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## Phenomenology of Religious Experience IV: Religious Experience and Description Editorial

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# Religious Experience and Description: Introduction to the Topical Issue

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In phenomenology especially, reflective analysis of experience initiates all arguments in the theory of knowledge, including the access to its aprioris. In his early work, while defining the terrain of phenomenology, Husserl suspended metaphysical investigations neither because he did not value the discipline (he actually mentions metaphysics among “precious sciences”),<sup>1</sup> nor because he considered them incompatible with phenomenology, but because he believed that naïvely conceived metaphysical categories are imprecise and confused, and that metaphysics proper should follow phenomenological investigations. These investigations proceed from the phenomenological clarification of the formal ontology of consciousness, i.e., from descriptive metaphysics,<sup>2</sup> and culminate in the transcendental phenomenology.<sup>3</sup> I want to propose that religious experience, with its rich in metaphysical intuitions immanent–transcendent (to be distinguished from psychological hypostatizations of metaphysics) constitution,<sup>4</sup> sets a cornerstone for investigations of the links between metaphysical intuitions and verbal expression—which is what we mean by “description.”

In making a description, the meaning in the mental state of experience is united with the meaning in the words of expression, and the meaning in the words of expression is united with the grammatical structure of its sentences. These constitutive syntheses are instant and invisible: expression and experience (including its objects) present themselves as a lived unity. This unity is not anthropological or psychological (i.e., of the material parts of a person or elements of one’s psychological makeup) but phenomenological and essential: expression is a part of experience, whereas meaning and grammar may be viewed as analytic strata within the whole of experience.

After meaning is languaged, description turns into an object of the world, a real object; it can be recorded, passed on, remembered, repeatedly referenced, etc. At the same time, the meaning it expresses is subjective, lived, ideal. Thereby, the unity of the two crosses over the divide between the knowing subject and the real world. According to the transcendental phenomenological theory of knowledge, subjective intuitions and their real objects are correlated; similarly, one can presuppose a correlation or similar relationships between the words and meanings they express. However, correlation, in this case, would

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<sup>1</sup> Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 76.

<sup>2</sup> For reference to formal ontology as descriptive metaphysics, see Moran, “Introduction,” in Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, ixv. For comments on metaphysical categories and their clarification, see Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 157, 179, 249. For metaphysics in the early Husserl, see Trizio, “Husserl’s Early Concept.” For phenomenological realism, see Ales Bello, *Sense*.

<sup>3</sup> For grounding metaphysics in transcendental reflection, see Husserl, *Idea*, 3: “The critique of cognition in this sense is a condition of a possibility for a metaphysics.”

<sup>4</sup> For more on constitution of religious experience, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Wellbeing,” “Introduction;” for immanence–transcendence in religious experience, see “Self-Internalization,” “Religious Experience.”

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be of a different type—i.e., implying relationships of a different kind.<sup>5</sup> Husserl initiates a discussion of the nature of relationships between sign and referent in Investigation 1 and continues in Investigation 6, but his analysis remains unfinished.<sup>6</sup> It is, however, obvious that this kind of correlation would be different from a phenomenological adequacy of intention and its object and rather must be close in its sense to correlation in Euclid's or Hilbert's mathematical axioms, assuming not just isomorphism but the sameness of essence in two different identities. An example would be a correlation between points A and B of one line with points C and D of a second line: we can say they correlate only in case of complete sameness of the position of these points. In a naïve description of experience, this kind of correlation between verbal expression and the meaning of experience is mostly absent: the words of description do not exactly match the subjective meaning of experience. Hence, to clarify a description, including its meaning, semantics, logical relationships of inference, and, especially in religious experience, of judgments and predication, is to make the words of description capture as closely as possible the subjectively lived essence of experience. With regard to religious experience, this task is especially meaningful because of the claims to ineffability of the former (see more on ineffability below).

Be it in the context of texts, ritual, liturgy, or an individual spiritual guidance session, descriptions do not simply complete the fulfillment of the first-person experience but have to make sense to others. In order to perform this way, besides being a unity of expression and intended meaning, a description also has to carry within itself a coherent logical unity that captures the intellectual essence of experience, and thereby makes it intelligible to others. Conditions of possibility for this logical unity within description include a number of assumptions: e.g., that religious experience exists, that its subjectively lived meaning is a coherent unity, and that this coherent unity of experience can be put into language, etc. As Husserl makes very clear, issues of language in the expression of experience entail “discussions of a most general sort which cover a wider sphere of an objective theory of knowledge, and, closely linked with this last, the pure phenomenology of experiences of thinking and knowing.”<sup>7</sup> With regard to religious experience, such discussions evolve around the issue of alleged ineffability.<sup>8</sup>

## 1 Ineffability claims

If we consider the term “religious experience” in a Jamesian sense—i.e., broadly and as an umbrella for a variety of forms—the idea that such experiences are ineffable is nowhere in James. This idea gained popularity via the twentieth-century grassroots spiritual movements. Meanwhile, the traditional attitudes toward verbalizations of religious experience have always been contradictory. On one hand, the claims to ineffability are quite extensive: cf. “he who knows doesn't speak” in Taoism; Buddhist koans that presuppose no description of experience, etc. But on the other hand, there are many positive descriptions of religious experiences and even of practices by which such experiences can be evoked. Philosophy sided primarily with the first group of claims; and while positive descriptions served the research of religious experience *per se*, the matters of description in them have never been thematized.

The philosophical “apologetics” of ineffability is summarized by Webb in the entry on religious experience in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, easily available online, so there is no need to repeat it here.<sup>9</sup> I will focus instead on the fact that all such claims can be easily refuted. For example, one of the arguments *contra* “effability” is based on the claims that ordinary language is designed to express the meanings related to the realistic ontology of the world. Consequently, if experience is not grounded

<sup>5</sup> For a limited-scale discussion of mathematical correlations, see Hartimo, “Towards Completeness.”

<sup>6</sup> For more on timeline and sources in Husserl's analysis of signitive and significative relationships, see Melle, “Signitive und Signifikative Intentionen.”

<sup>7</sup> Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 166.

<sup>8</sup> For the ineffability claims, see Scharfstein, *Ineffability*; Sells, *Mystical Languages*.

<sup>9</sup> See Section 2, “Language and Experience,” in Webb, “Religious Experience.”

in the reality of the world, which religious experience evidently is not, it cannot be properly expressed in words. However, even though realistically conceived ontological claims in religious experience cannot be verified, this condition does not lead to ineffability. Most religious experience claims accessibility of “the Truth within:”<sup>10</sup> Ultimate Reality reveals itself directly in subjective intuition.<sup>11</sup> Hence, what is at stake is not a verification of the reality of an object, but of experience *per se*. Despite a unique character of each experience, experiences *en masse*, and religious experiences in particular, fall into categories and classes. This fact presupposes that essences of experience are intersubjectively recognizable. In fact, recognizability of attentional/somatic aspects of religious experiences in particular led traditions to string descriptions of separate religious experiences together as developmental “maps” of consciousness, each of which presents an internally coherent, temporally extended whole.<sup>12</sup> For example, the so-called Spiritual Ladder (in early and medieval Christianity) consists of individual experiences that are not only internally interconnected but even predictable.<sup>13</sup> So, if some aspects of experience may be deeply personal and thereby difficult to communicate, the practices of traditions show that the generalizable essences of religious experience can be communicated and thereby are expressible. Hence, experiences of the same type, or belonging to the same stage, *can* be verified – e.g., by comparing the first-person descriptions with those of others as well as by reference to the textual or living authority.<sup>14</sup> Thereby, if the critique of “effability” of experience proceeds from the assumption that its ontological claims are not related to real objects and thereby are unverifiable, the subject of expression in religious experience is experience itself—and the latter is verifiable.

The same line of reasoning holds if a critique of the description consists in a Wittgensteinian characterization of it in terms of contextual language games rather than a genuine description of a real experience. Reducing expression of religious experience to a language game doesn’t make much sense in the context of above-mentioned developmental maps and predictability. Rather, the issue of ineffability needs to be reformulated. The problem appears to be not whether religious experience is ineffable or not (because it is), but what are the aprioristic conditions of “effability.” One needs to distinguish whether a description of religious experience is a true description or whether it is predication:<sup>15</sup> i.e., whether/under what conditions one should treat description of religious experience as an expression of mental events outside of an assessment of their metaphysical status or the truth-value of its metaphysical claims, or whether/under what conditions it should be treated as an expression of metaphysical reality within.

I’d like also to suggest that the situations of alleged ineffability give us much more information about the intentional structure of experience than appears at face value. Imagine religious experience in which the whole manifold of its intentionality is likened to an apple that was eaten through by several worms: each has its own labyrinthine “track;” at some points these tracks intersect, at some points they diverge from one another, altogether creating an intricate lattice of paths each of which has its own entry and exit within the same unity of the apple. All together, this lattice appears random and unpredictable, but from the standpoint of each individual worm the paths make sense and can be described. Likewise, several intertwined, temporally extended essences can play a role in the same religious experience, which can actually have several forms of verbal expression, according to this or that essence.

<sup>10</sup> For inwardness of religious experiencing, see Flood, *Truth*; Lavelle, “Metaphysics.” Thanks to James Hart for directing me to Lavelle.

<sup>11</sup> For examples of traditional approaches that treat religious experience as self-revelation of Reality, see al-Attas, *Intuition*; Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*.

<sup>12</sup> For the developmental maps of consciousness in religious experience, see Wilber et al., *Transformations*. For a bright example of developmental stages of religious experience, see Porete, *Mirror*, 189–94. Also, see al-Attas, *Prolegomena*; Goleman, *Meditative Mind*.

<sup>13</sup> For an example of contemplative practice that leads to predictable developments of religious experience, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Theophanis.”

<sup>14</sup> For methodological approaches and examples of verifications of religious experience, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Cognitive Phenomenology,” “Theophanis.” For generalizable structures of religious experience, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Wellbeing.”

<sup>15</sup> For B. Russell’s distinction between description and predication in description, see Ludlow, “Descriptions.”

## 2 What is at stake in verbalizations of religious experience?

Expression (sentences), meaning, and objects (i.e., what expression signifies and what meaning is about) comprise three “logical atoms,”<sup>16</sup> i.e., three formal domains of subjectivity (objects meant as intentional objects) that co-contribute to a complicated, intuitively clear but poorly definable entity called “logic.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, logic, taken broadly, is intertwined with the realistic compass of intentionality and the ontologies of objects.<sup>18</sup> Since religious experience is usually organized around a number of metaphysical suppositions,<sup>19</sup> at the heart of the matter of description is the question of how these metaphysical assumptions and intuitions are woven into the logic of description and its intentional metaphysical reference. *Contra* Frege, Husserl demonstrated that *signitive* relationships—i.e., intentionality involved in relationships between a word (the sign) and its referent—are weaker than *significative* relationships mediated by fully developed intentionality of meaning.<sup>20</sup> For example, in comparisons between mathematical expressions and nonmathematical expressions, semantics doesn’t show significant differences. By contrast, ontological statuses of the objects intended and intuitions corresponding to the objects are of course completely different from each other.<sup>21</sup> The phenomenological method and, specifically, imaginal variations allow one to dissociate phenomenological intentionality from referential relationships between words and objects, as well as from the relationships of inference in the description. And yet, any analysis of intentionality is possible only on the basis of description. Thus, a phenomenological clarification of the description of religious experience implies clarification of both the meaning of experience and of the relationships between this particular meaning and description/expression of it.

Among different theories of religious experience, two groups are especially relevant to the present discussion. One group (e.g., Ricoeur, Barber) stresses the symbol-centered constitution of religious experience.<sup>22</sup> The other stresses its epistemic function (e.g., Dadosky, Lonergan,<sup>23</sup> Shah-Kazemi,<sup>24</sup> Alston<sup>25</sup>). Within the first position, experience turns religious by a binding of religious symbols within the so-called appresentative mindset.<sup>26</sup> Obviously, a religious symbol can hold together a logical unity of description in the absence of a real object of intention. However, within this theory it is difficult to explain claims to kinds of religious experience that are predominantly nonsymbolic: e.g., spiritual experiences or “non-dual” experiences. Descriptions of knowledge in such experiences zoom into the idealities in direct metaphysical intuitions, which are essentially nonsymbolic.<sup>27</sup> By attempting to express an immediate availability of a foundational reality (of this universe, of things, of one’s own life, etc.), such descriptions have more to do with personal metaphysics than with faith.<sup>28</sup> Some forms of meditation include the symbolical–attentional entraining of a predisposition to such experiences (e.g., the Ignatian Exercises, the Buddhist practice of Deity Yoga, or Christian meditations on the Spiritual Heart), but it is not clear what role these symbols

<sup>16</sup> Milkov, “Formal Theory,” 120.

<sup>17</sup> For problems with definitions of logic, see Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, especially “Prolegomena to Pure Logic;” Zalta, “Logic.”

<sup>18</sup> As is well known, phenomenology is metaphysically neutral. However, it upholds that the world-directed intentionalities sustain a transcendental-realistic orientation. For more on realistic orientation in the transcendental concept of intentionality, see Zahavi, *Husserl’s Legacy*. For more on the real object-directedness of logic, see Zalta, *Intensional Logic*; Rush, “Logical Realism.”

<sup>19</sup> For metaphysics in religious experience, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Wonder.”

<sup>20</sup> Byrne, “Husserl’s Theory;” Haddock, “Remarks.”

<sup>21</sup> Haddock, “On Husserl’s Distinction.”

<sup>22</sup> For symbols in religious experience, see Barber, *Religion*; Starkey, “Ricoeur.”

<sup>23</sup> Dadosky, *Structure*.

<sup>24</sup> Shah-Kazemi, “Notion.”

<sup>25</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*.

<sup>26</sup> Barber, *Religion*.

<sup>27</sup> For examples of direct metaphysical intuitions, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Intuition;” eadem “Direct Intuition;” eadem “Qualia.”

<sup>28</sup> Despite a frequent reduction of the phenomenon of faith to merely psychologically grounded belief, especially in psychological research, faith involves a developed set of metaphysical intuitions: see, e.g., Louchakova-Schwartz, “Wonder.”

play in the religious quality of experiences themselves. In the experiences themselves (e.g., in Tantra Yoga), if exercises stop delivering a metaphysically “fresh” sense of reality, the “religious” component in the experience evaporates: the religiousness of experience doesn't seem to depend on the symbol.<sup>29</sup> By contrast, when this component is present, descriptions reflect the same “luminous certainty” of intuition that characterizes any truth in the Husserlian inward evidence.<sup>30</sup>

Ordinarily, the certainty of intuition is based on intentional fulfillment – i.e., a condition in which intentionality adequately meets and grasps its object. However, in religious experience, the certainty of metaphysical intuition is at odds with its own “whatness:” what serves as an object of description in religious experience can be very different. On one hand, traditions such as Sufism, Vedanta, or Christian Hesychasm presuppose direct, immediate intuition of “the Real,” suggesting a presence of a *sui generis* ontological phenomenological sphere with its own specific essences and idealities. Adequate expressions of such intuitions produce an instant intersubjective recognition that, when verbalized, is often capable of inducing the same intuition in others – a so-called transmission. As Frege noted, signification of being is always ambiguous.<sup>31</sup> But in contrast with the ambiguity of the signifier-referent relationships, “unambiguously clarified, sharply distinct verbal meanings”<sup>32</sup> of signification (intentional relationships) appear possible.<sup>33</sup> Insofar as metaphysical intuitions are cast in grammatical clothing,<sup>34</sup> descriptions of religious experience constitute a special instance of logic.<sup>35</sup>

All the way back to Neoplatonism in Europe and to the Upanishads and Tantras in Asia, verbalization of “the Real” entails both affirmation and negation. In their different versions of “truth,” both kinds of expression employ an interconnected web of concepts—that there is a reality of things; that it gives itself in empirical moments of indubitable certainty; that the form in which reality is revealed can be reconciled with other concepts about reality, normative, and theoretical, in logically coherent propositions and judgments, etc. – enough to create a misleading reference to logically coherent intellectual essences that, however, do not express the direct intuition at the core of the experience in question. Traditions tried to “cut through” the network of concepts by clarifying semantics of description: e.g., by distinguishing between the primary and secondary meanings of words.<sup>36</sup> For example, the primary meanings – e.g., of Sanskrit *ananta*, “limitless,” or *Brahman*, an untranslatable word that often means the universal limit of magnitude – give intuition of reality a positive expression. Similarly, a religious experience of identity, “I am That” or “I am He,” also became a subject of semantic analysis, etc. Both examples are from the monistic Indian philosophy of Vedanta, which presumes the Absolute to be available in direct intuition in a mode different from and stronger than that of the reality of objects. Other traditions (e.g., Sufism) use the power of group dialogue (Turkish *sohbet*) to deploy all possible meanings till the group intuition emerges<sup>37</sup> – i.e., signification in description works indirectly and intersubjectively. In other instances (e.g., in the spiritual philosophy of Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi), the metaphysical intuition has to be first naturalized and then described.<sup>38</sup> The task of the phenomenological clarifications of description would be exactly to break through the cloak of traditional interpretations and examine how and if the intentionality of such descriptions “bends” ordinary syntax and semantics in order to capture the extraordinary figures of meaning.

<sup>29</sup> This author's personal observations during years of serving as a spiritual guide and meditation teacher.

<sup>30</sup> For “luminous certainty” of inward evidence, see Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Haaparanta, “On Frege's Concept.”

<sup>32</sup> Paraphrasing Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 154.

<sup>33</sup> For clarified description of metaphysical intuitions see Tymieniecka in Louchakova-Schwartz, “Dia-Log(os).”

<sup>34</sup> Paraphrasing Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 167.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. interesting hints that mathematicians were involved with spiritual practices, in Graham and Kantor, *Naming Infinity*.

<sup>36</sup> Ye, “Wada, T. (2020) Navya-Nyāya Philosophy of Language.”

<sup>37</sup> Louchakova, “Experience.”

<sup>38</sup> For an example of philosopher's naturalization of metaphysical intuition, see Suhrawardi in Louchakova-Schwartz, “Way.”

### 3 Incompleteness in religious description

In what follows, I give an example of how the “ineffability” in religious description is related to specifics of its intentional structure. Across several traditions, a frequent expression of religious experience would be “I am He”<sup>39</sup> – meaning I am not the self but something else – which at first glance not only appears logically absurd but even has a psychological correlate in psychopathology. However, if such a description emerges in the context of a completed axiomatic religious system<sup>40</sup>—such as, e.g., a Vedantic claim that this universe is the Self and therefore each self is nothing other than that Self – it can make perfectly logical sense. In Vedanta, which claims this is signification of the direct (empirical) metaphysical intuition, expressions that follow this structure received a near-canonical status.<sup>41</sup> Vedanta treats them as descriptions of the state of affairs or predications, because it is only in the case of its being a predication that the description of “I am He” experience can have an emancipatory value. To this end, the tradition developed a set of reflective logics, each of which offers its own proof of the validity of the statement.<sup>42</sup> (Cf. the paths through the apple in the above-mentioned metaphor.) In these logics, none is capable of delivering a complete set of proofs, because each logical proof leads to a problem that is insoluble within this line of proof. Thus, a new line of logic needs to come in, but it also has a limit, and so on *ad infinitum*. Hence, none of the logics is capable of grasping the whole of experience: there is always an indeterminacy at the end of the description. Since each logic references a particular aspect of experience, the problem of “ineffability” can be reformulated as a problem of foundationalism: i.e., the problem of the self-evident ground (empirical/intuitional, in the sense of being given) that is required for different reflective logics to operate and for the judgment about experience to be shaped and enter the expression. In the example above, the expression will be founded on the reflective analysis of self-awareness resulting in the expression “I am He.” Different lines of reflective logical proofs that support the predication “I am He” will refer to different essences of self-awareness. (Again, cf. the paths through the apple.) Such expression, however, is tainted by Gödelian incompleteness—i.e., a condition of indeterminacy – because at the end of each logic, a new question with a requirement for the next set of proofs emerges. So, while a description sets the experience of self-awareness as “He” as an intersubjective truth-value, at the same time it is never capable of delivering a finalized set of proofs Hilbert-style, but rather falls within Gödel’s framework. Thereby, ineffability claims may have validity, but not while taken literally. Their existence reflects a certain difficulty in the expression of religious experience, but this difficulty does not have to be taken for the fact that experience cannot be described or understood. Rather, the logical and other relationships in the inner unity of description and experience incorporate incompleteness, and this intuitively perceived logical incompleteness passes under the claims of ineffability. The incompleteness in itself may serve as a specific denominator for religious experience as opposed to other kinds of experience.

### 4 The contents of this issue

Having provisionally established these ideas, one would expect that investigations of the matters related to description of religious experience will proceed in a manner of systematic stepwise clarification. However, religious experience and the language of description have already been subject to many separate reflections, as well as natural judgments, ending up in redundant or contradictory ideas that obscure the naturally emerging systematic sequence of inquiry, as well as the phenomenon of religious experience itself. Therefore, we proceed so as to clarify small areas of this vast field here, excising an obscuring concept

<sup>39</sup> See multiple examples of the structure “I am He” in Sri Ranjit Maharaj, *Illusion*; for Christianity, Porete, *Mirror*, 193.

<sup>40</sup> For Husserl’s manifolds and Hilbert’s completeness theorem, see Ortiz Hill, “Husserl.”

<sup>41</sup> For an example of nearly canonical statements in Vedanta, see Uskokov, *Deciphering*.

<sup>42</sup> For an example of reflective logics of Vedanta, see Lakshmidhara, *Advaita Makaranda*.

there, till these incremental spectacles of clarity will start to coalesce into a larger, coherent unity of understanding.<sup>43</sup>

The papers in this issue coalesce around these themes.<sup>44</sup> Several papers focus on the metaphysical potentialities within the phenomenological approach. Post-Husserlian phenomenology incorporated metaphysics in two forms, as phenomenological metaphysics of being and of appearing.<sup>45</sup> However, both have been viewed in the context of phenomenological reduction: i.e., as subsidiaries of the epistemological wing of phenomenology. A path via religious experience opens a different venue aiming at metaphysical realism.<sup>46</sup> To this end, Lyonhart identifies true ontological intuition of the “world-horizon” in experiences of faith in several classes of experience. Hart, in reflection on different kinds of wonder, revives the ancient convertibility thesis, applying it to experience itself – a bold move, considering the formal status of ontological investigations of consciousness in the early Husserl.

Stepanenko, O'Rourke, and Barber discuss pragmatic/performative aspects of language in descriptions of religious experience and the limitations that these impose on description. In his overview of the empirical dimension of religions, Benson references examples of pragmatic avoidance of definitions – which can be extended toward our topic as a pragmatic reluctance to embrace nonperformative, emancipatory, epistemological issues in description. Gillham, while also considering the pragmatics of description, elevates the discussion to analysis of relationships between experience and faith. A similar emancipatory motion is made by Nitsche, who discusses speaking about the invisible in contexts of relatedness within any kind of experience. Černý, on a related note, examines descriptions of self-revelation of the invisible according to Michel Henry. Wiskus, turning to Augustine's *Confessions* and *De Musica*, shows how description reveals the Divine through the rhythm embedded in specific memory. Salim, and Schellekens and Dezutter, view descriptions with regard to their capacity to capture the psychological aspects of religious experience; following Walther's psychospiritual phenomenological frame of reference, Feise-Mahnkopp links description to the contexts of clinical practice in mental health. Gołębiowska examines an aspect of description that is controversial with regard to religious experience<sup>47</sup> – the Kierkegaardian irony.

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<sup>43</sup> Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 175.

<sup>44</sup> Majority of the articles published in this topical issue were presented during the Second Regional Conference of the Society for the Phenomenology of Religious Experience, hosted by Valparaiso University on October 10–12, 2019. This topic also opens into a larger book project carried now by the Society.

<sup>45</sup> Marion, *Reduction*.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Ales Bello, *Sense*.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Barber, *Religion and Humour*.



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