CHAPTER 3

WINDOWS OPEN AND SHUT: ON ICONS AND IDOLS

3.1 The Problem

So far, I have investigated the way in which liberation theology has treated the poor and the ways it has worked with the concepts of idolatry and ideology. The time has now come to problematise this discussion. In order to do this, I will need to turn aside for a while from the world of Latin America and provide some tools for engaging with liberation theology's appropriation of the poor. We saw in the first chapter that the poor are understood as the chosen ones of God, even those in whom God chooses to reveal himself to us today. They have, in other words, a sacramental force. Another way of putting this is to say that they are regarded by liberation theology as iconic. On the other hand, anything which encloses rather than discloses God, as we saw in the previous chapter, is regarded as idolatrous. In order to question whether liberation theology does not run the risk of making of the poor a conceptual idol, (principally in terms of what in the previous chapter I termed Idolatry 1), it will be necessary to ask about the nature of icons and idols.

I start with what might be termed a theological case study, turning to the Iconoclast controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries. Although at first sight somewhat remote from the topic at hand, this will afford me an insight into how the church sought to deal with the question of representation and transcendence, as well as highlighting the problematic power relationships which weaken attempts to allow the iconic to be truly iconic. The discussion will show us how the Church has sought to allow the material to function as revelatory – iconic – of the transcendent, and at the same time to question whether the assumption and use of the power to define does not lead to totality, and thus in fact to idolatry.

Although there is no direct link between the Iconoclast controversy and the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, it is partly his concerns as a Jewish thinker that led him to postulate the link between idolatry and totality, where all is reduced to identity. In my investigation of Levinas, I will be asking first what it means to speak of the other as other. What does the encounter with the other presuppose and bring? I will also ask what in Levinas enables the political to have a continued role, and will see to what

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2 I stress that what is under discussion here is to be couched in terms of potentiality. It seems that there is a genuine risk of this idolisation taking place, so, if it does not, the question as to why remains vitally important.

3 See Chapter 2.1.1. In the context of my discussion in this work, Idolatry 1 means that the transcendence, the irreducible alterity of the poor, is reduced to something controllable and material.
extent this has been noted by liberation theology, especially by Enrique Dussel in his assumption of Levinas. Finally, I turn to Jean-Luc Marion. Marion was heavily influenced by Levinas, and, despite differences in starting points between the two, develops some of his ideas. Of particular importance for me is his repeated return to the notion of conceptual idolatry and iconicity, which will finally give me a clear language to speak about the problem which I see liberation theology facing. Beyond that, Marion will also provide a way for seeing what the “otherness” of the theologian to the other poor might consist in. The underlying hypothesis of this chapter is that liberation theology has sought to present the poor as iconic, so that an option for the poor, which necessarily includes an encounter with the poor, is at its most profound level an option for and privileged moment of encounter with God. On the other hand, the very force of this argument, and the consequent emphasis on the poor as the starting point and chief locus of theological reflection and activity, can lead to the poor being forced to become idols. For if the gaze is focussed entirely on the poor, it is the poor themselves who will end up reflecting the theologian’s own idea of God or own idea of self. The poor then essentially take the place of God for the theologian. This is not simply a problem for the theologian, however, but perhaps more disastrously for the poor themselves, who are denied the possibility of liberation because they need to be kept captive in order for the “God” of the theologian to remain in place. It is also a theological problem, since “God” is excluded from theology.

3.2 The Iconoclast Controversy

3.2.1 Introduction

The iconoclast controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries may at first sight appear to be a somewhat obscure starting point for a discussion of the status of the poor in liberation theology. It can seem of merely passing historical interest but with no real import for today’s world and church. This would be, however, to disregard two factors. One is that the struggle

4 Cf. Chapter 1.1.5
5 I repeat that this is pointing to a danger which may only be hypothetical, but which is, in my view, a serious theoretical possibility.
6 I am referring here to Marion, as will become clear in the subsequent discussion.
7 This will be the force of a critique of liberation theology made by Clodovis Boff, which I treat at the end of the next chapter. Cf., Clodovis Boff, “Teologia da Libertação e volta ao fundamento”, REB 67/268 (2007), pp.1001-1022.
8 Again the reference is to Marion, who uses “God” at times to talk of concepts of God, as opposed to God, who transcends all attempts at conceptual reduction. Cf. below, p.188
9 Cf., for example, the opening paragraph of the Preface in Daniel Sahas, Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1986, p.ix
between the iconophiles, or iconodoules, and the iconoclasts is a permanent one within and between Christian traditions. The second, and for my purposes more important, factor concerns the nature of the iconic, and the question of who determines what is iconic and what is idolatrous. This was the first and only time that the Church in Council considered the nature of the iconic and idolatrous. But could it do so non-ideologically? The underlying challenge here is to determine whether, and if so how, the material can open the way to the transcendent, or in terms of the typology of idolatry introduced in the previous chapter, how can we avoid Idolatry 1? In responding to this, Levinas and Marion will help us to ask whether, rather, the language of orthodoxy, of right opinions, is not a form of totality, which in turn will lead to idolatry.

In our discussion of icons in this section I refer in the first place to images. The iconoclasts, and those of like mind who came after them, objected to these, or rather to the possibility of representing Christ and the saints in image form. Neither the Iconoclasts of the eighth and ninth centuries nor the Reformers were of the opinion that nothing could be iconic – as we shall see later, for the former the Eucharist was the one true icon of Christ, whilst for the latter arguably the Scriptures held the same position. Thus, the question at stake is precisely that which interests us. What, if anything, can be an icon, and what can ensure that it remains iconic and does not descend into being an idol? Or, to put it in other words,

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10 Both terms are used by different authors. In general, I use “iconophile” here.
11 For an interesting discussion of the potential and problems of icons from an Evangelical perspective, see David Hilborn, “An Evangelical Perspective on Orthodox Liturgy”, in Ian Randall (ed.), Baptists and the Orthodox Church: On the Way to Understanding, Prague, IBTS, 2003, pp.64-80, here 72-76.
12 There are numerous works on the technical aspects of iconography. My approach here is not, however, that of an art historian. Nevertheless, reference can be made to the following, Kurt Weitzmann, The Icon: Holy Images – Sixth to Fourteenth Century, New York: George Braziller, 1978. Also on the technique of Icon painting, see Solrunn Nes, The Mystical Language of Icons, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005, pp. 8-11
13 Also similar is the political dimension. We shall see this later in our discussion of the Iconoclast movement, but for the political dimension in the Reformation, see Phyllis Mack Crew, Calvinist Preaching and Iconoclasm in the Netherlands 1544-1569, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978, who argues that political considerations, namely the desire for a stable political system, played an important part in the destruction of statues in the Netherlands, especially in 1566. See also, on England, Dan Beaver, “Parish Communities, Civil War, and Religious Conflict in England”; in R. Po-chia Hsia (ed.), A Companion to the Reformation World, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp.311-331, here 314-317.
14 The iconoclasts were not as such opposed to images, but they were opposed to representation of the human form. See, for example, Elizabeth Zelensky and Lela Gilbert, Windows to Heaven: Introducing Icons to Protestants and Catholics, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Brazos Press, 2005
15 On the Reformation and the appeal to scripture, see Carlos M. N. Eire, War Against Idols. The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986. On Calvin, especially, see 195-233, showing Calvin’s recourse to scripture, and of particular interest his appeal to the axiom finitum non est capax infiniti (the finite is not capable of containing the infinite), which is at the heart of our discussion here.
if the icon is a window into heaven or a window to the kingdom,\textsuperscript{16} how are we to see to it that that window remains open and is not shut? The aim of this discussion is to see whether what is said about icons as images is valid for the way in which liberation theologians have used the poor in an iconic fashion.

3.2.2 The Pre-History of the Iconoclast Controversy

I begin with a brief historical survey of the beginnings of the Iconoclast controversy, and then move on to consider some of the main theological questions which arose, especially as these were played out in the events leading up to and including the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicea, which took place in 787. Although this failed to bring a permanent end to the controversy,\textsuperscript{17} even within Byzantium, nevertheless it contains both the charges against the use of icons and the responses to them, and as such is a useful focal point for the discussion.

As the controversy is not well-known in Western Christianity, of which Latin American Christianity is undoubtedly a part, it is necessary to give a short historical overview, in order to provide some context for the discussion. The pre-history, going back to the early church, seems to have demonstrated a gradual move towards the acceptance of the use of images for the purposes of devotion.\textsuperscript{18} At any rate, by the sixth century the use of icons seems to have been fairly widespread. One of the features which is likely to have led to their acceptance and use was their ability to serve as rallying points. Rallying points,\textsuperscript{19} however, run the risk of becoming idols.

\textsuperscript{16} This is the title of a book by Michel Quenot, The Icon - Window on the Kingdom, Cresswood, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996. See too the title of the book by Zelensky and Gilbert noted above. See also Andreas Andreopoulos, Art as Theology: From the Postmodern to the Medieval, London, Equinox, 2006, p.23

\textsuperscript{17} It is generally held to have ended in 842 or 843. The First Sunday of Lent is still celebrated by Orthodox Christians as the Feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, marking the day in 842 (February 19th) when icons were carried in procession to be returned to the Cathedral of Hagia Sofia in Constantinople. However, as Leonid Ouspensky, Theology of the Icon (2 volumes), (trans. Anthony Gythiel), Cresswood, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992, p.208, notes, the repercussions of the controversy continued to be felt for at least another half-century after 843

\textsuperscript{18} The earliest evidence suggests that there was a rejection of images of Christ, though the iconic status of the fish and later the cross had already been established. This rejection can be seen in Eusebius' refusal to find a portrait of Christ for Constantine's daughter, or the prescription of hanging images on church walls by the Council of Elvira in 306. As one of the examples which would be appropriated by the iconophiles was that of the distinction between the icon of the emperor and the actual emperor, which did not lead to their being two emperors, it is possible that the end of the Emperor-cult made it more possible for Christians to appropriate this form of veneration for their own purposes. On the pre-history, see Hans Belting, Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art, (trans. Edmund Jephcott), Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994 (original German, 1990), pp. 144-146. Andreopoulos, Art as Theology, pp.10-19 argues for a Hellenist artistic base and a Jewish metaphysical one at the heart of the development of icons,

\textsuperscript{19} Symbols, as much as concepts, are capable of being iconic or idolatrous, and it is often symbols around which people rally.
The icon was not itself directly part of an ideology, at least not necessarily. Nevertheless, like anything else, it could be used to further a particular ideological aim. These aims may have been to do with the importance of a particular theme or city or person, but in stressing the importance of the one, they ran the risk of denigrating the importance of the other, and thus become exclusive and enclosed systems. In this sense, the icon is a symbol of totality.

3.2.3 The First Phase of the Iconoclast Controversy

The struggle between the iconophiles and iconoclasts began in the reign of the Emperor Leo III (717-741). Although a number of causes have been mooted for the outbreak of the crisis, historians seem now generally to agree that the initial impulse came from Leo’s own beliefs. Leo had come to the throne at a time when the Byzantine Empire faced its first serious threat from the Arab world. However, the extent of opposition to images in early Islam is a question of some debate, and in itself does not seem to have led directly to the formation of Leo’s beliefs. Nevertheless, the Arab invasion would appear to have played some role. For one thing, much of the army seems to have been behind Leo in his iconoclastic tendencies, and Leo’s military successes no doubt helped gain that support. More importantly, perhaps, the initial setbacks led people to seek a reason for God’s abandonment, and icons were settled on as one potential reason.

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20 See the discussion on ideology in Chapter 2. In this context, we are perhaps dealing mostly with Ideology 1, where the illusory is thought to be real. Clearly what is important here is the interpretation of the icon, rather than the icon itself. Note also that ideology in this sense is closely linked to the Levinasian notion of totality as will be seen below. On the “ideology” of the Iconoclast controversy, see David Olster, “Ideological Transformation and the Evolution of Imperial Presentation in the Wake of Islam’s Victory”, in Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson, David Thomas (eds.), The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam, Leiden / Boston, Brill, 2006, pp.45-71, especially pp.45-46

21 For example, the way in which statues or banners with images of patron saints were often used by countries or towns as they went to war in the Middle Ages. Shakespeare’s allusion to this in Henry V (Act 3, Scene 1) “Cry ‘God for Harry, England and Saint George’” is both an example and indication of the prevalence of this idea.

22 The administrative regions of the Byzantine empire

23 A good example of this is the way in which the Nazi use of the swastika turned what was originally a Hindu symbol of well-being into something which symbolised the worst form of totality.

24 See on Leo, Sahas, Icon and Logos, pp.24-30


26 The Qur’an has nothing to say on the subject, and it is only in the mid-eighth century that we have evidence of teaching against representative art in Islam. See on this Sahas, Icon and Logos, pp.18-21

27 Whether this reflects encounters with iconoclasts, then in the ascendency in Byzantium, or clashes with exiled iconophiles is not clear. It may, however, indicate a certain Zeitgeist. See on this K.A.C. Cresswell, and O. Graber, works cited in Peter Brown, “A Dark Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy”, in Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982, pp. 251-301, here p.252, note 6. See also the references to the Iconoclast movement in Armenia, untouched by Islamic invasion, p. 253, and note 9.
After all, a reading of the Scriptures could easily lead people to assume that icons were images of the type expressly forbidden by the Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4-5, see also Deut 4:15-19 and 5:8-9). Peter Brown in his article on the iconoclast controversy adduces several other reasons, which are perhaps related more to an Old Testament view of the world. For Brown, the icons reflect the importance of the holy man in Late Antiquity, and the debate is essentially one about the nature or role of the holy in Byzantine society. The icon, especially the icon of the saint, is thus to be understood as the continuation of the presence of the holy man who had proved his holiness by miracles and by acting as a focal point for people of a given place and a mediating point between God and them. The holiness of the other is allowed to continue to command. One of the questions which is at stake here is that of mediation. Directly, there is only one mediator between God and humankind, namely, Jesus. This is not something that any Christian denomination would want to deny, and certainly not the Orthodox. The very notion of theosis, so central to Orthodox worship, spirituality and theology, makes it clear that Christ is the unique mediator for humankind before the Father. Nevertheless, it is understood that, for example, the saints, and especially Mary, intercede for us, and in this sense they are a medium of access to God. The difference is perhaps that the communication is one-way. A mediator can secure the coming together of two opposite parties, whilst the intercessor can only present requests to a superior. The mediating power of the icon can be best understood in this latter sense, though it is also understood in Orthodoxy as

27 Brown, “A Dark Age Crisis”

28 I do not wish here to enter into a discussion about the differences between Hebrew and Greek thought, but simply to refer to the religious faith of Israel as it existed to a large extent in the pre-Exilic period, and in which henotheism was at least as powerful a feature as monotheism, as I noted in Chapter 2. This localised power of God, who could thus, theoretically (and indeed in some cultures actually) be replaced by the god or gods of an invading power who proved stronger, is demonstrated in many of the strictures of the early prophets such as Amos, as well as in the condemnation of the many kings who did not destroy the high places.


30 So, Brown remarks, the rejection of icons in Islam was not really to do with any problems about representation, but rather because there can be no mediator between God and humanity, “A Dark Age Crisis”, p.270.

31 See, for example, Zelensky and Gilbert, Windows into Heaven, p.29

a medium which God uses to communicate himself to humanity, or through which God allows humans to encounter the transcendent. The icon is truly sacramental, for its presence is also always an absence. To gaze on the icon is to have one's gaze taken beyond the icon to what is not there.

The iconoclasts of eighth and ninth century Byzantium never sought to deny any such mediating powers. They did, however, seek to limit the number and nature of these iconic presences to three: the Eucharist, the church building, and the sign of the cross. At least the first two of these were iconic because consecrated by an ordained priest, a feature which is interesting if for nothing else in that it ties in with the general centralising impulse of the iconoclasts. If at first blush this is an attempt to safeguard the iconic, and to ensure that it is not allowed to descend into idolatry, in the long run it seems unable to prevent precisely that happening. Controlling the image affords power to the controller, and the icon becomes a weapon of power, and like all such weapons it can be used for good or ill. Although by and large the initial iconoclast persecutions of the iconophiles seem to have been somewhat half-hearted, there is no doubt that they took place and led to death in some cases.

Though the precise antecedents of Leo’s iconoclastic tendencies remain indeterminable, he seems to have begun speaking about the issue first in around 726. The first act was probably the removal of the icon of Christ which stood above the main gateway to the imperial residence. The soldier who carried out this instruction was lynched and there was rioting.

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33 As Andreopoulos, Art as Theology, notes, in close agreement with Marion’s description of the conceptual icon, discussed below, “the icon is not only an object to look at, it is also an opening from which the believer himself is looked at; the icon is not only a window on another world, but can be said to be a window from another world as well, and the eyes of Christ and the saints are reminding the believer that he is always subject to the gaze of God”. (p.26)

34 Zelensky and Gilbert, Windows into Heaven, p.22. “An icon is an instrument through which the knowledge of God, in his mysterious human incarnation, becomes accessible to humankind”. Again I already want to draw attention to the relationship which will be found with Marion. The icon directs its gaze at us, rather than we containing the idol within our gaze.

35 Brown, “A Dark Age Crisis”, p.258. Brown suggests that all three were granted iconic status for this reason, so presumably the sign of the cross referred to here is the image of the cross hung in the church rather than the blessing of self performed by the ordinary Christian. Certainly this gesture, at least in tracing a cross on the forehead, has a very ancient history, being referred to, for example, by Tertullian, (De cor. Mil., iii), or Cyril of Jerusalem in the “Catecheses” (xiii, 36) The connection with ordination may also be important, especially given the attempts by various emperors to claim sacerdotal status. See Olster, “Transformation...”, pp.57-61 and on Leo III, p.70

36 See, for example, Giakalis, Images of God, p.3 and Olster, “Transformation...”, pp.46-47

37 Giakalis, Images of the Divine, which is resolutely in favour of the iconodoules, as may be expected from a Greek Orthodox theologian, refers to persecution of the monks and some martyrs, but does not record the actual number who died. It does not seem to have been large.

38 Belting, Likeness and Presence, p. 147 and Giakalis, Images of God, p.7

39 According to Gilbert Dagron, Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003 (trans. Jean Birrell, orig. 1996), p.160, note 7, the officer was killed by
in the streets. However, this seems merely to have encouraged Leo who called a council on 17th January 730. Here he laid down an edict for the Patriarch Germanus to sign. Germanus, however, refused to do so and was deposed. His successor, Anastasius, complied with the Emperor’s wishes and signed the document, which led to the destruction of icons, or at least their removal from places of visibility.

3.2.4 Constantine V and the deepening of the Iconoclast controversy

Although there is no doubt that Leo was fully committed to the removal of icons, it was only under his son and successor Constantine V that the full force of iconoclasm was felt in the Byzantine Empire, or perhaps more accurately in certain parts of it. Constantine seems to have been a complicated character, capable of great cruelty and brutality in his persecution, yet also a genuinely intelligent theological thinker. The charge that history is always written by the winners is very noticeable in church history, so perhaps we need to adopt some degree of scepticism towards some of the accusations made against Constantine. Nevertheless the broad outlines seem reasonably documented.

Two points are of interest here, highlighted by Nick Trakakis in a short article, “What Was the Iconoclast Controversy About?” First he makes the important theological observation that “[a]s in most religious controversies in Byzantium, one of the central issues in the debate over icons was the salvation of humanity”. Essentially the question is whether icons can aid Christians in recognising the truth of salvation in Christ. Do they point beyond themselves to allow a glimpse of the reality of Christ’s

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40 Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980, pp.265-66, notes that there is evidence “that some mosaics and paintings in the patriarchal palace of Constantinople, the very nerve centre of Iconoclasm, were removed as late as 768”, so presumably compliance with the decrees was not total and immediate in all quarters.

41 For a brief word on Constantine, see Sahas, *Icon and Logos*, pp.30-35

42 So, for example, Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth. Eastern Europe 500 – 1453*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971, p. 174, points out that although there was persecution at home, Constantine seemed relatively happy to allow the monks to move away, either to the further reaches of the Empire or into exile, something which in fact gave renewed impulse to the missionary endeavour of the Eastern church.


44 Giakalis, *Images*, p.8


47 Ibid., section 1. Salvation
salvific action, or do they so draw attention to themselves that this is fatally obscured? Icons, in the Orthodox tradition, are not understood as art, by extension anything that seeks to be iconic is not limited to a mere representation or substitution, but serves as an entrance into another world, namely the transcendent.

This is also Brown’s argument in his essay on the iconoclast controversy, which builds on his work on the place of the holy man in late antiquity. The point of *ho hagios*, the holy man, often a monk, is to assure access to God. For all the theological reservations that may be held over such a position, it reflects the actual religious beliefs and practices of Christians in late antiquity, and especially in the early Byzantine world. The mediating power of the holy man is then reflected in the icon, which in some sense stands in for the monk or other holy person when they are not present, and, of course, after their death. In this we can see the power of the holy man, and thus icon, to unite people. Brown observes that “the icon overcame the great loneliness of men and women in an urban setting.” In appropriating and placing trust in an icon people could both find symbols of hope and the prospect of a better future, and at the same time find a like-minded group with whom they could hope to escape the burden of loneliness.

### 3.2.5 The Council of Hierieia

In 754 Constantine summoned a council at Hierieia, sometimes referred to as the Headless Council, owing to the absence of the Pope and the Eastern Patriarchs, and indeed the Patriarch of Constantinople, as that position had been vacant since the death of the previous patriarch in 753. Nevertheless, there were 338 bishops present when the council gathered on 10th Feb and it lasted for almost six months, concluding on 8th August, with the...
Definition of the Council being proclaimed on 27th August.\textsuperscript{52} The main thrust of the condemnation of icons is that, in representing Christ, the iconographers are guilty simultaneously of two heresies. The painter, the Council states “in two ways, with the circumscription [of the uncircumscribable] and the confusion [of the two natures] … has blasphemed the Godhead.”\textsuperscript{53} If there are two natures in Christ, then only the human nature can be represented, since God cannot be pictured, but in that case either the divinity is denied, or the two natures, against Chalcedon, are intermingled.\textsuperscript{54}

As to the saints, where this critique clearly cannot apply, the Council condemns this as a sort of pagan recidivism, where people try to bring the holy back to life by painting images of them, whereas in fact their goodness ensures that they live for ever with God in heaven.\textsuperscript{55} The only “icon” of Christ which the Council is prepared to accept is that of the Eucharist, in which the bread and wine are indeed Christ, for God consented that this [the bread of the Eucharist] become a holy body – as a true icon of the natural flesh – consecrated by the descent of the holy Spirit and through the mediation of the priest who makes the offer (anaphora) in order that the bread be transferred from the state of being common to that of being holy.\textsuperscript{56}

Otherwise, all forms of representation are anathematised.

I will look shortly at the response to these condemnations in the Council of Nicaea, but here it is worth noting that, as Trakakis puts it, “both groups involved in the dispute were ultimately concerned with power (in its various guises – political, spiritual, military, etc)”.\textsuperscript{57} Trakakis analyses this in terms of caesaropapism and monachomachy, which, at least in this instance, are closely related terms. The rule of the Emperor, in order to include control of the Church, clearly necessitated control of the monasteries. There is at work here a two-way process. On the one hand, the power of the Emperor over the church was, if not dependent on, at least bolstered by his ability to intervene decisively in matters of faith. On the other hand, this very ability, or at least the claiming of it, gave credibility to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{52} See Giakalis, \textit{Images of the Divine}, p.9
  \item \textsuperscript{53} The text of the Council is found only in references to it, for the sake of refutation, at the Second Council of Nicaea. This translation is taken from Sahas, \textit{Icon and Logos}, p.83
  \item \textsuperscript{54} The rather grudging reference to the two natures, and the willingness to separate them remind us, as Andreopoulos, \textit{Art as Theology}, notes “that the iconoclastic arguments echo strongly the arguments of the Monophysites”. (p.33). Monophysitism is really an example of what in the previous chapter we called Idolatry 1, since it is fundamentally reductionist. In this sense, as one of the leading Western commentators on the controversy has remarked, the Second Council of Nicaea is really the final Christological council: Christoph Schönborn, \textit{God’s Human Face: The Christ-Icon}, (trans. Lothar Kraus), San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1994, p.137
  \item \textsuperscript{55} Sahas, \textit{Icon and Logos}, p.93
  \item \textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p.105
  \item \textsuperscript{57} N. Trakakis, “What was the Iconoclast Controversy about?”, section 2.
\end{itemize}
the Emperor’s assumption of power over the church.\textsuperscript{58} Hence, the attacks which were launched on the monasteries, who were the other claimants to be guardians of Orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{59}

What is at stake here is much more than whether it is licit to portray Christ or the saints in pictorial form. The conflict is to do with where power resides. Iconoclasm became an attempt to put ultimate power in the hands of the Emperor and the State. Such power is in practice always ideologically informed, and totalising. As will be seen, one may argue that the iconophile position is no less ideological. It was, after all, the Empress Irene who called the Council of Nicaea to affirm the Iconophile stance. As Belting notes, “the icon furthered the unifying discipline of a faction”,\textsuperscript{60} and perhaps even more than any religious sense, it held a further political meaning.\textsuperscript{61} So, Belting continues

[...] the power of proprietors of local images and the impotence of the emperors, who saw themselves degraded to vicars of divine images, were further problems in the outbreak of iconoclasm The collapse of the big cities … demanded a strong central authority that, if need be, would put the unity of the church above all potentially divisive symbols such as icons.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{58} An important related issue here is to do with who has the power to decide what constitutes a means of salvation. Olster notes that the Arab invasions led to “an institutional transformation of the imperial office that enhanced its sacerdotal claims – both ritual and doctrinal…”, Olster, “Transformation…”, p.47. This mediation of salvation is more directly influential in the lives of most people than the actual fact of salvation. The latter is a matter of faith and its final assurance is an eschatological reality. The former, on the other hand, is much more experiential and touches people in their daily lives. Put simply, one could say that it is a question of whether a particular activity or devotion is perceived by the believer as bringing him or her closer to God, and affording a greater sense of God’s salvific presence. This goes back to Brown’s claim, mentioned above, that the crisis in the veneration of icons was caused by their apparent inability to mediate salvation, especially in its present dimension, as effectively as they once had.

\textsuperscript{59} It would be going beyond the evidence to suggest that the Iconoclast controversy was instigated by the Emperors to gain control of the monasteries. Alexander Schmemann, not someone likely to be overly kind to Iconoclast Emperors, notes “the dispute over icons first arose in the Church itself and … only later did the state authority interfere in it in a peremptory way. [Current research] also reveals that there were sufficient grounds for such a dispute”. Alexander Schmemann, “Byzantium, Iconoclasm and the Monks”, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly, Vol.3, No. 3, Fall 1959, pp.18-34, accessed at www.schmemann.org/byhim/byzantiumiconoclasm.html on 6/2/06. However, Schmemann is clear that the question of power was crucial. He writes: “According to one ‘logic’ – that of the Church – the state was called upon to be the mainstay and earthly “receptacle” of the Church and therefore was to submit to ecclesiastical values, even if these were opposed to the state’s interests; according to the second “logic” – the theocratic one – Christianity itself was always in the final analysis interpreted as a state cult, as the religious support of the Empire. In the first “logic” monasticism was a symbol of the extranatural quality of the Church, of the inner freedom of the Christianity and the Christian personality from the all-absorbing “utilitarianism” of the state; in the second it could not but sooner or later prove useless and therefore also harmful to the state.” \textit{Ibid}. On this, see also Olster, “Transformation…”, 49ff.

\textsuperscript{60} Belting, \textit{Likeness and Presence}, p. 147

\textsuperscript{61} Further evidence of this is offered in Koutrakou, “Use and Abuse…” She refers to descriptions of Iconoclasm as an “imperial heresy”, (p.77) and shows how the use of language about the \textit{Theotokos} often had a political undercurrent. This is also the thrust of Olster, “Transformation…”, already referred to above.

\textsuperscript{62} Belting, \textit{Likeness and Presence}, p. 147
A similar point is brought out by Timothy Gregory in discussing the role of icons, when he refers to “ikons [sic] as localised manifestations of the divine”.

The key word here is “localised”, which can be understood in an iconic fashion, as rooting the transcendent in the immanent without seeking to reduce it to this particular time or place. However, the local can become ideological, when “here” is the place where the divine resides and nowhere else, when the local, the immanent, the particular, becomes the prison of the transcendent. This discussion is frequently found in the Old Testament, where the critique of the kings for not destroying the high places is linked to the stress on the uniqueness of the Jerusalem temple as the site of the presence-absence of Yahweh. Be that as it may, the icons remained exactly that, images which represented - but also in the literal sense of making present again - Christ and the Theotokos and the saints. Any mediation which threatens to become in any way immediate, unmediated, remains problematic for those in power. Totality is always more controllable than infinity.

3.2.6 The Second Council of Nicaea
On his death in 775 Constantine was succeeded by his son Leo IV, who, though in the Iconoclast camp, showed less zeal and interest than his father in pursuing the more open persecution of monks. When Leo died in 780, his son Constantine VI was only ten, so Leo’s wife, Irene, assumed the regency of the Empire. Irene seems to have been something of a mulier formidabilis, the only Byzantine woman to take the masculine title of Basileus, and not averse to treating her own family harshly if it served her interests. But she was also strongly committed to the restoration of icon worship, and to this end she first called a council in Constantinople in 786. This was interrupted by a mob of soldiers loyal to the memory of Constantine V and Leo IV, and thus finally a Council was summoned to meet in Nicaea, beginning there in the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia on 23rd

63 Gregory, A History of Byzantium, p. 189
64 Giakalis, Images of the Divine, p. 12, is of the view that Leo “abandoned his father’s view that the destruction of monasticism was a necessary precondition for the victory of iconoclasm”.
65 Gregory, History of Byzantium, p. 197
66 She was even responsible for the blinding of her son, Constantine VI, whose regent she ostensibly was. As a result of the blinding he died and she was able to resume sole rule of the Empire.
The Council’s eight sessions (the final one was held in the Magnaura Palace in Constantinople) lasted until 13th October of the same year. It began with judgement being passed on those bishops who were suspected of harbouring Iconoclast tendencies. All of them seem, however, to have recanted or provided evidence that made them acceptable to the Iconophiles. Arguments were then presented in support of icons, and the Definition of the Council of Hierieia was condemned. The Council’s own Definition was read at the seventh session on 13th October and proclaimed at the final session in Constantinople on 23rd October.

3.2.6.1 The Definition

Here I want only to comment on some points of relevant interest. As already mentioned, the Council, in seeking to defend and define the Iconophile position, was on somewhat shaky ground. Attempts to ground the veneration of icons in tradition came up against the obvious fact that this was, in fact, a relatively new development in the history of the Church. So, although the Definition states that “we preserve all the traditions of the Church which for our sake have been decreed in written or unwritten form, without introducing any innovation”, it wisely does not elaborate on what, especially, the unwritten tradition is. The earlier sessions of the Council had presented a whole list of texts, but none of them are exactly clinching. Perhaps one of the power questions involved in the dispute is also to do with the guardianship of tradition. Here it is worth recalling how liberation theology has sought to regain the Bible and its interpretation for the poor, so that the Bible might be encountered as truly liberating. The Definition begins by noting that, in Christ, the Church has been saved from the practice of idolatry, and that Christ’s promise of being present to his church (Mt. 28:20) means that this defence against “the darkness of the insanity of idols” is still in force. It is when the Council moves on to...
justifies the images from the area of tradition that its real arguments come to the fore. These are in the first place Christological. If the iconoclasts had long memories of Nestorius, the iconophiles had equally long memories of such as Eusebius or the extreme versions of the position of Cyril. Any denial of the unity of the divine and human is balanced by the fear of a denial of the reality of both.\textsuperscript{76} For the iconophiles what mattered was precisely the fact that images of Christ in their very visibility serve somewhat paradoxically “for the purpose of ascertaining the incarnation of God the Word, which was real, not imaginary.”\textsuperscript{77} Here the stress is clearly on the humanity, over against the Iconoclast insistence on the divinity.

The second reason is an exemplary one. Here the icon serves as a type, or a representation or way into the prototype. In the words of the Council, “the honour to the icon is conveyed to the prototype’. Thus, he who venerates the icon venerates the hypostasis of the person depicted on it’.\textsuperscript{78} As Giakalis points out in his treatment of this issue, “[t]he ‘type’ of every icon finds itself in direct communion with the prototype, although it is not actually identified with it”.\textsuperscript{79} For Giakalis, this is a crucial part of the argument against the iconoclasts. He judges that the iconophiles saw in “the rejection of images, as an indirect rejection of the material world, or at least as a rejection of the possibility of its sanctification [something that] signifies fundamentally the rejection of the very content of the Christian tradition”.\textsuperscript{80}

There is, however, an additional element here. For, to the extent that matter is beyond sanctification, it ceases to be of direct interest to the “spiritual”. If the Church is primarily responsible for that dimension of human life, then it can be safely left to get on with it. It cannot pose any threat to the “material”, which is to be understood as all other dimensions of human life, and especially those in which the ruler of a state might have an interest. To

\textsuperscript{75} The essence of this argument is that we have been saved from the threat of idol worship by the coming of Christ, and Christ is still present; therefore, we cannot run the risk of falling back into such worship, and those who claim we have done so are consequently denying the presence of Christ. For all its apparent neatness, this is not an argument that would be able to stand up to any great scrutiny, especially as the iconoclasts could presumably make exactly the same claim to support their position.

\textsuperscript{76} The condemnation of monothelitism at the Third Council of Constantinople (681) occurred, let it not be forgotten, less than fifty years before the outbreak of iconoclasm under Leo III. The Third Council of Constantinople is sometimes considered the end of the debate over the precise way in which the Church should articulate its faith in Jesus Christ that had begun at the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325. Perhaps, however, as Schönborn suggested, that accolade should go to Nicaea II.

\textsuperscript{77} Sahas, \textit{Icon and Logos}, p.178. The argument closely follows one of the earliest and most profound defences of icons by St. John of Damascus, in his treatises on the Divine Images.

\textsuperscript{78} Sahas, \textit{Icon and Logos}, p.179. The quotation is from St. Basil of Caesarea, \textit{On The Holy Spirit}, PG 32:149c

\textsuperscript{79} Giakalis, \textit{Images of the Divine}, p.85

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Ibid}, p.87. See also Zelensky and Gilbert, \textit{Windows into Heaven}, p.22 “an icon is the physical witness to the sanctification of matter”. 
maintain, with the iconophiles, that matter is not inherently evil,\textsuperscript{81} is to assert the possibility of its redemption and its transcendence. The state and its authorities, from this perspective, are placed firmly under at least the eye of the church, if not its power.

That this is not entirely implausible may be judged from the persecution of the monks under Constantine V. No doubt some of this may be ascribed to the general dislike autocratic rulers\textsuperscript{82} have of people who disobey them, especially when they feel they have gone to great lengths to present good reasons for their action. But also some of it was to do with the role monks played.\textsuperscript{83} They were, apart from anything else, living icons\textsuperscript{84} and as such enjoyed a mediating power which, as we noted above, was something the Emperor sought for himself. To destroy the images would not be enough if there were no way of attacking the even more potent force of monasticism.

### 3.2.6.2 The Canons of the Council

Further evidence for this claim may be adduced from a survey of the Canons of the Council. Of the twenty-two canons listed in the Council documents, only four are of direct relevance to the question of iconoclasm.\textsuperscript{85} Yet in their own ways, all of them are comments on the nature of power in the church and its correct application. For example, the third canon re-affirms the previous declaration\textsuperscript{86} that anyone who gained office in the church through the influence of secular rulers should be suspended. The iconic power of the church to serve as open mediator of Christ is, then, seen to be under threat whenever there is some sort of interference from the secular arm.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{81} As St. John of Damascus succinctly phrased it, “Do not abuse matter; for it is not dishonourable”, Treatise I.16, \textit{Three Treatises}, p.30

\textsuperscript{82} As Schönborn, God’s Human Face, p.149, notes, the “iconoclastic emperors were men of war; their political success and their fame rested on their fortunes in war. Warriors do not gladly engage in dialogue”.

\textsuperscript{83} See on this Schmemann, “Byzantium, Iconoclasm and the Monks”. He also points to other political implications of the power of monasticism in eighth century Byzantium.

\textsuperscript{84} Peter Brown “A Dark Age Crisis”, p.264, applies this epithet to the holy man, but he also shows that the monk continues the tradition of the holy man.

\textsuperscript{85} Canons 7, 9, 13, 16

\textsuperscript{86} The reference is to the Apostolic Canons 30.

\textsuperscript{87} A second group of canons (see 4, 5, 12, 15, 19) is primarily concerned with the interface between religious office and material gain. Presumably the fact that the Council Fathers felt the need to issue these condemnations implies that there was something to condemn. Trade in ecclesiastical office was hardly going to redound greatly to the Church’s credit, and thus its desire to remain an open mediator would be gravely damaged in the eyes of its members by such behaviour. The third group of canons is more connected with moral issues. In his essay on the Iconoclast movement, Peter Brown notes the real problems engendered by the Arab invasions of the late 7\textsuperscript{th} and early 8\textsuperscript{th} centuries: “Savage disillusionment and contempt for failed gods are important factors in the Iconoclast movement… Faced by real distress the Byzantine Age of Faith was as skin-deep as any other.” Brown, “A Dark Age Crisis…”, p.288. Presumably the scandals which these Canons imply cannot have helped fight this disillusionment.
The four canons which deal more directly with the consequences of iconoclasm deserve a slightly more detailed consideration, even if in essence they deal with the same issues. Canon 7 orders the renewal of the custom of relics being laid in new churches or installing relics in those churches where they are not present. The issue of relics is a particularly interesting example of icon veneration, since it marks clearly the link between type and prototype as a sort of synecdoche, where the relic is understood in some way to make present the whole (and holy) person. In this sense, the relic becomes a form of icon. Moreover, the relics lay particular stress on the materiality of existence and holiness, something which we have seen was important for the Iconophiles in their response to the “spiritualising” iconoclasts.

Canon 9 calls for the handing in of Iconoclast writings, and penalties against those who fail to do so. It is clear that it is aiming at restoring the power of the “orthodox” over the “heterodox”. Presumably the irony of a Council called to protest against destruction of icons urging the destruction of writings was lost on the Council Fathers. Yet it is an indication of the ultimate problem of any Conciliar attempt to respond to threats. Anathematization cannot solve the issue, since it simply leads to an escalation in violence and threats. The fact that there was a further outbreak of Iconoclasm less than thirty years after the Council of Nicaea is indicative in this regard. The perspective may change, but the reality of a totalitarian and hence ultimately violent reading of the world and relationships within it remains the same.

Canon 13 refers to restitution of church property seized under the auspices of Iconoclasm. Two points are of interest here. The chief one is the attempt to use “spiritual” threats, namely excommunication, to achieve political aims. Those who do not give back possession of churches and monasteries are portrayed as “criminals condemned by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and [are to] be assigned there where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched, because they oppose the voice of the Lord, declaring,

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88 In this regard, it is interesting to note that Giakalis devotes a section of his book to a discussion on possible Origenist influences in the Iconoclast position. Although he can come to no firm conclusion, he is fairly sure that there is such an influence in the works of Constantine and the Horos of the Council of Hiereia. See Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, pp. 70-74. As far as the discussion about liberation theology goes, this perhaps also reminds us of what Metz has called the “dangerous memory” of Jesus, or what we could also call the liberative memory of the poor. The memory of the rejection of injustice is a memory which both allows for the development of a utopia which protests against present injustice, and at the same time, as Libanio reminded us, holds onto the “eschatological reserve” of hope, so that the utopia does not itself become an idol.

89 It would be fascinating to read an account of the language of Church Councils from the perspective of the mimetic theory of René Girard. The “heretic” is always a scapegoat, a way of creating unity over against a necessary victim. See on the concept of scapegoat, René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, (trans. Yvonne Freccero), London: Athlone, 1986. John XXIII’s insistence that Vatican II would not use the language of anathemas becomes in this light even more significant.
You shall not make my Father’s house a house of trade”.\(^{90}\) This may be viewed as almost the other side of the coin of the Iconoclast division between the spiritual and material, where effectively the material (and hence the state) was in prime position. Now, the spiritual, but controlled by the church in alliance with the state, has the upper hand. The Iconoclast controversy has been characterised as a top-down movement, in which the whims of rulers were forced on to the rest of the population.\(^{91}\) This Canon is illustrative of this fact, and once again demonstrates the close similarity of the two positions, at least in terms of their use of power.

The final Canon which relates more directly to the Iconoclast controversy is Canon 16. This Canon is apparently counter-intuitive, since it condemns all clergy whose dress is too decorative, for “all indulgence and adornment bestowed on the body is alien to the priestly order”. Here the Council is struggling with what has been a constant problem for Christians, how to reconcile material needs (and it should be remembered that central to the refutation of the Iconoclast movement is an assertion of the goodness and Christ-revealing potentiality of the material) and a sound Christian humility. The person and the painting cannot be icons in the same way, but, at the same time, both can be iconic.

### 3.2.7 Summary of the Iconoclast Controversy

In this section I have examined the events of the Iconoclast controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries.\(^{92}\) I have charted, at least briefly, the development of the controversy, from its beginnings under Leo III in the late 720s, through the reign of Constantine V and the Council of Hieria, to the response, under the Empress Irene, of the Iconophiles with the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. In examining the two Councils, I have drawn attention to the ways in which they use language and the problems which arise from their decisions.

Although orthodox (and certainly Orthodox\(^{93}\) ) theology has subsequently considered the iconoclasts to be heretical, this seems to me a moot point. The iconoclasts were arguing for a particular interpretation of the doctrine

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\(^{90}\) Tanner, *Councils*, pp.148-149. The quotation is from p.149. The Scripture references are to Mark 9:47 and John 2:16.

\(^{91}\) See, for example, Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*, pp. 98-99. That both iconoclasts and iconophiles were in the same boat in this regard is also suggested by Peter Brown, “A Dark Age Crisis”, pp. 274-275.

\(^{92}\) I have not commented much on the resurgence of the controversy, because, although there was renewed persecution, there were no real developments in terms of ideas. As George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, puts it, the iconoclasm of the 9th century was “generally imitative” in character (p.180).

\(^{93}\) As noted above, the date of the final restoration of the Icons was 19th February 842, which was instituted as a feast in 843 and is still celebrated by Orthodox Christians on the First Sunday of Lent as the Feast of Orthodoxy.
of the Incarnation which is by no means obviously heretical.\textsuperscript{94} The fact that the Reformation would bring very similar responses to the use of images and statues in churches, not to mention the somewhat cool response of Rome to the Second Council of Nicaea, indicates that there was a strong case to be made by the iconoclasts.\textsuperscript{95} At best the iconoclasts should be thought of as schismatics, even if the theological implications of the debate are not to be overlooked.

In my analysis of the two Councils and the surrounding events, I have suggested that at least one interpretation is to see them as attempts to settle on who controls access to the holy, or, one could say, who decides what can be iconic. The path of de-materialisation, favoured by the iconoclasts, had the tendency to reduce the sphere of influence of the Church,\textsuperscript{96} and especially of the holy men. These, as Brown has argued,\textsuperscript{97} were understood in some sense to embody holiness, or at least to embody a channel of communication with the ultimate source of all holiness, God.

The Iconoclast argument does not, ultimately, solve any problems about how to allow any thing or concept to remain iconic without becoming idolatrous. It may attempt to do so, by limiting the power of icons, by pointing to the potential problems of icon veneration, which indeed often seems to have been more closely akin to icon worship.\textsuperscript{98} But by concentrating into the hands of a few, be it the Emperor or servile bishops, the power to decide on what channels can mediate the holy, the risk of a new form of idolatry is not avoided. The system is closed, because there is no place outside from which to challenge it, no position from which it can be extended. This perhaps suggests that liberation theology will have to attend to the “other of its other”, so that the poor do not become reduced to the single sight beyond which nothing can be seen.

\textsuperscript{94} Despite what I noted above about the Monophysite tendencies of the Iconoclasts, it would be possible to have an orthodox Chalcedonian understanding of the relationship between the two natures, and still hold an iconoclast position, based on a fear of reducing the mystery of Christ to a representation.

\textsuperscript{95} On the Roman reaction, see, for example, Giakalis, \emph{Images of the Divine}, p.21. There had been a Papal presence (in the person of legates) at the Council, but this did not prevent especially Frankish theologians from reacting against their (probably mis-)understanding of the Council acta.

\textsuperscript{96} Norman Davies, in his epic \emph{Europe: A History}, New York, HarperCollins, 1998, pp.245-246, sums up the controversy as follows: “At one level it involved a purely religious controversy over the place of images in Christian worship…. At another level, however, a deep social and political struggle was in progress. By attacking iconodulous monasteries and sequestrating their considerable properties, the Iconoclast emperors were strengthening the hold of the State over the Church”.

\textsuperscript{97} Brown has written extensively on this in \emph{Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity} and slightly earlier in Peter Brown, \emph{The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity}, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980

\textsuperscript{98} The reference is to the distinction in the Council documents between \emph{proskunesis} and \emph{latreia} – icons are worthy of the former, which can be translated as “reverence”. Only God is worthy of \emph{latreia}, adoration. The blurring of these two distinct kinds of attitude is perhaps not surprising and certainly not rare. See, e.g., Brown, “A Dark Age Crisis”, p.266, on the reaction to icons among the Byzantine people.
If the iconoclasts were destined to be unsuccessful, replacing one sort of idol by another, the attempts of the Second Council of Nicaea to affirm the value of icons are severely compromised by the form in which they are presented. This is not to question the value of the positive affirmations of the Council, of its desire to present a holistic picture of Christ and to declare, perhaps more openly than any other previous Council, the essential God-revealing, transcendent potential of created matter. However, in response to the claims of the Council of Hiereia, Nicaea makes its own counterclaims, which are phrased in essentially the same antagonistic language. Now it is the Church, gathered in Council, which holds power and, moreover, does so through the efforts of the Empress.99

The question of the power of Councils and the way in which it has been exercised and the justifications for it are too complex to address in detail here.100 But it should at least be noted that any too one-sided process is always prone to becoming closed in on itself, and thus becoming ideological.101 In pushing its version, however accurately that may reflect the reality it seeks to relate and address, the Council is always at risk of creating an idol out of its own affirmations, or, in Levinasian terms, allowing the return of the totality. What becomes important is not what lies beyond the definition, the reality of God to which it is designed to point, but rather the definition itself. This is Idolatry 1.

There is no obvious space for dialogue and encounter in the Council position, hence, of course, the recrudescence of iconoclasm in the second decade of the ninth century. There is no possibility of dialectic, of moving beyond the entrenched positions to a space where the legitimate concerns of the Iconoclasts and the positive insights of the Iconophiles can both be valued and incorporated. Again, the fact that very similar positions re-emerged in the Reformation, and have persisted ever since, is an indication of this problem.102 The Second Council of Nicaea both allows a glimpse of

99 “The holy, great and Ecumenical Council – convened by the grace of God and by the sanction of our pious kings, those lovers of Christ, Constantine and his mother Irene…”. Sahas, Icons and Logic, p.176

100 This was a particular matter of concern at the time of the Papal schism, being debated at the Council of Pisa in 1409 and at the Council of Constance (1414-1418).

101 In a very different context, this is perhaps one of the insights underlying Karl Rahner’s famous essay on the Council of Chalcedon. Seen, as Rahner puts it, as a beginning it can remain iconic, but as soon as it becomes an end, it is, by definition, closed, and ultimately runs the risk of being ideological. See Karl Rahner, “Current Problems in Christianity”, Theological Investigations 1, (trans. Cornelius Ernst OP), London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961, pp.149-200. See especially p.150 “The Chalcedonian formulation of the mystery of Jesus … is a formula. Thus we have not only the right but the duty to look at it as end and as beginning”.

102 In this context, it is worth pointing to an example which shocked much of the Brazilian population some years ago. On 12th October 1995, the Patronal Feast of Brazil, Sérgio von Helder, a bishop of the Igreja Universal, a Brazilian charismatic Pentecostal church founded by Edir Macedo, dropped on the floor and kicked a statue of Our Lady (Nossa Senhora Aparecida, so called because the statue appeared with miraculous results to a group of poor fishermen in the River Paraíba in 1717), accusing Catholics of idol-worship. This led to a great outcry, in the media and elsewhere. See, for example, Folha de São Paulo, Oct. 13th 1995.
an “iconic”, open-ended, solution to the problem and at the same time ultimately fails to transcend the question of relationships of power which underlay much of the Iconoclast crisis.

3.3 Emmanuel Levinas and The Other

3.3.1 Introduction

The investigation into the Iconoclast Controversy has left several questions unanswered. Especially important is the problem of totality. For that reason, in this section, I start with a discussion of the contribution of Emmanuel Levinas to contemporary philosophy. This will enable me subsequently to argue that, explicitly or more often implicitly, many liberation theologians have appealed to Levinasian ideas of the “other” as both motivation and justification for their use of the poor as the central guiding concept in their theology. My study of the Argentinian-born Mexican scholar Enrique Dussel will show the utility of Levinas’ thought for liberation theology, but also point to some of the problems, especially if the Levinasian concept of the third is not taken sufficiently into account.

3.3.2 The problem of totality

In *Totality and Infinity*, one of arguably his two most important philosophical works, Levinas writes:

> The work of justice – the uprightness of the face to face – is necessary in order that the breach that leads to God is produced – and “vision” here coincides with this work of justice. Hence metaphysics is enacted where the social relation is enacted – in relations with [people]… The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God. He does not play the role of a

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103 Emmanuel Levinas was born in Lithuania in 1905/1906 (the difference depends on which calendar one uses – January 12th 1906 in the Gregorian or December 30th 1905 in the Julian, in use in the Russian Empire which ruled Lithuania when he was born.) He moved to France in 1923, and studied with both Husserl and Heidegger. He was captured, as a French soldier, during the Second World War. As a Jew, it was only the fact that he was a soldier that saved him from the concentration camps, a fate that befell nearly all his family. After the war he was director of L’École Normale Israélite Orientale. From 1961 he was a professor at the University of Poitiers; then from 1967 in Paris, first in Nanterre, and from 1973 at the Sorbonne. He died on December 25th 1995. The only full-length biography of Levinas to have been translated into English is S. Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy* (trans. M.Kigel, S. Embree), Pittsburgh, PA, Duquesne University Press, 2006. See also Ulpiano Vásquez, “Apresentando Emmanuel Levinas”, in Eliana Yunes (ed.), “Emmanuel Levinas e Jean-Paul Sartre: Duas Faces da Alteridade”, *Revista Multitextos CTCH*, II/7 (2008), pp.9-16. The author, a Jesuit originally from Spain, but who has now lived for many years in Brazil, was perhaps one of the very first theologians in Brazil to study Levinas, writing his doctorate on Levinas’ work already in 1982: see Ulpiano Vasquez Moro, *El discurso sobre Dios en la obra de E. Levinas*, Madrid, UPCM, 1982

104 The difference and relation between Levinas’ philosophical writings and his Jewish writings is complex. Although at times Levinas would distinguish the two, they are clearly intimately related. See on this Niño Ribeiro Junior, *Sabedoria da Paz: Ética e teo-logica em Emmanuel Levinas*, São Paulo, Loyola, 2008, p.15 “It is worth emphasising that the writings on Judaism act as a sort of biblical-talmudic horizon for the personal philosophical writings” (italics in original). Ribeiro Junior’s book consists of a very close reading especially of the Jewish writings to investigate the heart of Levinas’ “theo-logic” approach to ethical thinking. See also on this Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp.34-36
mediator. The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed.\textsuperscript{105}

It is not surprising that this recognition of the other as the privileged place or moment of encounter both with self and God is one which has appealed to liberation theologians. Here I want to present – relatively briefly – what Levinas has to say on this question. As the very title of Levinas’ first major work on the topic of alterity, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, suggests, the problem with which he is dealing is how to respond to or escape from the totalising claims of ontology, or, in the Heideggerian term, ontotheology.\textsuperscript{106} Jeffrey Robbins outlines the problem thus:

\ldots the problem of ontotheology is that ontotheology is always already a ‘closed’ system, knowing its beginning and end before it ever begins the task of thinking… Ontotheology is totalizing, irrespective of thought’s bounds, reason’s limits, or the proper domain belonging to philosophy and theology.\textsuperscript{107}

Levinas is admittedly not addressing the issue of ontotheology directly in \textit{Totality and Infinity}, but that is because he has similar reservations to Heidegger\textsuperscript{108} about theology, precisely for the reasons outlined by Robbins. The key threat he sees is the ‘closed’ system, being (or Being) as a totality to which therefore all is subject. This totality\textsuperscript{109} manifests itself in relations and expressions of power.

The relation with Being that is enacted as ontology\textsuperscript{110} consists in neutralising the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it. It is hence not a relation with the other as such but the reduction of the other to the same. Such is the definition of freedom: to maintain oneself against the other, despite every relation with the


\textsuperscript{108} The relationship between Levinas and Heidegger is a very complex one, especially following the Second World War and Heidegger’s refusal to apologise for his relationship with National Socialism. However, personal and philosophical relationships may not be identical, and, for example, Lenka Karfíková has argued that we should adopt a more Heideggerian reading of Levinas. See on this Lenka Karfíková, “Dvojí čas v Levinasově díle ‘De l’existence à l’existant’”, in \textit{Teologická Reflexe} 12/1 (2006), pp.81-88

\textsuperscript{109} See Purcell, \textit{Levinas and Theology}, pp.101-103 “…culture and history are caught up in the tendency towards totality, and consort in compromising the singular significance of the other person. Insofar as culture and history determine signification, the significance of the other person is assigned by particular systems understandings”. (p.102)

\textsuperscript{110} Levinas describes this relationship as one of knowing.
other, to ensure the authenticity of the I... Ontology as first philosophy is a
philosophy of power.\footnote{Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, pp. 45-46}

Here it is probable that Levinas’ philosophy and autobiography coincide.\footnote{One must be wary of reading Levinas (or anyone else, for that matter) purely through the prism of his own life story. However, he himself acknowledged that especially the events of the Shoah or Holocaust had affected him. See, for example, the dedication to \textit{Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence} (trans. Alphonso Lingis), Pittsburgh, PA, Duquesnes University Press, 1998 (orig. 1974). Also on this and other influences on Levinas, see Michael Purcell, \textit{Levinas and Theology}, p.4 and Johan Goud, “This Extraordinary Word: Emmanuel Levinas on God”, in Peter Jonkers and Ruud Welten (eds.), \textit{God in France: Eight Contemporary French Thinkers on God}, Leuven, Peeters, 2005, pp.96-118, here p.96

\footnote{At least, as will be seen later on in this chapter, not politically. He does argue for “an-archy”, for the primacy of the saying over the said, (cf. \textit{Otherwise than Being}, pp.99-102), but that is a somewhat different argument.}

The predominance of ontology is not simply an intellectual problem, but one which has had devastating consequences – in Levinas’ case, especially, the totalitarianism of the National Socialist State in Germany which not only held him as a prisoner of war but also murdered nearly all his family along with millions of his fellow Jews and others. Thus, he continues: “[Ontology] issues in the State and in the non-violence of the totality, without securing itself against the violence from which this non-violence lives, and which appears in the tyranny of the State”.\footnote{Totality and Infinity, p.46}

Levinas is no anarchist,\footnote{I do not use the term “originary act”, which is not Levinasian, in its Freudian sense or in a Girardian sense. The reduction to sameness, for Levinas, can, however, only be accomplished finally by death. “Totalization is accomplished in history”, he writes (\textit{Totality and Infinity}, p.55). The process of reducing the other to sameness begins, then, with the ultimate desire to destroy, and thus has an inherent violence. Over against this, Levinas sees the possibility of love as originary, though the word “love” is one he rather eschews. See “Philosophy, Justice and Love”, in Emmanuel Levinas, \textit{Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other}, (trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Hanshav), London / New York, Continuum, 2006, pp.88-104, here p.92. For the originary power of agapic love as something that is at the heart of Christian living, see my treatment below in Chapter 4 of the methodology of Clodovis Boff.

\footnote{It should be apparent that the reduction to the Same does not in itself preclude difference. As history in the form of totalitarian regimes of the left and the right have repeatedly demonstrated, the problem of the
who opens up or closes down the space in which the other is allowed to exist. It is this boundary-setting role of the ‘I’ which Levinas is intent on transforming and transcending.

It is for this reason that Levinas wants to understand ethics as first philosophy, the “optics”, through which all else is seen. At this point, it may be useful to consider briefly what Levinas understood by ethics. For, on the face of it, this understanding of ethics as first philosophy could lead to it becoming a new totality or idolatry. However, that is to make of ethics precisely the sort of system which Levinas argues against. He is not interested in establishing a new rival theory of ethics, to go alongside, for example, Aristotle, Kant, or Bentham. Rather he is suggesting that the whole ontological foundation of Western philosophy needs to be questioned, because of its insistence on the primacy of the ‘I’.

As Nilo Ribeiro notes, “Levinas' intention [is] to establish an intimate relationship between ethics and metaphysics, or rather, an intrigue of ethics with metaphysics”. To this end, he quotes Levinas' own definition of ethics from Autrement que Savoir: “The term ethics for me always means the fact of encounter, of the relation of an I with an other...” Thus, ethics is discovered in relationship, in, one might say, praxis.

As Roger Burggraeve, one of Levinas' best-known theological interpreters, has noted,

Levinas does not concern himself with ethics as such, understood as the modality of being-human itself, but with the 'meaning' of ethics,... in a double sense: namely, ethics itself as meaning or orientation (towards the radically other) and ethics that is borne out of a deeper meaning (from the radically other).

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117 Totality and Infinity, p.29
119 Even if, as Ribeiro Junior notes, “there is a certain coincidence between Levinasian thought and Kantian philosophy”, nevertheless, “this formal approximation does not allow the classification of Levinasian philosophy as neo-Kantian, and therefore, inspired by the paradigm of deontological ethics”, Sabedoria da Paz, p.33
121 Ribeiro Junior, Sabedoria da Paz, p.271 and see the discussion on the following pages.
123 See on this Michael Purcell, Levinas and Theology, pp.33-44: “To state boldly that ethics is both 'first philosophy' and 'first theology' is to situate the origins of philosophy and theology in praxis. It is to privilege praxis as a point of departure for both philosophy and theology.” This point is important for our subsequent discussion in the next chapter about the role of praxis in the methodology of Clodovis Boff.
In this understanding of ethics, instead of ontology determining relations, the very notion of Being is now subject to the ethical demands of the other, the other who is always transcendent and encountered therefore only in infinity. The encounter with the alterity of the other is always an encounter with excess,\(^\text{125}\) with a surplus. As Levinas puts it: “To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression... it is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly to have the idea of infinity.”\(^\text{126}\) As he goes on to say, in this encounter I am taught, I am enabled to transcend my boundaries in reaching out into the infinite space between the other and the ‘I’. The other can, then, be seen as my only safeguard against idolatry, against the worship of the reflection of the self, because it is the other who gives me my identity.

### 3.3.3 The Face of the Other\(^\text{127}\)

The primary descriptive term which Levinas employs for the other is face. “The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face”.\(^\text{128}\) Levinas wants to indicate with this term the specificity of the encounter with the other. What we meet, what, one may say, we are faced with, is not an idea but a human being, unique and thus ultimately irreducible.\(^\text{129}\) This uniqueness is summed up in the face, that which presents itself to us as the visible expression of the other.\(^\text{130}\) At the most fundamental level, what the face of the other says to me is “you shall not commit murder”.\(^\text{131}\) As Levinas sees it, the “Other is the sole being I can wish to kill”.\(^\text{132}\) This is because as other this being is absolutely beyond my power, and in this absolute beyondness (transcendence) renders impossible for me the possession of any power. It is only by destroying this other that I can regain my power to be ‘I’. Yet in

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\(^{125}\) As we will see below, Jean-Luc Marion has developed and enriched the concept of the excess of the phenomenon. He has developed this out of both his own readings of Husserl and his contact with Levinas. As an aside, as Horner points out, Marion’s professional career has exactly reproduced Levinas’, with both starting at Poitiers before moving to Paris.


\(^{128}\) Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.50

\(^{129}\) As Paulo César Duque-Estrada notes, here Levinas is arguing against an Idealist reduction of all to the self. Paulo César Duque-Estrada, “Da Compreensão do Ser ao Rosto do Outro”, in Yunes (ed.), *Emmanuel Levinas e Jean-Paul Sartre*, pp.31-39, here p.33

\(^{130}\) Cf. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.66. “The face is a living presence; it is expression... The face speaks.”

\(^{131}\) *Ibid.*, p.199

\(^{132}\) *Ibid.*, p.198
my attempt to destroy this other, I am always already confronted with this face which insistently says to me “You shall not commit murder”.\(^{133}\) Although Levinas does have in mind also actual murder, perhaps at least as important is the metaphorical use of the term. My killing of the other is carried out not only in literally taking his or her life, but in every form of rejection, every form of incomplete acceptance of the other’s right to be other.\(^{134}\) In terms which, as will become clear, we could borrow from Marion, we try to force the Other to reflect the self, to be idolatrous, rather than allowing the Other to question and to command, to be iconic.

Clearly none of this means that murder (literal or metaphorical) does not happen,\(^{135}\) but Levinas does want to claim that to look into the face of the other and kill that other is in some sense to pass ethical judgement on oneself. The reason for this lies at the heart of Levinas’ argument. He puts it thus:

> It is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself. This does not mean that my existence is constituted in the thought of the others... The face I welcome makes me pass from phenomenon to being in another sense: in discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of response... engenders me for responsibility; as responsible I am brought to my final reality... To be attentive is to recognise the mastery of the Other, to receive his command, or, more exactly, to receive from him the power to command.\(^{136}\)

In other words, it is not that, faced by the other, I decide that it would be good to help her or him. Rather, in our encounter, the other, in making me responsible, opens up the horizon for my becoming who I am. The rejection (literal or metaphorical murder) of the other is not simply destructive of that other, but also makes impossible my own coming to being. I am constituted, not prior to my encounter with the other, but in the other opening and revealing her or his face to me and calling me to response. Here responsibility is both my ability to respond and thus my duty to respond, but also the gift of the other, who presents himself or herself primarily as gentleness,\(^{137}\) allowing me to become. And this

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\(^{133}\) There is some confirmation of this in, for example, the way in which those who are to be executed, especially by firing squads, are often blindfolded. In the conflict in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, faces of those killed were often obliterated. In this way, the face of the other, which is disturbingly similar to the face of the ‘I’ can no longer make any claims. See also on this, James Hatley, “Nameless Memory: Levinas, Witness and Politics”, *Religion and Public Life* 33 (2003), pp. 33-54, here p.34 “…in violence one treats the other as if he or she were faceless, or one is treated so by the other”.

\(^{134}\) This is one way of understanding the precepts in the Sermon on the Mount, such as for example Matthew 5:21-22. To be angry with one’s brother or sister is to be liable to the same punishment as for murder, for anger (it is implied) is an unwillingness to accept the alterity of the other and thus an attempt to reduce that other to the same, to the ‘I’.

\(^{135}\) This is a point which some of Levinas' readers have failed to note. See, for example, Richard Brosse, “The Infinite Mediation”, in Jacques Haers SJ et al., (eds.), *Mediations in Theology: Georges de Schrijver's Wager and Liberation Theologies*, Leuven, Peeters, 2003, pp.99-114

\(^{136}\) Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.178

\(^{137}\) *Ibid.*, p.150
becoming is necessarily a praxic becoming, since, to repeat, it is not in the thought of the other that I have my existence, but in the face to face, the actual encounter.

As has already been noted, the face of the other is always a specific\textsuperscript{138} face, and yet Levinas also wants to say something more about the nature of this face, attempting to characterise it without denying the specificity. In the first place Levinas understands this other primarily in Old Testament terms:

To hear [the] destitution [of the Other] which cries out for justice is not to posit an image for oneself, but is to posit oneself as responsible both as more and as less than the being that presents itself in the face. Less, for the face summons me to my obligations and judges me... More, for my position as I consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself. The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, the orphan to whom I am obligated.\textsuperscript{139}

In the Old Testament the stranger, the widow and the orphan are the destitute, the landless, those who have no access to land and therefore no access to food.\textsuperscript{140} These are the ones to whom Israel is commanded to respond. These ‘poor’ in this sense pass ethical judgement on the people. To the extent to which Israel responds, it is seen as God’s people.\textsuperscript{141}

3.3.4 “Substitution” and “The Third”

Two other important dimensions of Levinas’ work need to be touched on at least briefly. One is the notion of substitution, the other the idea of “the third”. The first seeks to spell out more precisely the claim of the other on me, the second tries to socialise the discussion by introducing the others (generally Levinas will refer to them as les autres in contrast to l’Autrui).

It is in Otherwise than Being that Levinas sets out most fully the idea of substitution. He was inspired to do so, according to Nilo Ribeiro Junior, by the demands of other philosophers to explain what he meant by the “disinterest of Being”.\textsuperscript{142} Like much in Levinas, the precise working out of the

\textsuperscript{138}“Specific”, because the other is always unique (see, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, “The Other, Utopia and Justice”, in Entre Nous, pp.193-202, here 198-199, on the relationship between the uniqueness of the other and the ‘I’ who must perceive each unique other in relation to other unique others). However, this very uniqueness makes the face of the other always in some sense abstract. See Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and Infinity (trans. Richard A. Cohen), Pittsburgh, PA, Duquesne University Press, 1985, p.86: “The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the colour of his eyes”, cited also in Annabel Herzog, “Levinas, Benjamin, and the Oppressed”, The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 12/2 (2003), pp.123-138, here pp.125-126.

\textsuperscript{139} Levinas, Totality and Infinity, p.215, cf. p.78, p.251. As to scriptural references, see, for example, Exodus 22:21-22, Malachi 3:5

\textsuperscript{140} Cf. the discussion in Chapter 1 on the poor in the Old Testament from the viewpoint of liberation theology.

\textsuperscript{141} Cf. for example, apart from the reference to Malachi, other prophets such as Amos or Micah.

\textsuperscript{142} Ribeiro Junior, Sabedoria da Paz, p.84. Here he quotes Emmanuel Levinas, Éthique et Infinité, Paris, Fayard, 1982, p.97: “Disinterest means concretely that the ontological condition is unmade, either in the human condition or the human non-condition” (= in English, Ethics and Infinity,....) Essentially the point
notion is complex, but the fundamental idea can be expressed in very simple terms, famously as “A subject is a hostage”. Because my identity is only given to me by the appeal of the other, in whom I discover the responsibility that brings self to life within me, I am in a strong sense dependent on the other. The ‘I’ is always reactive, responsive as well as responsible. My response and my responsibility are subsequent to the claim of the other against me. For this reason, Levinas emphasises that “[s]ubstitution is not an act”. I cannot decide to substitute myself for someone else, to be responsible for him or her. That would mark a return to totality, since it would involve re-shaping the other to the ‘I’, making that other fit into my world and my categories in the way I wish.

As the title of the book suggests, Levinas’ aim in Otherwise than Being is to enter into a deeper reflection on the Heideggerian turn to me-ontology, to get behind or beyond the limitations of the purely ontological. He is seeking to state the absolutely unstateable, to get back, to use his terms, behind the said to the saying. In this transcendence of being, totality becomes impossible. In the saying, the ‘I’ cannot reduce the other to the status of the same, because there is no ‘I’ and no other. These are subsequent categories, categories of the Said. For Levinas, the origin of all encounters is in this otherwise than being, but it is only when the other is involved in the saying of me that I can come to know who I am and how I am to respond.

In this sense, I am dependent on the other, a hostage. I can do nothing else than substitute myself for the other, take his or her place as he or she demands. That there is a paradoxical sense of violence at the heart of this idea is something of which Levinas is aware. But he also claims that ultimately it is not violent, precisely because it is transcendent, and thus goes beyond violence which is always ontological. Substitution is,
indeed, one way of talking about the possibility of not submitting to totality. For, it is in the encounter that leads to substitution that, for Levinas, the ‘I’ becomes most truly itself. As Nilo Ribeiro Junior puts it, “The I is not integrally I except in the instant in which it escapes from itself”.  

Despite what some of his interpreters may have thought, Levinas is, however, clearly aware that life cannot be reduced to the interaction of the other and the ‘I’, because there are always a host of other others, who affect and are affected by that interaction, however successful in Levinasian terms it may be. “[S]ocial reality… inevitably entails the existence of the third party”, he says. A result of this is the need for and role of justice, which Levinas sees as necessary alongside charity, but in some sense subsequent to it. The responsibility for the other cannot be allowed to destroy the other others, and for the ordering of relationships between the ‘I’ and the other and the other other there is the need for justice. So, he says “My resistance begins when the evil which [the Other] does to me is done to a third who is also my neighbour”.  

It might appear that there is a significant problem here for Levinas. For there seems to be a dilemma between the demands of alterity and the demands of justice and the political. It is now, apparently, the political that has the final say. However, as Nilo Ribeiro goes on to note, the dilemma which the introduction of the third seems to indicate, is in fact only apparent, for

The third does not appear as the one who comes to question ethics, nor does the third justify the setting up of a clear and precise distinction between ethics and morality, as other moral philosophers have done. The face refers to alterity, to exteriority, and thus exteriority includes in itself the demands of the relation with the third.

Before moving on from this rather general introduction to some key ideas which I wish to take from Levinas in order to apply them more specifically to liberation theology, it is perhaps worth outlining what I think can be taken from the discussion so far. Levinas offers us a way of encounter, or perhaps better being encountered, that, in terms of the specific interest of

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151 Ribeiro Junior, *Sabedoria da Paz*, p.87
152 See the fairly pointed comments on some of these interpreters, especially Christian interpreters, in W. Wolf Diedrich, “Levinas’ Christian Readers: Judaism’s Other?”, in Burggraeve (ed.), *The Awakening to the Other*, pp.67-88, here pp.73-74
153 “Clearly we cannot act on a daily basis in approaching our fellow man as if he were the only person in the world”, Levinas, “The I and The Totality”, in *Entre Nous*, pp.11-33, here 18
154 Levinas, “The I and the Totality”, p.18
156 Ribeiro Junior, *Sabedoria da Paz*, pp.91-92
this work, seems to allow the poor a possibility of remaining poor. The poor (as individuals in relationship) are those who command the theologian. Because every encounter with a poor person is also a recognition of “the proximity of the “neighbour of my neighbour”, the need for justice is also an inescapable part of this encounter. Finally, Levinas calls the theologian to return constantly behind the said to the saying (however impossible that may be), from the limited and 'de-fined' to the transcendent and unbound moment. The said – and this putting into words of the unsayable is the task of the theologian – is necessary, but always provisional, always a betrayal.

3.3.5 Levinas and the Poor in History

In her essay “Emmanuel Levinas and the end of history” Oona Ajzenstat discusses one of Levinas’ Talmudic lectures. In this lecture, Levinas presents a debate between two Rabbis, Johanan, whom Levinas sees as an idealist, and Simon, regarded as the realist. Ajzenstat argues that Levinas sees truth on both sides in this debate about the coming of the messianic era.

The truth in the realist Simon’s side is the understanding that poverty and inequality are the foundations of ethical action. The truth in the idealist Johanan’s side is that only the desire for a better world can move us to change or revolution which will make the life of ethical action a little easier.

Levinas, as Ajzenstat rightly points out, does not want to choose between these two positions, but maintains both, even in tension. Both the concrete response to particular manifestations of the Other who presents himself or herself to me as poor, as the one to whom injustice is done, and the desire for something better, for a world where there will not be poverty or injustice, are motivations for ethical action.

One of the important questions that arises here is how to move from or between these two positions. In much liberation theology the first position has tended to be dismissed as assistentialism, and attention has been given to the second task, which envisages not individual responses to individuals but social and systemic revolution. To want a better world is to want a world which is structured in a more just way. As James Hatley puts it: “One must respond not only to the other but also to all the other

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159 For a critical but interesting and important reading of Levinas in this regard, see Anselm Kyongsuk Min, *The Solidarity of Others In A Divided World*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004
161 Ajzenstat, “End of history”, p.8
162 See the discussion above, Chapter 1, p.25
others”.\textsuperscript{163} We shall return to this shortly, since it is precisely in this relationship between the ethical encounter of the other with the ‘I’, on the one hand, and the need for justice for all, on the other hand, - that is, the recognition of the third - that the question for liberation theology is to be posed.

Before we move to the use of Levinas made by Enrique Dussel, a leading Latin American philosopher and theologian, it may be instructive to consider an attempt to respond to this problem from another perspective. In a brief but suggestive article, Annabel Herzog compares the ways in which Levinas and Walter Benjamin treat oppression.\textsuperscript{164} Although the comparison is interesting, here we focus on her engagement with Levinas. She notes that there is “a possible deadlock” in Levinas, because the “poor and defeated are not revealed as authentic… they are regarded as poor and defeated, never as potentially and hence, essentially, victorious”.\textsuperscript{165} The argument is here between Levinas and Marx. This is not Herzog’s phrase, but one might express it in terms of the famous Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach,\textsuperscript{166} and ask if Levinas enables us not only to interpret the world, especially one in which the poor and oppressed are a majority, but also to change it.

One of the issues in Levinas, to which passing reference has already been made, is to do with the nature\textsuperscript{167} of the other to whom we are responsible. We have noted that this other is described primarily in terms of face, and I have on occasion stressed the particularity of this face. However, at this juncture, we need to consider this more closely, for this particularity is only partially true. For while it is true that the face cannot be universalised without its ultimate reduction, neither can it be entirely specified. This is because, for Levinas, my encounter with the face of the other must be something that commands me, and for that to happen I cannot grasp \textit{a priori} what it is that is before me. There is a uniqueness, or, better, an infinity.\textsuperscript{168}

\textsuperscript{163} Hatley, “Nameless Memory”, p.44
\textsuperscript{165} Herzog, “Levinas, Benjamin, and the Oppressed”, p. 124. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{166} Karl Marx, “Theses über Feuerbach”, in Karl Marx, \textit{Die Frühschriften} (ed. Siegfried Landshut), Stuttgart, Alfred Körner Verlag, 1971, p.541. „Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert: es kommt darauf an, sie zu verändern“.
\textsuperscript{167} Strictly speaking, of course, we can say nothing of this. To speak of the “nature” of the other is to reduce the other to terms of essence and identity. However, here I am more interested in the question of the other as whoever they are. This seems to me a reasonable question. For in order to be challenged, encountered and commanded by the other, I have to be where the other can encounter me.
This encounter with the infinite other is always necessarily situated, both in terms of place and of socio-political structures. Politics is what exists to moderate the ethical catastrophe, in the sense that it restores sameness in the face of the total transformative demand of the response to the other which always already destroys any possibility of the I residing in its own idea of ipseity.\textsuperscript{169} Politics, then, demands sameness, especially in the modern liberal state. To be a citizen is to be one who shares the same rights (and, at least in theory, duties) as every other citizen. One's citizenship is defined in terms of what one has in common with all others – there is no longer “one law for the rich, and one law for the poor”, but all are equal before the law.\textsuperscript{170} In this exaltation of sameness the other is unthinkingly ignored. Levinas himself noted that “one of the dangers of democracy [is] the permanent exclusion of a minority that always exists”.\textsuperscript{171} These are the people who cannot be “represented” because they are not enabled to “present” themselves. They are the faceless.

The question, then, of extreme pertinence to liberation theology, is how to enable these people who are rendered faceless by the society in which they live to regain a presence, to become, in Levinasian terms, an other who commands, rather than a problem to be either treated or swept aside. Levinas' own response to this is essentially eschatological, and in general an unrealised eschatology. There is already a trace\textsuperscript{172}, but perhaps this might be best understood analogously to the trace of a jet plane, which does not reveal anything about the nature of the plane, but enables us to see that it has passed. In this sense, any solution to this question is one which must wait. Utopia is here “non-place” rather than eutopic,\textsuperscript{173} the good place which is manifested in actual structures and relationships. Thus, at least for Herzog, Levinas is unable to carry us beyond the impasse to respond to the excluded other.\textsuperscript{174}

3.3.6 Levinas, Liberation and Salvation

In his contribution to a book published in 2008 the Belgian moral theologian Roger Burggraeve has sought to push Levinas further, by

\textsuperscript{169} See Herzog, “Levinas, Benjamin, and the Oppressed”, pp.132-133

\textsuperscript{170} Of course, this is the theory rather than the practice, but it is a particularly seductive and powerful theory, especially for those with power. The best-known deconstructions of this ideology remain George Orwell's novels, \emph{Animal Farm} (London, Penguin, 1998) and \emph{Nineteen Eighty-Four} (London, Penguin, 1998)

\textsuperscript{171} Emmanuel Levinas, “Dialogue on Thinking-of-the-Other” \emph{Entre nous}, p.176, referring here to Ricoeur. This is also cited in Herzog, “Levinas, Benjamin, and the Oppressed”, p.135 (referring to the Athlone Press edition of the book, p.205).

\textsuperscript{172} See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, \emph{De Dieu qui vient à l’idée}, Paris, Vrin, 1982, p.115


\textsuperscript{174} Herzog, “Levinas, Benjamin, and the Oppressed”, p.136
looking at how he deals with the themes of liberation and salvation.\textsuperscript{175} Given the importance of these two concepts in liberation theology, I will briefly consider this essay before moving on to the work of Enrique Dussel. Burggraeve notes that “[i]n following Levinas, we make use of 'liberation' and 'salvation' as synonyms, or rather as each other's reverse side in the sense that 'liberation' suggests especially the 'redemption from the negative' while 'salvation' rather accentuates the 'gift of the positive'.\textsuperscript{176} This is not so different from the basic understanding in liberation theology, where liberation is from all that brings death and salvation is to life with and in the fullness of God, both now and in the future.

For Levinas, Burggraeve argues, the greatest evil occurs when being is reduced to or replaced by the impersonal “there is” (il y a).\textsuperscript{177} This denies the process of being and replaces it with a void. It leads to depersonalisation, and thus to the permanent sense of horror of the being, especially the human being.\textsuperscript{178} In a way that resonates with my discussion in the previous chapter, Burggraeve notes that

we can also describe human existence as a never-ending struggle with the nameless and depersonalising “powers of darkness” and the “faceless gods, impersonal gods to whom one does not speak” (Tl, 142): “the impersonality of the sacred” (EE 61).\textsuperscript{179}

The first attempt at liberation is discovered in the declaration of the autonomy of the ‘I’. However, for Levinas, this is ultimately not something which can save, for, and again I quote, “[s]ubjectivity is on the one hand the mastery of the ‘I’ over the anonymous and depersonalising 'there is’,” and is thus liberation, but on the other hand it likewise again is calamity, namely, the return of the 'self' to the 'I', the hindrance of the 'I' by itself.”\textsuperscript{180} This leads to the paradoxical situation of the need for liberation of oneself from oneself.\textsuperscript{181} Salvation is discovered first in our being in the world, in “everyday life with its material and economic preoccupations”.\textsuperscript{182} As Burggraeve goes on to say, “[b]y no longer being equated immediately with itself, the liberation for itself is realised by its [i.e., the 'I'] active binding with the other than itself”.\textsuperscript{183} But for Levinas the economic is

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
  \item[175] Roger Burggraeve, “‘No One Can Save Oneself Without Others’: An Ethic of Liberation in the Footsteps of Emmanuel Levinas”, in Burggraeve (ed.), The Awakening to the Other, pp.13-65
  \item[176] Burggraeve, “No One Can Save Oneself”, p.14
  \item[177] Cf., for example, Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, pp.47-52
  \item[178] Burggraeve, “No One Can Save Oneself”, pp.14-20
  \item[179] \textit{Ibid.}, p.20 The references are to Levinas, Totality and Infinity, p.142, and Emmanuel Levinas, Existence and Existents (trans. A. Lingis), The Hague / Boston, Nijhoff, 1978, p.61
  \item[180] Burggraeve, “No One Can Save Oneself”, p.27
  \item[181] \textit{Ibid.}, p.27
  \item[182] \textit{Ibid.}, p.29
  \item[183] \textit{Ibid.}, p.29
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
always also problematic, as it was for the liberation theologians, and though the language is different, the underlying reasons are not so dissimilar. For the economic is reductive (what I called Idolatry I) and thus leads ultimately to the imprisonment of the ‘I’. So it is, as we saw above, that the only true path to liberation, to the 'I' becoming divested of its totalising and thus self-destructive tendencies, is through the irruption into the world of the 'I' by the other. The face of the other demands response, and it is indeed this response – and thus responsibility – that is truly liberative. However, we return with this to the question of the third. For my responsibility is never just to a single other, but to each other and to all who are my alterity. The need for justice, for the assurance of the maintenance of the alterity of all, also necessitates states. The positive side of this also brings with it a negative dimension.

The neutral objectivity of organised, socio-political justice is the cause of the fact that subjects are no longer truly treated as unique persons, but rather as elements that are classified under a generalising denominator of totality according to their function, status, professions, studies, possessions and wealth, ideology or religion.

Thus, there is a need for all institutions involved in government to maintain the “responsibility of the unique one for the unique other”. It is worth noting that this whole process is, for Levinas, something that goes “beyond being” or “beyond essence”. This 'transcendence' is fleshed out or given form by recourse to the idea of the Good, the Good which is beyond essence. So it is not the content of an ethics, nor the mediate justification for action, but “disinterested”. And ultimately this Good can also be understood as God, as the presence of the Infinite in me which liberates me from the totality of the 'I'.

Burggraeve's essay helps us to see the richness of Levinas' approach and its usefulness for liberation theology, since it seeks to give a language which is non-idolatrous, and to that extent non-ideological, to talk about the encounter with the other, be that the other as poor, or even more fundamentally, the encounter with the Divine Other, with God. The
possibilities inherent in Levinas’ work have not gone unnoticed by liberation theologians, and it is to their appropriation of it that we now turn.

### 3.4 Enrique Dussel: A Liberation Appropriation of Levinas

I focus now on the Argentinian-born Enrique Dussel, resident for many years in Mexico, and a leading figure in the construction of a Latin American philosophy of liberation and in the history of the Latin American church told from a Latin American perspective. Levinas himself knew and engaged in dialogue with Dussel and other Latin American thinkers, especially Juan Carlos Scannone.\(^{195}\) He declared himself “very happy, very proud even, when I find reflections of my work in this group. It is a fundamental approval. It means that some people have also seen ‘the same thing’”.\(^{196}\) David Roldán refers to others who have worked with Levinas, such as Pablo Sudar, whose doctoral thesis, written in 1978 in Münster, was on Levinas and his reception in Latin America.\(^{197}\) Apart from Ulpiano Vasquez, the name of Luiz Carlos Susin should be noted here too as an early writer in Brazil on the thought of Levinas.\(^{198}\) Thus, it is clear that from a very early date Latin American theologians and philosophers have recognised a great richness in Levinas' thought which they have sought to apply to their context.

### 3.4.1 Situating Dussel

Anton Peter has noted that “Dussel’s discourse essentially represents nothing more than a Latin American rereading of Levinas' thought”.\(^{199}\) Although it has to be borne in mind that Dussel has written very extensively in the twenty years since Peter passed this judgement, it remains broadly true of an important part of his work.\(^{200}\) Dussel himself has said that it was following a conversation with Levinas in January 1972 that

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\(^{195}\) Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*, p.102

\(^{196}\) *Ibid.*, p.102


\(^{198}\) Luiz Carlos Susin, *O homem messianico: uma introdução ao pensamento de Emmanuel Levinas* Petropolis, Vozes, 1984

\(^{199}\) Anton Peter, *Befreiungstheologie und Transzendentaltheologie: Enrique Dussel und Karl Rahner im Vergleich*, (Freiburger theologische Studien 137), Freiburg / Basel / Wien, Herder, 1988, p.361

\(^{200}\) See for confirmation of this, Michael Barber, *Ethical Hermeneutics: Rationalism in Enrique Dussel’s Philosophy of Liberation*, New York, Fordham University Press, 1998, pp. ix-x.
he felt compelled to apply Levinas' thought to the Latin American situation. For Dussel, in Peter's words, Levinas “[has] masterfully thought through the originary and mysterious nature of the relation of the face-to-face and the other as ungraspable epiphany of the creator God”. This last comment is especially important, since it ties in with the liberation claim that God reveals himself in and through the poor. The poor other can, thanks to Levinas, be understood and encountered as the revelation (albeit one which cannot be ever fully grasped) of the Creator God.

Dussel considers, however, that Levinas is incomplete. There is a need for a deeper understanding of this poor other, an understanding which includes structural and economic elements. In Peter's words, “[t]he poor would then be understood not only as an interpersonal reality, but also as a structural reality, as a dependent people and as a social formation exploited by an unjust system”. But it is precisely here that the difference between Levinas and Dussel becomes most sharply focussed, in a way which Herzog suggested in her article which we discussed previously. For, again to quote Peter, “if... the other is thought of as absolutely other and consequently as simply ungraspable in every aspect, then his or her voice in fact can be understood only as equivocal and as a result incommunicable”. If the other is really other, how is it ever possible for me to understand or respond to the gaze which the other bestows on me? What sort of political action is possible, other than the patient wait for the eschaton, if the other is always doomed to incommunicability?

3.4.2 Relationships of praxis

Having said this, there is still much for Dussel to take from Levinas, and he has done so consistently in numerous of his writings over the past twenty-five to thirty years. One of these is *Ethics and Community*. This is one of the books in the Theology and Liberation series, originally planned to

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203 Peter, *Befreiungstheologie und Tranzendentheologie*,p.384

204 Ibid., p.385. This is the criticism which Ricoeur makes of Levinas. See on this comments by Hans de Wit, “My God”, She Said, “Ships Make Me So Crazy”, p.96, note 16. Nilo Ribeiro Junior seeks to defend Levinas, suggesting that what is at stake is a conflict between a poetic (Ricoeur) and prophetic (Levinas) hermeneutic, and that if Levinas’ philosophy and Jewish writings are read together, many of the problems which Ricoeur sees are avoided: see Ribeiro Junior, *Sabedoria da Paz*, pp.198-208

205 It is this question which Dussel addresses in an article on the political in Levinas, where he approves of the way in which Levinas permits a critique of politics, but tries to re-introduce a positive reading of a politics of liberation. See Enrique Dussel, “Lo Político en Levinas (Hacia una Filosofía Política Crítica), *Signos filosóficos*, 9 (2003), pp.111-132

encompass more than fifty volumes, and Dussel understands it as being not just for academics but a wider audience. Therefore, he eschews footnotes.\textsuperscript{207} Thus, clearly there are no direct explicit references to Levinas.\textsuperscript{208} However, there are a number of important points where we can see that he is drawing on Levinasian ideas, as he seeks to show what it means to talk about ethics in a communitarian perspective.

He begins with a discussion of praxis, which is of relevance both to the immediate theme here but also to our later treatment of the work and method of Clodovis Boff. With the attempt to define praxis, he is both making use of Levinas and moving beyond. For at one level Levinas really fails to offer concrete suggestions as to how we are to move forward. In part this is no doubt due to his desire to avoid reducing the other to sameness, for any suggestions would tend to deny the transcendence of the other, who can now be mapped on to a given schema. Nevertheless, without some sort of help, the ethical catastrophe remains just that – my world is revolutionised, but it is so because I am no longer in a position to act from my own centre. But if that is the case, what is to stop my permanent and complete paralysis? Responsibility and response to the command of the other require that I am enabled to act.

Thus, Dussel argues that, in the first place, “praxis is an act done by a person..., but addressed to another person...” Secondly, “praxis is the relationship between two or more persons”.\textsuperscript{209} Note that this means that, at least for Dussel, praxis is always other-oriented,\textsuperscript{210} always communal. In terms of Levinas, one could ask whether this praxic act is the act of the ‘I’ or the act of the other. Another way of putting this is to ask if relationships occur spontaneously and completely mutually, or whether there is not an initiator. If any relationship requires one party to take the first step, then, strictly speaking, it should perhaps be the other who initiates, but even the willingness to be encountered by the other can be seen as an act, as an openness to the infinite possibility of relationship. Relationship, Dussel contends, is to be understood in a Levinasian sense, as a face-to-face.

Praxis, then, is the actualisation of proximity, of the experience of being proximate, for one’s neighbour. Praxis is the experience of constructing the other

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{207} Dussel, \textit{Ethics and Community}, p.1
  \item \textsuperscript{208} In fact, there is an appendix, which is footnoted, and where there are references to Levinas (Dussel, \textit{Ethics and Community}, pp.238-239), but otherwise, the work is unreferenced, and in the Bibliography, only \textit{Totality and Infinity} is mentioned.
  \item \textsuperscript{209} Ibid., p.8 There is an overlap here with the idea of the Third in Levinas, something which I am not convinced Dussel always takes sufficiently seriously.
  \item \textsuperscript{210} He does not discuss this, but it need presumably not always be positive. There can be examples of negative praxis – political, ecclesial, ethical, and so on, but these are always oriented to the other, too, but now to her or his disadvantage or destruction.
\end{itemize}
as person, as end of my action and not as means. We are dealing with a relationship of infinite respect.\textsuperscript{211}

Again, though, we see that in effect Dussel has re-ordered the Levinasian approach, for it is the ‘I’ who here constructs the other, not the ‘I’ who is constructed, or at least most fully and finally realised through and by the other. As we saw, for example, in Chapter 1 when looking at Gutiérrez’s first interpretation of the story of the Good Samaritan, this is not uncommon in liberation theology.\textsuperscript{212} On the other hand, Dussel gains by centring on the notion of praxis, for now there can be no divide between who I am and what I do, between ontology and ethics, and indeed ethics is first philosophy, since it is determined by action.

\subsection*{3.4.3 Categories of Otherness}

This action, in Dussel's view, is in some sense always communal.\textsuperscript{213} However, there are also different ways in which groups of people can be viewed. So, for example, there is

the potential, possible, future community – the object of the service of the one who is ethically just – the “crowd”… It indicates an indefinite number of poor who are not yet a “people”, because they lack the service that is the task of the shepherd, they are without the leadership of the just one, the prophet, the “Servant of Yahweh”. These “many”, who are outside the laws of the system, who indeed live “in exteriority” even with respect to social class, are the special object of the good, the holy, human being, the person who practises justice, goodness, holiness, love of the other as other.\textsuperscript{214}

Once again, one notes that Dussel employs a Levinasian language to achieve a result which is not necessarily entirely in agreement with Levinas himself. However, it is one which is perhaps justifiable from the biblical text. There is a sense in which this crowd\textsuperscript{215} can only act as other when it is sufficiently liberated to realise what it is that it needs to command. The teaching of Jesus is not a call to identity or sameness, but to discipleship and much of the New Testament text can be read as the unveiling of the realisation of the otherness of Jesus which commands and calls for response. Thus it is written from the other side of the divide, as it were, from the recognition of what the other can and does demand of the ‘I’.

Apart from the crowd, Dussel also introduces two other important terms, class and people. He outlines the distinction between the two in the following way:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{211} Dussel, \textit{Ethics and Community}, pp.9-10
  \item \textsuperscript{212} See above, Chapter 1.1.1.2, pp.30-31
  \item \textsuperscript{213} Dussel, \textit{Ethics and Community}, p.11 “The community is the real, concrete agent and mover of history”.
  \item \textsuperscript{214} \textit{Ibid.}, p.41
  \item \textsuperscript{215} \textit{Ochlos} in its various forms occurs 175 times in the New Testament. With the exception of four uses in Revelation, these are all in the gospels (including Acts as the second volume of Luke-Acts).
\end{itemize}
A class is not a people... “People” is a more concrete, synthetic category than that of the more abstract, analytic “class”... I shall be using the word [to] denote only the oppressed of the nation... Thus a “people” is the “communal bloc” of a nation’s oppressed.\textsuperscript{216}

In the first place, the people are thus viewed negatively, not for what they are in themselves, but as they are treated by the rest of society. They are, for Dussel, in this sense both victims and a constant reminder of the presence of sin, for it is sin that oppresses them.\textsuperscript{217} The question is whether Dussel can maintain that the poor, the oppressed people, are only reduced to sameness in terms of their oppression, or whether in fact their liberation does not end up doing the same to them. Certainly sin reduces to sameness,\textsuperscript{218} for all are oppressed in the same way, and broadly the effects are the same.\textsuperscript{219} Oppression is, among other things, forbidding the other to turn his or her face towards the face of the oppressor, which then facilitates the reduction of the other to the status of a category. However, liberation rhetoric can do something remarkably similar, for now the other cannot turn to face the liberator, but is enjoined to liberate herself or himself. There is now no one to be responsible, no one to respond, no one to command. It is perhaps for this reason that, unlike Dussel, Luiz Carlos Susin does draw on the Levinasian idea of the third, noting that one of the major problems in the west has been precisely the exclusion of the third, in terms of Aristotelian logic,\textsuperscript{220} and in terms of ethics.\textsuperscript{221}

In \textit{Ethics and Community} Dussel does not address the danger of who liberation theology's other is directly, but it perhaps lies at the heart of what he has to say about the role of liberation. This lengthy quotation makes it clear:

A communal ethics of liberation is one that reflects upon, describes, clarifies, and explains the very existence of the poor, here and now, concretely and historically. Without a clear view of the poor as the launching pad of the whole of theological discourse, theologians will not be able to speak of the God of the poor – for, after all, one cannot know \textit{a priori}, before the fact, who the poor are.... Paradoxically, although God is the First, the Origin, the Infinite, the issue today is one of the discernment of idols or fetishes that “pass themselves off as God”, and the “true God”. This true God is the God of the poor. The criterion of the discernment of the word of God is the standpoint of the poor. We take our place among the poor

\textsuperscript{216} Dussel, \textit{Ethics and Community}, p.81
\textsuperscript{217} Cf., \textit{ibid.}, pp.82-83
\textsuperscript{218} Cf. Romans 3::9, “for we have already charged that all, both Jew and Greek, are under the power of sin”.
\textsuperscript{219} This is, it must be stressed, not exactly what Dussel says; neither is it entirely true. There are many distinctions in social class and relationships among the poor as well, and not all of them are free of the influences of sin.
\textsuperscript{220} Luiz Carlos Susin, “Fé e Razão: Tertium non datur?”, \textit{Teocomunicação} 30/130 (2000), pp.589-604, here p.593
\textsuperscript{221} \textit{Ibid.}, p.594
in order to hear revelation, in order to be able to create, in order to know whether a praxis is orthopractic. The poor are Christ here and now, and constitute the route to a discovery of and discourse upon God.222

The claim here is a large one and perhaps not entirely coherent. On the one side, there is the affirmation of the poor as the standpoint for the discernment of the word of God. It is through the poor that God's voice can be heard, that Christ makes himself present to us. One needs to know and be with the poor in order to be able to understand and respond to God. Yet, at the same time, Dussel claims that the poor cannot be known a priori. At a purely logical level, this is no doubt true. One cannot predicate the existence of the poor as a necessary a priori fact.223 However, there is a sense in which much of the time, the poor are taken as an a priori, certainly in a chronological sense, in that it is the poor who have to be explained. The assumption of the poor as starting point is in itself an a priori one. It can be justified, but not proved.224

Dussel's approach is undoubtedly important. For him, the starting point is the analetical moment. He argues thus:

Liberation ethics, on the other hand, takes its point of departure in an affirmation of the real, existent, historical other. I have designated this “transontological” (metaphysical) positive moment of departure, this active point of the initiation of the negation of the negation, the “analetical”. By the prefix, the Greek ana-, I wish to denote a point “beyond” or transcending being. It is this logos (analos), this discourse originating in transcendence of the system, that reflects the originality of the Hebreo-Christian experience... The poor, the oppressed class, the peripheral nation, the female sex object, all have their reality “beyond” the horizon of the system that alienates them, represses them, dehumanises them.225

The poor are no longer regarded as the oppressed, as those within totality, but are now seen as the transcendent, as embedded in and finding or expressing their meaning from the infinite. There is no doubt that this is a powerful picture. The analetical gives us a way of talking about how the encounter with the other poor can transform the life not only of that person, those persons, but also of the ‘I’. Nevertheless, the suspicion remains. Who am I to assign a reality “beyond” to anyone, and does being told that one has a reality beyond oppression really help to liberate, or does it not add just one more burden?

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222 Dussel, Ethics and Community, p.229 Emphasis in original.
223 Though arguably the existence of the poor is a synthetic a priori necessity of capitalism, as the discussion above in Chapter Two suggested.
224 This raises the question of criteria for justification and proof. It also relates to issues of causality. The normal liberation narrative would suggest that the first factor is the overwhelming presence of the poor, which forces itself onto the gaze of the theologian who is compelled to talk of God in this situation. However, as soon as interpretive categories exist (and the option for the poor is, if not only, at least also an interpretive category), they by definition become a possible focus through which the world can be viewed.
225 Dussel, Ethics and Community, p.243
This question is addressed by Michael Barber, one of the leading American commentators on Dussel’s thought, in an essay on theory and alterity in Dussel and Marion.\footnote{Michael D. Barber, “Theory and Alterity: Dussel’s Marx and Marion on Idolatry”, in Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta (eds), \textit{Thinking from the underside of history: Enrique Dussel’s Philosophy of liberation}, Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000, pp.195-212} The problem as Barber sees it is simply put: “Alterity questions theory, and yet it takes theory to show how theory has not adequately responded to alterity”.\footnote{Barber, “Theory and Alterity”, p.195} There is no place outside of theory to judge the theory: as we saw above, Levinas himself recognised that the said always involves a betrayal of the saying.\footnote{See, for example, Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, p.6} Theories necessarily reduce and tend to sameness. Yet this is not a call to the abandonment of theory, likely to be even more damaging to the alterity of the other.\footnote{Books such as Daniel Goldhagen’s \textit{Hitler’s Willing Executioners}, New York, Vintage, 1998, or Jan Gross, \textit{Neighbours: the Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland}, London, Arrow, 2003 show all too clearly the ways in which unthinking acquiescence can lead people to carry out the most appalling atrocities.} Rather, Barber asks more pertinently: “[H]ow does one incorporate all the critical force of alterity within one’s own theory and not abandon theory?”\footnote{Barber, “Theory and Alterity”, p.205} Barber goes on to demonstrate that Dussel repeatedly fails to address this issue, even when he comes to a place where a re-appraisal of his own theory would appear natural.\footnote{Barber refers here, for example, to Dussel’s treatment of his own analectical method in \textit{Método para una filosofía de la liberación: Superación analéctica de la dialéctica hegeliana}, Guadalajara, Editorial Universidad de Guadalajara, 1991, pp.185-195 and notes how Dussel mails to criticise his own theory, even though Levinas had already given him Tools to do so. Barber comments: “[Dussel] fails to reflect upon… his own theory, which, as theory, still encompasses this other within a totality, like the totalities that Dussel criticizes, however much Dussel’s criticisms of these totalities improves upon them”, Barber, “Theory and Alterity”, p.207} The other, in order to achieve the status normally denied him or her, is then rendered not as unequal, asymmetric, but precisely as equal.\footnote{Ibid., p.208} One may applaud Dussel’s instincts here, but the excluded other is neither in fact nor in theory in a position of equality. Dussel is no doubt stressing the equality of human dignity, but as what is at stake is the systemic denial of this equality of dignity and respect, it is not possible to overcome the problem simply by an affirmation. Indeed, the equality of dignity and respect necessitates alterity, and it is only in accepting the essential and irreducible otherness of the other that I can respond to her or him as human and as the one who humanises me.

The examination of Levinas and Dussel has already given me some tools for addressing the problem that lies at the heart of my work. In a very different context the Slovenian philosopher and cultural commentator, Slavoj Žižek, spoke about the “hole” in the symbolic order of immediate
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post-Communist Europe. It seems to me that the discussion on Levinas and Dussel has led to the perception of a “hole” at the symbolic centre of liberation theology. In order to develop a clearer perception of what that “hole” is and how we can talk about it, I now turn to Jean-Luc Marion.

3.5 Jean-Luc Marion

In an article in the Spring 2006 issue of the Journal for Cultural and Religious Thought, Victor Taylor notes that “[Jean-Luc] Marion’s God Without Being and his challenges to the idolatry of Western metaphysics advance the field of religious theory, continuing and changing the great debate between philosophy and theology”. I begin this section with an examination of this contribution, in order that we can then use it to address the issue of the place of the poor in liberation theology. Much of the discussion of what Marion offers to theology has focussed, understandably enough, on the implications of what he has to say for fundamental theology and the possibility of “theo-logising”, of encountering logia to speak (of, to, in,) the Logos who speaks in turn of God, present in absence, absent in presence. Although this is of immense interest, it will not be the major focus of our discussion here.

It will be impossible to cover all of Marion’s work, even less to enter into the phenomenological debate underlying much of his writings. I will concentrate, therefore, on what he has to say about idolatry and iconicity, and more specifically, about their conceptual forms, especially concerning our ways of talking about God. I refer principally to three books, representative of Marion’s thought on the subject. The first, originally published in 1977, is The Idol and Distance, which is his first

233 Slavoj Žižek, Tarrying with the Negative, Durham, Duke University Press, 1993, p.1
235 Victor E. Taylor, “A Conversation with Jean-Luc Marion”, Journal for Cultural and Religious Thought, 7.2, Spring, 2006. Available online at http://www.jcrt.org/archives/07.2/index.html. Links can also be found here to the conversation with Marion. Towards the beginning of the conversation Taylor asks Marion whether it would not be more accurate to say that in his work one could also argue that the question is not at least as much about theology’s contribution to philosophy as vice-versa. Marion does not altogether disagree with this.
237 The best and most comprehensive book length treatment of the theological dimension and implications of Marion’s work is Robyn Horner, Jean-Luc Marion: A Theological Introduction
238 See, for example, John D. Caputo, (ed), Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate, New York, Fordham University Press, 2001
239 See note 236 above
specifically theological book. The second is *God Without Being*, and the final one *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*. These works will also enable me to see how Marion has developed his understanding of this theme over the past twenty-five years.

### 3.5.1 Naming Idols

At the heart of what Marion wants to say there is a fundamentally simple intuition. It is namely that talk about God is most of the time talk about “God”. The inverted commas signify that, for Marion, God-talk is grounded in our intention of God, that is, the “God” we can grasp. Thus talk about God occurs already from within the domain of Being, which is thus given a conceptual primacy over God. However, in claiming a conceptual primacy it always ends up exerting a real primacy. Marion demonstrates that if my concept of God does not permit God to be fully what- or whoever God is in God’s self-giving, then all that follows from my faith in God and the praxis which is dependent on and expressive of that faith will also be less, and in being less will hide rather than reveal God. When all other layers have been scraped away, there is always the tendency to posit “being” or, in the Heideggerian sense, “Being”, as preceding God. God is the Supreme Being. We are confronted with “a God who expresses supremely the Being of beings in general and, in this sense, reflects back to them a faithful image of that whereby they are and of that which they are supremely”.

Here already we begin to see something of what Marion understands by idol, that which reflects back the best of what we have and are. It is important to remind ourselves, first, that “[t]he idol never deserves to be

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240 See note 236 above


242 The Idol and Distance makes clear his debt here to Nietzsche. He also draws heavily on Heidegger’s concept of ‘onto-theology’, referred to above.

243 See on this Welten, “The Paradox of God’s Appearance”, pp.193-195

244 I use the word in its phenomenological sense. Good brief introductions to this concept are to be found in Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida and Marion on Modern Idolatry*, Downers Grove, Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 2002., pp. 34-38, and Horner, A Theo-logical Introduction, pp.27-28

245 However, for a critique of whether this reading is actually Heideggerian, and in general a critique of Marion’s reading of Heidegger and his use of “being” in relation to God, see Laurence Hemming, *Heidegger’s Atheism: The Refusal of a Theological Voice*, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 2002, pp. 249-269

246 Cf. the critique which Clodovis Boff makes of what he terms “superlativism”, which he sees as a sort of intellectual version of anthropomorphism. The difference between humanity and God is one of degree only, rather than absolute. Clodovis Boff, *Teoria do Método Teológico*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 1999 (2nd Revised Edition), pp.303-304

247 Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, p.17
denounced as illusory, since, by definition, it is seen – *eidolon*, that which is seen”.  

It is this visibility which is most problematic, for it is always something which delimits, which renders precisely graspable or comprehensible that which is beyond reach, unattainable, *invisable*.  

In *The Idol and Distance*, Marion sees the idol as that which reflects back to me my own image of the divine, and in doing so, “divinises” me, makes me into my own god. This is because “I attribute to myself the properties of the divine only if properties can be common both to me and to the divine – that is, only if the divine always already belongs to my sphere, as an idol that is close and, for that very reason, vain”. In this sense, the idol does indeed give me the divine, but in “safe mode”. I cannot be challenged by this version of the divine because, to use the other word of Marion’s title, there is no distance between me and the idol masquerading as the divine. To employ more Levinasian terms, there is no space allowed for the “otherness” of the other to be given to me and thus to demand my response. The idol becomes the ultimate “yes” man, the one who always supports me in my actions.

The support the idol offers me is, in the final instance, a support for my being, *Dasein*. But this itself finds support in the Being of beings, and this is grounded in its relationship with the supreme being. However,

> the supreme being gives the reason for beings in their Being, but thereby shows Being at work, including and first in itself. In this play … the supreme being is called upon only to ensure the foundation.

This point is of crucial importance. Marion wants to show that the death of God should be correctly understood as the death of “God”, of our idol of

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248 Marion, *God Without Being*, p.9. As Bruce Ellis Benson points out, the word “idea” is related etymologically to the words “ideology” and “idolatry”. See Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies*, p.23, and the discussion in Chapter Two.

249 “The idol does not deceive; it apprehends the divinity”, *Idol and Distance*, p.6. A helpful way of illustrating this is given by Jon Sobrino in his book *La Fe en Jesucristo: Ensayo desde las victimas*. In discussing the resurrection and the development of the church’s faith in Jesus as true God and true human, he highlights what might be called the reflex understanding of this comment. That is to say, we know what the categories “God” and “human” mean, and we are wholly confident that these can be truly related to Jesus of Nazareth. Our prior knowledge enables us to make successful identification. But, argues Sobrino, this is not the case. Rather, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, in the encounter with him which continues to this day, we are led more deeply into the mystery of what it means to truly divine and truly human. See Jon Sobrino, *La Fe en Jesucristo: Ensayo desde las victimas*, Madrid, Trotta, 1999, pp.363, 392, 448-449.

250 Note the difference here to the Orthodox idea, coming from the Church Fathers, of *apotheosis*. We will see later that this corresponds much more closely to Marion’s understanding of the icon, where we are drawn into God by the gaze of the icon. On *apotheosis*, see, for example, Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005

251 Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, p.7

252 Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, p.15. See also the discussion in Jean-Luc Marion, “Méthaphysique et phénoménologie: une relève pour la théologie”, in Jean-Luc Marion, *Le Visible et le Révélé*, Paris, CERF, 2005, pp.75-97
God, and as such should be welcomed.\textsuperscript{253} This is not so much a conceptual purification, to encourage us to have better concepts of God, but a post-conceptual or a-conceptual approach to God.\textsuperscript{254} Marion will frequently refer to God as strictly unthinkable.\textsuperscript{255} It is clear that he does not mean by this that we cannot think about God, a fact which would render his books themselves pointless. Rather, he means that we cannot think God in the sense of apprehending or comprehending God. And it is precisely this which grounding talk of God in being or perhaps more accurately in Being does. It is this kind of understanding of God whose death Marion is happy to see.

\textbf{3.5.2 Idols with Being}

Many of the themes present in \textit{The Idol and Distance} reappear in \textit{God Without Being}, so here I will both continue with Marion’s argument in the first book and say something about the ways in which he develops it further. First, he says somewhat more about the idea of conceptual idols.\textsuperscript{256} This is important for our discussion. Marion acknowledges that for most people today, at least in Europe, there is not much to be gained heuristically by talking of aesthetic idols. However,

[t]he concept consigns to a sign what at first the mind grasps with it (\textit{concipere}, \textit{capere}); but such a grasp is measured not so much by the amplitude of the divine as by the scope of a \textit{capacitas}, which can fix the divine in a specific concept only at the moment when a conception of the divine fills it, hence appeases, stops and freezes it.\textsuperscript{257}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{254} The extent to which this is actually possible is highly debatable. Much of the critique of Marion has focussed on precisely this area (a short debate is included in Horner, \textit{A Theo-logical Introduction}, pp.117ff.) Without recourse at least to something like Rahner’s supernatural existential, (which Marion will clearly want to avoid) it is hard to see how there could ever be any awareness of the divine. Even to understand gift as gift presupposes some concept of gift, some openness to reception of the gift, and love needs to be recognised as love. Although Marion’s understanding of the icon would allow for this to take place, the icon must first catch our gaze in order to gaze upon us. Ultimately it may be that concepts are inevitable, but, like the mould cast by the sculptor, they must be constantly broken open in order to reveal, and let reveal itself, that which lies behind or beneath them. See on this Michael D. Barber, \textit{“Theory and Alterity"}, pp.195-212, especially pp.203-205
\item \textsuperscript{255} A good example of this is in his meditation on the giving of the Name in Exodus 3:14. “That deliverance of the Name by the unthinkable, which reveals itself therein as unthinkable, gives to the requirement of thinking the divine things divinely its ultimate exigency”. Marion, \textit{The Idol and Distance}, p.142-143. See also Marion, \textit{God Without Being}, “Concerning God, let us admit that we can think him only under the figure of the unthinkable…””, p.46
\item \textsuperscript{256} In Marion, \textit{The Idol and Distance}, p.9, the discussion is so brief that it amounts to little more than an affirmation. See also on this Benson, \textit{Graven Ideologies}, pp.27-28
\item \textsuperscript{257} Marion, \textit{God Without Being}, p.16
\end{itemize}
Concepts, in other words, and here especially concepts of the divine, become idolatrous by seeking to fix the unfixable, grasp the ungraspable, think the unthinkable. There is always a temptation to use our concepts as prisons rather than as launching pads, to reduce everything to the confines of our modes of thinking, rather than use our thoughts to go beyond thought. This is what Marion argues against here.\(^{258}\)

What is of prime interest, however, in the treatment of idols which Marion develops in *God Without Being* is “the gaze”. Idols, and icons, are phenomena which give themselves to be seen\(^{259}\), and the difference lies in how that seeing takes place,\(^{260}\) or perhaps more accurately, in the “seeing sight”. Marion puts it thus: “In outlining the comparative phenomenology of the idol and the icon, it is therefore a question of specifying not any particular matter of aesthetics or art history, but two modes of apprehension of the divine in visibility.”\(^{261}\)

The idol is seen as that which attracts the gaze, and as we have seen reflects back the sight which is devoted to it. Thus, Marion can call it an “invisible mirror”.\(^{262}\) The idol becomes the entire horizon of my sight, and what I take for its gaze is my gaze reflected back to me. “The idol depends on the gaze that it satisfies, since if the gaze did not desire to satisfy itself in the idol, the idol would have no dignity for it.”\(^{263}\) In other words, the problem with the idol lies in its totalizing force, which is a reflection of my own totality. As Robyn Horner puts it, “[i]dolatry... does not occur so much because an image has reference to a god, but principally because it makes a god of the idolater”.\(^{264}\) Because it is everything, all there is, it is also my limitation. There is, thus, no room for transcendence.\(^{265}\)

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258 See on this the essay mentioned in Chapter Two, note 209, Ivana Noble, “The Apophatic Way in Gregory of Nyssa” on the dispute between Gregory and Eunomius. Gregory’s argument with Eunomius is a very good example of how this discussion plays out in a theological form. From a very different field, a good example of this is Douglas Hofstadter’s classic book *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, London, Penguin, 2000. Central to this is Gödel’s incompleteness theory, according to which the consistency of a system cannot be proved from within. Concepts which become idols are those which forget this fact.

259 Benson, *Graven Ideologies*, p.27, remarks “A phenomenon is simply ‘that which appears’... The world is in effect a collection of phenomena”.

260 Cf., Welten, “The Paradox of God's Appearance”, p.189 “Their difference [i.e, between idol and icon] is not about veracity, but simply about different ways of looking”.

261 Marion, *God Without Being*, p.9

262 *Ibid.*, Chapter 1.2, pp.11-14


265 A good example of this can be found in Peter Weir’s film *The Truman Show* (1998), which is a very precise illustration of the move from idolatry to iconic existence. What gives itself to be seen is, quite literally, a construct, and freedom is found only when that construct is breached, and the horizon is opened up.
For Marion, the biggest idol – he speaks of a second idolatry – is Being.\textsuperscript{266} In this sense Being becomes the horizon for all talk of God, but cannot in fact say anything about God.\textsuperscript{267} Marion’s interest lies in freeing God from talk of Being, so that God can be God above and beyond all else, rather than subject to Being. Hence his desire to find a way of referring to God which does not conceptualise God in a metaphysical sense.\textsuperscript{268} Although Marion undoubtedly sees the ‘ontologising’ of “God” as the major instance of idolatry, this does not therefore mean that other idols do not also exist. Perhaps we could understand them as reflecting the gaze of this supreme idol.

3.5.3 The Excesses of Idolatry
One of Marion’s major contributions to phenomenology is arguably his development of the concept of what he terms ‘saturated phenomena’.\textsuperscript{269} Normally, when I see something,\textsuperscript{270} there is a correlation or overlap between intentionality and intuition, between the meaning I give to the thing and the thing as it presents itself to me.\textsuperscript{271} However, it is clear that this correlation is sometimes not so complete. At a trivial level this may be because of a mistake in my intending (I think I see a person in the mist, but it is in fact a tree).\textsuperscript{272} However, Marion is interested here in another case, where the problem does not lie so much in my perception, but in the phenomenon. These are cases where “intuition gives (itself) in exceeding what the concept (signification, intentionality, aim, and so on) can foresee of it and show. I call these saturated phenomena, or paradoxes”.\textsuperscript{273} That is to say, in some instances the phenomenon contains more than we are capable of seeing: there is an excess of phenomenon over against the possibilities we have of grasping it. Like trying to look into the sun, there is simply too much light.

\textsuperscript{266} Marion, \textit{God Without Being}, p.44
\textsuperscript{267} “Being says nothing about God that God cannot immediately reject”, \textit{God Without Being}, p.45 Here he draws on Heidegger. See pp.41-44, and the references in footnotes 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29 and 30, pp. 207-210
\textsuperscript{268} Thus, he refers frequently to God as G\textcircled{d}, God revealed in and through the crossing of the Cross. See, for example, \textit{God Without Being}, pp.70ff.
\textsuperscript{269} See “Le Phénomène Saturé” in Marion, \textit{Le Visible et Le Révélé}, pp.35-74 and also Horner, \textit{A Theolo-gical Introduction}, pp109-134, for a consideration of Marion’s contributions to the renewal of phenomenology through his account of the horizon of givenness, and the saturated phenomenon. See also Welten, “The Paradox of God’s Appearance”, p.200.
\textsuperscript{270} “See something” here can be understood either in terms of a physical object. “I see a printed page”, or in terms of an idea, as when something is explained to us and we say “Oh, I see!”
\textsuperscript{271} In other words, a correlation between noesis, my knowing, and noema, what is known.
\textsuperscript{272} The reference here is, of course, to Wittgenstein. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, Oxford, Blackwell,1969, § 349, for discussion see also § 350, 387, 393, 443, 468, 503
This is the insight which governs Marion’s reflections on idols in *In Excess*. There is a significant development here from what we have seen before. Admittedly the idol still functions in terms of visibility, its problem is still that it presents itself to be seen, indeed as seen. Moreover, there is still a sense in which the idol reflects ourselves back to us. “Name your idol and you will know who you are”. The new element is in the recognition which Marion affords the power of the idol. In some of his earlier work there is an underlying sense that most of us are, at least unwittingly, deeply narcissistic. Now, he gives room for the idol as something which is not merely limited to returning my own gaze.

The idol is now understood also as an “excessive visibility”, as making apparent too much so that in the end all is visible and nothing is seen. He argues this through a fascinating discussion on art, especially on the work of Mark Rothko. Painting, he argues, is an especially good example of the problem of idolatry. Paintings cannot but make visible, and yet the visible is always reduced to the flatness of the surface on which it is done. There is no behind, beyond, beneath in the painting. For Marion, it is the recognition of this lack of depth that Rothko struggles with in many of his works. The idol is not something which seeks to show itself as something which it is not, but rather that which shows itself as everything, as so much that nothing can be seen beyond it. And yet, in its visibility, it blinds us to the invisible, to the transcendent which in order to be seen must be invisible.

Idols, then, play an important role for Marion in the constitution of the world. What he offers is a clear and powerful explanation of why idols are so present, and how they manage to be so attractive. Idols reflect at their most successful the best of ourselves back to us. They make visible what is attractive about us, as individuals, as groups, as nations, as human beings. But, as the saying has it, “the good is the enemy of the best”. In presenting and holding up for our admiration what is good, we are disabled from transcending the good, or rather from being pierced by the gaze of the transcendent. In seeking to turn outwards, we are forced inwards. This is why ideas can become idols. Our best ways of looking at the world, at reading the contexts in which we live, instead of remaining partial are

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274 Marion, *In Excess*, p.61
276 *Ibid.*, pp.75-81, where Marion also introduces Levinas, and the concept of the “face”.
277 As we shall see, this is Marion’s preferred paradoxical way of speaking of the icon. See, for example, *God Without Being*, pp.110 f., on being envisaged by the gaze of *agape*.
278 See also on this the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. The Ignatian concept of the *magis* points to the same thing, and the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits in the Second Week of the Exercises frequently point out how “the evil Angel” uses the good to draw people away from God, whilst the good Angel uses the good to lead people on to greater service. See Sp.Ex. 328-336, esp. 332 (Rule Four).
Chapter Three: Windows Open and Shut

All concepts run the risk of becoming in some form totalitarian, and for Marion at least it would be hard to name any concept which has not fallen into that trap. The history of the twentieth century, if nothing else, should be enough to show us that and to demonstrate just why the question of idolatry is so important.

3.5.4 Icons: Minding the Gap

In opposition to idols, Marion places icons, or often the icon, Christ. In doing this he draws on the text of Colossians 1:15, which refers to Jesus as \( \textit{eikon tou theou tou aoratou} \), “the icon of the invisible God”. The depth of the visible face of the Son delivers to the gaze the invisibility of the Father as such”, writes Marion. The “as such” is important, for it is not that in Christ we see directly the Father as Father. The icon is that which allows us to be confronted by the invisible which remains invisible. It is this which differentiates it from the idol. The idol can (only) show us the visible, to excess maybe, but it is precisely the visible which presents itself to us. The icon, on the other hand, is in this sense a saturated phenomenon. When we regard it, it presents us not just with what can be seen, but also with what cannot be seen.

There is an intrinsic link in Marion’s thought between idols and icons, since these latter are (also, if not only) negatively what idols are not, and thus his talk of the icon develops in parallel to that of the idol. In \textit{The Idol and Distance}, the key for interpreting the role of the icon is “distance”. As Robyn Horner remarks, “[d]istance is the theological motif most used in Marion’s work, and ... it is determinative of each of the others”. However, “because it is employed in very different ways in various contexts, it can be difficult to be sure of its meaning, especially since its very use implies an excess of meaning over concept”.

In the final chapter of \textit{The Idol and Distance}, Marion sets himself the task of enquiring whether there can be any definition of distance. “First, distance has a definition. Second, it remains indefinable by definition”, he writes. It is precisely this defined indefinability which is the iconic

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279 The reader will have noted already the clear relationship between Marion and Levinas. Despite the differences, which are not to be ignored, totality and the idol are two ways of talking about, if not the same, at least a very similar phenomenon, just as Infinity and the icon are.

280 For a very full account of the use of \textit{eikon} in Paul, see the doctoral work of Valdir Marques SJ, \textit{Eikon’ em Paulo. Investigação teológica e bíblica à luz da LXX}. The first part was published in Rome, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1986, whilst the second part is unpublished. This second part contains the treatment specifically of Colossians 1:15, pp.598-605

281 Marion, \textit{The Idol and Distance}, p.8

282 See Benson, \textit{Graven Ideologies}, pp.191-2

283 Horner, \textit{Theo-logical Introduction}, p.51

284 Marion, \textit{The Idol and Distance}, p.198. Distance, as Marion points out, (pp.200-201) is \textit{di-} and \textit{stance}, standing in two places, which cannot be one. As long as distance can be included and allowed to be distance, there can be no “taking a stance”, and where no stance is taken no idol can become fixed. See
aspect of distance. For there is no way in which distance can be approached and remain distance. Thus, if distance is to be truly distance, it must be always distant.285 It is therefore in the withdrawal that distance makes itself present, in deliberate absence that it is most keenly felt.286 As Marion puts it elsewhere, “‘God' shines, in his very glare, by his absence”.287 Particularly Marion will want to see Christ and the divine filiation in terms of distance, of the Christ who is the icon of the Father, who in making the Father present serves to make clear his absence, his otherness, one might say.288 Marion outlines various moments in which this withdrawal or distance is played out or experienced.289 What he is trying to do, as we have already seen, is find a language which will enable God to be spoken outside of Being or beings.290 Any reduction of God to ontological categories succeeds only in destroying the distance, which then renders God an idol. The question remains as to whether this is actually possible, especially in Christian theology. For Christianity presents and is presented with the brute ontologisation of God, Jesus of Nazareth, the one who became human, experienced Dasein in all its contingency and force. Marion can have a

also on this, especially in relation to Marion's later work, Derek Morrow, “The Love 'Without Being' That Opens (To) Distance. Part Two: From the Icon of Distance to the Distance of Icon in Marion's Phenomenology of Love”, Heythrop Journal 46 (2005), pp.493-511
285 Cf., Marion, The Idol and Distance, p.199.
286 See, for example, the final section of Marion, The Idol and Distance, §19, 233-253. In this section, p.239, he quotes Heidegger, Temps et Être, pp.40-41, “The It [i.e., the Es of Es gibt] names .... an advancing of absence, ein Anwesen von Abswesen”. In a later essay, Jean-Luc Marion, “They Recognized Him: And He Became Invisible To Them”, Modern Theology 18/2 (2002), pp. 145-152 (trans. Stephen E. Lewis, original “Ils le reconnurent et lui-même leur devint invisible”, in J. Duchesne (ed.), L’avenir de l’Eglise. Hommage au Cardinal Lustiger, Paris, Flammarion, 2001, Marion considers the Emmaus story. It is in being set free from their conceptual captivity and limitation that the disciples can grasp that it is Christ before them, but in the very act of seeing the need to see is removed. A critique of this article is to be found in Shane Mackinlay, “Eyes Wide Shut: A Response to Jean-Luc Marion’s Account of the Journey to Emmaus”, Modern Theology 20/3 (2004), pp. 447-456, who argues that Marion’s account of faith is ultimately unsatisfactory and against himself, since the presentation of Jesus in the bread and wine is no longer a saturated phenomenon but an impoverished one.
287 “«Dieu» brille, dans son éblouissement même, par son absence”, Marion, “Métaphysique et phénoménologie”, Le Visible et le Révélé, p.95. The inverted commas around God are one way of dealing with the unnameability of God.
288 It is interesting to note here that Louis-Marie Chauvet, also working from a Heideggerian reading of the problem of onto-theology, ends up with a similar conclusion in his discussion of the Eucharist in Symbol and Sacrament (trans. Patrick Madigan, Madeleine Beaumont), Collegeville, Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 1995 (original French 1987). See especially 403-405, where Chauvet discusses the iconic presence / absence of Christ in the Eucharist.
289 He names four such moments: lack of definition, anteriority, the fourth dimension and paternal withdrawal. See Marion, The Idol and Distance, pp.244-247
290 “Being', because Marion also finds Levinas' concept of the other ultimately unsatisfactory, since for him it moves the problem from the level of Being to that of beings. The other is other as other being, and therefore to treat God as Other is still to assert that God needs to be a being to be other. See Marion, The Idol and Distance, pp.215-220. Marion here also finds Derrida's différence unsatisfactory because in the end it cannot guarantee distance, see pp.221-231.
theology of the cross, but his theology of the Incarnation can only be expressed in terms of the givenness of flesh. But, as Paul reminds us, Jesus took on the form of a slave, was born in human form (Phil. 2:7). There is an inescapable “beingness” about Jesus which cannot be avoided, however much it may shock us. At the very least, the Son needs being in order for the “without beingness” of the Father to be revealed, and to speak of the Son is to speak of God, radically present among us.

3.5.5 The Invisable Icon

In God Without Being Marion continues his reflection on the nature of the icon, developing two ideas especially. The first is the contrast between the idol and the icon. The problem with the idol, as we have already stressed, is not that it cannot be seen but that it can be seen too much. It may be the best that I can intend, but it is only what I can intend. There is no room for the transcendent. Idols display a resolute thereness, an immovability. The icon, on the other hand, is not so much my gaze, as the gaze of the divine on me. In looking at the icon (be it aesthetic or conceptual), I am as much or even more looked on than looking.

The icon is that which renders visible the invisible in its invisibility. For Marion, then, the icon contains or perhaps better opens up the invisible, that which cannot be fully intended because it is beyond intention. If the idol is that which we intend to the point of excess, in the encounter with the icon we find ourselves intended by the divine, by what is “unenvisageable”.

A concept can also be iconic to the extent that it allows the invisible to become visible in its invisibility:

The only concept that can serve as an intelligible medium for the icon is one that lets itself be measured by the excessiveness of the invisible that enters into visibility through infinite depth, hence that itself speaks or promises to speak this

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291 See, for example, Marion, God Without Being, pp.42-43
292 Marion, In Excess, p.103
293 It seems to me that this is precisely the criticism which liberation theology would raise against Marion. There is really no room for the kingdom of God in his thought, nor for Jesus who went around doing good (cf. Acts 10:38). Marion rightly argues against a diminution of the transcendent, but it may be the case that his theology goes the other way, and that the equal value and importance of the material is denied or lost sight of. If the invisible is all there is to be seen, will it not also become an idol? Here the insights of the Second Council of Nicaea can act as a counterbalance, with their insistence on the transcendent potential of the material. Nevertheless, perhaps this is precisely Marion’s point. There is, as Chalcedon tried to state, an irreducibility about both the transcendent and the immanent, and the iconic is that which insists on this irreducibility.

294 This is not an example that Marion uses, but one might contrast the idol here with the image of the Spirit given in John 3:8, the Spirit that blows where it wills. The idol, on the other hand, can only move where I will that it moves. On its own it is massively rooted and immobile.

295 “Whereas the idol results from the gaze that aims at it, the icon summons sight in letting the visible .... be saturated little by little with the invisible”, Marion, God Without Being, p.17. See also p.19, “such a gaze belongs here to the icon itself, where the invisible only becomes visible intentionally, hence by its aim”.

296 Ibid., p.17 f.
infinite depth, where the visible and the invisible become acquainted.... Valid as icon is the concept or group of concepts that reinforces the distinction of the visible and the invisible as well as their union, hence that increases the one all the more that it highlights the other. Every pretension to absolute knowledge therefore belongs to the domain of the idol.\footnote{Ibid., p.23}

This suggests that concepts should be subject to a strong hermeneutic of suspicion, since it is in the nature of concepts to universalise.\footnote{Concepts are, after all, attempts to abstract from the purely physical in order to assert a certain shared characteristic (the degree and possibility of this being open to endless debate).} Marion, as a philosopher, is not going to deny the possibility of conceptual thinking (since that itself would involve a concept and thus be self-contradictory), but to show what it must involve in order to remain iconic. This is another way of talking about distance. A theological concept must refer to God at the same time that it renders transparent the distance, and invisibility (indeed, “invisability”) of God. Above all else, this may be the major contribution which Marion can make to theology. It is particularly important in considering the relationship between the transcendent and the immanent.

One of the more influential books in theology over the past twenty years or so has been Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*.\footnote{Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970 (2nd ed.) Kuhn, as is known, was somewhat sceptical about the transference of his ideas to other fields, and many of the divisions which, for example, Bosch (see note 301 below) proposes are not strictly speaking paradigm shifts in a Kuhnian sense, since the old paradigms have not broken down completely, but co-exist with the new paradigms, or perhaps one might say conceptual maps.} Kuhn’s emphasis on paradigm shift as essential for change in scientific world views has been taken up, to give just two examples, by Hans Küng in fundamental theology,\footnote{See, for example, Hans Küng, *Theology for the third millennium: An ecumenical view*, New York, Doubleday, 1988} and David Bosch in missiology.\footnote{David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis, 1991} Paradigm shifts, especially in theological terms, can be understood as the breaking of idols, when it becomes clear that concepts are concealing rather than revealing. Marion’s work gives a language to talk about idols, and to that extent helps to arouse interpretive suspicion, in the sense of Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic of suspicion.\footnote{See Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1967, pp.350-352} Is this a concept which I impose, or which I am forced to use, and hence idolatrous, or is it one which is, as it were, imposed on me, which calls me on? Theology is perhaps more prone to conceptual idolatry than other disciplines, or so the history of persecution and enmity which it has initiated and endorsed would suggest. Marion warns the theologian of this danger, and especially calls on theology to address its concept of God. Does theology talk of God or “God”?\footnote{\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{2}}} Ibid., p.23}
The second area that Marion stresses in God Without Being, one which is already present in The Idol and Distance, is that of gift, of the gift which gives itself. One of the ways he does this is through a fascinating reading of the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). He avails himself of the fact that this is the only text in the New Testament where the word ousia occurs, in reference to the property which the son seeks to have divided. What is even more relevant and interesting for Marion is that the story begins with the son asking the father “Give me my share tes ousias that is mine”. Here it is the act of giving that precedes and gives rise to the possession of the ousia. But precisely in seeking to appropriate what is gift and make it his all, the son loses it and loses the filiation which is his. Only by letting the Father be the giver of gifts can he be restored to the right relationship with his father. The giving of the Father cannot be reduced to possession of the gift, because in possessing it, it ceases to be gift. The connection with the visibility / invisibility of the idol and icon is clear. To the extent that I seek to appropriate and control the gift, so that it is no longer gift but possession, I end up with an idolatrous relationship to it. The gift, which renders the giver visible in the giver's invisibility, is reduced to something that is purely and wholly visible, which reflects the recipient rather than the giver. As long, however, as it remains gift, remains something which directs its gaze towards me, and in that sense challenges me, and calls me to the giver, it is iconic.

One major difficulty that Marion faces in his desire to make gift the starting point for talk of God is one that is already encountered in Heidegger's discussion of the “Es gibt”. What is the status of the “Es”? Marion argues that it (“Es”, “It”) can only be understood from the perspective of the “gibt”, of the giving. The need is to avoid allowing Being to enter through the back door, so that the giver is defined in terms of Being, to say that, before giving, the giver is, and moreover is dependent on being (and thus Being) in order to give. In the gift, the giver is encountered, but in

303 His major work on this topic is Jean-Luc Marion, Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness (trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky), Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2002.
304 It is also interesting to note here that it is precisely after the phrase kai oudeis edidou auto, “no one gave him anything” (Lk 15:16)), that he comes to understand what has happened. In the non-giving, he begins to realise the gift.
305 Marion, God Without Being, pp.95-100
307 There is a helpful brief reading of the importance of Marion’s turn to the centrality of gift and givenness in Welten, “The Paradox of God's Appearance”, pp.195-198.
distance. Giving must preserve distance. The gap between the giver and the gift, between the gift and the one to whom it is given, and therefore between the giver and the one to whom the giver gives, must remain. It is this gap, which only the giving of the gift can create, that he calls distance.\(^{309}\)

It is, though, perhaps this question which leads Marion to focus increasingly on the notion of “givenness”.\(^{310}\) In *In Excess*, he writes

Givenness is equivalent in fact to the phenomenon itself, the two sides of which, the appearing (from the side of consciousness) and that which appears (from the side of the thing), are articulated according to the principle of an “admirable correlation” only because the first is taken as a given, given by and according to the second, givenness itself.\(^{311}\)

We are now back with the saturated phenomena.\(^{312}\) Among the most important and most iconic of these Marion considers the face.\(^{313}\) Here he is obviously and consciously drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, even if he sees himself as going beyond Levinas.\(^{314}\)

The face, saturated phenomenon according to modality, accomplishes the phenomenological operation of the call more, perhaps, than any other phenomenon (saturated or not): it happens (event), without cause or reason (incident/accident), when it decides so (arrival), and imposes the point of view from which to see it (anamorphosis) as a *fait accompli*. That is why what imposes its call must be defined not only as the other person of ethics (Levinas), but more radically as the icon.\(^{315}\)

The face is, then, regarded as the best example of the icon, as what most truly allows the experience of the givenness of the gift. This gift is always more than can be intended, more than can be appropriated, more than can be understood. There is, that is to say, always an excess, which fills us. Ultimately Marion will want to name (or rather de-nominate) this excess as God, as *agape*, love.\(^{316}\) But it is precisely a de-nomination, a naming that is

\(^{309}\) Marion, *God without Being*, 105

\(^{310}\) On Marion’s attempt to set up a phenomenological approach to love as givenness, see Derek Morrow, “The Love ‘Without Being’ That Opens (To) Distance. Part One: Exploring the Givenness of the Erotic Phenomenon with J-L. Marion”, *Heythrop Journal* 46 (2005), pp.281-298


\(^{312}\) Cf., the treatment of the idol and icon as saturated phenomena in Welten, “The Paradox of God’s Appearance”, pp.203-203

\(^{313}\) For more detailed treatment of this issue, see Robyn Horner, “The Face as Icon: A Phenomenology of the Invisible”


\(^{315}\) Marion, *In Excess*, p.118

\(^{316}\) Marion, *God Without Being*, p.47, p.108.
a not naming, because there is no reducing God to a name, or even to a “beyond name” to the extent that that is taken to be itself a name.  

3.5.6 L’adonné  
There is one final point which I wish to take from Marion. I do this very briefly here, in order to return to it in the conclusion. One of the concepts which Marion introduces is that of l’adonné. He suggests as a definition of this, “the one who receives itself from what it receives”. It can also be understood as “the one ‘given over’, gifted, or devoted to the self-giving phenomenon”. L’adonné is, then, to be understood as recipient, but as the recipient who becomes in receiving the given.  
Here we are dealing with the phenomenality of the other, the other as givenness. The imagery which Marion uses to talk about the reception of this givenness is powerful. “The given, unseen but received, is projected on l’adonné (or consciousness, if one prefers) as on a screen”. The point here is that the recipient is now, so to speak, invaded by the givenness of the other in such a way that there are no reductive terms to be used about this other. The other, for example, in terms of my interest in this work is not poor, certainly not the poor. Rather, the other, in their otherness, which in this case includes but is not limited to the experience of poverty, determines in some sense who the recipient (in this case, the theologian) is. The other presents or reveals himself or herself as givenness, as gift. In traditional theological language, this is nothing other than grace. The other is in this sense indeed sacramental, a mediation of the grace, the free giving, of God. The other is, then, graced – filled with the grace of God and a living symbol of this grace. This means, though, that there can be no prior assignment of role or function or task to this other, no prior judgement as to suitability or usefulness for theology.  
Marion’s concept of l’adonné is important for several reasons. It gives a way of talking about the theologian. It also allows the poor to retain their
“hermeneutical privilege”. The theologian receives his or her calling as theologian precisely in the collision with the other who comes in his or her complexity, which, in the case of Latin America and the people with whom liberation theology works, includes but is not limited to their poverty. Precisely and only as other, the poor are also a gift, an authentic gift which conditions the truth of what the theologian writes. I emphasise here that this is as other, and not as poor. To see the poor only as poor would indeed be a form of idolatry, for it is to make the most glaring part of the reality the only reality, and it is to fail to be led beyond this to what is transcendent in the person one encounters.

3.5.7 Concluding Reflections on the Contribution of Jean-Luc Marion

Criticisms of Marion's position have already been made in the course of this section and others could be made, too. For example, Mark Manolopoulos criticises Marion for his “severe and excessive dogmatism”. Although the examples he gives are questionable, and may represent a misreading of Marion, the charge is not altogether without merit, especially in that Manolopoulos also considers that Marion does not always allow sufficient space for undecidability, which would mean not allowing distance to be distance, for a decision is always a cutting off. Bruce Ellis Benson's questioning of Marion is also of some relevance. Benson asks whether it is possible to posit pure givenness outside of any horizon. He also asks what is actually gained by over-stressing the invisibility of God and the unnameability of God. As to the first, it seems to me that he is probably right to question Marion on this, but that in fact givenness is its own horizon, and to that extent it does lie also beyond horizons. As to the second, this seems to be a question which Marion also strives to respond to. In In Excess, which was published just after Benson's book, he underlines that any naming of God must maintain distance, “shield God from presence”. The fact that God is invisible is what allows God to be encountered or perhaps God to encounter us as pure gift, pure giving. If God is visible, intendable, then God will be perceived through already existing categories, among which the primary one is Being, and thus, as I argued above, “God” will be less than God.

323 Clodovis Boff, Teoria do Método Teológico, pp.178-180
325 Ouspensky notes that people are “turning into a means of production: [their] essential value lies not in the person, but in [their] function”, Theology of the Icon, Vol. 2., p.478
327 Benson, Graven Ideologies, 208-223.
328 Marion, In Excess, p.156
A third criticism is made by Joseph Moignt. He suggests that the idea of image is more appropriate, because “the carnal weight of the image is a more certain ‘measure’ of truth than the lightness of the icon”. His essential argument is that the image is a more grounded concept than the icon, since it is able to render more “incarnate” the reality to which it refers. Although this may serve as a helpful corrective to any tendency to idolise icons, it seems to run the same danger as that mentioned in the preceding paragraph. In other words, Marion is arguing that it is precisely the “lightness of the icon” which prevents it being grasped and defined and limited. In this sense, indeed, pace Moignt, Christ is the icon and not the image of the Father, for, in the classic definition of Richard of St Victor, *Pater non est Filius* and *Filius non est Pater*. The lightness of the icon is capable of bearing the *est* (*est Deus*) and the *non est* in a way which the image cannot, because it reduces too quickly. The icon is not a “measure” of truth, perhaps because truth, if it is to remain true, is immeasurable.

Marion is a complex and fascinating thinker, and his ideas, whether one ultimately accepts or rejects them, cannot be ignored by contemporary theology. The reason for this is admirably summed up by Ruud Welten, who begins by noting the problems inherent in theology using Marion. The theologian will destroy all that is phenomenological about the philosophy, he says,

> because by *idolising*, by fixing, our theologian has completed the *possibility*, turned it into an an actuality. In my opinion, Marion's phenomenology of possibility is a phenomenology of *hope* rather than a crypto-theology. If theology is addressed at all, it is only in the context of hope. Marion will not show us God: he just makes sure there is room for God to show *Himself!*

This stress on hope can accompany us in this work as I seek to draw especially on Marion's explanation of the reality and force of idolatry and the countervailing possibilities opened up by the icon, especially when understood in terms of gift and of givenness, and on the concept of *l'adonné*. The idol is that which ends up doing too much, which offers back to me everything, and thus prevents me in the end from seeing anything. Thus it will be necessary to question whether the concept of the poor in liberation theology, which appears to shed light and make sense of so much, can in fact end up preventing us from truly seeing. Against this, the icon, rather than being the object of my gaze like the idol (which is at the same time, in as far as in some sense it always reflects me

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330 Moignt, “Images, Icons and Idols of God”, p.139
back to myself, the subject of the gaze), is what gazes. It is uncomfortable, like being stared at intently by someone, because I am caught in the gaze of what I do not and cannot know, at least not fully. In this sense, the icon as concept remains open, a window to God, as the icons have traditionally been called in the Orthodox tradition. The icon is a symbol and as such it contains a surplus of meaning. It is gift, givenness which cannot be owned and possessed but only received.

3.6 Conclusion
Although my discussion of Jean-Luc Marion has been the final section of this chapter, in fact its starting point was taken from him. I wished to see the ways in which any concept can be either iconic or idolatrous. That is to say, it can point beyond itself or restrict everything to its own presence. The poor themselves, as a category used in liberation theology, are therefore clearly susceptible to either possibility: they can remain icons of Christ, a window which allows a privileged access to God, or they can be a sort of blind, being forced by liberation theology into becoming all. My contention is that the danger of idolising the poor has not been sufficiently or adequately addressed, either by liberation theology or its critics and nor has it been shown what tools liberation theology itself has to avoid this danger. To use another element I took from Marion, how can the poor be enabled to remain as given, or rather as sheer givenness?

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332 See, for example, Elizabeth Zelensky and Lela Gilbert, *Windows to Heaven: Introducing Icons to Protestants and Catholics*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2005. I refer back to the discussion on the Iconoclast controversy with which I opened this chapter. Charles Barber notes that although icons were often understood as presenting the visible (idols, then, for Marion), in fact the actual interpretation was more complex. The answer to the question of what could animate ‘mere’ paintings was, he says, predominantly “divine intervention, namely, through the operation of grace”. Charles Barber, “Icons, Prayer, and Vision in the Eleventh Century” in Derek Krueger (ed.), *A People’s History of Christianity*, pp.149-163, here p.153

333 Perhaps not surprisingly, given the phenomenological starting point, there are many points of contact between Marion’s “saturated phenomena” and the Ricoeurian understanding of the surplus of meaning in symbols. The difference lies perhaps in what might appropriately be called the point of view. A saturated phenomenon is one which views us or shows itself to us more intensely than we can ever grasp, whilst the surplus of meaning suggests that our view of the symbol is never exhausted. The idol lacks this surplus, which is why idols are not really symbols, since they possess only denotative and not connotative power.

334 I have not gone into the extent to whether some concepts are necessarily idolatrous or iconic, or whether there is some sort of neutral reality, which can be conceptualised iconically or idolatrously. This would be an interesting, if probably unanswerable, question. It seems to me that Marion, for example, would argue that the concept of Being when applied to God will always be idolatrous, but then what about Being? In part this is a hermeneutical question. As I employ the terms here, I assume that the reality of the poor, as experienced and lived in Latin America, is one which can be used in theology in ways that are iconic (and hence liberative) or in ways that are ultimately idolatrous.

335 Or, perhaps, it would be better to ask what steps can be taken to ensure that the danger is reduced to a minimum. By its very nature, it seems to me that the problem will always be there. Only other concepts can help overcome conceptual inadequacies, but these too will be subject to the same strictures. In this sense, it is a process, one which involves refining our concepts and constantly questioning them. Closure is, in Marion’s terms, always going to be idolatrous.
The first attempt to deal with the problem took us back to eighth century Byzantium and the Iconoclast controversy. This enabled us to start with a theological perspective on what in Marion and Levinas became essentially a philosophical problem. From the discussion of Iconoclasm and responses to it positives and negatives can be taken. Positively, there is the strong affirmation of the transcendent (iconic, in Marion’s sense) value of the material, and thus of humanity. Human beings can be icons, can be vehicles or media for God’s self-revelation. Put very simply, God’s creation reveals, or can reveal God, its creator. Negatively, however, we noted that the way in which these points were made tended towards the replacement of one totality with another, so that whatever was explicitly stated was in some sense implicitly denied. Iconicity was to be still controlled, and the infinite to be corralled within pre-determined boundaries.

The problem of totality led me to examine Emmanuel Levinas’ emphasis on the other. Levinas allowed me to present the poor as always other, as the one who commands, and whom I am called to substitute. It is the face of the other who demands that I respond, take responsibility. However, whenever this other demands of me something that will harm another other, the third, then justice enters, and the possibility of community and politics is also present. Marion’s at times critical engagement with Levinas still leaves open the possibility in terms of our question of using the Levinasian other as iconic.

The difficulty here, however, is well exemplified by Enrique Dussel’s contextualised appropriation of the concept. How can the other, the “singularly significant”, remain as such, and still be spoken of in terms of “class”, or “people”, or even “the poor” (os pobres, los pobres)? The other may call out to me on behalf not only of her- or himself, but on behalf of all the excluded others, all the widows, orphans and strangers, but if I reduce them to this other, I am ignoring the significance, irreducible and unique, of each one. The question, then, is how in practice is the third to be included, without reduction?

It is not a question of whether, at some assumed “objective” level, my desire to help the other poor achieve liberation is right. I am convinced that, in the face of the reality of Latin America, it would be hard to argue that the poor do not need change, and that if this change happens, it will be perceived as liberation. What is really at stake is how to make the move from the poor being rhetorically the subject of their own history (Gustavo

336 It is not quite so simple for either of them, but broadly speaking my treatment of both has been from a philosophical angle.
337 Purcell, Levinas and Theology, p.102
Gutiérrez) to their actually being so. Moreover, it is only if the poor are allowed to be truly other, which is to say truly who each person is, that they (each person) can be iconic, revelatory of God’s love at work in the world. Icons need transcendence and infinity and it is only if the poor are a surprise that they can be iconic. If I know what the problem is, what their problem is, and how to solve it, the poor become a cipher. If the poor are able to command me, to elicit my response, then I cannot know beforehand what they will command me to or what response they will demand. Then they enable me to transcend myself and to meet them in the infinity of the iconic gaze.

This chapter has taken us on a long journey. We have seen that concepts always run the risk of becoming idolatrous, even as they also possess the potential to be iconic. The concept we have focussed on is the poor as this is used in liberation theology. We have noted that the poor, in order to be iconic, must be treated – or, better, must present themselves to us – as other, in the Levinasian understanding of that term. The danger is, however, that the poor are too quickly reduced to totality, leaving us with the poor as idol.

What remains, then, is to see if there is any methodology or process which will allow us both to affirm the iconicity of the poor and to allow that very affirmation to remain open and iconic. In other words, we will need a dynamic method, one which allows theology to be questioned as much as to question, one which refuses to set or accept any final goals. It is with this in mind that we turn now to the work of Clodovis Boff.

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338 As we saw, this rhetoric has been rightly questioned by such as Juan Luis Segundo and Hugo Assmann, and I agree with their strictures concerning the rhetoric. And yet, the investigation into Levinas has once again raised the importance of subjectivity, where the other truly is the subject, not as a rhetorical device, but because only in perceiving the subjectivity of the other who calls on me can I hope to encounter my own fullness.

339 There is no absolute need to posit a totally individualistic concept of person here. If the other commands me to be other to him or her in community, then that is what must happen. Moreover, it is precisely the fact that I can be encountered that makes substitution possible, and this can only happen where there is a strong sense of community already present.

340 See E. Jeffrey Popke, “The face of the other: Zapatismo, responsibility and the ethics of deconstruction”, Social and Cultural Geography 5/2 (2004), pp.301-317. “I will go so far as to suggest that the discourses of modernity, by attempting to legislate certainty, have in fact created the conditions for an abdication of our ethical responsibility. This does not mean that the ideals typically associated with modernity … must be discarded entirely. Rather, it suggests that we must pursue them in the absence of hubris, and recognise that their potential lies precisely in their impossibility.” p.302, emphasis in original.