

Phenomenology of Religious Experience

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Michel Henry: from the Essence of Manifestation to the Essence of Religion

DOI 10.1515/opth-2017-0014

Received March 7, 2017; accepted March 23, 2017

Abstract: This paper investigates the connections between the phenomenology of religious experience and Michel Henry's entire body of work. Henry debated on Christianity and the phenomenological interpretation of religion in the latter part of his philosophical thinking. However, a new interpretation of Henry's work is needed starting from his work *The Essence of Manifestation* and his critique of religion by Marx and Feuerbach which he analyzed in two volumes devoted to these two philosophers (1976). Although it has been scarcely investigated, Henry's work should be considered as a whole from its beginning to his philosophy of Christianity. As this aspect of Henry's work has often been ignored, this paper proposes a new interpretation of the essence of religion through its connections with the essence of manifestation. This will be done in three steps: firstly, an investigation of Henry's thought starting from his interpretation of Marx and Feuerbach will be proposed; secondly, a "new ontology of manifestation" by Henry will be analysed; and finally, a connection between Henry's phenomenological essence of manifestation and the new conception of the essence of religion will be suggested.

Keywords: Phenomenology of Life, Critique of Religion, Karl Marx and Ludwig Feuerbach, Phenomenology of Flesh, Philosophy of Christianity

1 Michel Henry and the Phenomenology of Religious Experience

Throughout his work, Michel Henry shows that the manifestation of reality cannot be known without understanding the *experience* that every man has of it. Henry also deals with this argument in his works on religion and, specifically, on Christianity, which he addresses from the point of view of the Incarnation and Life in the flesh that unites Christ and man. Therefore, all his work can be regarded as a phenomenology of religious experience. He develops this topic by considering what religion is, and how its phenomenology could be possible.

The objective of this article is to analyze Henry's view of the phenomenology of religious experience examining different aspects of his study. Firstly, his idea of religion is presented. Secondly, the article investigates his "critique of religion" through the reading of Marx and Feuerbach. The analysis concludes with Henry's investigation of the essence of manifestation and Christianity. These three key elements have provided a decisive contribution to the answering of Henry's fundamental question: how does a religious experience manifest itself?

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2 Which philosophy of religion?

As far as Michel Henry's work is concerned, does it make sense to talk about "philosophy of religion" or about "theology"? Probably not, as the author never defined his work through those terms. Even if Jean Greisch, in his majestic work *Le Buisson ardent et les lumières de la raison*,¹ inserted Henry in the section devoted to the phenomenology of religion, he cannot be defined as a "philosopher of religion". In a sense Henry confirmed this distinctiveness from the "subject" that questions the conditions of philosophic possibilities (not the theological ones, mind you) of religion when, attending the Institut Catholique de Paris (19th January 2001)² for the presentation of *Incarnation*, he showed that the whole of his phenomenology of life questioned the general foundation of phenomenology as «constituted by what can be called a 'phenomenological dualism'». ³ This assumption is at the basis of the fact that, in *Incarnation*, the body is investigated in its double being as the body appearing among things and as living flesh that reveals itself «by the immanent and pathetic self-impression of life». ⁴ And also:

These are only the beginnings of a written analysis for the first time in the years 1946-1950 [...]. Subsequently, these presuppositions of phenomenological dualism have been applied to various problems - Marx and the economy, the unconscious, culture, the work of art, the phenomenological method and the phenomenology of the twentieth century in general. ⁵

This philosophic path – regarding the hypothesis proposed at the beginning of this research – finds a specific expression in Christianity. Starting from the premise that «as soon as they return to their origin, the phenomenological presuppositions hold their truth by themselves», ⁶ when Truth and Life are identified it happens that «the power of revelation proves to be nothing else than is revealed in the absoluteness of its Parousia, and thus this self-attestation is what constitutes the essence of all life». ⁷ And, as Henry sums up this effective *Selbstdarstellung*, «in this regard we can consider the philosophical interpretation of Christianity proposed in the last two books as the encounter between the phenomenology of life and religion, which is in no way limited because religion is of life, and thereby can be subject to philosophy». ⁸

Henry, therefore, did not want to propose a "philosophy of religion", but he was interested in the instance in which life reveals itself as religion. So to the question "which philosophy of religion does Henry compose?", we could answer: it is the "philosophy of religion" in which religion becomes *life*, namely Christianity.

But this answer opens the way to other questions: how is it possible to talk about Christianity as "Life" distancing it from all the ecclesiastic and dogmatic perspectives that characterise it as a religion? How is it possible to talk about Christianity without "its" history – which is also marked by rifts and contradictions? These are questions that we will look for in Henry, even though he does not approach the "historical" Christianity but rather encounters the religion through the books where it is announced, such as in the New Testament, and through some Fathers of the Church, in particular St. Irenaeus, Tertullian and St. Augustin. A "philosopher of religion" would consider this approach unsatisfactory because it makes Christianity

¹ See Greisch, *Le Buisson ardent et les lumières de la raison*.

² Capelle-Dumont (ed.), "Phénoménologie et incarnation"; Greisch, "Le monde à l'envers".

³ Henry, "Réponse de Michel Henry", 88-89: «Est constitué par ce que l'on peut appeler un 'dualisme phénoménologique' ou encore une 'duplicité de l'apparaître'».

⁴ *Ibid.*, 88. «Par l'auto-impression immanente et pathétique de la vie».

⁵ *Ibid.*, 89. «Ce ne sont là que les prémices d'une analyse écrite pour la première fois dans les années 1946-1950 [...]. Par la suite, ces presuppositions du dualisme phénoménologique ont été appliquées à divers problèmes – Marx et l'économie, l'inconscient, la culture, l'œuvre d'art, la méthode phénoménologique et la phénoménologie du XX siècle en général».

⁶ *Ibid.*: «Dès qu'elles sont reconduites à leur originalité, les presuppositions phénoménologiques ne tiennent leur vérité que d'elles-mêmes».

⁷ *Ibid.*: «Le pouvoir de révélation se révèle n'être plus rien d'autre en l'absoluité de sa Parousie que cette autorévélation et ainsi cette auto-attestation qui constitue l'essence de toute vie».

⁸ *Ibid.*: «À cet égard, on peut considérer l'interprétation philosophique du christianisme proposée dans les deux derniers livres comme la rencontre de la phénoménologie de la vie et d'une religion, laquelle ne se limite nullement – précisément parce qu'il s'agit en elle de la vie – à une quelconque philosophie».

a kind of superhistorical truth. There is something in Henry however that has been grasped through his phenomenological approach and this runs the risk of getting lost when religion is “historicized” or “rationalized”: he carried out his investigation by placing himself in the *Sache selbst* of Christianity, in its essence, and he made his analysis by developing his work starting from *The Essence of Manifestation* to the texts devoted to the study of Christianity itself.⁹ But between the beginning and the end, as the author himself says, there was Marx, Freud and the matter of subconscious, the monograph about Kandinskij and, last but not least, the activity Henry carried out as a novelist.¹⁰ Through this do we mean to say that religion, through Christianity, gets treatment only at the end of the Henryan *œuvre*? No, and I would also like to demonstrate it by supporting this thesis: Henry attains to Christianity because *in the essence of the manifestation* he finds the possibility for life to manifest itself, which in his work has a crucial *critical* role. In other words, my thesis is that the critical role, which according to Kant is carried out by reason (to which religion is attributed),¹¹ is performed by life and its manifestation according to Henry. *Life, in other words, carries out the critique of religion.* For this reason Christianity is not meant in its historic meaning but it is examined, or if one prefers it is *criticized* and therefore *purified, in the light of life* which manifests itself. This – according to me – is the path that is carried out *from The Essence of Manifestation to the essence of religion.*

3 Starting from life: Michel Henry as a reader of Marx and Feuerbach

It is known that Henry does not formulate the phenomenology of life at the very beginning, with his first works: he gets there gradually, questioning *first* the essence of manifestation and showing *then* that such an essence is not something different from life. Nevertheless, when in the 70s he writes the monograph about Marx, *life* is the reason from which he reads the whole work by Karl Marx and *The Essence of Christianity* by Ludwig Feuerbach. Before considering how life has a critical role (in the Kantian meaning) already in this reading, we have to point out the background against which Henry moves, and some points that he discovers in *The Essence of Manifestation* and which he will never renounce in his philosophic path.¹²

In §§ 45-51 of Henry's *Essence of Manifestation*,¹³ he investigates the invisible as an inner structure of transcendence; he also insists on the *positive* character of the invisible. That is to say: the invisible is not a visible¹⁴ waiting for visibility, but rather, it has its own phenomenality which is distinct, especially by comparison with the purely visible in the world where everything appears. The invisible, instead, manifests itself in what Henry calls life, whose sign can take place only in the immanence one feels thanks to *affectivity*, and never in the visibility of the world; never, therefore, in transcendence: «All life is by essence invisible; the invisible is the essence of life»;¹⁵ and again: «The invisible is nothing which might be beyond the visible, it is nothing “transcendent”, it is the original essence of life such that, since it takes place in a sphere of radical immanence, it never arises in transcendence and, moreover, cannot show itself in it».¹⁶

⁹ See, Henry, *I am the Truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity; Incarnation. A Philosophy of Flesh and Words of Christ.*

¹⁰ Henry, *L'amour les yeux fermés; Le fils du roi; Le cadavre indiscret.*

¹¹ See Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft.*

¹² The secondary literature about Henry's thought is very wide and by now involves all aspects of his work. I highlight some scholarship useful for the bibliographic references: O'Sullivan, *Michel Henry. Incarnation, Barbarism and Belief*; Brohm, Leclercq, *Michel Henry: Dossier L'Age de L'homme*; Kanabus, *Généalogie du concept henryen d'Archi-Soi. La hantise de l'Origine; Michel Henry: O incondicional da condição humana.* De Simone, *La rivelazione della Vita. Cristianesimo e Filosofia in Michel Henry*; Canullo, *Michel Henry: narrare il pathos*; Jean, Leclercq, Monseu, *La vie et les vivants. (Re-)lire Michel Henry; Hatem, Kühn, Michel Henry's Radical Phenomenology.*

¹³ Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, Section III: *The Internal Structure of immanence and the Problem of its Phenomenological Determination: The Invisible*, pp. 279-456, §§ 45-51, pp. 378-456.

¹⁴ Visible and invisible are never used in accordance with the meaning of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (see Yorihiro, *Mienai mono Michel Henry to Merleau-Ponty no baai*).

¹⁵ Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 443.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 453.

A positive determination regarding the invisible is possible because 1- the difference (in this case between visible and invisible) is not necessarily an opposition; 2- because the same opposition presupposes a bond and «that such a bond can be established between “contraries” and remain in this extreme form of opposition is precisely demonstrative of its essential permanence in opposition and the determination by this bond of all opposition as such. [...] The affinity of contraries, their secret of co-belonging to a common essence, does not merely constitute the foundation of the bond which unites them; it renders such a bond effective in the passage from one contrary to the other and in the possibility thereof».¹⁷

This announcement of the visible and the invisible in the background of the same essence, and therefore two different ways of manifestation (one typical of the world and the other of life), is what in the year 2000, during the circumstance mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Henry called “phenomenological dualism” or even a “duplication of appearing”. Henry wanted to check this analysis in different fields of study, among which was the reading of the works by Marx.

Life is the horizon of Henry’s critique of Marx because only by considering life can one understand the reason (which is crucial in the work by Marx) of the *praxis*, that is to say the acting that is the basis of any possible social change. In fact, in order to be effective and produce some effects the *praxis* cannot be just a theory (and less still a doctrine), it must be alive, for the reason that only life can *be* its horizon. Indeed, *being*, for the *praxis* and the action, means acting, and acting is not grasping, seeing, or looking; moreover we can act without having an intuition of our action, without looking at it, without making it an *object* for ourselves, according to a phenomenological way which is different from the view of the objective world in which the beings and the visible objects appear.

The critique of objectivity is proposed in order to understand the life of man in a suitable way, and when such a critique is drawn it manifests a new meaning of how subjectivity is understood, meaning that overturns the way Western philosophy has always moved. Such philosophy, in fact, has privileged subjectivity «establishing and receiving the object, an “objective” subjectivity, to a radical subjectivity from which all objectivity is excluded. According to the first conception, being is an object and, as the objectivity of being is established within the realm of sense, a sensuous object».¹⁸ In the meaning of objectivity proposed by Henry, instead, «being is nothing that can be presented as an object, is nothing objective, nothing sensuous; it is in [sic] radical – and in a radically new sense – “subjective”».¹⁹ In other words, the being *is* as it is life and the *praxis* «is this lived tension of an existence caught up in the ordeal of its act of pushing, pulling, lifting or grasping».²⁰ Also the Marxist topics of alienation, of capital, of history and the definition of the individual are submitted to the crucial careful examination of life. Most of all, referring to the *Capital* that Marx defines as “vampire”, Henry writes that «the theme of the vampire is not a metaphor, but the rigorous formulation of the relation of capital, labor and work»;²¹ as a matter of fact the life itself of the worker is swallowed up and made “objective”.

In the same years, along with the readings about Marx, Henry also analyses the critique of religion that Ludwig Feuerbach proposed in *The Essence of Christianity*. In an essay called *La critique de la religion et le concept de genre dans L’essence du christianisme*,²² Henry builds a path that starts from the critique by Marx to Bruno Bauer and ends to the critique by Feuerbach of religion; a critique that Henry, in his turn, criticizes. It is worth summarizing this path, as the way Henry understands religion and its *essence* takes shape from here. Henry writes: «What is remarkable is that, on religion, Feuerbach’s materialism and Bauer’s idealism say the same thing, that one and the same pattern [...] commands analysis. This is

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 444.

¹⁸ Henry, *Marx I*, 145.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

²¹ Henry, *Marx II*, 436: «Le thème du vampire n’est pas une métaphore, mais la formulation rigoureuse de la relation du capital et du travail» (text not translated in the English issue).

²² Henry, *La critique de la religion et le concept de genre dans L’essence du christianisme* (1972), 11-29.

the pattern of consciousness. Criticism of religion is idealist».²³ In other words, religion is the outcome of a reduction «to a representation, to an object of consciousness posited by it», which «determines the status of religion or, better still, of religion itself and at the same time contains the principle of its resolution».²⁴ This judgment, however, seems to be true for Bauer but not for Feuerbach, who criticizes religion in an attempt to escape idealism, though failing in his attempt, according to Henry. In fact, Feuerbach's critique of religion is based on the fact that what it states as infinite God is in reality the infinity of the *Gattung* (genus), therefore of the species every individual belongs to. This "species", however – as Henry comments – is not different from a concept set by the representation, a concept grasped as it is set by consciousness.

Henry's critique of Feuerbach is therefore based on the fact that Feuerbach criticizes religion, for only the centrality of consciousness can make the representation of the infinite and therefore of the *Gattung* (genus) possible: «Consciousness in the strict sense, in the proper sense of the term, and consciousness of the infinite are inseparable; a limited consciousness is not a consciousness, consciousness is essentially of a universal, infinite nature».²⁵ And still: «Consciousness of the infinite is the same as consciousness of the infinity of consciousness», a passage that ends this way: «In the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious being has as its object the infinity of its own essence».²⁶ So if the *Gattung* (genus) is the infinite grasped by consciousness, Henry distances himself from Feuerbach when he writes:

How can atheist anthropology differentiate itself from the ontology of speculative idealism? How does the self-consciousness of man differ from the self-consciousness of God? The God of Hegel is the substance of universality. The self-consciousness of God is the becoming for itself of this substance, the being for itself of the universal being which belongs to it on principle and defines it. But Feuerbach's "man" is not the individual, he is the genus, the universal. The self-consciousness of man is therefore, as self-consciousness of the genus, only the self-consciousness of the universal.²⁷

Through this, Henry goes on quoting Feuerbach, «the man – such is the mystery of religion – objectifies its essence»²⁸ but – and here again is a critique by Henry of the German philosopher – «The essence of man is objectification»²⁹ produced by the consciousness that knows by making representations. That is to say, Henry objects to Feuerbach not having led a true critique of religion but rather having fallen into the same system he meant to criticize, the idealistic one, according to which everything is based on a consciousness that is the source of any representation, first of all of being and of God. Therefore according to Feuerbach any essence is set by consciousness and *the anthropological essence of religion is not an exception*. The steps Henry takes towards religion and specifically towards Christianity start from here: looking for an essence of religion that is not set by consciousness but rather by what also enables *the consciousness of being* what it is (i.e., consciousness): by life itself.

²³ *Ibid.*, 12: «Ce qui est remarquable c'est que, sur la religion, le matérialisme de Feuerbach et l'idéalisme de Bauer disent la même chose, qu'un seul et même schéma [...] commande l'analyse. C'est le schéma de la conscience. La critique de la religion est idéaliste».

²⁴ *Ibid.*: «À une représentation, à un objet de la conscience posée par elle (laquelle) «détermine le statut de la religion ou, mieux, du religieux et contient en même temps le principe de sa résolution».

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 27: «La conscience au sens strict, au sens propre du terme, et la conscience de l'infini sont inséparables; une conscience limitée n'est pas une conscience, la conscience est essentiellement d'une nature universelle, infinie». Henry quotes a French translation of the work by Feuerbach *L'essence du christianisme*, 118. (henceforth: F).

²⁶ *Ibid.* (F 118): «La conscience de l'infini n'est rien d'autres que la conscience de l'infini de la conscience»; «Dans la conscience de l'infini, l'être conscient a pour objet l'infinité de sa propre essence».

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 27-28: «En quoi la conscience de soi de l'homme se distingue-t-elle de la conscience de soi de Dieu? Le Dieu de Hegel est la substance de l'universalité. La conscience de soi de Dieu est le devenir pour soi de cette substance, l'être pour soi de l'être universel qui lui appartient par principe et le définit. Mais «l'homme» de Feuerbach n'est pas l'individu, il est le genre, l'universel. La conscience de soi de l'homme n'est donc, comme conscience de soi du genre, que la conscience de soi de l'universel».

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 28 (F 347): «L'homme – tel est le mystère de la religion – objective son essence».

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 28: «L'essence de l'homme est l'objectivation».

4 Life and “its” truth

The difference between Feuerbach and Marx, according to Henry, is based on the fact that the former (Feuerbach) does not begin from the supremacy of consciousness while the latter (Marx) understands that the individual is not a determination of the *Gattung* (genus), the result of the representation of consciousness, rather he is *alive*. This makes Henry say – in a much criticized paragraph – that what really matters in Marx’s texts, and that we ignore, is «What appears in them [...] a metaphysics of the individual. Marx is one of the first Christian thinkers of the West».³⁰ Henry knows well that the *vis-à-vis* position by Marx of Christianity is complex and equivocal³¹, but he does not hesitate to explain the meaning Marx gives to Christianity, the attention to the living individual and not to the abstract species. Therefore, he ends the two volumes about Marx by writing: «Whether subjectivity forms the essence of production, or whether, in a socialist universe to come, it is withdrawn from production and restored to itself, subjectivity constitutes in any event the basis and the single theme of conceptual development. Marx’s thought places us before the profound question: What is life?».³² This is the question that characterizes, separates, and distances Marx’s atheism from that of Feuerbach: according to the latter, life has no place because the individual is placed in tension with the *Gattung* (genus) of a concept. On the contrary, for Marx any critique – either of history, capital, economy, or alienation – places the individual against the background of life, and this is the central point of all other critiques, including the critique of religion.

Life “critiques” – in the Kantian sense – religion by obliging it to discover its real *essence* which, starting from *I am the Truth*, Henry finds in the truth of Christianity, accomplishing the arc of his *œuvre*. Life in fact already appears in *The Essence of Manifestation* where Henry writes that this is «the self-experiencing of self » possible because its essence is the *affectivity of life*,³³ the ability to manifest itself through feeling oneself, the ability to reveal itself while and because one feels oneself. Life is thus the *power* of «coming into itself»,³⁴ of manifesting oneself by virtue of the «original essence of revelation»,³⁵ which is not different from the power of life to self-reveal in the experience it makes of itself. Henry writes: «Life feels, experiences herself. Not that it is something which would have, moreover, this property of feeling oneself, but this is its essence: the pure trial of oneself, the feeling of oneself».³⁶ This feature of life makes self-affectivity of life possible, that is to say it becomes real. In fact, «self-affection [of life] is not an empty or formal concept [...] it defines the phenomenological reality of life itself - a reality whose pure substantiality and whose pure phenomenality is transcendental affectivity».³⁷ Finally life is the power of growing and the «growth is the movement of life that is realized out in life in virtue of what it is – its own *subjectivity*».³⁸ Nevertheless, if life already appears in *The Essence of Manifestation* in its close link with *affectivity* which makes its feeling and its *self-affectivity* possible, then why does Henry turn towards religion and specifically towards Christianity?

Perhaps he looks to Christianity because it becomes the testing ground for the dualism of appearance which Henry talked about in Paris, but also because it succeeds where the critique by Feuerbach had failed when the latter had replaced the infinite-God of rational theology with the infinite *Gattung* (genus), as the *raison d’être* of the finite individual. In doing that, Feuerbach was not able to assume the *living individual*

³⁰ Henry, *Marx* II, 445: «C’est ce qui pensent les textes qu’il a écrits. Ce qui paraît en eux [...] c’est une métaphysique de l’individu. Marx est l’un des premiers penseurs chrétiens de l’Occident».

³¹ See *ibid.*

³² Henry, *Marx*, 306.

³³ «Affectivity is the essence of life» (Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 519) because it is «the universal form of all possible experience in general, the ontological and transcendental dimension which constitutes the foundation of the reality of everything which is» (*ibid.*, 511).

³⁴ Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, 248.

³⁵ Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 463.

³⁶ Henry, *Qu’est-ce que cela que nous appelons vie?*, 49: «La vie se sent, s’éprouve elle-même. Non qu’elle soit quelque chose qui aurait, de plus, cette propriété de se sentir soi-même, mais c’est là son essence: la pure épreuve de soi, le fait de se sentir soi-même».

³⁷ Henry, *La Barbarie*, 30-31: «L’auto-affection n’est pas un concept vide ou formel, [...] elle définit la réalité phénoménologique de la vie elle-même – une réalité dont la substantialité pure et dont la phénoménalité pure est l’affectivité transcendante».

³⁸ Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, 39.

because, according to Henry, Feuerbach's individual would live *because of* a concept (the *Gattung/genus*) which represents its essence. The essence of the living individual, all in all, would be a dead concept whose truth is *set by the thought* and not by what enables man to *be a self, an ipseity*. Under the *Gattung* (genus) the individual is regarded as the *general aspect* of the concept of the individual, thereby alienating the individual from *its own self*. In this manner, the self is generated from an abstract *truth* which is different from his concrete life.

Therefore, in order to overturn this situation one needs to think about *the truth not outside of life but in life itself*. That is why Henry begins the first book of the trilogy about Christianity, *I am the Truth*, with the topic of truth and introducing the distinction between the truth of the world and the truth of Christianity and of life which it proposes. Loyal to the dualism of appearance as it was discussed in the Parisian *Selbstdarstellung*, Henry states again the double manifestation according to the truth of the world and the truth of life. The truth of the world, the only one that the Western world has ever thought, conceives of a unique interpretation of the manifestation of phenomena, the "outside of the world", the exteriority where everything comes to light, ending in the idea that the "outside" is the phenomenality itself, the condition of the *possibility of manifesting oneself* (and not only of the manifestation as such). About this matter the philosopher underlines that «the "outside" as such is the world. We say "the truth of the world", but the expression "the truth of the world" is tautological. It is the world, it is the "outside", that is, consciousness, truth».³⁹ Life instead does not manifest itself as a phenomenon or an object of the world and, therefore, does not let itself be grasped by the light of the world: nobody sees Life but only the living being feels it in himself, experiences it. What enables the living being to acknowledging this as such? Certainly not mere consciousness as the living *lives* even when he does generate any knowledge processes nor representations. Therefore contrary to the representation that places everything in the horizon of the world, making the world its truth, Life self-reveals itself. Henry writes: «Where is a self-revelation of this sort achieved? In Life, as its essence, since Life is nothing other than that which reveals itself – not something that might have an added property of self-revealing, but the very fact of self-revealing as such. Everywhere that something like a self-revelation is produced there is Life. Everywhere there is Life, this self-revelation is produced».⁴⁰ Where therefore does this Life find its essence? It finds its essence in that unique Truth that does not distinguish between what is true and what manifests, therefore merely in the only truth in which the revelation of the self takes place *without becoming being nor object of the world*. «It is only when the truth is understood as that of the world, when it makes everything seen by placing it outside itself, that the division in the concept of Truth, the difference between the truth itself and what it shows – what it makes true – is produced».⁴¹

At this stage one understands why the meeting with Christianity, even though it occurred *in the later years of his work*, is not by chance. Henry, in fact, finds in the New Testament the fulfilment of the thesis on which he had begun to reflect upon since *The Essence of Manifestation*: as in this work such an essence was identified in the fact that the possibility of the manifestation lies in the self-revelation of the affectivity of life, as the capacity of feeling oneself – and therefore in the revelation of the self and not *of and in* a horizon different from the self (the world), with the resulting coincidence and unity of true and Truth. Likewise, in the texts at the basis of Christianity Henry finds again the Truth that does not differ from what it makes true. Henry writes:

It is the first decisive characteristic of Truth of Christianity that it no way differs from what it makes true. Within it there is no separation between the seeing and what is seen, between the light and what it illuminates. [...] What, then, is a truth that differs in no way from what is true? If truth is grasped in its phenomenological purity – phenomenality and not the phenomenon – then what is phenomenized is phenomenality itself. The phenomenization of phenomenality itself is a pure phenomenological matter, a substance whose whole essence is to appear – phenomenality in its actualization and in its pure phenomenological effectivity. What manifests itself is itself. What reveals itself is revelation itself; it is a revelation of revelation, a self-revelation in its original and immediate effulgence.⁴²

³⁹ Henry, *I am the Truth*, 15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 24-25.

And immediately after he adds: «With this idea of a pure Revelation – of a revelation whose phenomenality is the phenomenalization of phenomenality itself, of an absolute self-revelation that dispenses with whatever is other than its own phenomenological substance – we are in the presence of the essence that Christianity posits as the principle of everything. God is that pure Revelation that reveals nothing other than itself. God reveals Himself. [...] Christianity is nothing other, truly, than the awe-inspiring and meticulous theory of the givenness of God’s self-revelation shared with man». ⁴³

From the essence of manifestation to the essence of religion, the phenomenological accomplishment of Henry’s thought is fulfilled as we have already highlighted. There is one last point to make clear, concerning not only life which self-reveals itself but any single living being, every single man. This must be clarified as it shows the radical difference between the essence of Christianity by Feuerbach and the essence of Christianity by Henry, that is to say a *Gattung* (genus) *without man* versus a *Life that gives itself in the living being*.

5 Essence of religion and essence of the living beings

The Truth of Life does not manifest through the *representation* of consciousness, rather it starts from itself: this is the point where Henry’s critique of religion gets to “critique” because his is not a suggestion for a “philosophy of Christian religion” but of the *Truth of Life* announced by Christianity. However, from *The Essence of Manifestation* forward Henry clarified that no revelation could be possible without a Self that is to say without such a revelation which singularizes itself in an *ipse*. The *Henryan* essence of religion reaches this point in his comment to the evangelical statement “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”: «Insofar as the Way consists in the Truth which consists in Life, it is the elucidation of the relation established between this ego and Life that matters to us: this “I” in which Christ is said to be the Word since it is the I of the absolute Life». ⁴⁴ Christ, through this, proclaims himself as the First Living where the Truth of Life happens. But, differently from the *Gattung* (genus), which is a representation of consciousness, this Life of the First Living «is repeated in the relation of reciprocal phenomenological interiority between absolute life and man himself, taken for what he is: a living transcendental Self». ⁴⁵ And in an *entretien* with Roland Vaschalde, Henry states that: «The central theme of *I am the Truth* [is] the immanence of the Life of each living». ⁴⁶ We still have to determine *how* this happens and if religion allows, again, an understanding of this.

Now, in my opinion, not only does Christianity enable this understanding but it also offers own evidence of such. In fact, in *The Essence of Manifestation* Henry talks about the Self of the self-revelation of the affectivity of life without explaining its *genesis* which, on the other hand, will be explained in *I am the Truth*. In this work, Henry conceptualized the «Archeology of the Self» ⁴⁷ through religion—namely Christianity—and Henry thus reaches «one of the foremost intuitions to which I hold: the Generation of a fundamental Ipseity in the reciprocal immanence of Life with living»; ⁴⁸ an intuition that Christianity makes possible because it does not *represent* Life (as the consciousness represents the *Gattung/genus*) but it welcomes its *Givenness* in the First Living (Christ) and in every living being. Why then in every living being? Which conception of Christianity is used there?

The answer is a Christianity, or a religion, not of the cult but of the texts of the New Testament and of the Fathers of the Church, as I said, and most of all of the Christianity of the flesh, of the incarnation. Following the common thread of the flesh and of the body would require the recreation of the work by

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Henry, *La vérité selon le christianisme*, 133: «Dans la mesure où la Voie consiste dans la Vérité qui consiste dans la Vie, c’est l’élucidation de la relation établie entre ce Moi et la Vie qui nous importe: ce Moi en lequel le Christ se dit être le Verbe puisque c’est le Moi de la Vie absolue».

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: «Se répète dans la relation d’intériorité phénoménologique réciproque entre la Vie absolue et l’homme lui-même, pris pour ce qu’il est: un Soi transcendantal vivant».

⁴⁶ Henry, *Entretiens*, 19: «Le thème central de *C’est moi la vérité* (est) l’immanence de la Vie de chaque vivant».

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*: «Archéologie du Soi».

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: «L’une des intuitions à laquelle je tiens le plus: la Génération d’une Ipséité fondamentale dans l’immanence réciproque de la Vie au vivant».

Henry from another point of view, which is not possible here. But what is possible is ending on another topic Henry was fond of until the end of his life, that link between Life and flesh that characterizes not only the First Living but every living being. The link between Life and every living being exists namely through the flesh that Christ takes on first and that every single living being takes on. Flesh is not the visible body as an object or thing among other things: nobody sees the flesh but everyone feels it and lives personally its enjoyment, the pleasure and the pain felt through it. Henry writes that «the flesh is possible only in life, in its self-revelation, as that self-impressionality in which each of our impressions, our joys or our sufferings originally experiences itself, that the pure phenomenological matter of this pathetic self-impressionality is nothing but the flesh itself».⁴⁹

Life that lies in the living flesh finds its life in religion before religion turns into a cult or precept. Reciprocally, since the flesh is the flesh of the First Living and of every living being, life becomes the *essence of religion; such religion does not alienate man from himself, but rather gives him back to Life.*

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⁴⁹ Henry, *La vérité selon le christianisme*, 135: «Une chair n'est possible que dans la vie, dans son auto-révélation, comme cette auto-impressionnalité en laquelle chacune de nos impressions, de nos joies ou de nos souffrances s'éprouve originairement elle-même, de telle façon que la matière phénoménologique pure de cette auto-impressionnalité pathétique n'est rien autre que la chair elle-même».

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