The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy

Daniele De Santis, Burt C. Hopkins, Claudio Majolino

Phenomenology and religion

Publication details
Stefano Bancalari
Published online on: 25 Aug 2020


PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
It is a fact that the varied philosophical movement that goes under the name of “phenomenology” has broadly accepted in its own field of inquiry a whole family of issues, all converging on a virtual blaze that can be defined, by first approximation, with the generic and all-encompassing noun “religion”: God, the absolute, the sacred, the holy, the faith, the mystic, the infinite (with its glory), prayer, incarnation, idol, icon, liturgy, but also religion as such are objects of analyses elaborated in texts that claim to be developments (more or less heretical) of Husserl’s ambition to a rigorous science and that in some cases have become real classics of phenomenological thought. One could, of course, dismiss all this as “swerving” of a method that has undergone an illegitimate “theological turn”: were it not that it would be really hard to know exactly when this turn took place, since the problem of phenomenological analysis of religion was born together with phenomenology itself. Or, in truth, even before. When, in fact, Husserl baptized his research method with the name of “phenomenology”, a certain “phenomenology of religion”, understood as an empirical, non-evaluative and not philosophical description of religious phenomena, already existed. While completely independent as to its origin, this pre-philosophical and pre-Husserlian phenomenology inevitably ends up weaving its path to that of phenomenology as properly (i.e. philosophically) intended. The result is a conceptual and methodological situation, intricate to say the least, which loads the question of a “phenomenology of religion” with a not-quite-easy-to-manage polysemy: but that is why it is crucial to note that the problem of the link between phenomenology and religion immediately (both in the historical and in the theoretical sense) imposes itself as inescapable within those boundaries drawn from Husserl’s method.

On a first level, this is even obvious: religious facts and problems, like any other fact capable of entering the cone of light of the phenomenological glance, claim to be taken into consideration, were it merely to be relegated to the pertinence of the natural attitude and therefore excluded from that of phenomenology. But there is a far deeper reason, which makes it inevitable for phenomenology to take on the religious problem, or rather the problem that religion in general represents for philosophy. In phenomenology’s genetic heritage, indeed, one finds a hereditary trait that links it in an essential manner with “philosophy of religion”. This latter is not an eternal category of the spirit, but, as Jean Greisch rightly asserts, it was “invented” (Greisch 2002–2004) at a given time: namely, in modernity, to coincide with that general theoretical movement that can be described as the crisis of metaphysics. It is when God’s existence (as the ground of meta-
physics) becomes questionable that the need for a specific philosophical discipline that inquires into religion rather than into God comes out: so that religion, in fact, and not immediately, nor directly God, becomes the possible and legitimate object of a truly philosophical discourse, that keeps itself “within the boundaries of mere reason”, to say it à la Kant. In the moment in which the ability to leverage on the *ipsam esse subsistens* as the foundation of all that (derivatively) “is” breaks down, then the very possibility of resorting to the notion of “existence” in general is called in question, with the inevitable effect of casting in doubt ontology and metaphysics in the traditional sense of the two concepts. From this point of view, phenomenology really appears as “the secret nostalgia of all modern philosophy” (Hua III/1, 133/142); by explicitly undertaking this leave from existence, which is phenomenologically understood as a general “thesis” of the natural attitude, and by theorizing the époché as the inaugural gesture of the phenomenological viewpoint, phenomenology is repeating and radicalizing that overall movement of taking distance from ontological metaphysics, by which God Himself, as Nietzsche says, is nothing more than an “epoch”, i.e. suspended, as the etymological derivation of “epoch” from époché suggests.

It is no surprise therefore that, just as happens likewise in philosophy of religion, such an époché does not translate, at all, for phenomenology, in a simple elimination of objects and problems, but in a reconstitution and transposition of the same on another plane: in the specific case, on the plane of manifestation. In this sense, the famous §58 of *Ideas I* can really be seen as the opening moment, in the historical and theoretical sense, of a phenomenology of religion in the philosophical sense of the word. Here Husserl, with the same gesture with which, on the one hand, he proceeds to a “disconnection” (*Ausschaltung*) of God’s transcendence, on the other hand prefigures the possibility of an “absolute” that is “totally different” (Hua III/1, 125/134) with respect to the absolute of transcendental consciousness. Regardless of the specific problem on which Husserl will almost never stop reflecting, it is interesting to note that this indication of a path, that at this level is really only just mentioned, is immediately translated, in the phenomenological circle, to the insistent position of a fundamental question: is it possible to “apply” the phenomenological method to a particular field of phenomena in such a way as to formulate a sort of regional ontology that has its theoretical foundation in the phenomenology of consciousness in general? The way to answer this question is so decisive for the type of phenomenology of religion that turns out, that the option for a positive or negative response can be effectively used to organize the (obviously very varied) field of the different approaches to the problem of the relationship between phenomenology and religion.

The paradigmatic example of an “ontological-regional” approach is Max Scheler’s phenomenology of religion. According to Scheler it is possible to identify a class of experiences and objects, specifically religious, that define the scope of relevance of a phenomenological-eidetic discipline that is totally autonomous. As defined by Scheler, the “essential phenomenology of religion” is, thus, a “thorough examination, on the basis of religion's independence, into the general peculiarities of the objects and values of faith” (Scheler 1954, 150–151/154), which is based on three fundamental tasks: “1) the essential nature of the divine; 2) the study of the forms of revelation in which the divine intimates and manifests itself to man; 3) the study of the religious act” (ibid., 157/161). Scheler's case is paradigmatic, but not isolated: the attempt to make phenomenology of religion a true phenomenological discipline on a classical Husserlian basis is shared by a large number of authors who design a perhaps not very well-known but heavily compact and interesting landscape [one thinks, for example, of Robert Winkler (1921), Jean Hering (1926) and Johannes Heber (1929)]. At the theoretical (and very problematic) core of this approach lies the need to trace, within the context of experience, a specific object and, by analogy, a specific act that allows us to uniquely qualify that experience as a specifically religious
Phenomenology and religion

one, differing from any other type of experience. In a sense, this type of phenomenology of religion reworks in a strictly phenomenological key the question raised by Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* (Otto 1917), who, despite his estrangement from the lexicon and setting of Husserl, is an important reference point for all the authors mentioned here. And it is no coincidence. On the one hand, the identification of the “sacred” as the object of the inquiry responds to the need of not restricting the field by prejudicially opting, for example, for theistic conceptions or institutionalized religions: so that it is evident and entirely intentional, in this setting, to marginalize the question of God’s existence in favor of the question of the description of religious living experience. On the other hand, the two central philosophical objectives of Otto’s work are purely phenomenological: a) to demonstrate that the sentiment of the “numinous” (the term was coined by Otto to avoid the ethical resonance of the German word *heilig*), the ambivalent mix of terror and fascination that is experienced in certain particular experiences (Otto offers a large number of examples), is radically distinct from any “natural” feeling; b) to prove that this sentiment is able to reveal immediately (regardless of any logical deduction or inference) the presence of a corresponding numinous object; an affirmation easily translatable in the phenomenological lexicon of intentionality.

It is significant to note that this “ontological-regional” understanding of the phenomenology of religion is by no means a thing of the past, but features in a style of research that is contemporarily practiced as of today, as is well documented in the relevant entry recently written by Mark Wynn for the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Wynn 2008).

A second (far more philosophically radical) approach is defined by the methodological refusal to understand the phenomenology of religion in disciplinary terms. Here the problem is not to cut into the space of experience an autonomous field that pacifically coexists with others, leaving the overall conceptual framework intact: a framework substantially coincident with the space of manifestation defined by the constituting transcendental consciousness; the problem, on the contrary, is just to understand how experience in general is to be considered, admitting (but not allowing) that a religious experience be possible. The fundamental theoretical core of this approach can be posed starting from an alternative: either in experience in general, that is, in every experience, we open a space for what is naturally understood in terms of religious experience, or the latter loses every phenomenal consistency, to prove to be an undue (and illusory) transposition on the phenomenological plane of what is and remains a thesis proper to the natural attitude.

In this perspective, which takes seriously the claims made by the method, the problem posed by Husserl (bracketing and eventual revival on another plane of a divine “absolute”) appears in all its complexity, revealing itself, more strongly and convincingly, as the theoretical beginning of the phenomenological-religious problem and as a phenomenological-religious version of the problem of the beginning, i.e. the problem of reduction. In effect, it opens a series of radical questions: if it is true that the practice of phenomenology is only possible thanks to the reduction of every transcendence to the immanence of the transcendental consciousness as the only legitimate source of meaning – i.e. as the absolute – is there still place for a phenomenological recovery of the meaningful character of the religious phenomenon? And from the opposite point of view: is it really conceivable that the absolute is the subject (rather than the object) of a religious experience? It is clear that the short way to appeal to an alleged “religious experience”, capable of connecting consciousness with the divine (the way of the first approach), circumvents the problem rather than solving it. Again, it is interesting to observe that this problem is taken up immediately after the publication of *Ideas I*: Adolf Reinach (1989), Josef Heiler (1921), and Kurt Stavenhagen (1925) enact a real intellectual battle to cope with the paradox of the conceptually never-heard-before situation, represented by the absolute (of transcendental consciousness) opening to another absolute, i.e. by the doubling of that which is single by definition.
What seems at first glance a trivial contradiction is a powerful trigger for a logical and methodological reflection that gives rise to some of the most original and fruitful developments of Husserl’s method. Indeed, at close glance, the formal structure of the problem of the “absolutes”, which configures what, technically, is a paradox rather than a contradiction, is nothing but the problem of the relationship between immanence (to the absolute of consciousness) and transcendence (of another absolute) — which means that it is a variant of a problem of phenomenology that is radical and by no means “regional”: the problem of intersubjectivity. It is the problem that arises when the intentional transcendence — the relationship between consciousness and the noematic contents that it encounters within its horizon (perceptive and temporal) — turns out to be inadequate to account for that particular “object” that claims to be another subject, with its own horizon of manifestation; a subject that claims to be constituting and not just constituted — exactly like the “totally different” absolute that, indeed, claims to be the principle of a unitary teleological movement that embraces not only the totality of the egos, but even that meaningfulness factually present in the world and, apparently, not attributable to any ego-consciousness in particular. The classical phenomenological question of intersubjectivity and that of divine absoluteness converge in questioning the constituting ambition of transcendental consciousness: the latter finds itself in a difficult relationship with a transcendence that is non-constituted and non-intentional and yet not to be reduced to that of the natural attitude. The question of God and that of intersubjectivity converge to the point that the interweaving between the two, and the consequent need to think their distinction, can be assumed as the very core of the “phenomenology of religion” in the sense that we are examining. Far from being a discipline, phenomenology of religion is the effort to articulate the notion of “transcendence”, so that it becomes possible to distinguish different levels of it, all “immanent” to the phenomenological point of view and all different from the naive transcendence that transcendental reduction excludes; therefore, it becomes possible to recover on the phenomenological level the meaningfulness of that intertwining of religion and transcendence that ordinary language and natural attitude assume as inextricable. In this sense, the operation carried out by Levinas on the non-technical term “religion”, resemanticizing and technicizing it in the light of the phenomenological problem of intersubjectivity, becomes a paradigm: “We propose to call ‘religion’ the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality” (Levinas 1990, 30/40). Two aspects here are extremely significant and exemplary of an overall attitude of this direction of the phenomenology of religion: a) the fact that, despite any simplifying attempt to identify (erroneously) Levinasian alterity with “God”, religion is called in question without reference to any divine element, but as the activation of a paradoxical “relationship” that breaks with the totality of the Same; the latter turns out to be questioned by another that has nothing of the divine, but indeed is “the neighbor”; b) the fact that phenomenology thus opens to “religion” in its pre-philosophical dimension, not so much as to make it an object of study, but to borrow lexical and conceptual resources that, revised and corrected on a methodological level, can be fruitful to describe, articulate, think the phenomenological problem of outright transcendence (not necessarily divine, and in any case not in the first place).

Among the many possible exemplifications of how this theoretical paradigm is embodied in contemporary phenomenological-religious theories, two particularly significant cases can be recalled.

The first is that of Michel Henry, whose conceptual lexicon, strictly based on the idea of the immanence of life, understood as pure auto-affection, and considered as the most original layer of the manifestation, seems to make it an exception to the general picture we are tracing. And yet, regardless of the use of the term, it is exactly the attempt to overcome the level of the intentional and horizontal manifestation, considered inadequate, which makes the dimension of
Henry’s concept of immanence substantially equivalent to “transcendence” in the way defined above. This is especially so, given that the research of this dimension leads to a direct confrontation with the Christian tradition that seems to be the inevitable reference point in order to move from life (of the single) to Life (that transcends any singular) (Henry 1996, 2000, 2002).

The second case is that of Jean-Luc Marion. Marion’s phenomenology also makes explicit use of a pre-phenomenological ground intended as a reserve of sense, from which it is possible to derive useful tools for a radicalization of the very idea of phenomenology. The “privileged” and yet ordinary phenomenon of “gift”, as a paradigm of the “givenness” of each phenomenon as such, is elaborated by virtue of a reduction exercised simultaneously on two sides: that of the empirical phenomenon of intersubjective exchange and that of the Christian theological tradition, both considered to be able to offer an alternative to the metaphysical model if phenomenologically reinterpreted. The transition from transcendental consciousness to the “gifted” (adonné) precisely marks the opening to the radical transcendence of what precedes and exceeds the constituent power of subjectivity: what Marion defines as “saturated phenomenon” (Marion 1998).

Further examples, as was said, could be given. However, it is interesting to note that the understanding of the relationship between phenomenology and religion in terms of a fruitful osmosis of conceptual resources between the two domains is already explicitly and theorized early on by Heidegger in the famous course of 1920–21 dedicated to the phenomenological analysis of the letters of Paul (Heidegger 1995). The young phenomenologist, who at this time was engaged in the elaboration of the “factic life experience” as the very scope of the phenomenological description, directed his interest to the Pauline epistolary, moving from a precise working hypothesis: primitive Christianity lives temporality as such, i.e. authentically. Consequently, phenomenological analysis requires, as an indispensable completion, an investigation into specifically Christian temporality, for it is the latter that reveals to the “self”, normally dispersed in the world, the possibility of access to its finiteness and “affliction” (thlipsis), without the protective and reassuring screen that is offered by what is “worldly”. If the time of the world is tailored to the self, the one that allows the self to foresee and control future events, the authentic time is the one of waiting for something that is not conceivable, that of those who live the “worldly meaningfulness” as something that “is passing away” (1 Cor 7:31).

Beyond the specific interest of these Heideggerian analyses, it is significant to note, once again, the need for transcendence in the phenomenologically more radical sense of the term: the one that consists in opening the horizon of the manifestation as a space within which the self necessarily moves – a space that embraces, surrounds, and constrains the self, and that the latter, relying solely on itself and on its own point of view, could not open without the help of a transcendent point of view. In the refined elaboration of the complex Pauline formula “as though not” (hos me), Heidegger intends to show how it is an expression of the authentically Christian attitude, and at the same time, of the authentically phenomenological attitude toward the world. Thus, an extremely interesting solidarity emerges, enabling us to reconsider the deeper and deeper core of the course we have undertaken and that brings the matter back to the kinship between phenomenology and philosophy of religion from which we started: in the end, it is by bracketing or suspending the world’s claims (that is, of natural attitudes) and its more or less conscious and more or less explicit “theses” that phenomenology and religion find their decisive point of contact; in the theorization, that is, of an epoché that is not merely understood as the simple preparation and/or reduplication of the transcendental reduction, that is, of the moving back to the constituting operations of consciousness, but which is understood as the suspension of the transcendental consciousness itself as the opening of itself to a stage further beyond the self, to a paradoxical transcendence, which is also paradoxically immanent, which never stops questioning both phenomenology and religion.8
Notes

1 The allusion is evidently to the controversial pamphlet by Janicaud (1991) who bemoans a betrayal of the Husserlian method by some of the most well-known French phenomenologists (such as Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Henry or Jean-Luc Marion). He considers them to have forced phenomenology, for the sake of apologetics, in the direction of theological and philosophical-religious themes, which in his opinion would be very alien to it.

2 Chantepie de la Saussaye is probably the first to use the “phenomenology of religion” expression in his Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte (Saussaye 1887–1889).

3 Douglas Allen distinguishes four meanings of the expression (Allen 2005).

4 For an historical and theoretical analysis of the birth the philosophy of religion in the modern era, see the fundamental contribution of (Olivetti 1995).

5 “The only possible way of upholding the sense of the concept ‘God’ would be: to make Him not the motive force, but the condition of maximum power, an epoch; a point in the further development of the Will to Power” (Nietzsche 1970, 201/122).

6 For its classical formulation see (Hua I).

7 Consider, for example, the phenomenological work on the prayer by Bernhard Casper (1998), that about the “kingdom of God” by Kevin Hart (2014) or, also, the trilogy by Emmanuel Falque (2016).

8 I tried to test this working hypothesis and to identify, in the elaboration of a new concept of “epoché” conceived of in terms of paradox, the real engine of conceptual contemporary phenomenology of religion in (Bancalari 2015).

References


Bancalari, Stefano. 2015. Logica dell’epoché. Per un’introduzione alla fenomenologia della religione. Pisa: ETS.


Phenomenology and religion


