

¹⁷ M. HENRY, *Ich bin die Wahrheit...*, p. 332.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 382 (end of the monograph).