

Phenomenology of Religious Experience

Vincenzo Lomuscio*

Key-Phenomenon and Religious Meaning

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Abstract: In this paper I develop a phenomenology of religious experience through the notion of key-phenomenon. My analysis moves from a general phenomenology of situation, in which we have to relate different phenomena according to a sense. What does “according to a sense” mean? My suggestion is that we should look for a relationship among these data when we find a key-phenomenon (among a series of phenomena) that would enlighten all the others. This key-phenomenon would show a non-phenomenal meaning which would make all the others understandable. Each other datum, therefore, becomes the witness of invisible meaning through a key-witness. The key-phenomenon we choose determines the role (i.e., the truth) of each datum within its situation. This phenomenological relationship belongs to both the sense of day-life situations, and that one of possible religious situations. If the religious interpretation of a situation depends on our choice of key-phenomenon, or key-witness, we have to define what kind of key-phenomenon constitutes a religious intuition.

Keywords: phenomenology, philosophy of religion, hermeneutics, Husserl, Heidegger, Marion

1 Phenomenology of situation: what defines the phenomena

I am walking along the hall of the History of Philosophy Department and I see many students in front of the door of the professor’s room, at the end of the hall. Some of these students hold a stack of copies, probably lecture notes. This situation is constituted by different phenomena which are probably linked. These phenomena are the door of professor’s room, the bustle of students, the copies. If I pay attention, I can also observe that some students are reading these copies, while others are going in to the professor’s room and others are coming out. To understand this situation I have to understand the sense of these phenomena, their meaning. This meaning is something that concerns all, or many, of these data, because it constitutes that which the other phenomena are ordered around.

Surely, to intend it I have to look behind the door, but let us assume that I have to intend the situation from a distance, without the possibility of walking toward the professor’s room. I have to read through the situation, only observing these phenomena. Why do I intend that there is a unique sense for all these phenomena? Why do I move my intention towards the professor’s room?

These intentions depend on my knowledge of the university, because I know that a reason for students’ behaviors is often their professor. Yet, without my previous experiences within the university, by a mere phenomenological way, I could point to the inside of the room, because it seems to be the *center* of those phenomena, and they are relating to this center. Here we begin to define an eidetic law: each phenomenon shows at the same time its relationships, and *to intend a phenomenon we look for its relationships*. In this case I look for relationships among students and copies and a professor’s room. I already suppose that these three phenomena relate among each other.

Yet, if each phenomenon establishes relationships, what is the border between a phenomenon and another? Why are these data *three* phenomena instead of only *one*? Furthermore, I could distinguish many

*Corresponding author: Vincenzo Lomuscio, Italy; E-mail: lomusciovi@gmail.com

other phenomena in the same situation, for example two students who laugh, or a particular kind of pen in a student's hand, or the inclination of light that comes in through the window.

In the same situation I could identify many other phenomena, but my intention has chosen only these three data: students, copies, and a professor's room. Why? I have already begun to interpret the situation because my intention has chosen certain ones of all the possible phenomena. In this *choice* there is *already an established relationship* among phenomena. Indeed, every time I identify a datum, I identify a relationship. The students who are coming in and coming out of the door and the door is what bonds the students. The students are identified in their relationship with the door and vice versa. The copies are identified in their relationship with the students and vice versa. If I were to consider the whole situation as a unique datum, I should establish another kind of relationship, for example I should relate this hall with another department of the university.

When we direct our intention to a phenomenon, that is, when we identify a datum, we establish a relationship. This relationship is a *possibility for...* In this case, I identify three phenomena because I establish relationships in what I'm observing. What I consider does not appear to me as an inventory of data, but as a whole to define. My early step is to identify the phenomena, and I can identify something in an indistinct *whole* only by marking some *parts*. I can distinguish the parts only when I distinguish a *difference* among them, and I can distinguish differences among them only when I establish *relationships* among them. Without this relating I could not direct my intentionality on those three data and the whole of the situation could remain an indistinct totality. When my intention enlightens a phenomenon, my intention enlightens a relationship among two or more phenomena. I can begin to interpret the sense of phenomena or, as Husserl says, to move my "intending meaning" toward its "fulfilling meaning"¹ only because I intend a happening of relationships. Through this relating, I intend something to which all are related. In our example, through my relating I intend a main relationship with the professor's room, looking for the invisible reason which traverses the phenomena.

As Heidegger argues in *Sein und Zeit*, our structural openness to the world, that is, our "understanding" (*Verstehen*), is an openness of possibilities, or "Being-towards-possibilities" (*Sein zu Möglichkeiten*) on which we develop our "interpretation" (*Auslegung*). We begin to understand the world as *disclosing* its possibilities, and then we begin to interpret it, *working-out* its possibilities:

The projecting of the understanding has its own possibility – that of developing itself. This development of the understanding we call "interpretation". [...] it is the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding.²

Each datum is opened through a relationship. There is not "what is?" without "with what is related?"; there is no "substance" without "relationship". To open a relationship it is not necessary to know what I relate, because the knowledge of data can only follow by the possible relationships among them. Only because I begin to open their possible interactions, can I begin to distinguish the phenomena. Only because I begin to open possibilities (understanding) and to work-out these possibilities (interpretation) can I begin to define the data. I can distinguish and interpret the phenomena because I intend them within a totality of relationships.

As the appropriation of understanding, the interpretation operates in Being towards a totality on involvements which is already understood – a Being which understands.³

Before *Being and Time* Heidegger already considers phenomenology as "original science", or *Urwissenschaft*⁴, and against Husserl he intends phenomenology as a "pre-theoretical science"⁵. Here he argues that this early openness of phenomena is not cognitive, but it is pre-theoretical, or pre-predicative.

¹ Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, I, 195.

² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 190.

³ Ibid., 191.

⁴ Heidegger, *Die Idee der Philosophie und das Weltanschauungsproblem* (1919), 12.

⁵ Heidegger, *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (1919–20), 66.

Any mere pre-predicative seeing of ready-to-hand is, in itself, something which already understands and interprets. But does not the absence of such an 'as' make up the mere presence of any pure perception of something? Whenever we see with this kind of sight, we already do so understandingly and interpretatively. In the mere encountering of something, it is understood in terms of a totality of involvements; and such seeing hides in itself the explicitness of the assignment-relations (of the "in-order-to") which belong to that totality.⁶

We leave undecided if this pre-theoretical understanding is conceptualistic⁷ or non-conceptualistic⁸, for here our goal is to show the relationships entailed in our intentionality.

Each attempt to distinguish and to define a datum concerns not only its pure definition (*what is it*), but also its relationships. Assuming that the phenomenon is given in space and time (as in our example), these relationships are spatial and temporal. Therefore, when we distinguish a phenomenon, we *implicitly distinguish its spatial and temporal relationships*; because these relationships are spatial and temporal, they concern how the phenomenon behaves, or what the phenomenon can realize, through space and time. For example: when I distinguish this table, I implicitly intend its possibility for supporting (through the space that it occupies and along its temporal life) a kind of object, for example my books. Indeed, if it were a plank in equilibrium on four sticks, I would not intend it in the same way of a table, because it could support anything. The table and the plank on four sticks are very similar, but they have different possibilities; they can realize different relationships with my books. According to their possible relationships (in this case, the possibility of supporting my books) there is a different interpretation and then a different definition. This "to support" regards a spatial-temporal realization and it is close to what Aristotle called "final cause".

When we think of "what is", or *formal cause* in the Aristotelian saying, we also have to intend its *final* one. In this case: to define the situation in front of the door of the professor's room, we have to intend the reason for that bustle of students. In intending this reason we are intending what those students are realizing; therefore we are opening and delineating a temporal horizon in which students realize something. This reason, or sense, has to describe the behavior of phenomena.

2 The key-phenomenon and its relationships

A student says to the other: "the professor is examining in his room". This revelation enlightens the phenomena in a new way. This is a fourth datum in the situation, but it is different from the others, because, even if it is a part of the same whole, it allows interpretation of the whole of situation. This kind of phenomenon can be called a "key-phenomenon", because it permits understanding of the intended sense for each of the phenomenon. It is a phenomenon like the others, a datum among data, but through it the others can manifest the sense for their spatial and temporal relationships: the students are waiting to sit their examination; some of these enter to attend, others exit to read in the hall. The copies are probably lecture notes that the students are studying before the examination.

Yet, each phenomenon expresses *by itself* the reason for the situation: the students are there to sit the examination, the copies are there to prepare for the examination, and the professor's room is the place of examination. Each phenomenon shows by itself the reality of examination, but we need a key-phenomenon to intend it. It is *the same meaning for each phenomenon*, but this meaning appears clearly in only one of them. Only *one of them* shows us the meaning for *each of them*. Since it appears through the key-phenomenon, it appears through the other phenomena, too. The phenomenality of the key-phenomenon adds the same phenomenality to the other data.

The same meaning links different phenomena among them. When we interpret this meaning we are interpreting two orders of relationships: that one between each phenomenon with its reason and that one between each phenomenon with the others. All the phenomena belong to the same situation, they express the same meaning, but only one of them shows it clearly; the other phenomena are influenced in their

⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 189.

⁷ For example in McDowell, *Mind and World*, or in Zinq, *Concepts, intentionnalité et conscience phénoménale*.

⁸ See Evans *The Varieties of Reference*, and Martin, *Perception, Concepts, and Memory*. For a general discussion see Siegel, *The contents of perception*, 3.5 and 6.2.

showing. This means that, without the key-phenomena, *each phenomenon could potentially express more truths*, or more possible “ideal unities”. In this way we could read in another sense what Husserl argues in the sixth investigation, where he affirms that “the realm of meanings is, however, much wider than that of intuition”⁹: because intuitions are less extensive than meanings, the same intuitions could be referred to different meanings.

Another student, indeed, gives me a different piece of information, telling me that the professor is handing out his lecture notes to the students. This new phenomenon casts a new light on the situation and each phenomenon becomes suddenly an expression of another sense: the students enter and exit from the professor’s room because there is someone who gives them those copies, which are needed to attend the next course. Each phenomenon remains the same, but their meaning has become different: the new key-phenomenon converts my interpretation of the situation. This reveals the convertibility of phenomena.

If our phenomenological reduction distinguishes the phenomena through their relationships in order to intend the sense of these relationships, the question of key-phenomenon arises when, in our intuition, it is given the convertibility of phenomena. Our intuition remains suspended, it is an intuition without “sufficient signification”¹⁰. Both key-phenomena can enlighten all the others but they are incompatible with each other. All the others are liable to two different senses without change. They remain themselves, but their sense changes. They are convertible from one sense to another one. What they express calls our choice of key-phenomenon, according to the witness we find more believable. One of two witnesses does not really belong to the unitary sense of phenomena, or does not constitute a real testimony of the situation.

Both appear plausible because they appear as *belonging to the same situation*. They seem to be two witnesses of the same situation, but one of these is not believable. The criterion for distinguishing the right witness, or the true key-phenomenon, can be different according to the situation, but in general it concerns the *double relationship* between this phenomenon and its sense and between this phenomenon and the others. This double relationship has to be clear. If one of the witnesses is not a philosophy student, that is, if he does not belong to the essential relations of the situation, he cannot show himself as an expression of their meaning. He must be *analogous* with the other phenomena, qua expression of the same meaning. He has to take part, in some way, in the same sense of the other phenomena.

If the other phenomena are convertible to another possible sense, is the witness convertible, too? Is he liable to different senses without change, too? Each phenomenon is analogous with the others, and also a key-phenomenon shares this analogy. It appears differently but with a common destiny, or movement. A key-phenomenon remains a phenomenon, therefore it is convertible; it can be reinterpreted in light of an antagonist key-phenomenon. However this light separates it from the common destiny of the others, keeps it out of the same relationship with the same meaning. The false witness is convertible but only *indirectly*, as in a *negative relationship with the meaning* for the other phenomena.

Who is more believable? Since the truth of a situation is given within the horizon of their spatial and temporal relationship, we will tend to choose the person who is spatially and temporally closer to the truth. We will prefer the witness who is closer to the room, or who has been there for more time. Obviously there could be conditions that produce exceptions, like misunderstandings or misinformation, that would result from a situation where we might prefer an analysis from a distance and information from detached witnesses. Usually we will look for what is nearer in space and time.

This criterion is worthy for an intuitive, or immanent, situation. Here we are considering a kind of plausibility that concerns spatial and temporal relationships; therefore it is an *immanent plausibility*, or a plausibility that can be confirmed by our intuitions. However, when we debate religious experience, and we have to establish the truth of a witness of divine (transcendent) meaning, on which we cannot have adequate intuitions, how can we choose the plausible witness? How can we choose who is the right witness of God?

⁹ Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, II, 311.

¹⁰ Marion, *Reduction and givenness*, 53.

Furthermore, whatever testimony implicates a distance between witness and truth, so that the witness does not understand wholly what he testifies, “he remains inevitably a distant, partial, false witness”¹¹. This understanding is even more difficult when it is about the experience of God:

The witness knows what he says, quite certainly and surely, since he speaks of what he has received through intuition; but he does not understand what he says, since he cannot unify in a comprehensive concept, or identify in a sufficient signification (*propositio sufficiens*).¹²

3 The witness of God

When we think of religious experience, usually we consider a kind of relationship with a supernatural dimension, with a transcendent level of being, from a simple prayer to the apostles’ experience with Jesus. There can be many meanings of transcendence, but I suggest considering the transcendence of God according to revealed theology, or Abrahamic religion (Hebrew, Christian and Muslim), because it provides us with the question of the witness of God and of its possible phenomenology, considering that God comes into the history and the history provides testimonies of God.

It might be thought that we do not need to refer a possible religious experience to Abrahamic God, because I could interpret a divine presence in my life through some phenomena and without reference to the Bible or Koran. Somebody could also elaborate a personally revealed theology and think of God’s personality according to their own opinion, but this could not provide a common experience from which to develop a phenomenology of religious experience. I suggest beginning with a *common and minimal notion of transcendent God*: creator of the world, merciful toward his creatures and the source of their salvation. This consideration, common in all Abrahamic confessions, implies that we could find testimonies of God through the world and history, and therefore through our personal experience. This testimony can concern both our interpretation of events of our life, in which we trace a divine action, and a religious person (a believer, a prophet, a mystic) who refers us to his relationship with God.

An event interpretable in a religious way is that one in which we are saved by a *lucky coincidence*, that we can read as a divine intervention or a pure fortuity. For example: I turn down my business travel to New York because I choose to see the play in which my son recites. Notwithstanding that I lose my money, I feel that it is better to stay with my son. The day after, I hear that the plane that I should have taken plummeted to the sea and there are many victims. This situation presents elements for a religious interpretation of events, because my choice has saved me from this catastrophe. This event brings me to believe that my choice has been inspired by God to save me from that situation. I can believe that my choice has something to do with God.

This possible interpretation of the phenomena presupposes my idea of a personal and transcendent God, such as He would save me and He could inspire my choice, or He has wanted to teach me that my son is more important than my business. I could think that these possible interpretations are influenced by my knowledge of revealed theology. After all, if there is an action of God in my life, this action has to be recognizable, I have to possess this knowledge. If God wants to show Himself to me, He has to give me these presuppositions. Therefore, I think that this presupposed context is not a vicious presupposition, but the necessary condition for recognizing a religious experience in my life. It can be considered the *horizon* in which religious phenomena can appear. My religious intending can be reduced to three phenomena: my project of business travel, my choice to remain with my son, the unlucky flight to New York. These phenomena are not given at the same time, but diachronically. They are three distinct moments that unfold over many hours.

We find here two phenomenological principles: the horizon precedes the phenomena and the I constitutes its phenomena. However, as Marion argues about the religious experience of miracle (“the possibility of

¹¹ Marion, *Believing in order to see*, 147.

¹² Marion, *Reduction and givenness*, 53.

the impossible”), both these phenomenological principles are transgressed, because religious phenomena overcome the possibilities of the world¹³ and of the I¹⁴. “How then can a phenomenon that challenges any horizon appear in the horizon of a world? By saturating it.” They are “saturating phenomena”:

By saturating phenomenon I mean that which the manifest given surpasses—not only what a human gaze can bear without being blinded and dying, but what the world in its essential finitude can receive and contain. In the common regime of phenomenality, our intentional aim most often reaches significations that no intuition will be able to fill adequately, so that we are accustomed to a relative shortage of visible givenness. Here instead, in an entirely reversed fashion, intuitive givenness infinitely surpasses what our intentional gaze can hope of significations and of essences, as well as what our intuition can bear of fulfillment.¹⁵

According to Marion, the divine Revelation reverses both the I and the horizon: because the I cannot constitute by himself the unitary meaning of the divine manifestation, the I himself is *constituted by it*, the I becomes the *me*, from subject to object; the divine phenomena are irreducible to the horizon’s conditions of possibility, so that the horizon is *saturated by phenomena*.

Our example does not concern a clear divine manifestation, and yet we can find what Marion argues. At first glance it seems possible to maintain the I and the horizon, because what links the three phenomena together is my choice: I establish a relationship among them because they appear, in a precise moment, as two alternative destinies of my life. Differently from the situation of the students, the phenomena are more distant in space and time and the only link among them is *my being located in this choice*. Differently from an immanent plausibility, it seems that there is not a key-phenomenon among the phenomena. At least, I can consider the key-phenomenon the notice of the incident, because by it I reinterpret the meaning of the events. This key-phenomenon does not by itself gives me a revelation; it does not show a unitary meaning of the other phenomena. In the situation of those students, the key-phenomenon is one of the students, who clearly reveals a datum that enlightens all the others. The witness-student is the phenomenon that conjures the invisible unitary meaning. Here, instead, there is no clear relationship among the phenomena, especially between the incident and my choice. I relate these separate phenomena because they concern myself, my happiness, and my salvation. I relate them because I think of meaning that traverses the events with a goal: my salvation.

Since this meaning does not appear through the phenomena, nor through the possible key-phenomenon, to recognize a religious meaning in my experience I already have to look for this meaning, I already have to direct my intentions *within this horizon*. That is, a phenomenology of religious experience is a phenomenology developed in the horizon of a finalistic meaning for my life. Each possible key-phenomenon in a religious signification has to concern a condition of realization, of fulfillment (for example of love, or of healing...) that I have received. The key-phenomenon enlightens something which can be distant in space and time, for example a far past choice, and establishes a relationship with a sequence of events of which it constitutes an important consequence. In this way, it seems that we have a specific horizon for religious experience.

¹³ “Therefore, any phenomenon must admit that its possibility is decided in advance within the dimensions of its horizon of appearance. This limit coincides with possibility because it is always a matter of the possibility of *appearance*. This precedence suits any phenomenon, provided that it appears within the possible world—a world of possible phenomena. The frame of a horizon hence suits any miracle that belongs entirely to the world. Conversely, if a miracle passes outside the world, because it points to what precedes the world, then this miracle must evade the common condition of phenomena—the inscription within the frame of a horizon” (Marion, *Believing in order to see*, 99).

¹⁴ “The I constitutes its phenomenon: this second phenomenological characteristic of the thing itself becomes henceforth questionable. The constitution of the phenomenon follows directly from two constants. First, the total object never totally gives itself in the same instant, even in the series of all instants; thus one must (re-)constitute it starting from the limited appearances, where it outlines its face each time, which remains invisible as such (for we have never been able to *see* even the most banal object from all its sides). Then, only the I can operate this constitution because, on the one hand, it receives givenness and, on the other, it ensures its constitutive synthesis; it thus controls givenness so as to constitute it into an object. In principle, the object depends on an I, even if the I does not produce it” (Ibid., 101).

¹⁵ Ibid., 99.

Since I could look for a finalistic meaning of my life without a reference to divine meaning, this horizon is specifically religious only as a horizon of transcendent meanings. While an immanent finalistic meaning is opened by my anticipation and my self-determination, when I look for a transcendent meaning of my life, I consider my life as constituted by this meaning, as reached by a sense which asks me to recognize it. That is, my phenomenological horizon has to be open to what I consider impossible. My phenomenological horizon has to be open to be saturated.

In this way, I consider myself not only as the subject of my life, but also as the *object* of a supernatural will. I consider the phenomenon that appears within this horizon not only as datum, but also as *calling*, or subject¹⁶. What appears, or what happens, calls me to recognize an aim of my life; these events constitutes a kind of “paradox”¹⁷, because it is both object of my intention and subject which calls me to choose how to realize myself, as a “vocation”¹⁸, both overthrowing of the I and calling of him personal choice.

I have said that each definition implicates an intuition of a formal and of a final cause at once. When I define a situation in a religious way, I define it according to a final cause that I ascribe to a transcendent reason. The final cause (my salvation) has to appear through an immanent phenomenon (and so through an immanent temporary salvation), in which I can intend a possibility to save me over my possibilities. The witness, therefore, has to show this transcendent possibility through phenomena within my horizon.

The key-phenomenon (the notice of incident) does not by itself show the relationship with a transcendent salvation. The moment of this possible relationship is not the key-phenomenon, but it is *the moment of my choice*. That means that the religious experience of this situation regards the past, the intuition of a precise moment of my past, it concerns a choice in which I have followed a mysterious reason, which I have understood only after making my choice. This seems coherent with the common notion of faith, as trusting to God without understanding the future of a choice¹⁹ (consider, for example, the experience of Abram, who understands his choice to sacrifice his son only when God stops him, or the experience of the apostles, who understand their choice to follow Christ only after the Resurrection). The key-phenomenon enlightens a previous choice. Its plausibility consists in the making clear the final cause already present in that choice.

Yet, the religious experience begins in the moment of choice. That moment has to show something which appeals to me, a calling of my choice. That moment has to have a revelation of a final cause. That moment has to be in some way a key-phenomenon, too. The choice to stay with my son appeals to me because it enlightens him as a fundamental meaning, of final cause, of my life. This choice casts a light on me, appeals to me about what is very important. There is, in the moment of (religious) choice, a question about what is important for me. If this moment constitutes the beginning of my religious experience, it has to include a testimony of transcendence, a kind of witness of God.

Through this consideration we can consider the main kind of religious experience, the one of meeting with a *witness of faith*. A religious testimony of one's own personal faith, could say nothing for us, because we could consider it a private question. We have to consider meetings that appeal to ourselves to make a choice. Here arises the question of conversion, in which there can be many personal and inscrutable factors and, overall, theological implications about the role of grace. Yet, we can describe some general factors of a testimony of faith: *who calls our choice*.

If my choice has been motivated by a witness of faith, who told me about the great grace of my son for my life, I could better define the religiosity of choice. His or her discourse touches my heart, enlightens my sleeping love for my child; he or she shows me a deeper meaning of my life, and I recognize it. Also, without believing in God, I can be convinced by his words, and after the incident I will reinterpret his words as a divine message. His or her plausibility as a witness of divine transcendence is not clear in the moment

¹⁶ Marion, *Reduction and givenness*, 202-04; *The Saturated Phenomenon*, 176-216; *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 199-221.

¹⁷ Malet, *La Paradoja de la vocación*, 101-22.

¹⁸ Housset, *La vocation de la personne*, 439-40.

¹⁹ See Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 159-73, and *Johannes Climacus*, 159-73; Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 2014: 82-10; Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 212-20.

of choice; however, it becomes clear after the key-phenomenon. Yet, there is a minimal and sufficient plausibility for opening my disbelieving mind.

This plausibility does not concern his or her spatial and temporal proximity to the truth, because a transcendent truth is over space and time. What is the criterion of a transcendent plausibility? Maybe a religious person is nearer to divine reason than mine, such that he or she can understand what God asks of me. But what does this proximity mean? Maybe he or she has a deep knowledge of Holy texts, or has had a deep mystical experience, or simply his or her rhetorical skills have been successful to my thought. However these possible factors do not explain what this plausibility means, because they regard my psychological suggestions.

Furthermore, we have said that there is a necessary distance between a witness and what is testified. The witness cannot show me the transcendent truth, at least his or her relationship with the transcendent truth. First of all, a witness testifies through his or her life, which is through his or her choice. Differently from the student in the hall, a witness of faith is not an external spectator that gives me information, but someone that has passed through a choice. The witness is who was in front of a choice, with his or her ignorance and limits; who has decided for impossibility, or who has answered to divine calling.

His or her plausibility regards only this choice: he or she can appear to me plausible because he or she has recognized the transcendent meaning in his or her life, and his or her being-witness is testified by his or her choice. The witness of God is plausible not because through him or her I understand better God in itself, but because I understand better my relationship with a transcendent reason. A transcendent plausibility has to regard its *proximity with me*, because it reveals something about what God asks me.

If a phenomenon shows me a transcendent meaning which appeals to my choice, this phenomenon can be plausible only because it reveals itself as a *gift* for my life (in our example, my relationship with my son), a gift that asks me to recognize it and to choose it. As Marion argues, because the gift has to be hidden itself (otherwise it was a real gift), this recognition is phenomenologically problematic:

The gift becomes all the *more* invisible the *more* effectively it gives itself. It disappears precisely in direct proportion to its appearing. This is an eidetic law.²⁰

As further example, ingratitude consists in nothing other than no longer recognizing the gift's character of being given, of seeing in it nothing more than the fact without its origin, the thing without its source. Ingratitude claims nothing real, but only suppresses what it censures as henceforth unreal—the gift's character of being given—and immediately the gift as such disappears because a non-given gift is no longer a gift at all.²¹

And the recognition of a gift requests a change in our intention, a new openness of our gaze. To recognize a gift we have to show “something that lies *hidden*”²², but this happens when we become a gift ourselves, through the gift of recognition.

To see the gift, one must double the gift of the gift by the gift of its recognition.²³

Differently from Marion, we argue that this change does not depend on “the proper hermeneutical decision – on the hermeneutics of givenness”²⁴, but it depends on a witness of faith, who shows me this choice

²⁰ Marion, *Believing in order to see*, 125.

²¹ Ibid.

²² “What is it that phenomenology is to ‘let us see’? What is it that must be called a ‘phenomenon’ in a distinctive sense? What is it that by its very essence is necessarily the theme whenever we exhibit something explicitly? Manifestly, it is something that proximally and for the most part does not show itself at all: it is something that lies hidden, in contrast to that which proximally and for the most part does show itself” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 59).

²³ Marion, *Believing in order to see*, 129.

²⁴ “Recognizing or not recognizing the gift as gift depends on the capacity of the gaze to see, through the transparency of the given thing, the giver from whom it comes forth and the givenness that determines it with contingency (or rather makes it indeterminate). In the end, recognizing the gift as gift accordingly depends on the proper hermeneutical decision—on the hermeneutics of givenness” (Ibid., 138).

as analogically realized. By his or her testimony, I have a testimony, or a proximity, of a choice for a transcendent meaning; but I will understand this meaning only when it will occur as a key-phenomenon. Like in the immanent plausibility, the key-phenomenon enlightens this relationship with transcendent meaning, which can be traced in each moment of my life, or of a community's life (for example when the earliest apostles come to understand all the moments of Jesus' mission as salvation of humanity). Retro-enlightening each moment of religious experience, each moment is interpreted as an expression of this relationship with transcendent meaning. As for immanent plausibility, these moments are also convertible; they can be reinterpreted in another way, and because the transcendent meaning is invisible, the religious phenomena are more convertible in non-religious interpretations.

Among all the data of my experience, nevertheless, the main moment is that of my choice. When this moment is retro-enlightened by a key-phenomenon (the incident), it becomes the real key-phenomenon. In the moment of my decisive choice I have experienced this calling from a transcendent meaning. Differently from the situation of the students, in which only some of the data show what the professor is doing, in the relationship with God, all the moments of my life could potentially testify to this transcendence, because it concerns the sense for the whole of being. However, on the contrary, while in the situation of the students, the key-phenomenon brings its phenomenality to the others, such that all the phenomena gain the same phenomenality, in the religious experience this does not happen. Indeed, when my choice, retro-enlightened, becomes the key-phenomenon, the other phenomena do not show the same relationship with God as that one I had experienced in my choice. The key-phenomenon of religious life (my choice) becomes irreplaceable.

4 Conclusion

This analysis has tried to show that each phenomenon is understood in relationships among phenomena and the center of these relationships can be identified through a key-phenomenon, which enlightens all the others in their relationship with what they show. The sense they express can be an immanent sense or a transcendent one, as in religious experience. While in immanent experience, the key-phenomenon brings its phenomenality to the others, in transcendent experience the key-phenomenon enlightens another key-phenomenon in which the relationship with God could happen. This happening is the moment of a choice, in which we have recognized a gift that calls us. The horizon of recognition is opened by a witness of divine meaning, who has passed through an analogous choice.

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