
The ethics of belief and philosophy of faith—both religious and otherwise—have not been substantially pursued in continental philosophy with the main exception of Gabriel Marcel, whose own treatments could perhaps be more rigorous. However, Jean-Luc Marion’s newest book in English translation, Believing in Order to See, a collection of twelve essays, helps to remedy that lack by exploring faith and in particular its relation to reason from a continental perspective. Though familiarity with the history of philosophy, especially Kant and Descartes, is helpful for the reader, this book remains broadly accessible.

Marion begins with a distinction that consists in two opposed models of faith. The first, a model frequent in contemporary discourse, suggests that “faith takes the place of reason” when reason is insufficient, so that faith is an assumption that something is true, without any actual basis (xiii). In this model, there is also the alternate possibility that faith is derivative from reason, since “from a great light in the intellect there follows a great propensity in faith. Thus faith and reason either grow in inverse proportion or in direct proportion, but always starting from reason” (xiii). Faith either begins when reason leaves off but something must be said, a faith of the gaps, or when humans have attained sufficient knowledge that on the very basis of such knowledge, they believe what has been comprehended, so that faith is an inferior substitute to reason. However, there is a different, Augustinian model of faith, in which a person believes so that she may understand (xiii). Here, what “matters is not seeing, that is to say knowing based on rational evidence in the…light of reason in order then better to believe…but, on the contrary, believing in order to see and to conceive” (xiii). Marion argues that belief precedes knowledge, for belief constitutes the “intentional aim,” the originary openness to something coming into the person from outside so that it can become known (xiii). By setting forth these two models, Marion makes explicit that he will be operating within an Augustinian framework in Believing in Order to See.

Within this context, faith is related to what are not items of scientific knowledge; for reason is referred to “objects as we produce them—at a distance” (7). What humans know by rational processes is what is most distant. That is, by reason, the mind seeks to “encompass the given within the grasp of the concept so as to transform it into an object” (42). But Marion points out that since “knowing the other requires treating him or her as another self…precisely in order to approach others in this manner, I must forgo transforming them into an object” (42). In approaching the other, one approaches “what is closest,” namely “death and birth,” “hatred and love, communion and division” of which “the common rationality of objects knows nothing” (8). These phenomena of life itself, what make up the daily existence of all humans, are characteristic of being with other humans, with interpersonal relationships, that is, with “alterity. For love alone achieves knowledge of the other, because it supremely believes in the other” (12). Belief, faith, is that by which the other is known; Marion notices that the most significant aspects of life are beyond the scope of reason, instead being under the purview of faith. Again referencing Augustine, Marion states “faith in things one does not see nonetheless allows no less for knowledge of them in the strictest sense because it refers to things we know perfectly
well, even though these cannot but remain invisible,” such as “a friend’s friendship, kindness, will, and, above all, love” (125).

Moreover, faith also is how the saturated phenomenon is accessed, which refers to “that which the manifest given surpasses—not only what a human gaze can bear without being blinded…but what the world in its essential finitude can receive and contain” (99). The saturated phenomenon is what cannot be comprehended by the mind. In particular, “[f]aith is the mode of knowledge suitable for the saturated phenomenon of the mode of Revelation” (113). For the center of Revelation for Marion is Christ, through whom God shows himself to the world (97).

If even the human other is beyond what can be produced by the constituting ego, then the divine other must be even more so (109). Marion’s fundamental argument concerning faith is that there are certain features of experience that are only accessible by belief, which is not some unfounded leap; rather, the phenomena of religion, in particular the Christian religion, are accessible through the same faith that is employed to know other humans. Faith allows that which is greater than any human or worldly being to enter into the person in its manifest fullness.

Believing in Order to See does a fine task of showing why faith and reason should not be construed as mutually opposed; it reveals how faith is a fundamental characteristic of life, so that faith is not merely some negative quality that is had in the lack of knowledge. Marion has demonstrated that faith itself is mode of knowledge, an equally rational partner to logic itself, as it follows Pascal’s logic of the heart, the way of love. The main shortcoming of Marion’s book is possibly its lack of a deep phenomenological analysis of faith; though it in general shows how faith is a part of life, it does not explore the ramifications of what is perhaps its most important observation. A thoroughgoing, rigorous explication of the features of faith itself, as it is actually experienced on a daily basis, would have been a good addition to this work. But, despite this absence, Believing in Order to See still stands as a major step forward in the project of showing that faith—both religious and otherwise—is a normal, healthy part of life that discloses the most tender, heartfelt dimensions of experience, and in so doing reveals that belief is just as grounded in the truth of reality as reason itself.

Reviewed by Zachary Willcutt
Boston College