

Phenomenology of Religious Experience IV: Religious Experience and Description

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The Invisible and the Hidden within the Phenomenological Situation of Appearing

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Abstract: This study focuses on various phenomenological conceptions of the invisible in order to consider to what extent and in what way they involve moments of hiddenness. The relationship among phenomenality, invisibility, and hiddenness is examined in the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Henry, and Merleau-Ponty. The study explains why phenomenologists prefer speaking about the invisible over a discourse of the hidden. It shows that the phenomenological method does not display the invisibility as a limit of experience but rather as a dynamic component of relational nature of any experience, including the religious one. Special attention is paid to topological moments of the relationship between the visible and the invisible.

Keywords: the invisible, the hidden, phenomenology, appearing, phenomenological situation, Husserl, Heidegger, Henry, Merleau-Ponty

1 Introduction

Religiosities, speaking generally, but also without a doubt, include some kind of relation to invisibility¹; be it, for example, an invisibility of divine beings, of esoteric mysteries, or a strategy of religious persons to be hidden. As if the general level of describing religion calls for a language that highlights a relationship between the visible profane and the invisible sacred. William James, paradigmatically in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, when trying to utilize the “broadest and most general terms,” characterizes the “life of religion” (and not simply religion, sic!) as the “belief that there is an *unseen* order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”²

Phenomenology of religious experience, however, cannot simply remain at the general level of description. In accord with its principles, phenomenology descends “back” to things themselves and to a concrete experience. Though these principles do not prohibit phenomenology to operate at a general level. On the contrary, Husserl teaches us from the first pages of the *Logical Investigations* how to lead phenomenological descriptions further to a level of a “pure logic” or a theory of knowing. Among the

¹ In accord with the phenomenological terminology, I mostly speak about the “invisible,” less about the “invisibility,” and only rarely about “invisibilities” (mainly in social or political contexts). As used in this study, there are no substantial differences among these notions.

² James, “The Varieties of Religious Experience,” 55 [italics mine]. Similarly, James mentions in the book as “vivid sense of the reality of things *unseen*” (ibid., 387) or “vital conversation with the *unseen* divine” (ibid., 401). In all quoted wordings, one can notice a very interesting relation between life of religion and the unseen: vivid sense – things unseen; vital conversation – the unseen divine.

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different ways of phenomenological generalization (e.g. eidetic reduction), ranks also what he calls “reflection on the phenomenological situation itself.”³ In my opinion, the generalization that leads phenomenologists to speak about the invisible stems exactly from reflecting on phenomenological situations. What makes a situation a phenomenological one? A simple answer for the purposes of an introduction may highlight that every situation is phenomenal (i.e., something occurs or happens) but not necessarily phenomenological. A situation becomes a phenomenological one by adopting a phenomenological standpoint that attends to the phenomenal, to the ways it is given, and to the environments of its givenness. Accordingly, reflecting on a phenomenological situation obliges not only to self-reflect my own situation as a phenomenologist (being addressed by the phenomenal and situated within environments of its phenomenality) but also to consider steadily the reach of phenomenological method, that is, also its possibilities to establish phenomenological situations.

Set within the task to reflect on the phenomenological situations, this study has two basic aims, namely, (1) to examine the relationship between phenomenality and hiddenness/invisibility and (2), in this framework, to contrast invisibility from hiddenness. Even though both, “hidden” and “invisible,” express very similar, if not the same, traits of human experience, including and especially the religious one, in my opinion it is vital to distinguish between them since as expressions they represent two different styles of thinking. I will primarily focus on various phenomenological conceptions of the invisible in order to consider to what extent and in what way they involve moments of hiddenness.

The study starts with a brief overview of various theoretical and practical discourses concerning invisibility in religious experience. Section 3 examines a tendency of these discourses toward a hiddenness-oriented style of thinking. Sections 4 and 5 analyze, in detail, the phenomenological conceptions of the invisible, beginning with implicit attempts of Husserl and Heidegger, and continuing to the explicit conceptions of Henry and Merleau-Ponty.

2 Different contexts of the invisibility in religious experience

In the first section, which is preparatory, my goal is to outline various possible meanings of invisibility and the invisible as they come out in scholarly attempts to understand religious experience. Basically, three different approaches to the invisibility can be distinguished: a theological, an anthropological, and a sociological. I will try, in the following, to identify these three perspectives; albeit my aim is not to be precise at this point but rather to outline the scenery for the investigations of the following parts and to clarify my point of view.

- (1) In theology, the invisibility of a Divine being accentuates either its *absoluteness* or its relationship to the visible world; where both options do not exclude each other. The invisibility of an absolute Divinity emphasizes its other-than-human nature, which cannot be grasped by human intellectual capacity. Yet the very same invisibility can be also understood as a condition of possibility of *sacred revelations* or even miracles. What appears to reconnect with a Divine being or to induce a sacral wonder must be energized with a power to address its onlookers. And analogically with the case of a dynamic relation between the visible and the invisible parts of an object (see below), the dynamics of a sacred appearing can be conditioned by the Divine invisibility understood as miraculously co-present with what is perceived in the moment of a religious experience.
- (2) Cultural anthropology directs our attention to different practices of *social invisibility* in religious experience. These practices include covering of one’s own body or its parts (such as the face or the head) and social hiding for a limited or an unlimited period of time.⁴ Both customs can be either

³ Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 169.

⁴ A great case study of cultural anthropological, religious, and political significance of invisibility practices offers Sözer in *Managing Invisibility. Dissimulation and Identity Maintenance among Alevi Bulgarian Turks*.

deliberate or imposed. Whereas phenomenology builds on a primacy of perception, anthropological approach shows that within a social context both the visibility and the invisibility must be considered in a more complex way. Even in phenomenology, the visibility is not a matter of just seeing (including watching, looking at, etc.) but involves all other senses (synesthetically) as well as all other sensing beings (intersubjectively/interanimally). The anthropological perspective still encompasses a broader spectrum of social and political factors that influence the social and political invisibilities. Simply put, the anthropological perspective does not build on the primacy of perception but of the social and political relations. On the contrary, social and political phenomenologies still take the primacy of perception in the account.

- (3) Sociology pays attention not only to practices but also to religious and quasi-religious moments of socialization; so not only to visible practices of hiding and covering but also to what Thomas Luckmann calls *invisible religion*. In this expression, the *invisible* does not mean primarily *unseen* but *elementary* religious forms (“elementary social form of religion”).⁵ “Invisible” in the sense of “elementary social” is for Luckmann (in Schutzian tradition) related mainly to socialization as a construction of social reality; so the religion, in this sense, is invisible, because it does not operate by obvious religious means.

3 Appearing: the invisible and the hidden

I have listed three basic perspectives within which the invisibility related to religious experiencing can be understood. In all the three approaches, the *invisibility indicates a hiddenness of what is not directly experienced*. In this part, I aim to reflect upon this indication that directs our philosophical attention from invisibility to hiddenness. Since my aim is to contrast invisibility with hiddenness, I am obligated to ask where the tendency to link invisibility with hiddenness leads, if it is not even misleading, and whether there are other options to think invisibility at all.

With respect to connections between invisibility and hiddenness, there are, however, two different types of the invisibility: the *invisibility of what is essentially hidden* and the *invisibility of what has been covered* (and is hidden therefore).⁶ In theology, the invisibility that characterizes a Divine being helps to capture its essence that is its essential relation to the visible (it is both invisibly absent from and present in the visible). Similarly, for Luckmann the invisibility (of religion) also defines what (religiously) functions from an essential hiddenness. On the opposite, the hiddenness caused by religious practices of covering is different than essential; though, not accidental as one might be tempted to say. The Aristotelian distinction between essential and accidental must be avoided in naming the difference between the essential hiddenness and the hiddenness caused by covering, since the practices of covering can essentially characterize a specific religiosity. Though the essential characteristics of a religion related to religious practices are visible, they are not simultaneously accidental.⁷ From the metaphysical point of view, the hiddenness consequent to religious practices is not essential but accidental and caused as an effect; from the invisibility-focused point of view, however, the invisibility of what has been covered matters to the comparable degree of importance with the invisibility of what is essentially hidden. So instead of essential versus accidental hiddenness, I prefer to differentiate between essential and social-and-political hiddenness.

⁵ Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*, 53.

⁶ A third type can be considered too: the invisibility of what has been overlooked by an inattention or looking away (mainly, in social and political context). I do not take it into consideration in this study, though, because it is not connected directly with the phenomenological relation between the invisible and the hidden.

⁷ Within the Aristotelian framework, the accidental properties correspond with different ways of visibility.

The *essential hiddenness* can be understood as a condition of appearing: what is essentially hidden conceals itself to enable something else to appear. The *social-and-political hiddenness* lacks this ontological moment of transcendental enabling. On the contrary, covering rather disables something (that is, principally, social or political encounters) to occur. I assert, though, that the element of disabling does not allow one to comprehend the hiddenness induced by covering as a negative counterpart of the essential hiddenness, for covering does not create some kind of a negatively operating essential disabling factor. The social-and-political hiddenness is neither accidental, nor negative, but simply a radically different type of hiddenness. The difference reaches so far that the relation of the social-and-political hiddenness to appearing must be questioned. Given that the relationship between hiddenness and appearing conceives of the hidden as a condition of possibility of appearing, I claimed that there is no such a relationship for the social-and-political hiddenness. Covering does not equal dis-appearing, and practices of covering do not have an essential link with appearing since they cause neither appearing nor dis-appearing. What has been covered is still present (and thus, strictly speaking, appears) as before, but the way of its appearing has changed and is marked by an invisibility; paradoxically, it appears as socially-or-politically invisible. Practices of covering alter appearing of what has been covered; one way of appearing is overlaid by another in a process of what could be called covering-layering.⁸

If we attempt to think invisibilities from hiddenness, the path of thinking leads us to the contexts of appearing. What appears presents itself from an essential source which is hidden. This is a model of appearing that not only prevails in traditional ontology but also seems to be natural for religious thinking. What appears reveals itself from somewhere else – from the transcendent. Yet, as has been shown in this part of the study, the course that leads from invisibility to hiddenness can be deceptive. On this course, for example, the social-and-political invisibility seems to be accidental or negative; which it is not, if we focus on invisibility itself directly, and not from hiddenness.

The connection between invisibility and hiddenness brings philosophical insights into the nature of revelation, that is, the way something appears for us to be experienced. Therefore, *religious thinking usually prefers the traditional model which, within a context of appearing, connects invisibility with essential hiddenness*. Despite important attainments for explanations of religious experience, it cannot be overlooked that the path marked by this connection misdirects our understanding to some aspects of invisibility. To think invisibility more complexly thus means to investigate whether appearing is the prevalent phenomenological situation in which we experience the invisible. And consequently to ask to what extent appearing understood as a phenomenological situation involves hiddenness as a factor of invisibility.

4 Hiddenness and phenomenological situations of appearing: Husserl and Heidegger

A phenomenological situation of appearing is a situation of an object-directed experience within which both an object and my consciousness of it are co-constituted. For Husserlian phenomenology, “my” consciousness establishes the area of appearing: what appears occurs within a stream of consciousness. This does not mean, though, that what appears within consciousness comes from somewhere else. Husserl does not presuppose a transcendent hiddenness, but only searches, in the good traditions of modern philosophy, for transcendental conditions of possibility of appearing. Rather than as a revelation, Husserl understands appearing in terms of a *givenness*; the consciousness itself stands for the original scene of

⁸ I have investigated phenomenological relationship between appearing and layering of experience in a previous study published in *Open Theology*: Nitsche, “Transformative Impact.”

appearing (as the primary phenomenological situation), and there is nothing essential hidden behind this scene.

As the most classical example of Husserl's approach to an invisibility can serve his remark in *Ideas 1* that "a physical thing can be given only 'one-sidedly'."⁹ The "other" sides of the perceived thing remain unperceived, not absent though since we know that we experience the whole thing. What is unperceived stands co-present or co-given with the actual perception. The relation between the perceived and unperceived parts of the same object continuously changes with our bodily moves: in a continuous series of adumbrations our experience of the given thing becomes complex.¹⁰ In accordance with the continuity of adumbrations, the unperceived cannot be understood as hidden: it does not hide neither at a reverse side of the perceived, nor somewhere outside the actual perception. The unperceived is always co-present and co-given, never strictly (essentially) hidden; its main characteristics of being unperceived implies, on the contrary, that it can be comprehended as invisible. The invisible, as a consequence, gains in Husserlian perspective a situational nature. For Husserl, *phenomenological situations of appearing do not involve hiddenness as its essential aspect but enable to respect an invisibility as a part of our perceptual experience*.

In the framework of Heideggerian approach, appearing also shapes the phenomenological situation of humans as both *Dasein* and mortals (in the earlier, respectively, later work). Can one claim that Heidegger is philosophically more sensitive to essential hiddenness than Husserl? Heidegger declares famously in §7 of his *Being and Time* that the task of phenomenology is to "let us see" what "lies *hidden*, in contrast to that which proximally and for the most part does show itself;" the hidden even "belongs essentially" to what "shows itself."¹¹ Compared with Husserl, for Heidegger the phenomenological situation of appearing is primarily not a situation of perceiving but of thinking – and as such pertains to ontological questioning. Phenomenological method, according to *Being and Time*, can be applied as the most proper ontological tool since it uncovers Being of particular beings. So, at first glance, Heidegger is very philosophically sensitive to the ontological task to define what essentially enables beings to be. At a closer look, however, it must be noted that his critical refusal of metaphysics encompasses a resolute disclaimer of essential hiddenness. The crucial passage of §7 in *Being and Time* declares it clearly: "'Behind' the phenomena of phenomenology there is essentially nothing else; on the other hand, what is to become a phenomenon can be hidden. And just because the phenomena are proximally and for the most part *not* given, there is need for phenomenology. Covered-up-ness is the counter-concept to 'phenomenon'."¹² What is essentially hidden can be localized behind the apparent; this is the case of transcendent causes of appearing. With the quoted claims, Heidegger rejects linking the phenomenological situation of appearing with any conception of essential hiddenness. He assures that phenomenology must relate to what is hidden, but not across a border of the apparent, or the visible, specifically. The phenomenological mission according to *Being and Time* consists not in describing phenomena (as that which is apparent) but in helping them reveal, that is, uncovering them.

Compared with Husserl, Heidegger does not focus on the dynamical relation between the visible and invisible (neither of them is, in fact, directly a topic in *Being and Time*). On the other hand, Heidegger

⁹ "Of necessity a physical thing can be given only 'one-sidedly'; and that signifies, not just incompletely or imperfectly in some sense or other, but precisely what presentation by adumbrations prescribes. A physical thing is necessarily given in mere 'modes of appearance' in which necessarily a core of 'what is actually presented' is apprehended as being surrounded by a horizon of 'co-givenness' which is not givenness proper, and of more or less vague indeterminateness." Husserl, *Ideas 1*, 94.

¹⁰ Another classical Husserlian insight emphasizes a temporal connection of the visible and the invisible; where the visible stands for the originally present and the invisible for the co-given dimensions of our time consciousness (that is, retention and protention).

¹¹ "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; but at the same time it is something that belongs to what thus shows itself, and it belongs to it so essentially as to constitute its meaning and its ground." Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 59.

¹² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 60.

explains, phenomenologically, the connection between appearing and hiddenness (not the essential one but a “covered-up-ness”). The explanation links phenomenology, remarkably, with what is in this study understood as the social-and-political hiddenness; so, *even though Heidegger does not analyze invisibility that accompanies experiences of perception, his methodology can help to comprehend the processes of covering-up and un-covering within the social and political context.*

At the end of the previous part, I have asked two questions: (1) whether appearing is the prevalent phenomenological situation in which we experience the invisible and (2) to what extent it would involve hiddenness as a factor of invisibility. Both founders of phenomenology acknowledge that appearing establishes the fundamental phenomenological situation. On a Husserlian path, the answer to the first question is positive; the situation of appearing grants a phenomenological access to the invisible which is always co-given with the visible – within a dynamic relationship of bodily based moves of a perceiver. On a Heideggerian path, even though Heidegger himself does not explore the invisible, the response is also positive since the situation of appearing, in this version, elucidates the dynamic relation between covering and uncovering. An answer to the second question must emphasize that for both initial versions of phenomenology *an essential hiddenness cannot be associated with phenomenological accounts of invisibility.*

5 The invisible beyond the limits of appearing: Henry and Merleau-Ponty

I have accentuated that appearing establishes the most fundamental phenomenological situation. Is there, then, for phenomenology anything beyond the limits of appearing at all? What are the limits of appearing insofar as it forms the basic phenomenological situation in Husserl’s and Heidegger’s foundational works? In my opinion, appearing is hither limited by being tied with what appears, that is, by being understood as appearing of an object, an entity, or a phenomenon. Within these limits, the invisible is articulated either as a co-given unperceived part of an object or as a covered sense of a phenomenon. The aim of this section of my study is to go beyond these limits to ask if phenomenology can expound the invisibility also differently, that is, exposing its other aspects.

To search for invisibility beyond the object/phenomenon-bound limits of appearing, of course, does not mean to turn back to an absolute invisibility essentially hidden behind the phenomena of metaphysics but, on the contrary, to untie the bonds of appearing to the object that appears. The same claim can be found already in the 1963 work of Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*. He criticizes classical phenomenology for being an “ontological monism,” that is, for moving in a circle while striving endlessly to understand the “essence of the phenomenon;” in this way, “[p]henomenology is its own object.”¹³ It is important to note that Henry detects the roots of ontological monism in the fixation of appearing to what appears. He writes “The radical dependence of that which appears with regard to the act of appearing requires that this act henceforth become the theme of the problematic.”¹⁴

The way Henry unties the bonds between appearing and what appears (that is, phenomena) leads him to speak about *manifestation rather than appearing*. As a matter of fact, manifestation means appearing, but conceived in a radically new manner without the limiting bonds to appearing objects. The manifestation is for Henry primarily a “self-manifestation of Being,” or, in other words, “the self-manifestation of the pure essence of manifestation.”¹⁵ The “pure essence” refers to the phenomenological

¹³ “Insofar as it is the application of the phenomenological method to the problem of the essence of the phenomenon, phenomenology moves in a circle. [...] Phenomenology is an inquiry which aims at clarifying its own foundation, it is a reflection upon itself. Phenomenology is its own object.” Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 56.

¹⁴ Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 52.

¹⁵ Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 143.

fact that the “self-hiding of the essence of phenomenality is the self-manifestation of a being.”¹⁶ The notion of self-manifestation builds on the interplay between the hidden and the apparent, which is also the fundamental relation for classical phenomenology (mainly for Heidegger). Henry focuses not on the apparent (that is, the “self-manifestation of a being”) but on that what escapes the usual view which concentrates on what appears: the “self-manifestation of Being,” which manifest itself by the “self-hiding of the essence of phenomenality.”¹⁷ By its very nature, the “self-manifestation of Being” appears as nonapparent; it is invisible.

Henry ranks among the most prominent phenomenological thinkers who write about invisibility explicitly and extensively.¹⁸ Even though he speaks about the “self-hiding of the essence of phenomenality,” the invisibility is not for him connected to essential hiddenness. The invisible is not hidden behind phenomena but, so to say, hides in the same direction as the phenomena appear, that is, toward a perceiver; it appears *together with the apparent as its essential and nonapparent determination*. In a genuine phenomenological manner, Henry insists that “the invisible is not the antithetical concept of phenomenality.”¹⁹ Even though Henry inclines to award primacy and originality to the self-manifestation of Being, the core of his approach consists of a *twofold understanding of manifestation* (that is, appearing); “a two-fold evidence according to which it becomes apparent,”²⁰ as he points it out. The twofold structure of manifestation investigates Henry thoroughly as the relationship of the immanence and the transcendence of self-manifestation. The self-manifestation leans toward its immanence, that is, invisibility, immediacy of Being, and its own self-affection; but at the same time, it must manifest itself just as a manifestation, that is, transcend its immanence toward the visible (and the apparent).²¹ The dual description of the self-manifestation (though, not dualistic!) enables Henry to explain carefully, for example, the relationship between affectivity and self-affection, the inner structure of temporality, etc.; but it also brings him close to dialectics in a Hegelian manner.²²

Also Merleau-Ponty, another phenomenologist who reflected upon the invisibility which accompanies phenomenality, unties the bonds between appearing and objects that appear. For him, seeing does not occur as an intentional act related to an object which is seen but rather as a *bodily immersion into the visible* – where the visible stands for the visible field (or environment, world). Merleau-Ponty’s conception, compared with Henry’s, is radically different since it builds on the perception, not the tension between the hidden and the apparent. For Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenological situation of appearing is fundamentally a situation of perceiving which includes not only my own sight but also the gazes of others. Unlike Henry, Merleau-Ponty does not adopt a perspective of the phenomenal itself; even when he formulates an ontology and speaks about essences or Being, he starts with the *primacy of perception* in a strictly bodily sense (so that there is nothing like pure phenomenality for him).²³

¹⁶ Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 108.

¹⁷ Henry is here very close to later thinking of Heidegger who in *Contributions to Philosophy (Beiträge zur Philosophie)* describes Being as a self-refusal that happens to benefits of particular beings: “Yet, as refusal, being is not mere withholding and seclusion; on the contrary, refusal is the intimacy of an allocation.” Heidegger, *Contributions*, 189.

¹⁸ For a more thorough interpretations of Henry’s phenomenology see: Zahavi, “Michel Henry and the Phenomenology of the Invisible,” and Canullo, “Michel Henry: from the Essence of Manifestation to the Essence of Religion.”

¹⁹ “The original revelation of the essence to itself, which is constitutive of its reality, is the invisible. Because it constitutes the original revelation of the essence to itself and of its reality, the invisible is not the antithetical concept of phenomenality, it is rather its first and fundamental determination.” Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 438.

²⁰ Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 266.

²¹ See, for example, Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 218 ff., 262 ff. (here with an emphasis on “world” and “imagination”).

²² A similarity between Henry and Hegel (esp. in his young work) highlights e.g. Dominique Janicaud. Janicaud et al., *The French Debate*, 74.

²³ It is remarkable that the two fundamentally different conceptions of invisibility were created almost in the same time in France. Merleau-Ponty’s work on the theme can be dated between 1959 and 1961 but has been published posthumously in 1964. Henry’s book has been published in 1963; in all probabilities, he could not have seen Merleau-Ponty’s notes. See on this Jean-Luc Marion’s comment in Marion, “The Invisible and the Phenomenon,” 61.

Jean-Luc Marion affirms the radical difference between the two phenomenological conceptions of invisibility by emphasizing that for Merleau-Ponty the invisible “does not have any specific mode of manifestation available that would be irreducible to that of the visible.”²⁴ In fact, for Merleau-Ponty (at least with regard to what are only fragmentary beginnings of an unfinished conception), the *invisible* is *directly related to the visible field* (not just an object). In the Introduction to *Signs*, he compares invisibility with immobility, which can be understood as a form of movement, claiming that “[t]he invisible is the limit or degree zero of visibility, the opening of a dimension of the visible.”²⁵ In *The Visible and Invisible*, he approximates the invisible to a “latency”²⁶ of the visible, or to a “blind spot”²⁷ of our consciousness. In short, the “invisible of the visible”²⁸ is the theme for Merleau-Ponty.

Even the rudimentary state of Merleau-Ponty’s notes allows one to see the very specific way he conceives of the invisible. Since he theorizes the visible as a field primarily, the invisible of *this* visible gains *topological* features; that is, it characterizes the visible as a dimension. Few lines after the sentence from the *Signs*, which is quoted above, Merleau-Ponty explicitly speaks about the “topology of being”²⁹ (la topologie de l’être). The topology of Being not only explains the visible as an opened “dimension” but also, and more accurately, as a “topological space,”³⁰ that is, as a lived environment which enables localization of perceptions understood as chiasms. To understand perceptions as chiasms means to describe them not only as acts of, for example, seeing, but as intersections of seeing and being seen, or of my gaze and the gazes of others.³¹ To localize perceptions/chiasms is, consequently, different from placing an object as an extended and limited part within a container-like dimension. To localize, perceptions/chiasms mean to localize relations that are already spread throughout the dimension. For example, if I watch a thing and see others watch the same, a net of our gazes together with the appearance of the thing are already extended in the space; though, it does not mean that they are localized here. We cannot know exactly, where they are since these relations are invisible; they are the invisible of *the* visible “objects” here, that is, the thing, me, and the others. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty refers to mathematical topology which can localize invisible relations or networks by, in a way, localizing the whole space/dimension, that is, providing the space a specific orientation and structure (or even a shape). *The invisible of the visible, thus, in a topological sense transforms the dimension of our surroundings to become our lived environment, where we are finding our places.*

Despite all differences, this could be what Henry’s and Merleau-Ponty’s conception share: for both the invisible deepens the dimension of the visible and helps us to understand it as something more than just a sphere of apparent objects. Both phenomenologists reflect the invisible behind the limits of appearing (that is, without concentration on what appears) to describe the visible as an element or an environment of manifestation. Merleau-Ponty does so directly in spatial terms; Henry investigates the relationship among the visible, the invisible manifestation, the space, and the placement later, in a way that can be interpreted closely to Merleau-Ponty, in his 1988 book *Seeing the Invisible*.³²

²⁴ Marion, “The Invisible and the Phenomenon,” 62.

²⁵ “One says invisible as one says immobile – not in reference to something foreign to movement, but to something which stays still. The invisible is the limit or degree zero of visibility, the opening of a dimension of the visible. There can be no question here of a zero in every respect or of an unrestricted being.” Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 21.

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 251.

²⁷ “When I say then that every visible is invisible, that perception is imperception, that consciousness has a ‘*punctum caecum*,’ that to see is always to see more than one sees – this must not be understood in the sense of a *contradiction*.” Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 247.

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 247.

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 22.

³⁰ “Take topological space as a model of being. [...] The topological space, on the contrary, a milieu in which are circumscribed relations of proximity, of envelopment, etc.” Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 210. See my conception of a transitive-topological phenomenology in Nitsche, *Methodical Precedence of Intertwining*.

³¹ See e.g. “Chiasm: I – the world, I – the other.” Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 264.

³² See e.g. “The disappearance of the object in geometrical abstraction is thus only the bringing to light of its essence, that which allows every object to be an object: it is placed in front of us in the space of light that is the world. It is the opening of this

6 Conclusion

The study has presented four phenomenological approaches to the invisible, which are related with the following names: Husserl, Heidegger, Henry, and Merleau-Ponty. How can these conceptions inspire thinking about religion (that is, not only a theory but also a reflection of lived religious experience)?

Phenomenologists write about the invisible from the fundamental phenomenological situation of appearing. Set within this situation, the hiddenness in a strict sense can be theorized only as related to a hidden source of appearing; but since the phenomenological perspective prohibits to understand the transcendence in a metaphysical way, for phenomenology appearing cannot have a hidden source. This proves true even for Heidegger, the only from the examined four who reflects upon the hidden explicitly; yet, the hiddenness of Being, for him, denotes not a hidden source of existence, but a “covered-up-ness” that always accompanies appearing (and is never hidden “behind” it). Phenomenologists, therefore, prefer to identify the concealed aspects of appearing not as the hidden but as the invisible (this term is preferred even to the nonapparent). Henry is close to Heidegger claiming that an invisible self-manifestation always accompanies and deepens what is apparent. Husserl explains how the fields of our perceptions are given within a continuous series of adumbrations which connect the perceived and unperceived. And Merleau-Ponty followed Husserl to initiate in-depth investigations of how the invisible co-establishes our lived environment.

The phenomenological method, generally speaking, does not understand the invisibility as a limit of what can be directly experienced but rather as a dynamic component of relational nature of any experiencing, including the religious one. Compared to theology, phenomenology repels tendencies to think the invisible (or the hidden) *per se* but concentrates on the relationship between the visible and the invisible as a co-giveness of both in the dynamics of human experience.

In the introduction, I quoted William James’s declaration that a religious experience consists of harmonizing with an “unseen order.” The phenomenological investigations presented in this study help to clarify at least three aspects of his assertion: first, that the unseen order need not to be essentially hidden; second, that the invisible is always already in a phenomenal harmony with the visible; and therefore, finally, that to accord with an unseen order means to be able to localize our own experiences within the dimension of this harmony.³³

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world, the first emergence of the Outside in which all objects will be joined together. It is the opening of the horizon against whose background all external phenomena will emerge. All of these ‘abstract’ investigations allow us to see the visibility of the visible, to the extent that they can. At the end of their journey, the most demanding investigations will only encounter the emptiness of this pure space.” Henry, *Seeing the Invisible*, 14.

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