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The Phenomenology of Prayer and the Relationship between Phenomenology and Theology

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Abstract: The present article analyzes the relationship between phenomenology and theology, starting from some examples of the phenomenology of prayer. First, the article presents the phenomenology of prayer in the writings of phenomenologists such as Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Yves Lacoste, Christina Gschwandtner and Natalie Depraz, indicating that the type of phenomenology and its relationship with theology influence the way in which they approach the theme of prayer. Second, the paper proposes a systematization of prayer, starting from the personal pronouns uttered when praying: I, you (thou) and he. "I" sees oneself as being called by God to a transfiguration which is impossible through one's own powers and visible in the experience of the plenitude and joy of prayer; "You" provides the predicative dimension of the discourse and reveals communion either with God or, in the case of liturgy, with others; "He", used less frequently in prayer, can constitute a source for a later theoretical discourse, being recognized as a "mysterious presence". Following these analyses, the article concludes that there are two major relationships between phenomenology and theology: that of partial overlap, called theo-phenomenology, and that of rigorous delimitation. Regardless of the preferred model, the use of phenomenology for theology proves to be fruitful.

Keywords: phenomenology of prayer; phenomenology and theology; theo-phenomenology; Jean-Luc Marion; Jean-Yves Lacoste; Christina Gschwandtner; Natalie Depraz

1. Introduction

The question regarding the phenomenology of religion "remains a contested one" (Gschwandtner 2019d, p. 6), as Christina Gschwandtner states at the end of an article in which she highlights the existence of three types of phenomenology of religion: the first one, used in religious studies, looks for common patterns of religious experience across different religions; the second one belongs to phenomenological philosophy from the Husserlian tradition that also dealt with religion; and the third one is manifested in the "theological turn of French phenomenology" and its anglophone reverberations (see Gschwandtner 2019c, 2019d). How is a phenomenology of religion possible, though? Is this not a case of a blind phenomenology interposing itself between religious phenomena, one for which prayer either cannot be approached phenomenologically (Benson and Wirzba 2005, p. 3) or is nothing more than a staging of a relationship through which man addresses an illusory absolute, about whose existence nothing can be asserted with certainty? One may find examples of the phenomenological impossibility of dealing with religious phenomena both in Husserl, who believed that the transcendental-phenomenological reduction takes God out of the equation (Husserl 1976, para 58), and in Heidegger, who claimed that theology is an ontic science, akin to the positive sciences, and not an ontological discipline, such as philosophy (Heidegger 1998). This theoretical attitude was, in fact, overcome by the works of those who considered that phenomenology, as "the final court of appeal in clarifications of experience" (see Louchakova-Schwartz 2018, pp. 640–41), is a good philosophical paradigm for religious experience. This overcoming, as evidenced by the three directions highlighted at the beginning of this article, has proven to be fruitful.

In what follows, we will narrow down the question regarding the phenomenology of religion to the relationship between phenomenology and Christian theology. To shed some light on the relationship between the two disciplines and on the possibility of a meeting between them, we will start with a few phenomenological descriptions of prayer, which is one of the most important religious phenomena. In this regard, we will discuss the ideas developed by Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Yves Lacoste, Christina Gschwandtner and Natalie Depraz. Starting from the four phenomenologists, this paper will then systematize the levels of the phenomenology of prayer, using the personal pronouns "I", "you" and "he", in order to answer the following questions: How do phenomenology and theology meet if we use the phenomenology of prayer as a starting point? What does the phenomenology of prayer tell us about the relationship between phenomenology and theology?

2. Jean-Luc Marion: Distance and the Discourse of Praise

Jean-Luc Marion approaches prayer from a formal and individualistic perspective rather than from an ecclesiastical one, his considerations being intertwined with his phenomenology—a phenomenology of excess (Gschwandtner 2014, p. 147). Thus, the act of being in dialogue with God—one of the definitions of prayer—reveals several forms of discourse. As a predominantly descriptive science, phenomenology can, strictly speaking, see the change in discourse from the predicative discourse to the performative discourse of prayer; Jean-Luc Marion called the latter "discourse of praise" in a commentary on Saint Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (Marion 1977, pp. 183–251). A phenomenological reflection on prayer constructs a phenomenology of distance: the absolute discourse of prayer does not capture, produce, or completely explain the God to whom the prayer is addressed. The distance—which does not eliminate the loving presence—gives God a level of freedom both from the ontic register, for God is not a mundane being, and from the ontological register, because God is "without being," opposed to any conceptual idol, non-given to a philosophical exercise that deals with being as being (see Marion 1991, p. 59). Considering the apophatic expression according to which "the unthinkable gives itself to thought as unthinkable" (Marion 1977, p. 187), the discourse of prayer, as a discourse of praise, is the only one that paradoxically travels the distance without canceling it—an experience through which man can meet the unapproachable God. Marion cites the Confessions of St Augustine, which open and end with a prayer, as an example (Marion 2008, pp. 391–92).

The distinction between the predicative discourse and the discourse of the prayer of praise (*hymnein*) cannot be erased because both the former and the latter use the same names of God. Marion argues that the naming used in prayer does not name God's essence or his ontic presence (Marion 2001, p. 173). Moreover, given that prayer is not addressed to a form of nothingness, it needs a name without limiting itself to these names; it seeks the encounter with the God of life, with the personal God. Unable to express transcendence, ordinary language is erased in favor of the ineffable encounter, allowing the prayer to travel the distance and to remain itself beyond the predicative meaning of words (Marion 2001, p. 174), thus engaging the calling and the listening pragmatically (see Turcan 2020). The same idea of distance can be found in Marion's description of the icon, as opposed to the idol, a description that uses the non-idolatrous discourse of prayer. Unlike the idol, which is created by the gaze itself and which leads to self-idolatry, the icon summons sight as a "counter-gaze" (Marion 2010, p. 112), letting the visible be saturated by the invisible, which still remains invisible in its very givenness. Given the impossibility of thinking about the invisible, this experience points apophatically towards the need for communion through prayer (Marion 2010, pp. 111–12). To Marion, prayer is the one method that allows the splendor of the coming Kingdom and of the eschatological world to be manifested— a manifestation that can no longer be captured by thought, only by love (Marion 1996, p. 115). In developing a phenomenology of givenness, Marion highlights the existence of excessive phenomena, in which intuition overcomes the concept—the so-called saturated phenomena—and both prayer and the icon are a part of these phenomena.

This approach certainly raises the question of the boundaries between phenomenology and theology. In a text on the phenomenon of Christian Revelation, which is also considered a saturated phenomenon, Marion establishes a clear distinction between phenomenology and theology: phenomenology can only discuss the possibility of Revelation, without having the legitimacy to decide on its actuality and truth—that kind of legitimacy belongs only to theology (Marion 2013, p. 387). Phenomenology can deal with theological phenomena only up to a certain point; after that, it must pass the baton to revealed theology. Beyond the hierarchical relationship between the two disciplines, what is decisive here is the rigorous distinction between them, a distinction maintained even when both discuss the same phenomena.

3. Jean-Yves Lacoste: Liturgy and Prayer

By extending the definition of the liturgy beyond the ritual, Jean-Yves Lacoste takes into consideration the liturgical phenomenon as the placing of man before God in order to serve Him. He defines "liturgy" as the special logic "that governs man's encounter with God" (Lacoste 1994, chp. "Liminaire"). In a reply to the Heideggerian *Dasein*, Lacoste uses the method and concepts of phenomenology to describe the theological existentiality of the believing *Dasein*, pitting the being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1996, §12)—described in *Being and time*—against man as a being-before-God; therefore, as a liturgical existence. For Lacoste, prayer is the endpoint of any discourse about God and of any theoretical knowledge. However, knowledge and prayer are complementary within this model that reaches the language of praise and the use of second-person pronouns (Lacoste 2018, p. 179). The liturgy does not represent man's encounter with a mystery devoid of any previous knowledge, of any theology, given that man does not pray to a vacuum. He who prays thinks about God and even though prayer is not a theological endeavor, it can nourish a future theology (Lacoste 1994, §54). This precondition of theological knowledge for prayer is significant in this context, as it proposes a kind of theological reduction that does not disqualify faith. On the contrary, *knowing* the God to whom man prays gives meaning to the prayer, whether it be reason or feeling. Lacoste does not separate thought from feeling, viewing both as important; however, it must be said that both have in common the inability to exhaust religious knowledge and experience.

Lacoste's theological phenomenology goes beyond the framework of classical phenomenology when describing prayer. He replaces the phenomenological reduction with a "liturgical reduction" (Lacoste 1994, §65) of a theological nature, by means of which the religious experience becomes an *inexperience* (Lacoste 1994, §54)—a term that, in my opinion, must be understood apophatically in order to delimit the term "experience" that would refer to non-religious phenomena. Prayer is an inexperience that takes place in a "non-place" and seeks a "non-time"—that is, in an eschatological dimension, even if that may be given only as anticipation (Lacoste 1994, §§10–13, 32–34). The intentional consciousness of phenomenology has no hold on God; rather, it is more of a counter-intentionality. Lacoste speaks here of a "maddened consciousness" or the "liturgical madness of consciousness" in which man exposes himself to God (Lacoste 1994, §56). Prayer and liturgy call our consciousness to a conversion from mundane experience to liturgical inexperience (Lacoste 1994, §56), in a reversal in which he who prays appears as eccentric, exposed to God, seen by God. He who prays cannot be a mere spectator before God. He exposes himself to God, understanding that the invisible God initiates the encounter. In this liturgical inexperience, God is the subject and man is the object (Lacoste 1994, §56). For Jean-Yves Lacoste, the knowledge of God that brings about prayer is always accompanied by ignorance, emphasizing the incomprehensibility of God: "What we cannot know of him must always far and away exceed what we can know" (Lacoste 2018, p. 178).

By tackling theological topics and paying attention to the faith of the Church, Lacoste combines phenomenology and theology in a model of partial overlap. Phenomenological description alone is "partial and fragmentary"; therefore, it gives way to theology, especially in the case of religious phenomena, which do not appear in the same way that mundane

objects appear. Modifying the concepts of phenomenology to adapt them to theology, in an exercise of negations that references apophatic theology, Jean-Yves Lacoste offers, starting from the (in)experience of prayer, a model of a frontier between phenomenology and theology, a line of demarcation where the two meet and overlap (Lacoste 2018, p. x).

4. Christina Gschwandtner: The Phenomenology of the Eastern Orthodox Liturgy

Christina Gschwandtner, a specialist in Jean-Luc Marion and in continental philosophy, considers that the phenomenology of prayer is insufficiently developed in Marion, given the emphasis he places on individual and mental prayer at the expense of collective liturgical prayer and the dimension of corporeality. Consequently, Gschwandtner would emphasize the existence of other, less excessive ways of praying (Gschwandtner 2014, p. 169), which engage the person as a whole and bring about communion with others; the most significant way of reaching this communion is the Eastern Orthodox Liturgy itself. The phenomenology of the liturgy unfolds thematically starting from the heterogeneity of time and space, which was also examined by Mircea Eliade. Intentionality, a central concept for phenomenology, appears in the liturgy in the context of a space organized for the purpose of "liturgical intentionality" (Gschwandtner 2019b, p. 184). In opposition to Lacoste, who spoke of non-space and non-time in man's liturgical inexperience, Gschwandtner presents a space transfigured by sacred architecture, a space that does not disappear, but rather invites man, opening up a world of communion, commitment and transfiguration. Regarding corporeality in prayer, Gschwandtner underlines the importance of the liturgical context and of the factors ignored by the phenomenology of the mystical encounter. She notes that there are liturgical prayers in which we pray for the health and sanctification of soul and body alike. Corporeality takes part in prayer through periods of fasting, which anticipate the great feasts, as well as through asceticism (Gschwandtner 2017, p. 17). Likewise, the preparation for the Eucharist also involves our bodies, with our senses prepared through music, community prayer and the sermon (Gschwandtner 2019a, p. 13). The liturgy is "embodied" (Gschwandtner 2019b, p. 89); its main goal is the mystical communion in the body of Christ, which is the Church (Gschwandtner 2019b, p. 100).

The liturgy takes the ordinary and transforms it into the extraordinary, calling the senses to a participation destined for transfiguration (Gschwandtner 2019b, p. 106). Moreover, the affectivity of man has two dimensions in the liturgy: on the one hand, it is the awareness of our finitude and fragility; on the other, it is a need for healing (Gschwandtner 2019b, p. 141).

Gschwandtner emphasizes the essential role of communion in the liturgy. In contrast to classical phenomenology, where the autarchy of the ego remains predominant (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Henry, Levinas, Marion and Lacoste) and thereby misses communion, community and communion take precedence in the liturgy, overcoming this primordiality that annihilated the uniqueness of the person. The liturgy does not require a loss of the self, but rather its recreation and transfiguration through practice and participation in order to progress spiritually (Gschwandtner 2019b, pp. 164–65).

The liturgy is, therefore, an invitation and a reception of man and his finitude to heal and to transfigure life and reality: "Liturgy matters to our lives as they are lived in their day-to-day existence on this earth in our flesh and bones, engaged with the real people around us, their (and our) affects and emotions in all their concrete, particular, finite, frail, and fully human reality" (Gschwandtner 2019b, p. 203).

Christina Gschwandtner's description is rigorously phenomenological, carefully separating what can be expressed by using the phenomenological method from what can be affirmed only by theology. The emphasis that Orthodoxy places on experience is well-known. Since the phenomenological approach intends to reveal the profound structures and truths of human experience, Gschwandtner regards phenomenology as a suitable method for theology. Therefore, a phenomenology of the liturgy is considered "beneficial to philosophical phenomenology, liturgical theology, and Orthodox thought: by providing a more rigorous grounding for thinking about liturgical experience and by opening new

paths for thinking about religious experience more broadly" (Gschwandtner 2019b, p. 54). Just as Jean-Luc Marion, Gschwandtner carefully distinguishes between phenomenology and theology, acknowledging the limits of the former when turning towards theological phenomena (see also Turcan 2021b).

5. Natalie Depraz: The Cardio-Phenomenology

Coming from the Husserlian tradition of phenomenology, Natalie Depraz proposes a phenomenology of the prayer of the heart that she calls "cardio-phenomenology" and "theo-phenomenology." Because philosophical thought has often objectified and reduced the human person to a thing based on a linear causality, Natalie Depraz proposes a rethinking of causality so that it grants the human condition the depth of incarnation and glory. It is a multidimensional causality "which precisely unites both the experiential order of the phenomenological foundation (*Fundierung*) and the anticipatory temporality of the theology of the divine 'economy'" (Depraz 2022, p. 26); this perspective unites, therefore, the phenomenological approach and the theological one, recognizing the same genealogy and the same roots in both of them.

The phenomenological approach has, first and foremost, an important hermeneutic dimension, examining the prayer of the heart starting from the Orthodox hesychast tradition and from the spiritual writings of the *Philokalia*. However, it does not stop at the interpretation and understanding of the texts that teach about prayer; instead, it dives deeper into an analysis of the experience of prayer as an inner experience, one that is comparable, as far as the work of man is concerned, to the phenomenological approach. Without excluding the work of grace, which is "the free presence of God" (Depraz 2022, p. 31) and "supernatural energy" (Depraz 2022, p. 49), and underlining the fact that man's preparation and exercises facilitate its presence, Natalie Depraz sets phenomenology and the theology of the prayer of the heart side by side, with the result being a surprising cardio-phenomenology.

The theology of the prayer of the heart—which speaks of body positions, exercises of breathing and repeating the name of the Savior Jesus Christ—is compared with the phenomenological reduction because both practice a withdrawal from reality, a suspension (*epochē*) with the aim of focusing on transcendental interiority. Where prayer speaks of awakening and watchfulness (*nēpsis*), phenomenology expresses "the reflexive conversion of voluntary and active looking"; the *hesychia*, the stillness and the silence of the prayer remind one of the receptive status that follows the phenomenological reduction; and *prosochē*, the lasting effort of the soul, which keeps oneself away from scattering, is analogous to the phenomenological living present, "keeping in the grip", the retention and protention of experience (Depraz 2022, p. 44). However, the question regarding the role of faith in the practice of prayer still remains: while not mentioned in this theo-phenomenological approach, we must emphasize that, in the Orthodox tradition, the prayer of the heart engages faith as a true landmark of mystical experience (see Turcan 2021a, p. 6).

While the analogies may be imperfect, from the perspective of a human experience of mindfulness and stillness, the similarities are, to Natalie Depraz, notable; they are also manifested in the way in which prayer has been associated with the process of purification by fighting against passions and reaching the state of *apatheia*. Through *metanoia* (the conversion of the mind), the affectivity and passion in the hesychast tradition change their negative meaning that would endanger prayer; they are transfigured by grace, reaching a state of plenitude and joy. Present in the phenomenology of the body—for example in Michel Henry—affectivity and passion are also taken into consideration both in their negative and positive dimensions. Following the same game of analogies, Depraz concludes that phenomenology calls the fight against passions practiced by hesychasts "disinterest-edness, detachment, self-affection", whereas the practitioners of the prayer of the heart describe this experience "with extreme subtlety," which enriches the "speculative aridity of phenomenological concepts" (Depraz 2022, p. 58).

This brief sketch is meant to emphasize a theo-phenomenological dynamic that is different from previous models. For Natalie Depraz, the model of separation between theology and phenomenology is outdated. Phenomenology is no longer the handmaiden of theology, nor is it completely separated from it or merely intertwined with it. By displaying them as in a mirror, Depraz rejects the derivation of one from the other, freeing them from any linear causality and presenting them as two gestures of thought that are co-incident. The stakes of this double endeavor, phenomenological and theological, are to prove their co-generativeness in both method and experience and to emphasize the potentiation of one by the other to a mutual benefit (Depraz 2022, pp. 343–44).

I believe this is a Husserlian solution: as the transcendental consciousness was, to the father of phenomenology, the common foundation of all disciplines, the same consciousness seems to meet, in their difference and specificity, phenomenology and theology. The encounter seems possible in accordance with Jean-Luc Marion's Thomist idea that there is a "rigor of things" (Marion 2012) that reveals a common rationality to theology and phenomenology, regardless of how one interprets the relationship between them.

6. "I", "You" and "He" in the Phenomenology of Prayer

A phenomenological analysis of prayer highlights three levels: that of the ego (understood as a person searching/waiting for God); that of intentionality, which takes the form of prayer itself; and that of the noematic content towards which the prayer is directed—in this case, God Himself. The brief analyses of prayer could, however, be systematized according to the personal pronouns used in the practice of prayer: first person (I), second person (you) and third person (he).

The first person, the *ego*, enters prayer aware of both its finitude and the need for healing through the transfiguring experience of prayer. The *ego* is not only a gifted one (*adonné*) (see Marion 2013, pp. 436–39) who receives himself from the saturated phenomena he is given from the incomprehensible God, but is also the person healed in their own corporeality and transfigured because of prayer (Gschwandtner 2019b, p. 211). Exposed to God, the praying self awaits a transfiguration brought about by God's grace, in which one takes part by praying, exercising attention, self-will, and the search for *apatheia* as a result of the fight against passions. Thus, prayer has a truly transfiguring role and is a way of attaining plenitude and joy (Depraz 2022, p. 52).

I would add that, in this analysis of the *ego*, it is important that the phenomenological *ego* be at least empathetic towards the praying *ego*, with the most comprehensible option being the one in which they overlap within the same *ego*. If the phenomenologist also prays, the phenomenological description of prayer presupposes a reduction performed by the phenomenological *ego*, a reduction that consists in bracketing the praying *ego* to analyze the religious experience without automatically becoming a theologian. It is both a critical attitude (in the Kantian understanding of the term) and a reductive one at the same time (in the Husserlian understanding). If the *ego* of the phenomenologist differs from the *ego* of the person who prays, then empathy is required for the understanding to take place.

The second person, the You (Thou) of prayer, offers its most powerful dimension: the predicative discourse becomes performative, with the God of metaphysics giving way to the living and lovable God in the wake of prayerful intentionality. This is the Marion's idea but it should be overcome by a liturgical dimension: man discovers himself as a liturgical person, always before God and in God. Communion with the divine Thou brings about communion with others, whether with the community of faith or with other people. The liturgy highlights an anticipatory and eschatological dimension of the faithful *Dasein* (Lacoste 1994, §8), a welcoming space for human finitude (Gschwandtner 2019b, p. 228).

The third person—which characterizes the predicative discourse—seems to be the least present in prayer, although it is not missing entirely; an example in this regard is the recitation of the symbol of faith during the liturgy. "He" will be found abundantly in the discourse that follows prayer, in the theology for which prayer is both a source and a necessity. God appears as the Transcendent who, selflessly descending towards man,

through his uncreated grace, offers knowledge synonymous with love, knowledge that can never be exhausted and that never ends. It is a form of knowledge that does not cancel ignorance, because God appears after prayer both as *a mysterious presence*—not a simple presence such as the objects and things of the world—and as a *presence with distance* (see Marion 1977, pp. 255–315), as an unapproachable and incomprehensible God.

7. Conclusions

Both the phenomenological analysis of prayer and its systematization starting from personal pronouns affirm the possibility and the usefulness of a phenomenology of religious experience. Therefore, a phenomenology of religion could abandon the Husserlian interdiction of using phenomenology for religion. Religion provides phenomenology its phenomena, whereas phenomenology describes them starting from the experience lived during these religious phenomena. The distinction between phenomenological and religious experience must be clear, even when we describe or compare them.

I will conclude that there are two major relationships that can be established between phenomenology and theology: one of partial overlap and the other of rigorous delimitation. In the first case, we could speak of theo-phenomenology and regard it as a place where the phenomenological ego overlaps with the religious ego. Here, the phenomenological discourse agrees with faith and theo-phenomenology can, if need be, take the form of a theology that uses the language of phenomenology, therefore making it a phenomenological theology. The advantage of such a theo-phenomenology is that, accepting the Heideggerian critique of onto-theology, it goes beyond onto-theology by appealing to the religious experience. At this point, theology comes after metaphysics and is not confused with it, even if it sometimes relies on metaphysical concepts, because it emphasizes the necessity of experience and spiritual life in any theoretical endeavor. Even when using the phenomenological language, the meeting point between the two disciplines has an important theological dimension and aims to preserve specific doctrine even when describing experience. Sometimes this correspondence between phenomenology and the theological teaching of faith is affirmed only tacitly, starting from religious phenomena or from liturgical experience. The examples are those of Jean-Yves Lacoste and, in part, of Jean-Luc Marion, whose phenomenology has a theological breath, even when theology is placed under the sign of a reduction that makes the phenomenological discourse possible.

The second major relationship between phenomenology and theology is that of a rigorous separation. The admission that theology offers only the phenomenon makes a phenomenology possible, while phenomenology provides its method. Remaining separate from each other, phenomenology and theology recognize their own fields or elements: for example, Marion admits that phenomenology cannot decide on the truth of the Christian Revelation—only revealed theology can. Gschwandtner uses phenomenology to describe the Orthodox liturgy both without delving into theology and without making claims that contradict theology, and Depraz maintains the distinction between theology and phenomenology, eliminating any derivation between them, even as she recognizes their co-originarity and the possibility of mutual mirroring.

Both relationships affirm the usefulness of using phenomenology to analyze religious phenomena. How these relationships between phenomenology and theology are established is relevant to the understanding of both phenomenology and religion. The phenomenological principle "Back to the things themselves!" forces phenomenology not to falsify religious phenomena. Depending on the religious differences between the phenomena, phenomenology can become a theo-phenomenology—which agrees with the faith and teachings of a religion—or it can separate itself from theology, remaining a method of analysis and description. The analysis of the phenomenology of prayer showcased both of these attitudes, while also highlighting the usefulness of phenomenology for the field of religion.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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