

Jean-Luc Marion, in *God Without Being*, has given me the first effective response to Quohélet's charge of vanity with which I have struggled much of my life. I read this but two weeks ago, and already I find it challenging and transforming a long held instinctive response to the world.

As I have very briefly written previously in this blog, Marion opens with an incisive discussion in chapter 1 of the idol and the icon. He develops that theme in a remarkable way in chapter 4, "The Reverse of Vanity." I will attempt to sketch his arguments here.

Per Marion, to see the world is to see it idolatrously. To see idolatrously is to have one's gaze arrested by something in the world, to not see beyond it, to make of it something that it is not, to raise it to the status of an idol, a false god. In that gaze there is no distance, not understood as physical distance, but as phenomenological distance, or "iconic distance"***; the observer identifies with the observed in the idolatrous gaze, and in that identification the distance between the two is closed.

(*** Thanks to Brett Saunders, a graduate student at the University of Dallas, for this comment. After a brief conversation with him recently I think that I need to reconsider Marion's concept of distance.)

When finally disillusioned and disappointed by the world, the idolatrous gaze becomes the gaze of boredom, and in the gaze of boredom a distance from the world opens; from that distance the world suddenly appears vain, in which the observer is detached from the observed; that detachment opens distance from the observed for the observer. The world which idolatrously appears worthy of hope, in the gaze of boredom becomes as a mist or vapor, which though appearing substantive, is easily dispersed, vanishing in a light breath or wind.

Boredom opens distance, and in that distance the world is seen in vanity. To see with the gaze of boredom is to see the world from the distance from which God sees it, but not as God sees it. To see the world as vain is to see it accurately; many times in the Bible our lives are described as a mist that disperses, or as grass that withers and dies. And in that assessment we can go no further. We, like Quohélet, are immured in the vision of vanity.

God's bridge closing that distance is love. He sees the world as vanity, a mist, a vapor, but he loves, and that love bridges the distance opened in understanding the world as vain.

It is there that I find myself provoked deep within by my own cynical, detached, bored response. I have long been quite cynical politically. I think people tend to place a hope in democracy that is idolatrous. Observing the Democratic national convention this week, where I find myself detached and evaluating the rhetoric as vanity, I find myself challenged by Marion's analysis that, though God may see the vanity of unredeemed human self-actualization, in response he loves and bridges the gap.

In bridging the distance of vanity, he does not negate vanity, for the world is vain; however, he does offer his hope in the presence of his son, God become flesh, who finally closed the gap by becoming as we are that we might become as he is. We who now follow him are to close the gap in the same way. Without negating or denying vanity, we close that distance in love to touch the lives of those around us that either still see idolatrously or in boredom, in detachment, see vanity.

From Marion's analysis I finally understand God's love as the response to my all too common cynical detachment from the world, held from my teenage years when the opening of Ecclesiastes, "Vanity of vanity - all is vanity," accurately summed the confusion and vanity I felt when observing the world in the late 60s, a world into which I did not know where or how to fit. Mine has since been the gaze of boredom, of detachment, of iconoclasm (or perhaps idoloclasm.) It is not that I have not had times of deep hope and engagement, but every one of those times has proven vain, empty, only reinforcing my cynical detachment.

God changes us to love as he loves, to bridge the gap of vanity to those that still see either idolatrously or in boredom. I understand better why we visit the prisoners we do. I visit one with a life sentence and one with a death sentence. As a former prison guard expressed it, they didn't get there by singing too loud in Sunday School. These are people that most see from the distance that Marion describes, yet the love of God closes the gap of vanity to touch them where they are.

It is love bridging the distance of the Samaritan from the one lying helpless in the road. It is the love of God imparted to us by the Spirit of God that will transform us to bridge the gap between us and those in dire peril in this world. It is love that will actualize the radical equality of which I wrote last week. Without the Holy Spirit changing us to love as God loves we have no hope of effecting that.

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