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## On the Manifold Meaning of Letting-Be in Reiner Schürmann

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## On the Manifold Meaning of Letting-Be in Reiner Schürmann

Ian Alexander Moore

Die geheimste Gelassenheit.

Gelassenheit fährt GOtt: GOtt aber selbst zulassen /

Jst ein Gelassenheit / die wenig Menschen fassen.

— Angelus Silesius

Herkunft aber bleibt stets Zukunft.

— Martin Heidegger

Despite his relative obscurity today (owing no doubt to his premature death of AIDS in 1993), Reiner Schürmann<sup>1</sup> has been called “one of the most important philosophers of

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<sup>1</sup> All translations for which I do not specify an English source are my own. When citing unpublished foreign-language material, I provide the original either in the body or in a footnote. I use the following abbreviations: DPF = Diaphanes Verlag, unprocessed private files, Zurich, Switzerland and Berlin, Germany; DW, LW = Meister Eckhart, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, herausgegeben im Auftrag der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft, 11 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936–); GA = Martin

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the XXth century” and “perhaps the most important thinker to advance the lineage of Eckhartian–Heideggerian mysticism.”<sup>2</sup> While many scholars who knew Schürmann and who still know his work today – which, after all, uniquely develops the philosophical and political implications of what Meister Eckhart and Heidegger had called releasement or letting-be (*Gelassenheit*) – would agree,<sup>3</sup> almost nothing is known

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Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, 102 vols. (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1975–); RSP = Reiner Schürmann papers, NA.0006.01, The New School Archives and Special Collections, The New School, New York City, USA.

<sup>2</sup> First quotation by Françoise Dastur, in an email to the author from 29 January 2021.

See also her preface to Reiner Schürmann, *Les origines: Récit* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2003), vii (“auteur de trois remarquables ouvrages de philosophie qui ont suffi à lui assurer une place au premier rang des penseurs de ce siècle convulsif entre tous que fut le siècle qui vient de s’achever”). Second quotation by Tobias Keiling, *Philosophische Rundschau* 67, no. 4 (2020): 366 (“dem vielleicht wichtigsten Weiterdenker einer Eckhart-Heideggerschen Mystik”).

<sup>3</sup> Schürmann has been praised by the likes of Giorgio Agamben (“wonderful book on the *Principe d’anarchie* [...]. Among post-Heideggerian philosophers, Schürmann is the only one to have understood the nexus that links the theological notion of *oikonomia* [...] to the problem of ontology and, in particular, to Heidegger’s reading of the ontological difference and of the ‘epochal’ structure of the history of being” [*The Omnibus Homo*

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publicly about the ends of Schürmann’s own path of releasement: about how, for

example, he discovered this term or, better, this way of life while a student at the

Dominican school of theology, Le Saulchoir, or about how it shaped the way he died

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Sacer (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017), 429)]; Alain Badiou

(regarding *Des hégémonies brisées*: “puissantes analyses ‘locales’ [...] et [...] catégories

générales [...] visent à une construction historique capable de rivaliser, tout en le

défaisant, avec le montage heideggérien” [letter to Schürmann, 4 May 1993 (DPF)];

Hans-Georg Gadamer (“Das Buch [*Le principe d’anarchie*] verlangt besondere Beachtung.

Es ist mit außerordentlicher Sorgfalt gearbeitet und folgt Heidegger insofern durchaus,

als es die Abweisung der Frage ernst nimmt, die Beaufret an Heidegger gerichtet hatte

[...]: ‘Wann schreiben Sie eine Ethik?’ [...] ausgezeichnet” [“Gibt es auf Erden ein Maß?

(Fortsetzung),” *Philosophische Rundschau* 32, nos. 1–2 (1985), 18–19)]; Mehdi Belhaj

Kacem (“the greatest Heideggerian of the 20th century. His thinking is the most

negative, the darkest in the history of philosophy, which is why he is no longer read,

and why he must, in my opinion, be read. [...] *Broken Hegemonies* [is] the greatest

philosophy book of the last 25 or 30 years” [interview with Olivier Zahm, *Purple S/S*

2011 issue 15; italics added]); and Emmanuel Levinas (“[*Le principe d’anarchie*] c’est une

Somme sur toute le pensée de Heidegger, dont la valeur spéculative et pédagogique fait

vivement souhaiter la publication” [in “Rapport sur la soutenance de la thèse de Reiner

Schürmann, le 22 juin 1981,” RSP: Box 1, Folder 13]), to name but a few.

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three decades later. And yet, as I will endeavor to show, this very early and very late work on and of releasement is crucial for understanding Schürmann’s trajectory and hence what he has to offer to thinking and being today — this in spite, or rather because of, the fact that the unpublished, often private work contrasts not only with his first book *Maître Eckhart ou la joie errante* (*Wandering Joy*) but also with his posthumous magnum opus *Des hégémonies brisées* (*Broken Hegemonies*). If, in his published works, Schürmann downplays or denigrates Christian releasement (about which more will need to be said) as derivative or even delusional, it is nevertheless this variety of releasement that set him on his path of thought. Christian releasement, in more than one sense, is also, as we will see, what awaited him at the end, as though his path had been a circle all along.

A common story, perhaps. The prodigal son, repentance *in extremis*, a Catholic funeral, etc. But the story I want to tell is different. I am interested less in the state of Schürmann’s soul than in the significance of the connections and disconnections between his thinking of releasement and his living of releasement. In light of the theme of this issue of the *Journal of Continental Philosophy* (“History, Memory, Interpretation”), I have also been motivated by broader hermeneutic questions such as: To what extent should or must one use archival and biographical documents in philosophical interpretation? To what extent, having encountered this material, can one sincerely forget or avoid it? What sort of history do we encounter in the *Nachlass*, in literary

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remains that have been left and preserved, whether intentionally or not, for posterity?

And what should we do with this inheritance?

I will begin with a brief history of the term *Gelassenheit* and a survey of Schürmann’s published work on it. I will then turn to archival documents from his time as a friar in the Dominican order, when he first committed himself to a life of releasement in the spirit not only of Eckhart and Heidegger, but also, specifically, of Christianity. Next, I will draw on a eulogy for Schürmann as well as on unpublished letters that he wrote toward the end of his life to show how the question of Christian releasement came back to the fore in Schürmann’s final years. Finally, I will consider whether the sort of releasement he proposes in his published work is itself sufficiently released.

## 1. SCHÜRMANNS PUBLISHED WORK ON RELEASEMENT

The word *Gelassenheit*, which Meister Eckhart coined in its Middle High German form *gelâzenheit* in the thirteenth century as a synonym of *abegescheidenheit* (“detachment,” “cutting away”; *Abgeschiedenheit* in Modern German) (DW 5: 283,8), today has the sense of serenity or calm composure.<sup>4</sup> However, for Eckhart, as for his successors John Tauler,

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<sup>4</sup> For Eckhart’s coinage, see Erik A. Panzig, “gelâzenheit und abegescheidenheit—zur Verwurzelung beider Theoreme im theologischen Denken Meister Eckharts,” in *Meister*

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Henry Suso, Jacob Boehme, Silesius, and Heidegger, the various senses of the word are closer to its root *lâzen* (“to let”; *lassen* in Modern German): it means not just letting go, but also being let and letting be. To capture these various senses, I will typically follow Schürmann in translating *Gelassenheit* with the English “releasement,” by which one should hear not merely a state wherein action (“I release”) and passion (“I am released”) have been completed, but, fundamentally, a way of being that is more akin to the middle voice: the deepest aspect of my being (what Eckhart calls the spark or citadel of the soul and Heidegger calls *Dasein* or mortality) and the deepest aspect of being itself are both implicated in the selfsame *event* of releasement. I will also render *Gelassenheit* as “letting-be,” as Schürmann himself does from time to time. Although Schürmann occasionally translates *Gelassenheit* as “serenity,” he doubtless always has the Eckhartian tradition of releasement and letting-be in mind, as he does when he uses the related concept of detachment.<sup>5</sup>

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*Eckhart in Erfurt*, ed. Andreas Speer and Lydia Wegener (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 338, n. 11.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of earlier usages of the term *Gelassenheit* and its cognates, see Ludwig Völker, “‘Gelassenheit’: Zur Entstehung des Wortes in der Sprache Meister Eckharts und seiner Überlieferung in der nacheckhartschen Mystik bis J. Böhme,” in *Getempert und gemischt*, ed. Franz Hundsnurscher and Ulrich Müller (Göppingen: Kümmerle,

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Schürmann uses the term “releasement” in a number of ways throughout his published corpus, including: (1) as an appeal to detachment or letting go; (2) as a description of the wandering, event-like identity of the essence of both God and the human; (3) as letting things be as they are; (4) as a way of living anarchically or “without why”; (5) as the very meaning of being itself; (6) as a militant means of radical enlightenment; and (7) as acceptance of the tragic condition of life. I will briefly discuss each of these uses of the word in turn, before turning to other, distinctively Christian, senses that it has in Schürmann’s unpublished writings.

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1972), 281–312.

Following the character of the scholar in Heidegger’s first “Country Path Conversation” (GA 77: 109), Emil Kettering (and he is not alone in this) sweepingly relegates the “mystical” use of the term *Gelassenheit* to the domain of the will: “Three things,” Kettering says with regard to the mystics, “belong to proper *Gelassenheit*: complete willlessness, i.e., giving up one’s self-will, turning away from everything of this world, and finally sinking into the ground of the divine will.” *NÄHE: Das Denken Martin Heideggers* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1987), 250–51. Yet, in his most famous sermon, on the topic of spiritual poverty, Eckhart preaches that those who would give up their self-will to fulfill the divine will are but “asses who understand nothing of divine truth” (DW 2: 490,8–491,1).



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In the introduction to his book on Meister Eckhart, first published in French in 1972 and then in Schürmann’s own revised English translation in 1978, Schürmann outlines (1) the call to let go and (2) the Eckhartian way of being of releasement. Schürmann designates releasement as “the central theme of Eckhart’s preaching,” the two essential dimensions of which he explains as follows:

His thought fluctuates between the demands of a law: voluntary disappropriation and impoverishment; and the description of a state: the original liberty which man has never lost at the basis of his being. The concept of releasement includes these two aspects. For Eckhart, learning how to give up everything [*Apprendre la conversion qui est ordonnée*] and understanding perfect identity with God, which is already given [*donnée*], are the two aspects, legislative and manifestative, of releasement. Bringing together the imperative of a moral course: “You will detach yourself” and the infinitive of a metaphysical discourse: “To be of the nature of God” — this is grasping Meister Eckhart. These two aspects will be joined under the designation “wandering identity” [*“identité pérégrinale”*].<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Reiner Schürmann, *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart’s Mystical Philosophy, Translation and Commentary* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne, 2001), xix–xx. In the original French version (I cite from the second edition: *Maître Eckhart ou la joie errante* [Paris: Payot &

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Releasement is at once the prescription to let go of, that is, to detach ourselves from, all distinction in ourselves and in God and the description of the selfsame essence of ourselves and of God. This essence or way of being (Middle High German *wesen*) is less a static state than a process that essentially holds sway (*west*) “before” and “beneath” not just the dichotomies of activity and passivity, immanence and transcendence, subject and object, time and eternity, but any and all ends by which action is directed.

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Rivages, 2005], 13), Schürmann uses the term *détachement* for “releasement” here and, typically, elsewhere. Although he occasionally uses what will become his preferred translation for *Gelassenheit*, namely, *délaissement* (62), in 1972 he had yet to clearly distinguish *abegescheidenheit/Abgeschiedenheit* and *gelâzenheit/Gelassenheit*. Compare pp. 82, 106 of the English with pp. 140, 177 of the French, for example. See also 190/296, where Heidegger’s use of *Gelassenheit* is rendered as “letting-be”/“laisser-êtré.” Schürmann’s decision to translate *Gelassenheit* as *délaissement*, not just in Eckhart (in whose authentic writings the term appears only once), but also in Heidegger, differs from other francophone scholars of Heidegger, who choose terms such as *souple douceur*, *sérénité*, *égalité d’âme*, *désinvolture*, *acquiescement*, and *laisser être*. In the 1930s and 40s, *délaissement* had actually been used to translate *Geworfenheit* (“thrownness”). See Dominique Janicaud, *Heidegger en France*, 2 vols. (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 1:26–28, 582–583, for details. In early papers, Schürmann also used *délaissement* to translate Heidegger’s *Verlassenheit* (“abandonment”).

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“Only what is without principle [*sine principio*],” writes Eckhart in his Latin

Commentary on John, “properly lives” (LW 3: 16, no. 19). Or as he puts it in a Middle

High German sermon:

Out of this innermost ground [of God and the soul] you should work all your works without why [*sunder warumbe*]. I speak truly: so long as you work your work from without for the sake of the kingdom of heaven or God or your own blessedness, things are truly not right with you (DW 1: 90,11–91,2).

In Schürmann’s words:

It is in the name of the strictness of releasement that Meister Eckhart criticizes the pretension of the supreme being, “God,” to the rank of the origin. The supreme being has still a “why,” namely all other beings. We speak of God as the highest reason behind life. We speak even of his will and his intention. But intentionality and purpose have no place in releasement. To think of God divinely [and hence to think of our fundamental oneness with God] is to render his [and hence our] ebullience aimless.<sup>7</sup>

In *Wandering Joy*, Schürmann typically describes this essentially anti- or, better, *a*-teleological and *a*-teleocratic way of being—which we are admonished to own up to in

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<sup>7</sup> Schürmann, *Wandering Joy*, 108. The corresponding French passage in *Maître Eckhart ou la joie errante* (on p. 181) is much briefer.

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our daily existence—as peregrine, wandering. (3) It is what allows a new relationship to things, defined no longer by possessive domination but by “supreme interest,” letting them be as they are.<sup>8</sup> On one occasion, Schürmann even calls the way of being of releasement anarchic,<sup>9</sup> which brings us to the fourth sense of the word.

(4) Schürmann develops the idea of anarchic releasement above all in his 1982 book *Le principe d’anarchie: Heidegger et la question de l’agir* (translated, less boldly, into English in 1987 as *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*). Ever since Plato, the Western way of relating to things, words, and actions, that is to say, Western “politics” in the broadest sense, has been governed by different principles reigning from one epoch or “eco-nomy” to the next. These principles have imposed upon all entities (*Seienden*; first layer) in a given epoch their universal “beingness” (*Seiendheit*; second

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<sup>8</sup> Reiner Schürmann, “Trouver enfin l’origine,” *La vie spirituelle* 127, no. 596 (May–June 1973): 394.

<sup>9</sup> Schürmann, *Wandering Joy*, 115–116/*Maître Eckhart ou la joie errante*, 197: “For Eckhart *ursprunc* (*archē*) is not the beginning of being; rather it is nothingness and anarchy. [...] The *ursprunc* as anarchy breaks the fetters of individuation and rids me of attachments and links, even of God [*L’ursprunc est anarchie: l’existence détachée me rend libre, sans attache ni lien*].” See also Reiner Schürmann, “The Loss of the Origin in Soto Zen and in Meister Eckhart,” *The Thomist* 42 (1978): 283.

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layer), i.e., what it means for them to be at all, whether this be createdness, objectivity, or “standing reserve,” to name just a few. Heidegger’s deconstruction of the history of metaphysics unearths that which makes these different principal arrangements possible. Heidegger variously refers to this third level, which precedes all epochal determinations, as: being or being as such (*das Sein* or *das Sein als solches*), *Seyn* (an obsolete spelling of *Sein*; cf. premodern “beyng” in English), and the appropriative event (*das Ereignis*). Schürmann, “violently” taking Heidegger’s thought “where the man Martin Heidegger undoubtedly would not so much have liked to see himself led,”<sup>10</sup> calls this third layer anarchy, since it is literally without (*an-*) principle or ground (*archē*). This ontological notion of anarchy is essentially tied to releasement for Schürmann. From the side of the human being, Schürmann writes:

The violence Heidegger espouses before the institutionalized assault is the non-violence of thinking. Indeed, what is thinking’s “nonviolent power”? It is to do what presencing [another word for the third layer mentioned above] does: to let be [*laisser être*]. [...] Releasement [*Le délaissement*] is neither a benign attitude nor a spiritual comfort. It is the sole viable path that may lead from action as mapped

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<sup>10</sup> Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 293/*Le principe d’anarchie: Heidegger et la question de l’agir*, new edition (Bienne: Diaphanes, 2013), 419.

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by calculative reason to a praxis not conceivable in terms of calculative reason, neither as its negation nor as its dupe. Letting-be is the only possible way out from under the principles [which pertain to the second level] and into the event [another reference to the third] because [...] it displaces the conflict [of needing to counter universalized violence with more violence of the same], [...] because] it is essentially a-teleocratic, and [...] because] it prepares an anarchic economy.<sup>11</sup>

From the side of being as such, which is (5) another sense of releasement that I mentioned at the outset, Schürmann notes not only that being is anarchic, but that this sense of anarchy can itself suitably be understood as a type of letting-be. Being as such *lets* presencing happen, *ohne Warum*. Although Heidegger never, to my knowledge, speaks affirmatively of ontological anarchy, he does celebrate Eckhart’s “without why” (GA 10: 56–58; GA 81: 187), and in one passage he even claims that “[t]he deepest meaning of being is *letting* [*lassen*],” which we are supposed to hear in a “non-causal sense” (GA 15: 363).

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<sup>11</sup> Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 277–78/ *Le principe d’anarchie*, 398–99. See also 85/114: “With the withering away of the principles that generate *telē*, action metamorphoses along with the economies. That is the hour when releasement can come into its own—the hour of closure—the hour when principial dispositions yield to anarchic ones.”

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(6) Despite Schürmann’s appeal to non-violence in the above block quotation, in a rare, late interview titled “On the Philosopher’s Release from Civil Service,” from 1988, Schürmann calls for a “radical enlightenment” that would bring releasement into the domains of activism and, if necessary, militancy. Although one would be hard pressed to call Eckhart’s mysticism “other-worldly,” although Eckhart does not typically tell people to abandon their political, social, or ecclesiastical obligations, and although Eckhart himself was quite active in the Church and communities in which he lived, Schürmann still contends that: “The kind of releasement of which Meister Eckhart speaks has to do with interiority.” Schürmann continues—and the critique would seem to apply as well to Heidegger’s thought—:

I can [...] think of quite a few situations in many countries in the 20th century where [Eckhart’s (and Heidegger’s) kind of] releasement does not bring one very far. For example, in the 60s, we on the left had hero[e]s—and the greatest of them were the Khmer Rouge. And my biggest shock was that when the Khmer Rouge finally came to power, they served us Pol Pot. Now, in such a situation, or in a situation of occupation, releasement is just a luxury that makes too much of interiority. And there, anarchism has to be taken in a very strict and militant sense including acts of terror. Man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage is not as serene an undertaking for us as releasement could be under the sway of interiority in the heritage of Augustine. It may take a great variety of forms

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according to context.<sup>12</sup>

According to Schürmann in this interview, in order to release ourselves radically from what Kant calls our “self-incurred tutelage,” we must not only *discursively* or *hermeneutically* deconstruct claims to ultimacy or absolute foundations. We must not only let ourselves correspond to being as itself a letting-be, which Schürmann glosses as an appeal to “‘comply’ with presencing, with the ever changing plies or folds according to which phenomena render themselves present to us.”<sup>13</sup> Letting-be is insufficient—or rather, in an age dominated by global technology and totalitarian tendencies, we must rethink releasement to *include* the possibility, and even temporary necessity, of *physically* violent opposition, howsoever precarious. I do not know whether Schürmann

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<sup>12</sup> “On the Philosopher’s Release from Civil Service: An Interview with Reiner Schürmann,” *Kairos* 2 (1988), 137–39. Schürmann’s friend Drucilla Cornell recalls that, although Schürmann was personally never opposed to activism, he did not believe it was philosophy’s role to change the world. “Remembering Reiner Schürmann: An Interview with Drucilla Cornell,” conducted by Ian Alexander Moore, *Philosophy Today* 68, no. 4 (forthcoming Fall 2024). If, however, philosophy is a matter of releasement, and releasement occasionally necessitates changing the world, then philosophy cannot altogether be dissociated from the need to change the world either.

<sup>13</sup> “On the Philosopher’s Release from Civil Service,” 138.



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ever called himself a pacifist. But, up until “On the Philosopher’s Release from Civil Service,” he always seemed to espouse a claim he made shortly after the publication of his quasi-autobiographical novel *Les origines (Origins)*: “Rather than speaking of violence, it would be necessary to speak of counter-violence. The necessity of such counter-violence is a new phenomenon. But, evidently, it can take diverse forms. I don’t agree with the bloody form of anarchy.”<sup>14</sup> In 1988, however, Schürmann contends that, when a Pol Pot reigns, we need to resist by whatever means necessary, including physical violence. And this too, remarkably, would be a form of releasement, one that goes beyond anything that can be found in Eckhart or Heidegger.

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<sup>14</sup> “Entretien avec un jeune écrivain allemand: Reiner Schürmann,” *La croix* (30 September 1977), 3, column 1. In *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, Schürmann does, admittedly, speak of the need to “set presencing free, prepare releasement [*délaissement*], actively liberate ourselves from epochal principles, and make sure that fewer and fewer of them will prevail” (95/*Le principe d’anarchie*, 131; emphasis added), but he takes pains to dissociate such action from violence (e.g., 59–60/81–82, 275–81/395–403). His important contribution to the 1987 book session on *Heidegger on Being and Acting* at SPEP is, in this respect, in the same vein as the book. See Reiner Schürmann, “‘Only Proteus Can Save Us Now’: On Anarchy and Broken Hegemonies,” ed. Francesco Guercio and Ian Alexander Moore, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 41, no. 2 (forthcoming).

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(7) This more militant form of releasement is nevertheless absent from *Broken Hegemonies*. In the latter, Schürmann again describes releasement as characteristic of both Heideggerian *Ereignis* and the way in which we are properly to comport to it. But, now, Schürmann interprets this comportment in terms of a tragic condition of being, into which we are ineluctably pulled by conflicting tendencies of universalization and singularization, natality and mortality, appropriation and expropriation. To release oneself is to unlearn the hubris through which philosophers have granted legitimacy only to the former terms in these binaries and thereby set up systemically violent, maximally subsumptive epochal principles (or what Schürmann now calls “hegemonic fantasms”). Positively, *Gelassenheit* means facing and living in accord with the “tragic truth that always ends by singularizing the hero to the point of killing him”; we “save the phenomena (*diasôzein ta phainomena*),” not by bringing them under some *principium* or *princeps*, but “by letting [*laisser*] them manifest themselves, by allowing the diremption [*dessaisir*] of theses that console the soul and consolidate the city, by letting diremption legislate.”<sup>15</sup> There is no explicit justification for militant counter-violence

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<sup>15</sup> Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 348, 577, 620, 647, n. 44/*Des hégémonies brisées*, 2nd ed. (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2017), 191, n. 44, 409, 666, 712. For the different role of “letting” in Schürmann’s reading of Luther, see especially 423–25/491–93.

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here, however,<sup>16</sup> and certainly none for the Christian religion, which would seem to be of an inextricable piece with the repressive drive for consolation and consolidation.

Indeed, none of the seven senses of releasement I have outlined—not even that of Eckhartian releasement to and in the ground of God, which Schürmann also develops at the end of the first volume of *Broken Hegemonies*—is specifically Christian. However, archival material from Schürmann’s time as a student of theology suggests that he was initially drawn to the tradition of releasement because of its connection to and relevance for Christian thought.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. CHRISTIAN RELEASMENT IN SCHÜRMAN’S EARLY WORK

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<sup>16</sup> This, despite the seemingly violent character of language such as the following: “If there is a task and a possibility of thinking today, it can only be that of letting normative consciousness collapse.” Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, 514/*Des hégémonies brisées*, 592–93. Cf. 558–59/644–45, as well as my comments on *Heidegger on Being and Acting* in note 14, above.

<sup>17</sup> It exceeds the bounds of this study to consider why Schürmann entered the Dominican order to begin with. Some of the harrowing experiences Schürmann relates in the early chapters of *Les origines/Origins*, trans. Elizabeth Preston (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2016) may have played a role.

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The earliest evidence for Schürmann’s interest in *Gelassenheit* dates back to a paper he wrote in May 1964 for a course at Le Saulchoir on the philosophy of history. The paper is titled “Über den Wechselbezug, bei Heidegger, von Wahrheit und Freiheit” (“On the Reciprocal Relation, in Heidegger, between Truth and Freedom”). One of the surprising things about this text, which Schürmann confesses to be the “product of my very first contact with Heidegger’s world of thought,”<sup>18</sup> is that it is devoted largely to Heidegger’s later philosophy, which Schürmann takes as a necessary basis for understanding the more Dasein-centered or, if you will, “subjectivist” approach to truth in §44 of *Being and Time*. Schürmann, it seems, was always reading Heidegger backward—an approach for which he would later be recognized in Heidegger-studies.<sup>19</sup>

The twenty-three-year-old Dominican’s aim in this early paper is to show how Heidegger’s key terms “Dasein,” “existence,” “truth,” and “freedom” all point, albeit in different ways, to the fundamental openness of the human being to being itself. Truth, for example, indexes a primal unconcealment of being that enables any and all relation

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<sup>18</sup> “Diese Arbeit ist das Ergebnis einer allerersten Kontaktaufnahme mit der Gedankenwelt Heideggers.” Schürmann, “Über den Wechselbezug, bei Heidegger, von Wahrheit und Freiheit” (RSP: Box 3, Folder 41–42), 1.

<sup>19</sup> Schürmann thematizes this approach especially in *Heidegger on Being and Acting/Le principe d’anarchie*, §2.

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toward particular beings, whereas freedom essentially refers, not to the ability to make particular choices, but at once to an involvement with this unconcealment and to a careful regard for it and for what shows up in it. For the first time, Schürmann sounds the leitmotif of his lifework: freedom, he says, is fundamentally a matter both of “letting oneself into (an engagement with) the openly manifest and unconcealed character of being [*Sich einlassen ins Offenbare, ins Unverborgene des Seins*]” and of “‘letting beings be’ [*Seinlassen des Seienden*]”.<sup>20</sup> A couple pages later, he even uses Heidegger’s (and Eckhart’s) crucial term *Gelassenheit*. Schürmann ties this term to what Heidegger calls “the mystery” (*das Geheimnis*) in the latter’s 1955 lecture “*Gelassenheit*.” Although the importance of the mystery will recede for Schürmann after his dissertation, it was, along with *Gelassenheit*, one of the main ideas animating Schürmann’s early thought and faith. The following year (1965), he would even call it “the key concept of his *Weltanschauung*,” that to which he had “committed” himself “philosophically.”<sup>21</sup> As he

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<sup>20</sup> Schürmann, “Über den Wechselbezug,” 8. The latter quotation comes from GA 9: 192.

<sup>21</sup> “Je me sens, une fois de plus confirmé dans mon ‘option philosophique,’ faite entre les quatre licenciés de cette année, le soir de l’examen autour d’une bouteille. Bernard L. avait choisi comme concept-clé de sa *Weltanschauung* ‘image de Dieu’; Chales B., ‘thymos’; Marcel S. ‘la pensée’; ton serviteur, ‘le mystère.’” Reiner Schürmann, letter to Claude Geffré, 13 August 1965 (DPF): By early 1969, Schürmann’s *Weltanschauung* would be more overtly Eckhartian. In a letter to Geffré from 6 January of that year, for

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puts it in this early paper on Heidegger:

The ‘obscure,’ the ‘mystery,’ which belongs in each case already to [human] existence [*Eksistenz*], can be found on both sides of [the latter’s] comportment: in freedom as the letting-essentially-hold-sway [*Wesen-lassen*] of being, and in truth as simultaneous dis-closing and letting-be-closed-off [*Ent-schliessen und Verschlosseneinlassen*] [...]. Both speak of a necessary obscurity of being, since beings always show themselves only in partial unconcealment, hence they precisely withdraw when they best show themselves. This doubleness, which we call the mystery, belongs to being, and Dasein must take it into account.

‘Releasement,’ i.e., letting oneself into (an engagement with) beings [*Gelassenheit, d.h. das Sicheinlassen ins Seiende*], requires of Dasein an openness for the mystery [*Offenheit für das Geheimnis*], in order to correspond, in a suitable

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example, he writes: “dans une heure, à la vigile de l’Épiphanie, nous lirons MEISTER ECKART [*sic*]. J’ai demandé à Paul-Dominique de nous faire cette lecture—il en était littéralement effrayé! Il m’a dit qu’être chrétien, c’est croire à la croix et la résurrection du Christ, et qu’Eckart n’en dit pas un mot. Ce qui est vrai. Je lui ai fait un développement sur ma Weltanschauung, sur le grand Tout et le fond de l’âme, mais ça ne l’a guère convaincu” (DPF).

form, to being.<sup>22</sup>

Schürmann, of course, is not yet a full-blown Heideggerian, let alone an expert commentator on the German philosopher. One can see this in his searching attempt to find a suitable language for the reciprocity between truth and freedom, as well as in his final remarks on a possible place for the Christian God within Heidegger’s realm of thought. In both cases, Schürmann relies on medieval philosophy, as might reasonably be expected of a young student at Le Saulchoir. Regarding the interplay of truth and freedom, he invokes the medieval doctrine of transcendentals, according to which terms such as “one,” “good,” and “true” express different aspects of being in general, without

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<sup>22</sup> “Das ‘Dunkele,’ das ‘Geheimnis,’ das der Eksistenz je schon zugehörig ist, findet sich auf beiden Seiten des Verhaltens: in der Freiheit als Wesen-lassen des Seins, und in der Wahrheit als gleichzeitiges Ent-schliessen und Verschlossenseinlassen [...]. *Beide* sprechen von notwendiger Seinsdunkelheit, da sich das Seiende selbst immer nur in teilstückhafter Entborgenheit zeigt, es sich darum gerade dann entzieht, wenn es sich am besten zeigt. Diese Doppelheit, welche wir das Geheimnis nennen, gehört zum Sein, und das Dasein muss ihr Rechnung tragen. Die ‘Gelassenheit,’ d.h. das Sicheinlassen ins Seiende, verlangt vom Dasein eine Offenheit für das Geheimnis, um dem Sein in gemässer Form zu entsprechen.” Schürmann, “Über den Wechselbezug,” 10. Cf. GA 16: 528.

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“contracting” the latter in the manner of the Aristotelian categories. Regarding God, Schürmann wonders whether Thomas Aquinas’ *Quarta Via* might not be applicable. Just as, for the Dominican Doctor of the Church, the degrees of goodness, truth, etc. in the world imply a best, a most true, etc., might not our experience of the imperfect disclosure of being imply the possibility of a complete disclosure, that is, “a God who, as eminently true and free, would himself essentially hold sway [*wesen*] in pure unconcealment”?<sup>23</sup>

Schürmann’s teachers, especially the Heidegger-inspired theologians Claude Geffré (to whom we will return in Section 3) and Bernhard Welte, often encouraged him to investigate the parallels between Aquinas and Heidegger’s predecessor Meister Eckhart; Welte drew some of these parallels himself, and even demonstrated some similarities between Aquinas and Heidegger.<sup>24</sup> But Schürmann’s teacher Morand

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<sup>23</sup> “einen Gott, der als eminent wahrer und freier in reiner Entborgenheit selbst *wesen* würde.” Schürmann, “Über den Wechselbezug,” 12.

<sup>24</sup> Bernhard Welte, *Denken in Begegnung mit den Denkern I: Meister Eckhart–Thomas von Aquin–Bonaventura*, ed. Markus Enders (Freiburg: Herder, 2007). Heidegger’s influence on Geffré can be seen, above all, in the latter’s “Le problème théologique de l’objectivité de Dieu,” in *Procès de l’objectivité de Dieu: Les présupposés philosophiques de la crise de l’objectivité de Dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 1969), 241–76, where Geffré argues that, just as



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Kleiber, for whom he wrote his 1964 paper, was skeptical. Kleiber, who had attended the famous 1955 Cerisy conference on Heidegger, found the language of transcendentals inapplicable to a philosophy that refuses to conceive of being as in any sense related to substance (cf. God as *ipsum esse subsistens* in Aquinas). As for Schürmann’s invocation of the “Fourth Way,” Kleiber bluntly accuses his student of going in the “wrong direction.” Aquinas’ proof, on Kleiber’s reading, pertains only to “God as the highest being [*Seienden*], not to being [*Sein*]. It thus belongs to theo-logic; thus, to thinking in the oblivion of being [*Seinsvergessenheit*].”<sup>25</sup> Heidegger’s concepts may well be “just as sharply defined as those of the medieval thinkers,” as Schürmann

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Heidegger seeks the proper place of being subtending its various senses throughout history, so too theology must seek the proper place of revelation subtending its rational explanations throughout history. A theological *Kehre* and a “topology of God” are needed, where “it would be a matter, no longer of rational man with his will to representation before God, but of the event–advent [*l’événement–avènement*] of God revealing himself in relation with man defined as welcoming, opening, *Gelassenheit*” (255).

<sup>25</sup> “falsche Richtung. [...] Gott als dem höchsten Seienden, aber nicht zum Sein. Er [the proof] gehört also zur Theo-logik, also zum Denken in der Seinsvergessenheit.”

Marginal annotation by Kleiber in Schürmann, “Über den Wechselbezug,” 12. Cf. GA 11: 66–68, 78.

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maintains.<sup>26</sup> Yet Schürmann’s recourse to the convertibility of the transcendentals and to Aquinas’ proof of God is, Kleiber concludes, “very questionable.”<sup>27</sup>

Schürmann seems to have taken Kleiber’s criticism (however legitimate it may be)<sup>28</sup> to heart. For, in Schürmann’s next paper on Heidegger from the following year, Aquinas appears only once, and in an endnote at that. In contrast to Kierkegaard and Heidegger, whose treatments of anxiety form the subject matter of this substantial early study, Aquinas has no conception of anxiety before the void; indeed, the Middle Ages, as such, “do not know this radical threat of nothingness [*néant*].”<sup>29</sup> And even when

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<sup>26</sup> “sind seine Begriffe genauso scharf umrissen wie die der mittelalterlichen Denker.”

Schürmann, “Über den Wechselbezug,” 12.

<sup>27</sup> “très discutables.” Evaluation by Kleiber written on the verso of the cover page of Schürmann, “Über den Wechselbezug.”

<sup>28</sup> Cf., for example, Welte’s attempts to salvage a non-ontotheological Thomism in *Denken in Begegnung mit den Denkern I*.

<sup>29</sup> “le Moyen-Age ne connaît pas cette menace du néant.” Schürmann, “Le sentiment d’angoisse comme constitutif de l’existence authentique: Une étude du ‘Concept d’Angoisse’ de Kierkegaard et de ‘L’Etre et le Temps’ de Heidegger” (RSP: Box 3, Folder, 41–42), 26, drawing on Hans Urs von Balthasar (XVI, n. 122). Passage on Thomas Aquinas on p. II, n. 10.

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Schürmann does point to certain formal similarities between Aquinas and Heidegger in a different paper from 1965 on philosophical anthropology, he is careful to highlight Heidegger’s refusal of hierarchy, infinity, and fundamental rationality, as well as Heidegger’s “radically different response” to the question of being. “Being,” for Heidegger, “is what *wells up*” (*jaillit* in French, a word that will be important for Schürmann’s interpretation of the event-like character of being in Eckhart): “not a perfection that traverses all of reality and diversifies itself according to an act; rather, it *appears* in the opening of existence to the world, as a *mystery* [*mystère*].”<sup>30</sup> Everything comes down to grace: not, to be sure, the grace of the transcendent God of faith—Kierkegaard’s option—but that of the mysterious “it” that “gives being” (*es gibt Sein*). As Schürmann writes in his essay on anxiety, citing Heidegger in the original,

In a postscript to “What Is Metaphysics?” from 1943, Heidegger will say that salvation, the emergence of authentic being [*l’être authentique*], is given by a certain grace [*donné par une grâce*] (*Huld, Gunst*); and later, in his lecture “Time and Being,” he has let [*laissé*] a Source of this grace be perceived: “Es gibt Sein;

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<sup>30</sup> “réponse radicalement différente.” “L’être est ce qui *jaillit*. L’être n’est pas une perfection qui traverse tout le réel et qui se diversifie selon un acte, mais il *apparaît* dans l’ouverture de l’existence au monde, comme un *mystère*.” Schürmann, “De universa philosophia” (RSP: Box 1, Folder 28), 28–29.

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das Es bleibt rätselhaft . . . Wir versuchen, das Es und sein Geben in die Sicht zu bringen und schreiben das ES gross [It gives being; the It remains enigmatic . . . We shall attempt to bring the It and its giving into view, and we will capitalize the IT].” The gift of this salvation is an event, and it is ineffable.<sup>31</sup>

In these early papers from 1964–1965, Schürmann is beginning to ally himself with Heidegger, especially his teaching of releasement, against figures such as Aquinas and Kierkegaard. This does not mean, however, that Schürmann has left the faith, even if he has no illusions about Heidegger’s methodological atheism (see, for example, GA 20: 109–110). Schürmann seems, instead, to be in search of a guide who, like Heidegger, is able to think outside the confines of Western metaphysics, while at the same time drawing from a different source, namely, that of Christian faith. Schürmann finds this guide—or so he believes, for a time—in his medieval Dominican predecessor Meister

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<sup>31</sup> “Dans un postscriptum à ‘Qu’est la Métaphysique?’ de 1943, Heidegger dira que le salut, le surgissement de l’être authentique, est donné par une grâce (Huld, Gunst); et dernièrement, dans sa conférence ‘Le Temps et l’Être,’ il a laissé percevoir une Source de cette grâce: ‘Es gibt Sein; das Es bleibt rätselhaft . . . Wir versuchen, das Es und sein Geben in die Sicht zu bringen und schreiben das ES gross.’ Le don de ce salut est un événement, et il est indicible.” Schürmann, “Le sentiment d’angoisse comme constitutif de l’existence authentique,” 27–28. Cf. GA 9: 310, GA 14: 9.

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Eckhart.

In a one-page text from late 1965, which is more a manifesto or confession than an academic study, Schürmann tries to reconcile, for himself at least, Eckhart’s mystical teaching of the Godhead beyond the representable and relatable God with doctrines of the Christian faith. “The reredos before which I sacrifice,” he begins, “has two panels.”<sup>32</sup> On the first wing is the abyssal, predicate-less Godhead, with which an aspect of the human soul is always implicitly, albeit rarely explicitly, united. Language must fall silent in the face of such divinity. Unknowable, this Godhead can nevertheless be experienced. Indeed, in the spirit of theological universalism, Schürmann suggests that it lies at the basis of teachings as varied as Taoism, Buddhism, and Heideggerian phenomenology. It is noteworthy that, at the age of twenty-four, Schürmann is already referring to both Eckhart and Heidegger, the two thinkers who would remain closest to him for the remainder of his life. He also cites the Anglican bishop John Robinson, whose best-selling *Honest to God* (1963) popularized the labors of the Protestant theologians Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Rudolf Bultmann and acted as a sort

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<sup>32</sup> “Le rétable devant le quel je sacrifie [...] comporte deux volets.” Schürmann, “Le rétable [...]” (DPF). This text is forthcoming in Reiner Schürmann, *Solve et coagula: Writings on God, Eckhart, and Zen*, ed. Francesco Guercio and Ian Alexander Moore (Zurich: Diaphanes).

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of “bombshell that blew the roof off the church.”<sup>33</sup> Schürmann writes:

Meister Eckhart says that the soul is above God, and God’s messenger, the bishop Robinson, would like God finally to be once again ‘without God.’ Heidegger, too, has been seized by that which is radically unknowable [*inconnaissable*]. I understand these authors, for the same gift has been given to all. And why should we be surprised that there are profound resemblances between the experience of the ‘Tao,’ of the Buddhist ‘Emptiness,’ of the thinker’s *Es gibt Sein*, etc., if it is the same divine that gives itself [*le même divin qui se donne*].<sup>34</sup>

The other wing of this metaphorical reredos, however, bears the image of an addressable, relatable God:

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<sup>33</sup> Lloyd Geering, “Theology Before and After Bishop Robinson’s *Honest to God*,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 31, no. 1 (2018): 224.

<sup>34</sup> “Maître Eckart dit que l’âme est au-dessus de Dieu, et l’envoyé de Dieu, l’évêque Robinson, voudrait qu’enfin Dieu soit de nouveau ‘sans Dieu.’ Heidegger, lui aussi, a été saisi par cela qui est radicalement inconnaissable. Ces auteurs-là, je les comprends car le même don a été fait à tous. Et pourquoi s’étonner qu’il y ait des ressemblances profonds entre l’expérience du ‘Tao,’ du ‘Vide’ bouddhiste, du ‘Es gibt Sein’ d’un penseur etc; si c’est le même divin qui se donne?”

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I know that God loves me, loves all men, and that he speaks to each human being, in a language intimate and wholly personal; that he is there at the heart of all human experience, and with all the more love as the latter becomes sin. Saint Dominic said ‘my Mercy,’ and I say it with him.<sup>35</sup>

It is important, Schürmann continues, to heed God’s call, although Schürmann also recognizes alternative paths to divine presence. In any case, trust in Christ’s power is key, at least according to this side of the reredos:

We should be able to feel, touch, and embrace this dialogue that men, so secretly, have with their Savior: this would be the most beautiful path for knowing Jesus Christ. I believe, however, that this experience of extension [*prolongement*] (of man to the Son of man), which is rather an experience of presence, is also had [*se fait*] in unusual ways, where the Catholic Church would scream in fear. It is not we who decide the ‘how’ of this dialogue, but Jesus Christ who knows, better

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<sup>35</sup> “Je sais que Dieu m’aime, aime tous les hommes, et qu’il parle à chaque être humain, dans un langage intime et tout à fait personnel; qu’il est là au coeur de toute expérience humaine, et avec d’autant plus d’amour que celle-ci devient péché. Saint Dominique disait ‘ma Miséricorde,’ et je le dis avec lui.” Schürmann quotes from Dominic’s prayer: “My God, my mercy, what will become of sinners?”

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than we do, the human dough and the ways of kneading it.<sup>36</sup>

In the final paragraph, however, Schürmann finds a different solution to his dilemma.

He looks not to the wings, as it were, but to the center or hinge that joins them.

Applying Heidegger’s idea of the ontological difference between being and beings, to what might be called a “theological difference” between the unnamable Godhead of the first wing and the loving father and savior of the second,<sup>37</sup> Schürmann writes:

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<sup>36</sup> “Il faudrait pouvoir sentir, toucher, embrasser ce dialogue que les hommes, si secrètement entretiennent avec leur Sauveur: ce serait la plus belle voie pour connaître Jésus-Christ. Je crois d’ailleurs que cette expérience du prolongement (de l’homme au Fils de l’homme) qui est plutôt une expérience de présence se fait aussi là, sous des modes insolites, où l’Eglise catholique pousserait des cris de frayeur. Ce n’est pas nous qui décidons de ce comment de ce dialogue, mais Jésus-Christ qui connaît mieux que nous la pâte humaine et les façons de la pétrir.”

<sup>37</sup> According to a report by Max Müller (*Existenzphilosophie im geistigen Leben der Gegenwart*, 2nd ed. [Heidelberg: Kerle, 1958], 73), Division III of *Being and Time* was supposed to examine, among other topics, the transcendent or theological difference between God, on one side, and beings, their beingness, and being, on the other. What I am proposing is a difference *within* the first side, since neither the Godhead nor the redeemer God should be understood simply in terms of the second.



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God ‘gives’ being [*Dieu ‘donne’ l’être*], and at the same time he has wanted us to be able to know him as something ‘ontic.’ Each human event is mysterious, but the source of the mystery is precisely this ‘rift [*faille*] in God.’ And the rift is a solid rock: with God’s help, I will be able to build there a life that has *meaning* [*sens*].<sup>38</sup>

Anyone familiar with Schürmann’s later thought should be surprised by this final sentence. Schürmann, *the* twentieth-century philosopher of “life without why,” posits a solid foundation on which to make his life meaningful? And yet, although he will eventually distance himself from foundationalism in all its guises—and, moreover, from Christianity—it is not as though the rock of this early text were the rock of Peter, on whom Jesus was to build his church (Matthew 16:18; see also Matthew 7:24).

Schürmann’s rock is not merely broken; oxymoronically, it is *itself* the break, the *faille* or “fault” that, in French as in English, has both seismological and axiological connotations. Intentions aside, this seemingly infelicitous, architecturally unsound figure anticipates Schürmann’s later “principle of anarchy.” It also demonstrates

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<sup>38</sup> “Dieu ‘donne’ l’être et en même temps il a voulu que nous puissions le connaître comme une chose ‘ontique.’ Chaque événement humain est mystérieux, mais la source du mystère est précisément cette ‘faille en Dieu.’ Et la faille est une pierre solide: avec l’aide de Dieu, je pourrai y construire une vie qui ait un *sens*.”

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Schürmann’s youthful struggle with Eckhart and Heidegger, with the teachings of the Church, and with what he would soon call “the unknown God.”<sup>39</sup>

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This struggle will not abate as Schürmann turns more explicitly toward Eckhart in the coming years. On the contrary, rather than resolve the dilemma between thoughtful adherence to the universalist Godhead and faith in the Christian God by opting for the former, Schürmann maintains the tension by developing the Christian character of Eckhart’s notion of releasement (this is not to say, however, that Schürmann was not already tempted by the first approach, as other texts from around this time attest).<sup>40</sup> We

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<sup>39</sup> See Reiner Schürmann, “Der unbekannte Gott,” *Der Christliche Sonntag*, no. 22 (29 May 1966): 174–75.

<sup>40</sup> The most conspicuous example of this can be found in a letter Schürmann wrote to Geffré from Israel during Sukkot (28 September – 5 October) 1966: “after many conversations with Jews, Christians, and Muslims here [...] I am becoming more of a monotheist, a disciple of Eckhart and Heidegger, someone who hopes for the experience of God, than a Christian preacher speculating on the essence of Christ [*nach vielen Gesprächen mit Juden, Christen, Mohammedanern hier [...] werde ich mehr monotheist*

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find the most prominent and detailed example of Schürmann’s understanding of Christian releasement in the 1969 version of what would eventually become his celebrated book on Meister Eckhart. He produced this early version, titled “Identité pérégrinale: Le concept de détachement dans les sermons allemands de Maître Eckhart” (“Wandering Identity: The Concept of Detachment in the German Sermons of Meister Eckhart”) as a *thèse du lectorat* at Le Saulchoir (a final thesis that enabled him to teach theology in the Dominican order).<sup>41</sup> For the expanded version that he defended as a doctoral dissertation in 1971 at the Sorbonne,<sup>42</sup> Schürmann excised nearly all of the pertinent material on Christianity.

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[sic], *Eckhart- und Heideggeranhänger, Hoffender auf die Erfahrung Gottes, als über das Sosein Christi spekulierender christlicher Prediger]*” (DPF).

<sup>41</sup> Bibliothèque du Saulchoir, call number 326 B 312, and Dominikanerkonvent St. Josef Düsseldorf, call number N-006-00219. Selections from the 1969 thesis are forthcoming in Schürmann, *Solve et coagula*. For more on Le Saulchoir and the course of studies during Schürmann’s time there, see Jean-Miguel Garrigues, *Par des sentiers resserrés: Itinéraire d’un religieux en des temps incertains* (Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> “Identité pérégrinale: Sermons allemands de Maître Eckhart,” Thèse pour le Doctorat du Troisième Cycle présentée à l’Université de Paris IV–La Sorbonne, June 1971, Bibliothèque du Saulchoir, call number 439 C 194.

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In all of the versions of his Eckhart-study, Schürmann characterizes *abegescheidenheit* or *gelâzenheit* as the core of Eckhart’s teaching, a claim with which most scholars, and indeed even Eckhart himself, would agree (DW 2: 528,5–6). As we saw in the previous section, Schürmann also emphasizes that this core has two aspects: one prescriptive (“You will detach yourself”), the other descriptive (“To be of the nature of God”). That is to say, detachment or releasement is at once the very way of being of both the Godhead and our deepest self *and* that which we must do to appropriate and to live in accordance with this way of being here and now. What is unique about the 1969 thesis, however, is not only its attempt to develop a practical, “wandering difference” (*différence pérégrinale*) beyond Heidegger’s ontological difference,<sup>43</sup> but also—and this will be my concern in what follows—its movement from negative theology to what he

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<sup>43</sup> Schürmann, “Identité pérégrinale: Le concept de détachement,” 132–39. Wandering difference relates to what Schürmann develops under the heading “symbolic difference” in texts such as “La différence symbolique,” *Cahiers Internationaux de Symbolisme* 21 (1972), 51–77, and “La praxis symbolique,” *Cahiers Internationaux de Symbolisme* 29/30 (1976), 145–70. Both projects date back to his initial plan for his dissertation, titled “Dieu et l’homme, son symbole: Une interprétation de Maître Eckhart,” a substantial draft of which survives in RSP: Box 2, Folder 23.

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calls Eckhartian–Christian “abnegative theology” (*théologie abnégative*).<sup>44</sup>

Eckhart demands total detachment: from multiplicity, temporality, and corporeality; from all relatable representation of God; from God as Person of the Trinity; even, at the deepest level, from the self as in any sense separate from the supra- or infra-Trinitarian Godhead. Yet, as Schürmann asks at the beginning of the final section of his thesis, if Eckhartian detachment goes so far as to result in the “loss of all support, exterior and interior, for faith,” then what can this “disappearance of God into the anonymity of the origin mean for a Christian”?<sup>45</sup> There are, Schürmann answers, two ways to understand faith. The first is personalist, “pertaining to the day” (*diurne*); it is faith in a protector, a counselor, a beloved—precisely the predicates of God from which Eckhart calls on us to release ourselves. The second way of faith Schürmann calls “nocturnal” (*nocturne*); it is faith in the hidden God, Job’s God, the God who abandons us or the God who was abandoned on the Cross; the God, in short, who has become a scandal. On Calvary, Jesus may have asked *why* (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34), but the

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<sup>44</sup> Schürmann, “Identité pérégrinale: Le concept de détachement,” 140.

<sup>45</sup> “Dans une lecture théologique, le détachement signifie la perte subie par le croyant, de tout appui extérieur ou intérieur à sa foi. [...] On peut se demander en effet, que signifie pour un chrétien la disparition de Dieu dans l’anonymat de l’origine.”

Schürmann, “Identité pérégrinale: Le concept de détachement,” 140.

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man of nocturnal faith empties himself even of questions; he “lives without why,” to recall Eckhart’s phrase. The detached find no support for their faith, and they have no need of support. But is there anything distinctly Christian about all of this? In other words:

The whole problem is to know whether the insistence with which Meister Eckhart announces the *kenosis* [*kénose*, “emptying”] of the Christian reflects and organically prolongs the *kenosis* of the Word made flesh, or whether, on the contrary, it instead follows from the universal experience that men have of the mystery of being [*mystère de l’être*] in general.<sup>46</sup>

Schürmann answers that Eckhart’s “nocturnal faith” is an “authentically Christian experience.”<sup>47</sup> For, it is nothing less than the ultimate *imitatio Christi*, an

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<sup>46</sup> “Tout le problème est de savoir si l’insistance avec laquelle Maître Eckhart annonce la *kénose* du chrétien reflète et prolonge organiquement la *kénose* du Verbe fait chair, ou si, au contraire, elle découle plutôt de l’universelle expérience que les hommes font du mystère de l’être en général.” Schürmann, “Identité pérégrinale: Le concept de détachement,” 144.

<sup>47</sup> “La destruction de la théologie comme science, chez Maître Eckhart est l’ultime conséquence d’une expérience authentiquement chrétienne, si tant est que la foi chrétienne se définit d’abord par l’imitation de Jésus.” Schürmann, “Identité

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emulation *par excellence* of Jesus’ charitable self-divestment.<sup>48</sup> Overcoming theology as a science does not mean overcoming Christianity. Disregard for Jesus of Nazareth does not mean disregard for the Way of the Cross. Even if Eckhart’s preaching of the birth of the Word in the soul is but one “‘cipher’” (in Karl Jaspers’ sense) among others for “the divinization of the detached man [*l’homme détaché*],” there is “a profoundly Christian inspiration” behind Eckhart’s teaching of *Gelassenheit* that Schürmann, for his part, is not yet ready to leave behind, whether exegetically or existentially.<sup>49</sup> At the level of

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pérégrinale: *Le concept de détachement*,” 143.

<sup>48</sup> Schürmann also characterizes Eckhart’s “appeal to active charity” (*appel à la charité active*) as being “of profoundly Christian inspiration” (*d’inspiration profondement chrétienne*). Schürmann, “*Identité pérégrinale: Le concept de détachement*,” 145.

Schürmann concludes his 1969 thesis with a reference to Eckhart’s German Sermon 86 (“*Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum etc.*”), where Eckhart subversively interprets the active Martha as superior to the contemplative Mary in Luke 10:38–42. Elsewhere, Schürmann speaks of a “spirituality of the profane,” wherein loving the other is already loving Christ. See Reiner Schürmann, “*Geistliche Dimension der Technik?*,” *Der Christliche Sonntag*, no. 29 (17 July 1966), 229–30.

<sup>49</sup> “*Mais la prédication de la naissance du Verbe en nous n’est pas encore une christologie. C’est plutôt un ‘chiffre’ parmi beaucoup d’autres suggérant la divinisation de l’homme détaché. [...] Il me semble que la pensée d’Eckhart, malgré les réserves que*

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exegesis, we find him writing in a paper published in January 1971:

Meister Eckhart, expert in itinerancy, leads us nowhere else than on the way of the Cross. You will follow Jesus on the path of total abandonment to the will of the Father; you will renounce yourself, and you will renounce God; only then will you follow the Son in his abasement and dispossession.<sup>50</sup>

At the level of existence, Schürmann found in Eckhartian releasement a way to live before the mystery of the hidden God and at the same time to follow the call to be a

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nous avons formulées et qu’il importe de ne pas minimiser, est d’inspiration profondément chrétienne.” Schürmann, “Identité pérégrinale: Le concept de détachement,” 145.

<sup>50</sup> Reiner Schürmann, “Maître Eckhart, expert en itinérance,” *La Vie spirituelle* 124 (1971), 31. Here he also writes: “Il y a [...] une inspiration profondément chrétienne dans ce laisser-être compris comme renoncement à tous les appuis de la foi.” Already in a paper from 1967 (forthcoming in Schürmann, *Solve et coagula*) titled “Les présupposés philosophiques de la Christologie de Maître Eckhart” (RSP: Box 3, Folder 41–42), Schürmann had written: “On pourrait dire que la pensée de Maître Eckart [*sic*] est ‘chrétienne’ non pas tellement parce qu’il s’interroge sur l’ontologie du Verbe incarné, mais parce qu’elle propose un chemin à l’existence qui est une ‘imitation de Jésus,’ une kénose du chrétien” (10).



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Christian priest.<sup>51</sup>

However, by June 1971, when he submitted the doctoral version of his thesis to the Sorbonne, little remained of the Christian character of releasement in his study.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See the recollections of Schürmann’s lifelong friend and (while they were students at Le Saulchoir together) lover Philippe Nouveau, *Le pari de l’amitié* (2011), Bibliothèque du Saulchoir, call number 498 D 602, pp. 57–61. In an email to me from 15 July 2021, another one of Schürmann’s confrères, Jean-Miguel Garrigues, wrote: “il [Schürmann] avait une lecture déjà [in 1967] très personnelle de Heidegger, dans un sens gnostique d’inspiration eckartienne [*sic*] dont je doute qu’il ait été conforme à la pensée du maître de Freiburg in Brisgau. Je n’étais pas très convaincu en particulier que sa préoccupation de ‘Du sagen’ (au sens de Martin Buber), de ‘dire Tu’ au ‘Sein’ heideggérien ait un sens dans la pensée de ce dernier.” For Heidegger’s own answer to the question of whether one can legitimately say “thou” to the *Es* that *gibt Sein*, see “Reiner Schürmann’s Report of His Visit to Martin Heidegger,” trans. Pierre Adler, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 19, no. 2 (1997), 67–71.

<sup>52</sup> There is only one pertinent passage on the subject, in which Schürmann writes: “The temptation is great to confuse the overcoming of Sonship with the overcoming of Christianity altogether. Hegelians, Marxists, Buddhists have taken this step. When it is measured by the criterion of the history of salvation, the thought of Eckhart will appear

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And, by 1975, Schürmann would interpret Eckhart’s Christianity as nothing more than a product of linguistic context. It became a matter of form rather than content. There is nothing here about following Christ in exinanition: “Meister Eckhart’s vocabulary is Christian. The attitude of Releasement reflects itself in a movement between man and God. I consider, though, that this is due to cultural conditions: the experience itself is not religious.”<sup>53</sup>

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indeed as hardly Christian. But the logic of detachment reflects [*répand un reflet*] the logic of the way of the cross.” Schürmann, “Identité pérégrinale: Sermons allemands de Maître Eckhart,” 258; *Maître Eckhart ou la joie errante*, 257. Yet notice what happened to the final sentence when Schürmann revised it for publication in the 1978 English version: “But it *may well be* that the logic of detachment *somehow* reflects the logic of the way of the cross.” Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart: Mystic and Philosopher* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 165; *Wandering Joy*, 162; emphases added. The indicative has become subjunctive, tentative.

<sup>53</sup> Reiner Schürmann, “Heidegger and the Mystical Tradition,” ed. Francesco Guercio, *Journal of Continental Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (2020), 288 (composed sometime between 1972 and 1975). See also Schürmann’s 1973 essay “Heidegger and Meister Eckhart on Releasement,” *Research in Phenomenology* 3, 95–96. Later in Schürmann’s work, even the term *kenosis* will assume the secular signification of the emptying out of ultimate

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It is noteworthy that 1975 was the year in which Schürmann left the priesthood. His ability to remain a priest—indeed his ability to remain among the faithful—seems to have been bound up with his ability to hear the *kerygma* in Eckhart’s teaching of releasement. Judging solely from his subsequent published writings, one would be justified in thinking he never heard it again. As Pierre Hadot, who served on Schürmann’s dissertation committee, recalls:

The two worlds of secret experience and of social convention were ultimately juxtaposed [for Hadot in his youth], because at that age I did not raise any problems for myself. Things were as they were, and that is all there was to it. Later, I met someone for whom this situation did pose a problem. It was Reiner Schürmann, who attended my classes for at least a year at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* [...] when he was a Dominican novice at the Saulchoir. He was very influenced by Heidegger, and his Christian faith was juxtaposed, but not harmonized, with his experience of “authentic” existence, of the openness to Being. He shared his personal notes with me, in which he expressed his confusion, and I was rather perplexed, not knowing how to help him. I tried to put myself into his Christian perspective, and to persuade him of the possibility

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normative authority. See, *Broken Hegemonies*, 4, 514, 601, 609/*Des hégémonies brisées*, 10, 592, 691, 700.

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of accepting this coexistence in himself, but I believe he ultimately renounced the Christian Faith.<sup>54</sup>

### 3. CHRISTIAN RELEASUREMENT IN THE END?

And yet, after his partner, the abstract painter Louis Comtois, died of AIDS at the age of forty-six in June 1990, Schürmann rekindled the question—which, as far as I know, had long gone out for him—as to whether the path of releasement can or does join the *via crucis*. Only, now, just a few years away from his own death, it was, for Schürmann, a matter less of following Christ’s *kenosis* at Golgotha (Philippians 2:7–8) than of releasement to Christ’s ascension near Bethany (Luke 24:50–51). To be sure, according to his mentor and friend Claude Geffré, Schürmann did die a death that was in accord with his early work on Christian–Eckhartian releasement. As Geffré explains in notes for a eulogy he delivered for his erstwhile pupil:

The search for truth was also a search for the unknown God. / Reiner had strayed from the institution and dogma of the Church. But his agnosticism was a mystical agnosticism. He had detached [*détaché*] himself from a too imperfect knowledge of God, but he remained fascinated by the inaccessible light of God—

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<sup>54</sup> Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 2nd ed., trans. Marc Djaballah and Michael Chase (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 7.

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especially since the death of his friend L. [...] He departed faithful to his Dominican master Meister Eckart [*sic*]—i.e., to detachment even from God [*détachement même de Dieu*]. [...] Detachment and divinity = *Gelassenheit*. Letting go [*Lâcher prise*]. He knew this peace in the final hour of his life, “humbly” ... countenance illuminated with peace.<sup>55</sup>

But, in letters to Geffré and others, Schürmann also opened himself to the possibility of a releasement to the promise of eternal life. Although there is much to say about these letters, I will try to confine myself to the essentials, focusing on the themes of light, life, and hope.

In his own life and work, Comtois was fascinated by the abstraction of light.<sup>56</sup> At

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<sup>55</sup> “La quête de la vérité qui était aussi une quête du Dieu inconnu. / Reiner s’était éloigné de l’institution et du dogme de l’Église. Mais son agnosticisme était un agnosticisme mystique. Il s’était détaché d’une connaissance trop imparfaite de Dieu, mais il demeurait fasciné par la lumière inaccessible de Dieu — surtout depuis la mort de son ami L. [...] Il était parti fidèle à son maître dominicain Maître Eckart — cad. au détachement même de Dieu. [...] Détachement et divinité = *Gelassenheit*. Le lâcher prise. Il a connu cette paix dans la dernière heure de sa vie, ‘humblement’ ... visage illuminé de paix.” Claude Geffré, homiletic eulogy for Schürmann (DPF).

<sup>56</sup> See Reiner Schürman, “Abstraction That Makes the Viewer Think: About the Last

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Comtois’ funeral, officiated by his hospital chaplain the Dominican priest John E. Allard (who would also, at Schürmann’s request, officiate the latter’s own funeral several years later), Schürmann read a single verse from the Gospel of John, which he took to encapsulate his partner’s faith: “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have *the light of life* [φῶς τῆς ζωῆς]” (8:12).<sup>57</sup> Or, in Schürmann’s French translation: “la lumière qui *conduit* à la vie,” “the light that *leads* to life,” i.e., eternal life. After the funeral, Schürmann told Fr. Allard that he now had reason to hope.<sup>58</sup> Hope in what? A letter to Geffré from around the same time provides a clue. There, in the wake of Comtois’ death, Schürmann relates that he is trying to sort out the difference between what in him belongs to the “megalomania of desire” and what belongs to “faith, perhaps.” When Jesus says, “I will see you again” (John 16:22), might, Schürmann asks, the “you” include both him and Comtois? Might they, being seen, be able to see one another again? Schürmann, “more serious than ever,” declares

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Paintings of Louis Comtois,” *C Magazine* 29 (Spring 1991), 6–7.

<sup>57</sup> Reiner Schürmann, letter to his sister, 4 July 1990 (DPF); Schürmann’s emphasis. In notes for his homily for Comtois, Fr. Allard (who shared them with me) speaks of this verse as “L’s creed.”

<sup>58</sup> “You have revived in many of us a dormant conviction that one is not a fool if one trusts one’s hope.” Reiner Schürmann, excerpt from a letter to Fr. John E. Allard, O.P., provided to me by the latter. Cf. Psalm 39:7–8.

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that, in this *possibility*, “I have hope.”<sup>59</sup> It is, admittedly, a restless hope, beleaguered by questions and scruples, but a hope nonetheless.

One of Schürmann’s questions, posed to Geffré in a 1991 letter that Schürmann sent from his summer retreat on the Greek island of Amorgos, ties this hope to releasement. After speaking of eternal life as “a progression ‘from light to light’” (a telling, if unintended, alteration of Paul’s “from faith to faith” in Romans 1:17),<sup>60</sup> of whether he might in some sense be able to communicate with Comtois through the Eucharist, Schürmann writes:

The great silence is so impressive. But one also confuses everything in it: the thoughts of God, aesthetic egotism, the presence of absent Louis ... It is like the light here [in Amorgos] that he loved so much: is letting oneself be seized by it

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<sup>59</sup> “Depuis la mort de Louis j’essaie de faire la part de ce qui relève de la mégalomanie du désir, et peut-être de la foi. [...] j’ai de l’espoir. [...] je suis plus sérieux que jamais.” Reiner Schürmann, letter to Claude Geffré, 4 August 1990 (DPF).

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Psalm 36:9 (“in thy light shall we see light”), the Nicene Creed (“God from God, Light from Light”), as well as Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann: Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Louise Gnädinger (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984), 3.232:

Freund, so du etwas bist / so bleib doch ja nicht stehn:

Man muß aus einem Licht fort in das andre gehen.

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[*s'en laisser saisir*] a surge [*élan*] toward him, toward God, or toward oneself?

These, at last, are my concerns.<sup>61</sup>

Whether Schürmann ultimately resolved these concerns for himself personally, it is noteworthy that his preoccupations toward the end of his life were centered not merely on releasement (which anyone who knows his writings would expect), and not even merely on the Christian releasement of *kenosis* (which those who knew him at Le Saulchoir might not find so surprising), but on *letting* himself be taken with a light that he was at least unable to deny came from God or was God himself. Schürmann had long let go of the reified God. But his hope in the light that leads to everlasting life was, I believe, a way of letting God be, come what may. Schürmann, at least for a moment, thereby fulfilled a wish that Gabriel Marcel once expressed in a lecture which

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<sup>61</sup> “Je crois aussi qu’ils ne désirent absolument pas son ‘repos,’ comme le disent les prières, mais bien plutôt une progression ‘de lumière en lumière’ (n’est-ce pas dans la Bible quelque part?) [...]. Le grand silence, c’est tellement impressionnant. Mais on y confond tout aussi: les pensées de Dieu, l’égoïsme esthétique, la présence de Louis absent ... C’est comme la lumière ici qu’il aimait tant: *s’en laisser saisir* est-ce un élan vers lui, vers Dieu, ou vers soi-même? Enfin, voilà mes préoccupations.” Reiner Schürmann, letter to Claude Geffré, 9 June 1991 (DPF). Cf. Schürmann’s letter to Jacques Laval, O.P., 2 June 1991 (DPF).



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Schürmann had translated into German a couple years before meeting Comtois:

I allow myself, dear students, to wish that at least for moments it will be given to you to see the light shine in your reflection, the only true light of which John speaks, and thus to find, beyond dubious resignation, a peace that passes understanding and whose portent [*Vorzeichen*] is nothing other than hope.<sup>62</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSION: *GELASSENHEIT POLLACHŌS LEGETAI*

As an epigraph to his 1971 doctoral thesis, Schürmann quotes Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art”:

What seems easier than to let a being be just the being that it is? Or does this turn out to be the most difficult of tasks, particularly if such a project—to let a being be as it is—represents the opposite of the indifference that simply turns its back upon the being itself? We must turn towards the being, think about it in regard to its Being, but by such a thinking at the same time let it rest upon itself in its

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<sup>62</sup> Gabriel Marcel, “Mein Leib–Mein Leben–Mein Sein” (trans. Reiner Schürmann), in *Dialog und Erfahrung: Vorträge in Deutsch*, ed. Wolfgang Ruf (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1969), 133. According to a letter in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Fonds Gabriel Marcel, NAF 28349 (22), Schürmann sent the translation to Marcel on 7 October 1967.

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way to be.<sup>63</sup>

This quotation, with its exhortation to let be and its recognition of the supreme difficulty of such an endeavor, could, as Bernard Flynn once claimed, just as well serve as the epigraph to Schürmann’s life work.<sup>64</sup> Schürmann is, indeed, the last great thinker of *Gelassenheit* in the lineage of Eckhart and Heidegger. To this tradition, he does not just contribute anarchic and even militant senses of the term; he also tries to work out a specifically Christian releasement that is easy to forget when one reads Eckhart and would seem, for Heidegger, to be a contradiction in terms, inasmuch as *Gelassenheit* is a key word of *thought*, not faith.

Now, I am not saying that Christian releasement, whether in the form of an imitative *kenosis* or in that of an openness to eternal life, is ultimately for Schürmann what substance, at the level of being, and correspondence, at the level of truth, were for Franz Brentano in his famous dissertation on Aristotle.<sup>65</sup> It would be outrageous to

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<sup>63</sup> Schürmann, “Identité pérégrinale: Sermons allemands de Maître Eckhart.”

Schürmann’s own translation in *Wandering Joy*. Cf. GA 5: 16.

<sup>64</sup> Bernard Flynn, “Reiner Schürmann 1941–1993,” *Social Research* 60, no. 4 (Winter 1993): v.

<sup>65</sup> Franz Brentano, *Von der mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seienden nach Aristoteles* (Freiburg: Herder, 1862).

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subject the manifold meaning of letting-be in Schürmann—who announces the closure of metaphysics precisely as the withering of the *pros-hen*-relation<sup>66</sup>—to Christian releasement as the word’s focal meaning or core-dependent homonymy. Nor, however, am I saying that the seven “secular” senses of letting-be that I outlined in section 1 are *merely* homonymous with the “sacred” ones outlined in sections 2–3. Releasement, to be sure, is more a process than a meaning. If it means anything, then it means liberation—to the extent possible<sup>67</sup>—from focal meaning, unidirectionality, and universality. But, letting the manifold be manifold also required that Schürmann give leave to all of the folds, including those of his own religious origins. I can, thanks to his literary remains, say at least this much about his life (whether or not he ultimately came back to “the” fold of the Church). More importantly, though, the *Nachlass*, together with Schürmann’s published writings, challenges everyone who stands in the lineage of releasement—and that means, although it would require another study to develop this, everyone who stands in the tradition of continental philosophy—to take *Gelassenheit*, in all of its

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<sup>66</sup> Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting/Le principe d’anarchie*, §6.

<sup>67</sup> For a discussion of the impossibility of its absolute attainment, see Schürmann’s remarks on natality throughout *Broken Hegemonies/Des hégémonies brisées*; compare also the two pieces collected and published under the title ““Only Proteus Can Save Us Now.””

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senses, seriously.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> My thanks to Michael Heitz, Schürmann’s literary executor, for permission to cite extensively from unpublished material, and to Kieran Aarons, Fr. John E. Allard, O.P., Peg Birmingham, Francesco Guercio, and Nicolas Schneider.