

Phenomenology of Religious Experience

Editorial

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Religious Experience, Adumbrated: Towards a Phenomenological Ontology of the Region

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Editors' Introduction to the Topical Issue "Phenomenology of Religious Experience"

Theological approaches to religious experience attribute the same if not a higher degree of reality to it as to everyday experience¹. In this, theology differs from philosophy, for which the existence of religious experience remains subject to debate. Phenomenology's "legitimization" of religious experience as a subject matter of philosophical research goes back to the larger phenomenological agenda of establishing subjectivity as a valid area of scientific inquiry. Drawing on a field of inquiry as broad as this, the present topical issue richly represents contemporary phenomenological research addressing religious experience.

Instead of axiomatic affirmation of religious realities, philosophy aims to harvest the fruits of knowledge from both the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*. This thesis is proposed in this issue and examined with regard to 20th century Continental thought by Jason Alvis, Martin Nitsche and Olga Louchakova-Schwartz, as a form of dialectic which goes back to the influence of apophatic and cataphatic theologies on trends in continental philosophy. These philosophers examine whether religious experience exists, in what mode, and how exactly it may be different from everyday experience. Debates around this issue have affected many disciplines. For example, most of psychology avoids researching religious experience, treating William James's famous classic as a roster of altered, spiritual, and non-ordinary states of consciousness², as if "religious" in the title is merely a confusing metaphor. Religious experience has been reported to cause a profound personal transformation and have effects on health³, but in defining religious determinants of health, medical research is more interested in the social function of religion and religious behaviors⁴. Conducting cognitive or neuroscientific studies on a form of experience is not possible as long as its specific properties remain unclear.

The argument against the possibility of religious experience goes back to Hume's rejection of the possibility of the ego's knowledge of itself,⁵ and Kant's argument that, since God is not an object, experience

¹ For examples of treating mystical experiences as reality in theological discourses, see Roy, "Wainwright"; Lossky, *The Mystical*.

² James, *The Varieties*.

³ For the transformative effects of religious experience on health, see Iqbal et al., "An Interpretive".

⁴ For an example of a focus on social and behavioral aspects in religious determinants of health, see Mishori, Aleinikoff, and Davis, "Primary Care"; Idler, *Religion*.

⁵ For more on Hume's perspective applied to the analysis of religious experience, see Roy, *Transcendent*.

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of God is not possible⁶. Further, even if established, the logical possibility of religious experience does not presuppose that it actually happens. The massive evidence for religious experiencing in esotericism, mysticism, and in all of the traditions that derive theologies from experience, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hesychasm, and New Age, can be a symbolic construct,⁷ an artifact of introspection, an illusion, an epiphenomenon, and so on. An opposite view was upheld by theologian Rudolph Otto⁸ whose approach to religious experience was qualified as phenomenological by Espen Dahl, by William James, whose radical empiricism echoes phenomenology, and by Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology as a scientific discipline.

This topical issue includes papers written from different phenomenological perspectives. The papers by Ronald Mercer and Robert Kugelmann are written in the classical Husserlian phenomenological tradition; Peter Costello and Martin Nitsche draw on Heidegger; Carla Canullo and Olga Louchakova-Schwartz approach the philosophy of religion (Canullo), and the analysis of religious interiority (Louchakova-Schwartz) in light of Michel Henry's phenomenology of life; Henning Nörenberg examines Otto's early concepts of the numinous and the holy, in light of the later work of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas; Javier Carreño follows Chretien; and Jingjing Li compares Husserl's phenomenology with Yogacara. Some of these papers (e.g., Mercer, Barber, Nörenberg, Nitsche, and Lomuscio) focus on constitutive analyses of consciousness in religious experiencing; Carla Canullo and Jingjing Li, in different ways, focus on the analysis of phenomenology itself; and Robert Kugelmann and Peter Costello clarify religious experience in life (Kugelmann) and the Old Testament (Costello). It might seem that such a diversity of approaches would constrain the findings, as it happens, for example, in discussions of phenomenological method in psychology or in attempts to bridge phenomenology with natural sciences. However, as Olga Louchakova-Schwartz argues below, the situation is different here, as the apparent disparity of approaches is not only warranted, but serves a good purpose.

In phenomenological investigations of religious experience, the distinctions between different approaches and methods of phenomenology fade into the background while opening a space for more essential philosophical concerns. Husserl himself conceded that religious experience is not only a kind of experience in its own right, but also that the "intimations of transcendence" in religious experiencing are constitutive of consciousness as such⁹. According to Jean Héring¹⁰, an idea that phenomenology can be a philosophy of religion and can explain consciousness from a metaphysical standpoint brings phenomenology too close to losing its scientific *modus operandi*. Scientific phenomenology operates by reductions which "slice" consciousness in order to restrain the natural attitude and uncover horizons for systematic research. In theory, one can think of religious experience as an aspect of the mind which can be researched within the attitude attained by reductions. However, when one is confronted with the empirical intensity and tangibility of religious experience¹¹, even the most austere phenomenological reductions cannot keep out the implicit doxastic impact of such experiences, i.e., their own implicit attitude and their own lifeworld. Religious experience does not merely follow pre-existing religious beliefs but, in its excessive yet passive givenness, generates religious beliefs and its own self-interpretations¹² (in this issue, see an original interpretation of the topic by Michael Barber; also, by Henning Nörenberg). Lifeworlds of religious experience can be further subjected to constitutive analysis in any of its forms¹³, such as static (i.e., structural), genetic (temporal), and generative (historical). In the present issue, Vincenzo Lomuscio accounts for the massive scale of the constitutive impact of religious experiences by introducing a structural notion of a "key factor". As is well known, French phenomenology (Levinas, Marion, Chretien,

⁶ For a detailed analysis of Kant's argument, see Zangwill, "The Myth".

⁷ For religious experience as symbolic consciousness, see Penner, *Impasse*; Guthrie, *Faces*.

⁸ For more on phenomenological interpretations of Otto's discoveries in *The Idea*, see Dahl, *Phenomenology*.

⁹ For the constitutive function of religious consciousness, see Ales Bello, *The Divine*.

¹⁰ Héring, *Phénoménologie*.

¹¹ For a discussion of the intensity of religious experience, see Marion, *In Excess*. For tangibility in religious experience, see the use of Henry, *Material*, in Louchakova-Schwartz, *Qualia*, in this issue.

¹² For more on givenness, see Marion, *Givenness*.

¹³ The idea of religious experience happening in its own lifeworlds was introduced by Louchakova-Schwartz in "Method".

Henry, etc.) has been critiqued for losing its agenda of the clarification of consciousness to examinations of the nature of appearances, i.e., phenomenological metaphysics. Luijpen and Natanson argued that treating phenomenology as the opposite of metaphysics is artificial, because metaphysics (not a formal one, but the one derived from phenomenological analysis of experience) is a fruition of phenomenology¹⁴. In this issue, Ronald Mercer argues along the same lines by analyzing Levinas' notion of Other as the absolute; according to Mercer, this notion has its roots in the Husserlian analysis of intentionality-as-absolute. In the same vein, Carla Canullo proposes a new formulation of the philosophy of religion which, building on the material phenomenology of Henry, grounds the understanding of all experience in the monistic notion of the self-affection of life which underlies all appearances.

In light of these and other recent phenomenological discoveries, object-absence does not create a problem for religious experiencing. First, as noted by Otto and developed at present in the phenomenology of emotions, pre-reflective consciousness can intend "open-endedly", as happens, for example, in the experiences of faith or hope. Options of religious knowledge without an object are discussed in this issue by Olga Louchakova-Schwartz. Also in this issue, Nörenberg argues that the open-ended intentionality described by Otto can be an atmospheric quality in experience, open to the unknown, which can further give rise to reflection and intentional knowledge (of God). Such analyses indicate that religious experiences are privy to their own phenomenological genetics, their own conditions of possibility¹⁵, which means that such experiences inhabit an ontological region of their own, as a specific and unique kind of consciousness distinct from other kinds of consciousness.

A framework for the present analysis was derived from the idea of the regional ontologies of knowledge developed by Husserl in context of his transcendental phenomenology¹⁶. In this sense, the knowledges of physics, chemistry, or the social sciences would be region-specific, that is, have their own evidence to emerge from, their own intuitions, and their own genetics of reflectivity, with their own structures of experience and eidetic essences. The natural attitude, i.e. the experience of everyday life, develops in the context of the region Husserl termed the lifeworld, as a further development of the concept of regional ontologies at the end of Husserl's philosophical endeavor. Dahl suggests that the distinction between the holy and the profane cannot be understood without engaging the concept of the lifeworld¹⁷. In his view, the everyday contains the seeds of the sacred within itself, and the empirical distinctions between the everyday and the holy (as reflected in the historically recent notion of religious experience, as opposed to the notion of experience that Michael Torre in this issue traces back to Aristotle) emerge through the properties of the lifeworld. However, as noted by Stein, "[B]efore one can delineate the genesis of something, one must know what it is"¹⁸. So, in order to understand the manner in which religious experience is generated—that is, whether it is an event of interpretation, whether it has its own essential phenomenological core structure, how this structure is situated, and whether this structure incorporates some specific quality (as claimed by both Otto and James)—one needs to bring together the seemingly disparate phenomenological findings in order to define the ontological region they draw upon¹⁹. In the case of the study of religious experience, the differences between the kinds of phenomenology are not constraining but rather complementary to one another.

¹⁴ For more on phenomenology as metaphysics, see Luijpen, *Phenomenology*; Natanson, *Anonymity*.

¹⁵ For the idea of the conditions of possibility for religious experience, see Steinbock, "Evidence".

¹⁶ For explanation of the idea of regional ontologies of knowledge, see Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*.

¹⁷ For the explication of the sacred in the everyday, see Dahl, *Phenomenology*.

¹⁸ Stein, *On the Problem*, 26.

¹⁹ For a similar approach, see Taves, *Experience*, on the building block approach in the study of religious experience.

1 Polymorphism and complementarity in the phenomenology of religious experiencing

Religious experience is polymorphous; in this issue, concrete forms of religious experience are examined by Robert Kugelman in a concern for the everyday, by Olga Louchakova-Schwartz – in a concern for spontaneity vs. experiences induced by contemplation in Tantra and Advaita Vedanta, and by Javier Carreño – in a concern for visual art. There are observable correspondences between the form of experiences and the phenomenological research approaches they “invite”. For example, the introspective practices of Indian Tantrism or Advaita Vedanta produce experiences which fit well with the framework of Henry’s philosophy of phenomenological materiality, which affirms the ego’s knowledge of itself²⁰. Otto’s examinations of the numinous correlate with Levinas’ emphasis on transcendence and otherness in religious experience²¹, etc. Correlations between forms of experience and kinds of phenomenology further impacts researchers’ understanding of essences in religious experiences. For example, Otto associates the essence of the religious with intentional, object-directed feeling (see the analysis in the paper by Nörenberg), Marion with object-less properties such as saturation or givenness, Steinbock finds the essences of religious experiencing in intentional consciousness and associates them with verticality (as opposed to horizontality in the constitution of everyday experience), Husserl points to passive synthesis and hyletics, and Henry – to *pg* materiality. The cross-cultural phenomenological approaches link religious experience to cultural modes of introspection and constructions of self-identity²². From such a multiplicity of findings, a conclusion can be drawn that the conditions of possibility for religious experience manifest themselves across different domains and spheres of consciousness, supporting a proposition that religious experience not only has its own regional ontology, but perhaps, a (life)world of its own. One may find similarity between this idea and Barber’s examination of religious experience in light of the Schutzian notion of the province of meaning²³.

It is possible to envision that the lifeworld of the everyday would be “masking” the Holy: while the Holy can be spontaneously “unmasking” itself, that is, coming out of anonymity²⁴. This would correlate with the instances of religious experiences engaging the domain of intersubjectivity, or the domain of self-awareness, directed at the world in a sense of connectedness, or intended inward. In this view, the polymorphism of religious experience is not unlike the elephant in the ancient Vedantic metaphor of blind men touching an elephant’s different parts (in a semblance of different horizons of inquiry) and reporting the elephant’s different looks. Early on, Otto suggested that religious experience is a composite. A phenomenological ontology of a composite experience must be a composite ontology from a combination of findings in different “clearings” (*Lichtung*) of the lifeworld. To that future end, that is, finding out how the fullness of religious experience “shines through” the lifeworld and, eventually, delineating the genesis of religious experience, we bring together and juxtapose different phenomenological perspectives in this issue.

2 Co-constituted sharing of religious experience

Bergson distinguished between mystical experiences with a truly religious quality, and experiences which are not religious in their essence but are perceived as such by their subjects²⁵. Yet how does one make

²⁰ For philosophy of phenomenological materiality, see Henry, *Words*; Henry, *Incarnation*. For the ego’s knowledge of itself, see Henry, “Deconstruction”.

²¹ The presence of the numinous is especially pronounced in the Christian or Sufi experiences of *apophysis*, or some experiences in Tantra in Jñānadeva, *Amritanubhava*.

²² For the intentional analysis of the essences of religious experience, see Steinbock, *Phenomenology*. For the association between religious experience, hyletics and passive synthesis, see the interpretations of the above by James Hart, in Dahl, *Phenomenology*, 115; Ales Bello, “Hyle”; Ales Bello, “Christian Mysticism”. For religious connotations of phenomenological materiality, see Henry, *Incarnation*. For a cross-cultural approach, see Flood, *The Truth*.

²³ Barber, *Religion*.

²⁴ For a discussion of intentionality’s masking of phenomenological materiality, see Henry, *Phenomenology*. For a prototypical idea of God’s unmasking, see the Sufi notion of unveiling in Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*.

²⁵ Bergson, *Sources*.

such a distinction? Religious experience is certainly a private, internal event pertaining to the sphere of ownership, “alone with the alone,” as Corbin puts it²⁶. Be it by a communal ritual, by revelation, or in ascetic practice, religious experience belongs to the region of individual being, that is, to one’s inward psychological universe. It is a one-time event, unreproducible, spontaneous, resisting generalizations, and belonging to the self. As James wrote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

The first thing the intellect does with an object is to class it along with something else. But any object that is infinitely important to us and awakens our devotion feels to us also as if it must be sui generis and unique. Probably a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean, and thus dispose of it. “I am no such thing,” it would say; “I am myself, myself alone”²⁷.

Being internal to the self, religious experience is also not perspectival. The intuitions of religious experience do not add up to constitute a whole picture of the Holy, or a whole picture of the Numinous. A series of images in experiences of “Me and my Christ” does not result in a presentation of a three-dimensional Jesus available to intersubjective empathy, and neither would it need a series of adumbrations to become a complete religious feeling²⁸. Each instance is a moment complete in itself.

However, in oral transmission and when recorded in traditional texts, religious experience is deployed from interiority into intersubjectivity, from one’s sphere of ownership into a communal sharing as a text-object. It is out of this shared continuum that the traditions distill the categorical essences of religious experiencing²⁹. Reflected in texts and formalized in oral practices, the forms of religious experiencing add up, not unlike adumbrations in Husserl’s view of sensory objects. Traditional discourses imply that such manifestations would be the specific forms of divine self-disclosure fitted to the particular predisposition of the seeker³⁰. Metaphorically, these would be the adumbrations of the Holy, adumbrations of that feeling of “something there” which both Otto and James so markedly placed at the core of religious experiencing. Polymorphism of religious experience is, in fact, a richness of complementary possibilities in consciousness, with essence of religious experiencing to be considered as a sum of these options. As Ibn- al’Arabi stated: “Truth wanted to see the essences of His most perfect Names whose number is infinite... in one global object which... summarized the Divine order...”³¹. That is, the whole becomes many so that it can reveal itself as a whole. As a result, the categorical apparatus of different branches of phenomenology in this issue is very diverse, and it may require the reader to search for some of the terms in order to catch up with the exposition of the ideas in the thought of different authors.

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²⁶ Corbin, *Alone*.

²⁷ James in Kamber and Kolak, *William James*, 199.

²⁸ The quote is from Kyril Wolfe, Wolfe, personal communication, 9.6.2017.

²⁹ For an example of developing stages in Christian experience, see Porete and Babinsky, *The Mirrors*, 127.

³⁰ For more on the modes of divine self-knowledge in self-disclosure, see Ibn al-’Arabi, *The Wisdom*; or Silburn, *Kuṣḍalini*.

³¹ Ibn - al’Arabi, *The Wisdom*, 8.

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