



Phenomenology of Religious Experience

First Conference of the Research Circle
in Phenomenology of Religious Experience
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Sponsoring Institution: Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute

Conference Abstracts

November 4, Friday, Morning Session, 9:30 am -1:15 pm

Between Legein and Noein: the Stranger Jesus as Indicating the Necessary Interruption of and by Phenomenology

Peter COSTELLO, Providence University

Heidegger's work on thinking and language, particularly on the conjunction of *legein* and *noein* in *What is Called Thinking*, does not make problematic enough the human possibility of moving from letting-something-lie toward taking-that-thing-to-heart. Heidegger implies that we move from one to the other in a seamless transition. And I find a problem with that in terms of the phenomenon of Jesus' self-descriptions. At least in the case of the Jesus of Luke's Gospel, it seems that neither letting him be nor taking him to heart is easy. And in fact Jesus himself appears to interrupt the transition we might make from one act to the other, at least insofar as we try to experience him.

Certainly it is easy for us phenomenologists to see that it is only by allowing something to be itself, that it is only by allowing it to lie there on its own terms, and on the terms of the situation in which it is experienced, that we can grasp that thing's own-essential meaning. And, certainly, taking that thing to heart in its manner of self-giveness is something we regularly try to do—ever since Husserl introduced us to the *epoche*. The very moves of explication are a kind of translation, a correlation, of the thing into the language of our heart, a writing with and on our hearts, as it were. But what seems to me to be missing from the account of Heidegger in *What is Called Thinking* is the description of any kind of gap, or difference, between the two. What seems to be missing is the way the phenomenon itself (or what grounds or founds its giveness) resists lying down for us or resists being taken to our hearts.

More specifically, as I read Luke's Gospel, I am reminded of the difficulty of connecting the letting lie and the taking to heart 1) when Jesus says to a would-be disciple that he has no place to lay his head and 2) when Jesus tells all who can hear him that he longs, ineffectively, to gather the children of Jerusalem under his wings. Jesus cannot lie there to be taken up as the foxes or the birds do. And Jesus himself cannot take to heart those whom he would gather.

In this paper, then, I will use Heidegger and the Gospel of Luke to reflect on one another. I will argue that at least in the case of a phenomenology of religion, we are given the very difficult task of exploring how the moves of letting lie and taking to heart (the moves of the *logos* and of the correlation of *noesis* and *noema*) appear as different from one another and, in their differences, to demand an interruption, a pause, a restless searching. Phenomenology in the face of the Jesus of the Gospel requires us, as phenomenologists, to conjoin the Heidegger of



What is Called Thinking with the Heidegger of *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*. We are compelled by the Jesus of the Gospels to consider Paul and to find how meaning breaks off from itself in order to rejoin itself.

The Sound of a Small Whisper: Ordinary Religious Experience

Robert KUGELMANN, University of Dallas

Ordinary religious experience, as I am presenting it, is experience that does not entail an overwhelming sense of the Divine; it is not a "numinous" experience. It is instead "the sound of a small whisper," easily ignored. Such a moment does not submerge the ego or encroach on its freedom. After a description of such an experience, an initial phenomenological reflection on this everyday experience will follow. Then the presentation turns to an exposition of the category, "experience," in the psychological literature, with an emphasis on the work of Antoine Vergote. Because religious experience makes a religious claim, attention will also be given to theological contributions, where experience—in the Catholic context viewed in the early twentieth century with suspicion because of its associations with the irrational and the subconscious, and then rehabilitated beginning in the 1950s—features prominently. The presentation will take the form of an initial exploration of these important events in the lives of individuals and communities. To conclude, we turn to the question whether or not any experience whatsoever can be a religious experience; in other words, is the religious, however understood, always a possible horizon of experience?

A Plea for Elusiveness: On Vocation and Identity in Western Mysticism

Jana TRAJTELOVÁ, Trnava University

In my paper, I explore the meaning of vocation and identity in the experience of a theistic (Western) type of mysticism (mainly, through John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich).

These deeply related phenomena of vocation and identity reveal their essential aspects and constitutive structures through the subtle movements of the deepest inner life of an individual (the mystic, the contemplative); these hold generally, in an attenuated form, for any human person. Adding views of existential and contemplative psycho-therapeutic approaches (V. E. Frankl, G.G. May), I will discuss the meaning of phenomena involved in the process of unique vocational individuation of a person: desire (as the "primordial call"), the process of dispossession and transformation, and the gift of a loving union. Given these experiences, I will highlight the meaning of what I call the "precedence of being" and its vocational impact ("doing"); I will emphasize the significance of a genuine transcending intentionality as opposed to ontological isolation; and I will briefly treat the problem of idolatry (as any kind of possessive fixation of sense, especially as the attachment to arbitrary self-images or social, conventional, and ideological "identities").

In my last section, I elaborate upon the specific, essential, and paradoxical character of personal identity (as revealed most deeply through the mystical and contemplative life), and



highlight its essentially open, elusive, and transsubjective character. I will suggest in concluding that it is precisely “elusiveness” that bears the only genuinely firm standpoint for discovering and evolving one’s vocational dimension (vocational identity), and I will point out the philosophical implications for this understanding.

Some Disparate Reflections on the Category “Religious Experience”

Michael DURHAM TORRE, University of San Francisco

The concept “religious experience” is one found in many a text on the philosophy of religion, where one also is likely to encounter proofs for God’s existence based on “religious experience.” After noting how the use of this term is often to be found, the basic aim of the paper I will offer is to challenge the way this term is often used. I will first offer some reflections of what might be meant by “experience.” I will then argue that the category of “religious experience” is often used too narrowly. We need to be attentive to its wider, richer, and multiple meanings. In short, while it probably is true that most people hold the religious convictions they do or continue to practice a religious tradition by virtue of their religious experience, this is mostly not because they have what the present textbooks are speaking of when they refer to “religious experience.”

November 4, Friday, Afternoon Session, 2:45 am – 6:45 pm

James and Husserl: The Early Development of Phenomenology of Religious Experience

Laurel MEIERDIERCKS and John SNAREY, Emory University

This paper will show William James’s place in the wider narrative of the phenomenology of religious experience and, in particular, how his connection with Edmund Husserl can shed light on what James’s work offers contemporary understandings of the phenomenology of religion. We postulate that William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* exhibits the hallmarks of Husserlian phenomenology and can act as a methodological example of what a Husserlian phenomenology of religion would look like.

We will trace how James influenced Husserl by examining Husserl’s notes, some of which credit James with helping Husserl to develop specific aspects of his thought. These notes, paired with the development of James’s understanding of phenomena, horizon, intentionality, and his early version of the epoché, plot a clear picture of James’s importance in the development of phenomenological thought. These elements come together in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* to portray a budding phenomenology of religious experience. Acknowledging that these elements are present in *The Varieties* can lead us into an understanding of phenomenology of religious experience which relies on James as much as on Husserl. We will not claim that James is a phenomenologist, only that his work influenced Husserl’s formation of phenomenology and that James’s unfinished work contains the beginnings of phenomenological inquiry, particularly into religious experience. His methods are close to those



of Husserl, but James did not live long enough to bring to fruition the essential structures of phenomenology that he had discovered.

Methodological Issues in Describing the Experiences of Qigong: a first-person approach based on the philosophy of Eugene Gendlin

Haruhiko MURAKAWA, Kansai University

In this paper, I will examine some methodological issues to describe the first-person experiences of religious and spiritual practices, i.e., "qigong", a Chinese traditional practice based on qi metaphysics. Recent development of various qualitative research methods in human sciences including phenomenological psychology provides us with the systematic procedures to examine such "first-person experiences." However, most of those endeavors are still naïve in terms of the division of language and experience, in their actual procedure of interviewing, analyzing, and describing, and resulted in poor description, either a mere repetition of metaphysical textbooks or reduction of experiences to scientific explanations.

For this matter, I would propose a first-person approach based on the philosophy and practice of Eugene Gendlin, which contain three methodologically controversial points: 1) taking such religious experiences as not contents but a flow, which Gendlin called experiencing, 2) creating new meaning out of the flow of experience, 3) feeling as an anchor for any step of research procedure, which in Gendlin's view is not consciousness, emotion nor sensation, but rather as *Befindlichkeit*, a mode of being-in-the-world. I will discuss these points, with some experiential descriptions from the interview with qigong practitioners.

The End of Phenomenology for Buddhist Studies

Thomas CALOBRISI, Graduate Theological Union

The Embodied Mind by Francisco Varela, Eleanor Rosch and Evan Thompson has guided comparative studies of Buddhist philosophy, phenomenology and cognitive science for the last two decades; it is not, however, without its critics. Robert Sharf has claimed not only that the turn to phenomenology in studies of Buddhist philosophy performs a philosophical sleight of hand on matters of access to conscious, phenomenal states but that, in privileging what appears to consciousness, it misses the critique of the "natural attitude" proffered by social theory. While these critiques are perceptive, Sharf effectively performs the same bracketing of metaphysical questions which leads phenomenology to the sleight of hand for which he criticizes them; rather than appealing phenomenology to counter reductionism, Sharf appeals to social theory to do so. If we seek to get beyond phenomenology in Buddhist studies, as Sharf does, it cannot be, I claim, through social theory. In this paper I want to present the end of phenomenology for Buddhist studies. Following Tom Sparrow's critique of phenomenology in *The End of Phenomenology*, it will be shown that in establishing itself against realism and idealism, phenomenology, through its "rhetoric of concreteness" posits a subject-independent real which it cannot philosophically justify and thus undermines its own prohibition of metaphysical speculation. Sparrow proffers the nascent speculative realist movement and its critiques of



“correlationism” as the remedy to the deadlock of phenomenology. Again, following Sparrow’s lead, I will demonstrate that speculative realism can serve to break comparative studies of Buddhist philosophy with the mode of phenomenology and allow it to engage more both Western and Buddhist traditions more honestly, precisely by breaking the prohibition on metaphysical speculation. Finally, it will be shown that in breaking this prohibition, comparative studies can better equip Buddhist and Western traditions alike against scientific materialism/reductionism

November 5, Saturday, Morning Session, 9:30 am – 12:45 pm

Religious Experience and Photography

Javier CARREÑO COBOS, Franciscan University of Steubenville

A significant contribution of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology to the philosophy of imagination has been the clarification of our conscious rapport with depictive images, together with their differentiation from the experience of perceptual illusions (Husserl, 2005). This clarification is also helpful for the philosophy of religion and especially the reception of the practice of praying with religious images such as icons. Already Ludwig Wittgenstein had pointed out in his critique of Frazer that no one paying an act of piety to an image crudely confuses the image with what it represents (Wittgenstein, 1993). For the phenomenologist, the ground for this non-confusion goes back to the essential features of a conscious experience at work therein, which Husserl calls “image-consciousness,” and in which “image-object” and “image-subject” are found to be distinct (if intertwined) moments of this experience.

It would appear that a phenomenology of image-consciousness that is attentive to concrete forms of representation and image-making can also reveal the specific forms of imaginative involvement called forth by religious representation and religious experience. Following the time-honored principle that a thing often shows itself at the point of disappearing, I would like to focus on the impact of photography on religious experience. According to Roland Barthes and, more recently, John Brough photography cannot become a genuinely religious art (Barthes, 1980; Brough 2015). Setting aside arguments from the historical and ontological inaccessibility of religious subjects, Brough points to the fact that photographs tie their subjects too firmly in a specific, past moment, thereby preventing the play of imagination required for a genuine religious experience.

While partly accepting this argument, Barthes’ and Brough’s claims still need to be measured against possible objections coming from the photography of the miraculous; the photography of the *numinous* (Otto, 1923; Van der Leeuw, 1963); and the photography of Eucharistic presence (Sokolowski, 1993). In doing so, I will not only defend a *minimal* religiosity to which photography can rise, but also strive for a more positive delineation of the sort of imaginative play at work in more mainstream religious experiences involving images.



Topological Space and the Presence of God. Heidegger on the Spatiality of Embodied Religion
Martin NITSCHKE, Institute of Philosophy, Czech Academy of Sciences

The question how to explain the presence of God in terms of embodiment involves another question concerning space. In last decades, not only the conception of corporeality changes radically towards the intertwining body-soul-spirit or body-self-world(-divine) but also the concept of space and place undergoes crucial transformations. We follow in this presentation the phenomenological-topological conception of space as it was unfolded by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Especially Heidegger connects topological understanding of space (die Ortschaft; or the “place-space”, Ort-Raum) with an attempt to rethink the essence of God. The early and middle Heidegger (*Being and Time*, *Contributions to Philosophy*) understands the space as a “between-space” (Zwischen-Raum), i.e. the space for encounters between *Dasein* and Being or (in our context) humans and gods. The late Heidegger reaches the conception of the “place-space” (Ort-Raum, Ortschaft): things as places are permeated with the sense of a “four-fold” (the world). The idea of encounter in the between-space is thus replaced with the conception of topological permeation. This conception of topological permeation means for us in this paper an important enrichment of the phenomenological idea of embodiment and a possible way of understanding the spatiality of “embodied religion”.

In the presentation I want to address following questions: What does the turn from between-space to place-space mean for the possibility of an encounter with the Divine? Can *religio* be understood topologically? Do things (as places) play the key role in rituals and sacraments? In the paper we try to answer these questions following Heidegger’s topology of Being (Topologie des Seins) and his topological conception of place-space (Ortschaft).

From Self-Attaching to Self-Emptying: The Investigation of Xuanzang’s Account of Self-consciousness

Jingjing LI, McGill University

In this paper, I investigate the account of self-consciousness in Xuanzang (602-664CE), the Chinese Yogācārin’s doctrine of consciousness-only (*vijñāptimātra*). I will explain how Xuanzang’s conception of self-consciousness first serves as the diagnosis of human suffering, and, then as the way of realizing the Buddhist goals of emptiness and compassion. Current scholarship often interprets the Yogācāra account of self-consciousness either as a science of mind or a metaphysical idealism (mental ideality is exhaustive of reality). Both of these two interpretations are misleading. While the former overlooked the religiosity of Yogācāra Buddhism, the latter perpetuated the stereotype that Buddhists do not engage themselves with the real world. Against the *status quo*, I argue that in his account of self-consciousness, Xuanzang advocates a transcendental idealism. This idealism yields a Buddhist phenomenology that stresses the correlation between ideality and reality. A Buddhist phenomenology as such resembles and also differs from Edmund Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology.



Sight and Sacrament: Nature, Liturgy, and Earthly Life
Christopher DUPEE

Within Pavel Florensky's essay on sacred art, *Iconostasis*, we find the enigmatic reference to a precondition of spiritual knowledge in a mode free of prelest, that is, free from all pathology and delusion. He calls this a "day of spiritual sobriety", a phenomenological enmeshment of attention within the spatio-temporal nexus which, in its material humility, is distinct from localized psychological and sociological phenomena, and thus opens up through material means the spiritual vision provided by iconography and liturgical practice. In a similar fashion, we find in St. Theophan the Recluse's writings the sharp distancing between the salutary materiality of the natural world and the pathological materiality of human culture. Both of these thoughts of a positive spiritual significance to earthly materiality specifically distinguished from the socio-cultural do not, for the most part, find an easy inclusion in contemporary phenomenological accounts of religious experience; and in this paper I take as privileged examples the liturgical thought of Jean-Yves Lacoste and the account of the saturated phenomenon of Revelation provided by Jean-Luc Marion. In Lacoste's work, there is no easy distinction between the salutary and pathological materialities identified by Florensky and Theophan, especially when both total horizons of experience, world and earth, are precisely critiqued by liturgy. In Marion there is a double lacuna: first concerning "natural" phenomenon and the world-horizon, and the question of the (non-)site of Revelation. While all naively "real" phenomena are marked by givenness, and thus attain to the possible iconic excess of any purely objective horizons, the relation such real givens to the possibility of spiritual iconicity, as the site of the phenomenon of Revelation, has hitherto been unexamined. In this paper I thus attempt to develop an eco-phenomenological nuancing of these accounts in conversation with the thought of both Florensky and St. Theophan.

November 5, Saturday, Afternoon Session, 2:00 pm – 6 pm

Living the Epoché: A Phenomenological Realism of Religious Experience
Sam MICKEY, University of San Francisco

In contrast to constructivist and reductionist denials of the existence of religious experience, this paper presents a phenomenological realism of religious experience, particularly by elucidating the function of the epoché in the phenomenology of religion. Some interpretations of the epoché preclude any commitments to realism. For instance, Husserl's epoché is typically understood as a methodological device for "bracketing" any assertions arising from the natural attitude, which would entail holding in suspense any metaphysical claims about the existence or non-existence of religious experience. Drawing on the works of Emmanuel Levinas and the Dutch phenomenologist of religion Gerardus Van der Leeuw, I outline a different interpretation of the epoché, one that suspends the understanding while nonetheless affirming the real existence of religious experience.

Van der Leeuw and Levinas approach phenomenology from different contexts, Christianity and hermeneutics for the former and Judaism and ethical metaphysics for the latter. Following



Heidegger's existential turn in phenomenology, both thinkers seek to live the epoché such that it is not a mere methodological device but a pre-reflective mode of being, a restraint that is fundamental to the openness of human existence to the world. Bracketing is the process whereby the understanding reaches a limit that opens out onto that which is other in its irreducible otherness (Levinasian "alterity"). The reality of the other is given in a pre-reflective encounter while one suspends one's own understanding of the other. Furthermore, both Van der Leeuw and Levinas argue that such openness to the other is what defines religious experience, which means that religious experience is real, and it is a constitutive feature of human existence. The human is thus "*Homo religiosus*," as Van der Leeuw says. This entails a provocative suggestion that the practice of phenomenology involves a religious dimension, and conversely, every religious experience involves an epoché.

Extending the Phenomenological Method for Nondual Experience **William A. ADAMS**

The need for a special epistemological method to understand reality is an ancient argument. In Plato's cave, the shadows were epiphenomenal and taking the sensory evidence at face value was error. True reality is apprehended through the special method of philosophical reasoning, Plato argued. Here, at this conference, we ask, is phenomenology a suitable epistemological method for study of religious experience?

There is considerable diversity around the definition of religious experience. William James's definition is simple and pragmatic: Religious experience is human experience, regardless of its origin. It is often described as an ineffable revelation of knowledge, with a strong component of feeling. Husserl's phenomenology would seem well-suited to study such an experience. However, this paper argues that there cannot be a successful phenomenology of religious experience because of the way phenomenology works, as a kind of introspective empiricism that presupposes epistemological dualism, the intrinsic separation of knower from known. By contrast, a defining characteristic of religious experience is its nondual nature, the sense that one is not distinct from the object contemplated but united with it.

A solution to this mismatch is to supplement traditional phenomenology with an epistemological method that embraces nondualism. A methodology is proposed that extends phenomenology with a procedure described in the *Yoga-Sutras* of Patanjali for attaining a nondual state of consciousness. Combined, the two methods might offer a path to insight into the nature of religious experience.

Qualia of God: A Post-Henry Approach to Religious Experience **Olga LOUCHAKOVA-SCHWARTZ**, Patriarch Athenagoras orthodox Institute and UC Davis

In recent debates on the philosophy of religion, it has been suggested that religious experience must be viewed as a set of ideas constructed by texts (Penner, Gimello, Flood) and social practices (Geertz and Jensen). A more radical perspective in analytic philosophy (Zangwill) echoes the Kantian argument that since God is not an object, religious experience



doesn't exist or is simply a phenomenon of language (Ciolkozs). Such accounts dismiss phenomenality of religious experience, and with it, the possibilities of knowledge without an object (cf. self-affection in Henry) or of non-intentional knowledge (cf. in Henry, Vedanta or Islamic Illuminationism; cf. critique of the modes of knowledge in Marcel). Even if religious experience is linked to specific conditions of possibility (Steinbock) or self-masking intensity (Marion), its givenness remains problematic (cf. opposite perspectives in Husserl and Ales Bello). I submit that while phenomenology can clarify this form of experience, it remains limited by its focus on the primacy of phenomenologically reduced consciousness, as opposed to other possibilities in the phenomenal field.

According to Henry, the phenomenological origins of religious thought, time and even "pure seeing" should be sought after in the horizon of phenomenological materiality-sentience-meaning, and not in a classical phenomenological horizon of pure meaning. Following Henry's account and my own findings, I show that the central datum of religious experience abides in embodied, introspective, phenomenologically material subjectivity. As I will show from the examples of the early Christian religious concept of the Ladder and Illuminationist concept of *nur mujarrad* ("light made bare", Arabic), this approach gives religious experience back its phenomenality, i.e. qualia (in terms used by the analytic philosophy). Further, such approach enables the search for diachronically and synchronically stable phenomenological structures pertaining exclusively to the genus of experience as religious experience.

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