

*Philosophical Concepts and Religious Metaphors:  
New Perspectives on Phenomenology and Theology*

— *Introduction* —

Cristian CIOCAN

Today it might be needless to remind that the relationship between phenomenology and theology is one of the most debated topics in the field of continental philosophy. Beginning with the Husserlian investigations of religious life, passing through Heidegger's discussion of the sacred, and ending with the "theological turn" of the French phenomenology (admittedly illustrated by E. Levinas, M. Henry, J.-L. Marion or J.-Y. Lacoste), in conjunction with the ever-growing interest of contemporary theologians in the phenomenological method, the conceptual boundaries between these two "types of discourse" have been ceaselessly shifted. Until this day the subject remains highly controversial and, indeed, bears witness to a necessary discussion in contemporary thought.

It is for these very reasons that the Romanian Society for Phenomenology has organized in August 2007 an international symposium in the Transylvanian city of Sibiu during a period when this beautiful town was hailed as "European Capital of Culture." The event brought together phenomenologists with a declared interest in the subject of the sacred and its multiple discourses, on the one hand, and Christian theologians who openly welcome the phenomenological and "post-metaphysical" understanding of Being, on the other. Amongst the questions that the participants have tried to address, we can remind: how could phenomenology contribute to a better understanding of religious life? What are the limits of the phenomenological description and its underlying hermeneutical enterprise, when faced with the task of a philosophical understanding of

the sacred? Is there any room left for narrative in the phenomenological world of noetic abstractions? What are the major theological challenges of various phenomenologists who, against the lures of relativism, still think in line with the classical assumptions of universal rationality?

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The present volume reproduces only a part of the papers given in Sibiu. Other scholars, not present at the conference, have been invited to publish their contributions, as well. The essays published here tackle crucial concepts such as, “gift,” “truth,” “revelation,” “logos,” “writing,” “incarnation,” “temporality,” and “death,” seeking to articulate in a fruitful fashion the contemporary debate alluded to above.

We are honoured to open the volume with two novel essays by two contemporary thinkers who made indispensable contributions to the discussion regarding phenomenology’s rapports with theology, more specifically, Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Yves Lacoste.

In his article, “The Recognition of Gift” *Jean-Luc Marion* deepens his famous project of a radical phenomenology of the gift. Here the category of the gift gets under way from the conceptual couple of visibility and invisibility. Marion’s goal is to expose the tension between what is seen, what remains unseen, and what is in principle invisible in the gift. Thus, the gift appears as autonomous by being thought independently from its source (the donor), thereby losing its status of a given conceived along the lines of an object susceptible to possession. With that in mind, Marion focuses on the figure of Christ portrayed as God’s gift in the light of the Gospel of John. Ultimately, Christ illustrates the perfect gift which is given in the Eucharistic bread and wine.

The same Eucharistic presence pervades the reflections developed by *Jean-Yves Lacoste* in his essay “La chose et le sacré.” The study takes its critical starting point from Heidegger’s view of the thing as an item of equipment (*Being and Time*) and as part of parcel of the well-known four-fold (in the late conference entitled *Das Ding*). While illustrating his case through the painting of Vermeer, Lacoste argues that there might exist an ultimate horizon which is heterogeneous to the world and in which the

“truth” of the thing surmounts the laws of phenomenality. This horizon is precisely the sacred, the divine. However, if the thing is able to reveal the sacred, then this sacredness should not to be understood within an “earthly-pagan” manner as Heidegger wants us to. For illustration, Lacoste refers to the “things” involved in the Eucharistic event, which exhibit essential differences vis-à-vis their profane, everyday (or ‘pagan, for that matter’) use.

The next two essays focus on the phenomenon of truth, which is decisive not only for phenomenology and theology in their particular domains, but also for an arguably “theological phenomenology” or “phenomenological theology”.

Rooted in a rich erudition in the field of compared philosophy of religion, *Jad Hatem’s* contribution, “Être la vérité,” proposes a comparison between Christianity, Advaita Vedanta, and Sufism by means of three figures: Jesus Christ, Adi Shankara, and Mansur Al-Hallaj. Inasmuch as all these figures saw themselves as the incarnation of truth itself, the proclamation “I am the truth” is interpreted in terms of different (human) modalities of being God or even as identification with God. Hatem seeks to reveal, first, the phenomenological import of this identification and second, the discernible divergences between these three paradigms of identification.

In his study “«Wahrheit» als Ur-Intelligibilität des Lebens”, *Rolf Kühn* adopts a perspective informed by Michel Henry’s phenomenology of life. His contention is that the original meaning of truth precedes any theoretical approaches to verity in traditional philosophy or theology. Understood as original intelligibility of life, truth is, according to Kühn, prior to any manifestation of language, and therefore to every conceptual analysis. If the truth is to be conceived in accord with the Christian proclamation, that is to say, as self-revelation and self-manifestation, it follows that the problem of truth must be viewed in the horizon of incarnation. Hereby the Logos appears as unrelated to rationality and thought, in general, but rather as purely affective and indicative of the original immanence of life. Christ, who is the primordial Truth of Christianity and as such, the affective truth of life, precedes any heuristic theory and gives himself in the Eucharist. Finally, Kühn underscores the unity between the Eucharist and the Gospels, implicitly placing a question mark over the phenomenological status of the Holy Scriptures.

This puzzling connection will be questioned by the next three studies which envision in different ways the status of writing, sign, and meaning with the help of Heidegger, Derrida, Marion and Jean-Luis Chrétien.

In his paper “Sacramental Signification and Ecclesial Exteriority: Derrida and Marion on Sign,” *Michael Purcell* starts from the premise that the sacramental reality is fully meaningful. He focuses first on Marion’s “eucharistic Hermeneutic” and on the exteriority which is essential in giving transubstantiation its due. Purcell further argues that in order to describe the liturgical site of signification, one should reconsider the notion of transignification. What he thus intends is a shift of accent from an eucharistic “ousiology” to the eucharistic ecclesiology. Next, Derrida is brought into discussion, more exactly, his criticisms of Husserl’s theory of sign and signification, for the sake of clarifying the specificity of the sacramental signification. Purcell shows that the specific meaningfulness inherent to the liturgical event is to be placed in a distinct web of signification, namely in its original ecclesiological context, i.e., at the inter-subjective level of religious community.

A more concrete discussion of writing from a phenomeno-theological perspective, which is also related to Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology, is developed by *Javier Bassas Vila* in his “Écriture phénoménologique et théologique: Fonctions du «comme», «comme si» et «en tant que» chez Jean-Luc Marion.” On the basis of Marion’s *The Idol and Distance, God without Being*, and *Being Given*, the author — who is also Marion’s translator into Spanish — describes the hermeneutic function of three particles “like”, “as”, and “as if” in the abovementioned works. It is precisely via such linguistic approach to these operators that Bassas Vila sets out to sketch the multisided relationship between phenomenology and theology.

Given the metaphorical crux of religious language, the next article approaches another important figure of contemporary French, theology-oriented phenomenology, Jean-Louis Chrétien. In a paper entitled “La métaphorisation du lexique augustinien comme herméneutique phénoménologique,” *Sylvain Camilleri* takes a critical stance towards Chrétien’s phenomenological interpretations of Augustine by contrasting them with early Heidegger’s own discussion of the issue. Camilleri argues that Heidegger’s interpretation is more phenomenological in nature, since

it employs the Augustinian texts as a means for developing a hermeneutics of factual life. Heidegger's "metaphorization" of the Augustinian lexis represents a phenomenological tactic intent on revealing the fundamental structures of originary life. In contradistinction, Camilleri holds that we can detect in Chrétien's examination a subordination of phenomenology to a legitimate reading of Augustine.

Situated on the same plane of early Heidegger's encounter with various religious writings, *Cristian Ciocan's* study, "Heidegger, l'attente de la parousie et l'être pour la mort," explores the phenomenological significance of Paul's Epistles and questions the ontologization of the structures of early Christianity. The author analyzes the formalistic understanding of the expectation of Parousia, starting from which he expands on the future-oriented structure of being-towards-death. His thesis is that the key to understanding the phenomenological turn from religious life to the ontology of Dasein lies in the methodological concept of "formal indication."

One of Levinas's significant theological terms — namely "paganism" — is thoroughly discussed by the Japanese scholar, *Tomokazu Baba* in his "Du mode d'existence païenne selon Levinas." After a succinct overview of the history of the concept, he details the apologetic critique of paganism as developed (under the influence of Jacques Maritain) in the early writings of Levinas related to his critiques of Nazism. Baba suggests that Levinas's indictments are based on Heidegger's analytic of Dasein. Subsequently, Baba stresses the particularity of Levinas's critique of paganism from *Totality and Infinity* in the context of the biblical-theological tradition. A fruitful comparison with Schelling's view of the topic closes the article.

In the next paper, "Theological and Philosophical Transcendence: Bodily Excess; the Word Made Flesh," *James E. Faulconer* claims that the idea of excess is a key problem not only in the theological phenomenology of Levinas, Henry, and Marion, but also in the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger (excess being understood here as an equivalent of transcendence). After a brief historical sketch of the theme in Husserl, Heidegger, and Levinas, Faulconer tackles the trope of revelation, understood as the fifth type of saturated phenomenon in Marion's typology, and insists that this category can be used only in the case of Christ who is the incarnated Logos of God.

One of the most important precursors for phenomenology's stress on the concrete human existence is Søren Kierkegaard whose view of temporality and God incarnate is broached by *Leo Stan*. His overall conjecture is that Kierkegaard's multifaceted perusal of temporality can be viewed as a latent source of inspiration for phenomenology. More exactly, in the various pseudonymous masks assumed by Kierkegaard we can discover several proto-phenomenological investigations of temporality. The article develops three paradigms of temporality, the "aesthetical," the "ethical," and the "soteriological," pointing to both their specificity and connectivity. Stan purports that these differentiated analyses of time from the Kierkegaardian corpus should count for phenomenology precisely because they raise the question of historicity vis-à-vis the Christian religion and thereby one can speak only of Christocentric historicity.

*Beáta Tóth's* "Gift as God — God as Gift? Notes Towards Rethinking the Gift of Theology" should be seen within the same vista of the theological challenges for phenomenology. The author maintains that the topic of gift, which lies at the core of the Marion–Derrida debate, has a long and rich tradition in the history of theology itself. That said, although it seems to rely on philosophy for the development of this problematic, theology should reach its own understanding of the gift, more specifically, in conjunction with the intra-Trinitarian perspective on love, as Hans Urs von Balthasar has convincingly suggested. Tóth also deals with two historical instances, Hilary of Poitiers and Augustine of Hippo, for whom God can be contemplated as gift.

Our volume closes with an article that moves the discussion to another plane which at first sight is not linked to the philosophical dialogue between phenomenology and theology. Here I refer to psychoanalysis and the works of Julia Kristeva. In her essay, "Subjects in Love: Julia Kristeva on the 'Consciousness of the Flesh'", *Kristien Justaert* targets a type of experience which is decisive for psychoanalysis, as well as Christian life: love. While inspired by Michel Henry's critique of psychoanalysis, the author wishes to show that the non-representational description of love proposed by Kristeva shares several points with Henry's category of auto-affection. Subsequently, Justaert compares Kristeva's concept of love to both the Christian concept of agape and the Plotinian notion of eros. The investigation determines the author to raise the question concerning

the difference between psychoanalysis and faith, which are both captured within the dynamic of love.

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Our hope is that, in spite of its difficulties, the fertile combination of the topics of “love,” “gift,” “truth,” “revelation,” “logos,” “writing,” “incarnation,” “temporality,” and “death” will further enrich the contemporary discussions regarding the possible affinities between phenomenology and theology.

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