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Phenomenology of Religious Experience II: Perspectives in Theology Editorial

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Phenomenology and Theological Research

Introduction to the Topical Issue of “Open Theology” *Phenomenology of Religious Experience II: Perspectives in Theology*

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This topical issue of “Open Theology”, *Phenomenology of Religious Experience II: Perspectives in Theology*, addresses various aspects of phenomenological investigations in theology. An overarching unifying theme of the issue can be outlined as follows: Can rigorous phenomenological science serve theology in ways that turn theology itself into a system of knowledge in its own right and distinct from the natural and historical human sciences? It never hurts to remind ourselves that the focus of phenomenological research on subjectivity and consciousness, in European philosophy as it is understood by Husserl in “Crisis” and in his essay “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science”, grew out of theological reflection if not out of the sense of immediacy in first-person religious experiences (cf. DeRoo paper in this issue). It is unquestionable that theologies of different kinds actively participate in shaping ideologies and play a central role in forming both religious and secular lifeworlds. However, there were hardly any reflections on the role of theology in constitution of knowledge in the history or sciences, and even less research on theology’s relationship with deontic logic or the unity of motivation which defines the flow of history. Within theology itself, an outstanding problem remains a lack of methods by which theology can study itself or address its own unique and specific subject matter, which, in our understanding, would be the eidetics of a specific case of transcendence, between human being and God. While analytic approaches continue their longtime friendship with theology, and even gave birth to analytic theology, the famous theological turn in French phenomenology remained questioned by theologians with regard to its validity, largely because of the view that phenomenologists are not trained theologians but philosophers who do not know theology well enough to do theology proper and therefore replace it by philosophical investigations. Therefore, in this issue, we present papers which illumine the research potential of phenomenology within traditional theological terrains, but on the roads less traveled. Not surprisingly, many of these roads go through less known aspects of religious experience, or reveal a hidden presence of phenomenology within existing theological agendas.

Kristof Oltvai’s scholarly analysis of Pope Francis’ Pontifical texts in this issue reveals the Pope’s likely familiarity with French theological phenomenology, particularly Emmanuel Levinas. Such phenomenological influences are not only, and perhaps not at all, theoretical, but rather relate to the experience of a particular kind of transcendence, towards God as the Other. As an experience in which the self realizes its structure, a kind of religious experience is defined by one’s human situation. In this context, one may mention the well-known work of William P. Allston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (1993), considered to be an analytic work in theology. Less well known is that this major analysis in Allston’s own work was preceded in 1964 by his English translation of Husserl’s *The Idea of Phenomenology*, which means phenomenology was among the core influences in Allston’s research.

Given phenomenology’s established status as the final court of appeal in clarifications of experience, finding the influences of phenomenology in theological endeavors is not surprising; however, upon closer examinations and attempts to work out exactly how these influences can be formalized in the direction

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of systematic science of phenomenological research in theology, the naïve intuitions of possibility turn into riddles. For example, Esterson and Louchakova-Schwartz show the parallels between the emerging structures of experience in religious contexts and the methodological and systematic treatment of experience in a variety of reductions used under the umbrella of phenomenological method. Such parallels refer not to the reflective layer of experience or to the eidetics associated with its transcendental character or existential modes, but to the fact of *reduction* per se. Relevantly to such analysis, Schutz, in his 1945 essay *On Multiple Realities*, noted that reductions are implicit in the natural givenness of experience; similarly, Bachelard indicated that reductions are inherent to poetry. If the phenomenological and transcendental attitudes bring with them their own set of reductions, how do we ensure that phenomenological method doesn't distort the givenness of experience in theological contexts? Essentially along the same lines, Bermant, in this issue, questions the validity of phenomenological analysis with regard to non-Christian theologies, specifically, the Buddhist ones. In a related line of thought, DeRoo attempts to turn the reading of Husserl's term *Geist*, traditionally understood as a reference to human consciousness, to the theological meaning of "spirit" or even "spirituality". Then again, it may be possible that in using phenomenology to address the problematic of theology, one ends up analyzing one kind of spirituality by another kind of spiritual discipline, resulting in a circle of errors caused by conflicts between differently directed reductions.

On the other hand, it would be hard to deny that the theological or religious attitude, that is, a supposition of the existence of transcendental Other or God, illumines the breadth of human experience and possibilities of consciousness otherwise unavailable for analysis. This we see in the papers by Cyfko, Nelson and Koetke, Verducci, Pastro, and Sandru, all of which point to the forms of experience whom, being defined by their subjects as religious, enrich and enhance various areas of psychology, philosophy and applied theology. A rather general but interesting observation can be made that while the phenomenological research of religious experience delivers valid new knowledge and adds to the understanding of subjectivity and human consciousness, the most valuable insights emerge when such experience is approached phenomenologically but within the religious attitude.

How can we reconcile this observation with phenomenology's claim to metaphysical neutrality¹? We can argue that the presuppositionlessness of phenomenology means not an unequivocal elimination of all metaphysical assumptions, but rather, bringing in assumptions which preserve the givenness of experience relevant to the context of investigations². For example, Marion studies the forms of experience relevant to Trinitarian theology³, Henry – to Christology⁴, and Levinas – to the rhetoric of otherness which can be applied to the ethical communities of faith⁵. In 2015, Rivera introduced the term "phenomenological theology"⁶; this term should be understood generatively, in relation to the unity of motivation which brings up this or that form of religious insight in a manner of Husserl's *Erste Philosophie*, that is, in correlation with the background of religious-ethical style and forms of intentionality predominant in the current *Geist*⁷. When approached exclusively as an exercise in explaining doctrinal positions in reasoning, and without phenomenology as its ally, theology suffers from a "convincingness deficit"⁸. However, would phenomenology stand up to such a collaboration⁹? With the religious attitude as both the subject matter and the condition of possibility for theological investigations, can phenomenology continue as phenomenology proper? Several considerations apply. First, surrendering a stance of metaphysical neutrality in favor of religious attitude would mean not just thinking "God in experience" constitutively or ontologically, but

1 For phenomenology's metaphysical neutrality, see Zahavi, *Husserl's Legacy*, 30.

2 For such adjustment of the metaphysical neutrality claim, see Sarna, "On Some Presuppositions"; Zahavi, *Husserl's Legacy*, 63.

3 Marion, *Being Given*; Marion, *In Excess*.

4 Henry, *I Am the Truth*.

5 For otherness as a token of infinity as opposed to the sameness of totality, see Levinas, *Totality*.

6 Rivera, *The Contemplative Self*.

7 For more on the inner history of religious experience, see Dahl, *Phenomenology*.

8 Kirkpatrick, "Analytic Theology"; Bartlett, "The Worldview".

9 Cf. Simpson, *Merleau-Ponty*.

allotting the Absolute a kind of immanence necessary for real participation in experience¹⁰. This leads to a very difficult question: Are there aspects of the first person consciousness which can be co-shared between human being and the Absolute, in a manner of properties or essences and not just in eidetic thinking? In the present volume, Louchakova-Schwartz gives an example of this kind of “sharing” in the Gathas of Zarathushtra; also, Pastro brings up a reference to a similar theology in discussion of the option for the poor derived out of the phenomenology of Michel Henry. One would expect the Levinasian approach, which is connected in its source with the Talmudic Judaism, to suggest otherwise, but through Cyfko’s analysis of passivity, or Sandru’s analysis of resistance, God’s immanence in religious experience appears possible, albeit in forms which are different from the transcendental givenness of the world.

Examining such shared aspects presupposes not only *locating* the sphere of religious experience, but *characterizing* such a sphere with regard to its origination and its situated conditions of truth. Just these few initial concerns show that a doxastic approach shifts the paradigm of phenomenological investigations, from the focus on egological consciousness to the consciousness which is shared with the invisible Other, who participates, either remotely or closely, in constitution of the former. Building such a phenomenology is a matter of research. As *Wissenschaft*¹¹, phenomenology operates by submitting empirical data to the verdict of reason. Westphal calls phenomenology a descriptive form of empiricism¹². However, the “descriptive” part makes a big difference: empiricism and phenomenology exercise radically different approaches to experience. In order to describe experience, a phenomenologist exits the natural attitude and enters the attitude of phenomenological reduction, thereby gaining an access both to the rigorous, scientific treatment of subjectivity, and to the fresh outlook on something very familiar, i.e., one’s own consciousness. One of the arguments against an “overconfident” admittance of religious experience into theological nomenclature (under an “experiential-expressive” mode of it) is that it would mean romanticizing experience in the absence of due reflection¹³. But, as noted by Leonard¹⁴, theology’s interest in experience changes over time; and so we don’t ask whether experience can be a source of theology, but how we can *accurately and critically* approach religious experience as such¹⁵. This is illustrated in this issue by Esterson’s analysis of experience in Hasidic Judaism and in the writings of Swedenborg.

In the doxastic approach to phenomenology, reduction plays a dual role: on one hand, it prepares messy experience for *critical and accurate* reflection of reason; at the same time reduction keeps analysis “data-driven”. However, the analytic suspension of the idea of God could mean throwing the baby out with the bathwater, that is, losing the very core of experience. The methodological “storehouse of phenomenology—*epoché*, bracketing, reduction, transcendental subjectivity”¹⁶— is always modified according to the need of the phenomenon under investigation, which in the case of a theologically-minded phenomenology would be God’s presence in the given, and the ego’s engagement with it. This suggests including the non-eidetic forms of intuition, e.g., imagination (in the work of Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, *apud* Verducci, in this issue) or the intuition of life (e.g., Pastro, in this issue)¹⁷.

In the preceding research, it has been shown that God’s participation in experience finds conditions of possibility in several phenomenological locales, such as self-awareness, embodied subjectivity, intersubjectivity, the invisible, and affective feeling¹⁸. The present issue widens this spectrum of possibilities towards passivity (Cyfko), dynamics of call and resistance (Sandru), or and teleological generativity of consciousness (Verducci). Clearly, the answers to the possibility or impossibility of phenomenological

10 Seifert, *Discours*; Mezei, “Realist Phenomenology”.

11 For more on theology’s *Wissenschaft*, see Pannenberg, *Wissenschaftstheorie*; Westphal, “Phenomenology”; Zachhuber, “Wissenschaft”.

12 Westphal, “Phenomenology”, 523.

13 Biernot and Lombaard, “Religious Experience”.

14 Leonard, “Experience”.

15 Cooke “The Experiential ‘Word’”, 72, quoted in Leonard, “Experience”, 44; for a similar argument, see Gunther, “Bergson’s Reflective Anti-Intellectualism”, for the defense of Bergson against accusations of anti-intellectualism.

16 Natanson, “Alfred Schutz”, 4.

17 For more on direct intuition, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Direct Intuition”.

18 Louchakova-Schwartz, forthcoming.

theology emerge out of the given, *not in generalizable reflection but in concrete situatedness*. As Bloechl says in commentary on Lacoste:

On the one hand, Lacoste rejects the modern habit of grounding religious thought in the category of experience (e.g., Schleiermacher) and in its place proposes an account of our “liturgical” relation with God. On the other hand, he also rejects any attempt to submit the meaning of that relation to the self-authenticating reason of a system (e.g., Hegel). These two efforts are of a single piece¹⁹.

It is possible that “realistication” and “theologization” of phenomenology go hand in hand, and that the “phenomenologization” of theology makes its agenda more susceptible to the realities of hands-on research.

Most of the papers in the issue were presented at the Second Regional Conference of the Society for the Phenomenology of Religious Experience, which took place in Berkeley on January 27-28, 2018, at the Jesuit School of Theology of the Santa Clara University.

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¹⁹ Bloechl, *From Theology*, 13.

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