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Interreligious Dialogue: A Challenge for Phenomenology

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Abstract: This article assesses the possible role and scope of phenomenology for the emerging field of interreligious studies while at the same time bringing forth a critical reflection on the practice of phenomenology itself, and more particularly of phenomenology of religion. It contends that phenomenology can be used as a descriptive method in order to understand the structures of experience which are at stake in interreligious dialogue, thus complementing the current approaches in interreligious studies towards this question which are mainly normative. Moreover, it can offer a comprehension of the paradoxical dimension of interreligious dialogue which is marked by a tension between openness and closedness, by drawing on Husserl's phenomenology of the world, and its dynamic opposition between homeworld and foreign world. This analysis is structured around four argumentative moments: (1) an overview of the main features of the history of the phenomenology of religion and its problematic relationship towards the interreligious space; (2) an assessment of the main advantages of the phenomenological method for the study of religious and especially interreligious studies; (3) a sketch of a possible phenomenology of dialogue, grounding mainly on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology; (4) a sketch of a possible phenomenology of interreligious dialogue, drawing on Husserl's phenomenology.

Keywords: phenomenology of religion; phenomenology and interreligious studies; phenomenology of dialogue; phenomenology of interreligious dialogue; Merleau-Ponty; Husserl

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1. Introduction

Interreligious dialogue can be defined as an active encounter between groups of persons representing or belonging to diverse religious or spiritual traditions, both on individual and institutional levels, whose aim is to foster mutual understanding, cooperation and peaceful cohabitation. Defined as such, interreligious dialogue is a more specific form of dialogue than interfaith dialogue that can also designate a form of dialogue that arises between persons who belong to different subgroups of a common religious tradition, such as different churches, sects or denominations (Hoffman and Thelen 2014). Hence, interreligious dialogue is a more general concept than interfaith dialogue and is privileged in this project for this reason.

Although interreligious encounters and practices which aim at fostering interreligious peaceful cohabitation and tolerance have a long history (particularly starting from the religious tolerance policies implemented in the 16th century in Europe but also in other parts of the world such as India), interreligious dialogue as a formal movement has begun relatively recently, namely, in 1893 at the World's Parliament of Religion in Chicago (Halafoff 2013). Nowadays, interreligious dialogue is a crucial issue particularly due to the movement of globalization through which various religious communities are brought to cohabit together or at least to know each other (Hintersteiner 2005). This growing importance is attested on an interpersonal and on an intercommunal level, but also on an institutional level. The value of interreligious dialogue is increasingly highlighted by political institutions, such as the United Nations Organization and the European Union (Lehmann 2020), but also by political leaders, such as leaders from the United Arab Emirates (Warren 2021) or from the Russian Federation (Curanović 2012). This raises the question as to the possible

political instrumentalization of the idea of interreligious dialogue, but also as to its possible ideological value (Griera 2019). For this reason, a critical philosophical reflection on the idea of interreligious dialogue is required to assess its conditions of possibility and its aim.

The question of interreligious dialogue appears prominently not only in social–political contexts, but also inside the research literature of religious studies, from the perspectives of various disciplines: philosophy, theology, social and political sciences. The abundancy and variety of this literature testifies to the emergence of a new research field, namely the field of interreligious studies (Mosher 2022; Lehmann 2021; Körs et al. 2020; Moyaert 2019; Capelle-Dumont 2018; Oppy and Trakakis 2017; Leirvik 2011; Patalon 2009; King 2010; Hintersteiner 2005; Panikkar 1999).

At the same time, interreligious dialogue has a problematic and paradoxical dimension which calls for further investigative work. Indeed, interreligious dialogue is problematic if we consider the understanding of religion as a form of absolute truth proper at least for a certain group of religious persons (Basset 1996), or the tension characteristic of interreligious dialogue between openness towards religious alterity and closedness around a specific religious identity (Moyaert 2011). Hence, interreligious dialogue must avoid the dilemma of complete faithfulness to one own's religious tradition, and on the other hand the betrayal of this tradition. As some scholars argue, it is possible to avoid this dilemma through hermeneutic openness towards the religious other, grounding on interreligious translation (Moyaert 2011). This hermeneutic openness aims at interreligious hospitality (Moyaert 2011, 2014) which could be conceived as a specific form of radical hospitality, i.e., as a radical openness towards the stranger (Kearney and Fitzpatrick 2021).

Nevertheless, it is not yet entirely clear how this radical openness towards religious alterity is possible. Indeed, the question still remains as to the concrete and diverse modalities of lived experience and general structures of human experience through which this openness and hospitality towards religious alterity can arise. More precisely, the question is how persons who are neither religious leaders and representatives, nor activists, nor "individual religious virtuosi" (Lehmann 2021), who do not participate, in other words, in the building of a specific public discourse and perhaps ideology around the idea of interreligious dialogue, experience interreligious dialogue, both as a concrete activity and as a mere idea. Do these persons experience interreligious dialogue as a form of openness towards religious alterity, and if yes, through which concrete modalities of lived experience? In order to answer these questions, a particularly relevant investigation tool is phenomenology, for its rich tradition of analyzing subjective lived experience while at the same time unveiling the structures that underpin these experiences. However, there is hardly any phenomenological approach to the question of the problematic nature of interreligious dialogue from a systematic point of view, even if some researchers working in the field of interreligious studies partly draw on phenomenological authors such as Levinas (Leirvik 2011).

Hence, the aim of this analysis is to assess the possible role and scope of phenomenology for the emerging field of interreligious studies, while at the same time bringing forth a critical reflection on the practice of phenomenology itself, by questioning and enlarging its current limits.

2. Interreligious Dialogue as an Investigation Object throughout the History of Phenomenology

Phenomenology has been abundantly applied for the study of the phenomenon of interculturality, particularly in the last years (Stenger 2006; Sepp 2014; Weidtmann 2016; Elberfeld 2017; Wolff 2021). At the same time, it has been much less applied to the investigation of interreligiosity as a specific phenomenon, distinct from the intercultural realm. One could even dare to say that is has still to be explored.

Indeed, if we consider the history of the phenomenology of religion, we can observe that the question of the interreligious space is almost absent for two reasons. First of all, this question presupposes to take into account specific historical confessions that could enter in

dialogue. However, many major figures of phenomenology, such as Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas or Marion, investigate religion from the point of view of an abstract God, which is not bound to a particular religion, even if these authors are clearly influenced by positive religions, namely, Christianity and Judaism. Thus, in his Kaizo-articles *On the Renewal* as well as in his manuscripts published in *Husserliana 42* Husserl analyzes the idea of God as a teleological ideal of authentic, ethical humanity, without relating it to a specific religion, albeit mentioning briefly Christ as an illustration of such an ideal (Husserl 1989, 2013). Also in his earlier ethics lectures, Husserl considers God an abstract ideal of ethical and rational perfection (Husserl 1988). Neither does Heidegger relate God to a specific religion when he evokes, in the *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, the sign of the last God that opens other possibilities of being (Heidegger 2012). Levinas, moreover, avoids relating (at least in his phenomenological, not Talmudic writings) God to a specific religion when he describes the trace of God that reveals itself through the face and as face of the Other (Levinas 1969). Finally, Marion, an important figure of the so-called theological turn of phenomenology (Janicaud 2001), does not situate his description of God as the highest possibility of a saturated phenomenon in the framework of a specific religion in an essential way. Indeed, the figure of Christ plays the role of a general paradigm of the phenomenon of revelation as such (Marion 2002). This entails the possibility for this phenomenon of revelation to arise in any other religious spaces.

Secondly, when phenomenologists do consider religion from the perspective of a specific historical confession, such as Heidegger (in his classes on phenomenology of religion from 1920/1921), Henry, Chrétien and Lacoste, they tend to analyze religion as the lived experience of the subject which adheres to this religion (namely, Christianity) or at least is part of the cultural space of this religion, acquainted with its fundamental texts and symbols, but do not analyze how this subject can open itself to other religions (Reinach 1989[1]; Kearney 2001; Henry 2002; Depraz 2008; Scheler 2010[2]; Heidegger 2011; Hart 2014; Stein 2014; Lacoste 2015; Chrétien 2019; Gschwandtner 2019).

Henceforth, the interreligious realm and interreligious dialogue appear to be a challenge for current phenomenology, which has the potential to open the horizon of the phenomenological reflection on religion, but also to interrogate the presuppositions (abstract universalist or Christian-centric) of phenomenology's approach of religion as it has unfolded so far.

3. Phenomenological Resources for the Investigation of Interreligious Dialogue

3.1. Why Use the Phenomenological Method for Religious and Interreligious Studies?

One can distinguish three main reasons for applying the phenomenological method to religious and interreligious studies. First, as some scholars of religious studies have already pointed out (Smart 1973), phenomenology can offer relevant tools for the study of religion first of all through one of its most fundamental and unique methods, namely, phenomenological reduction. This reduction is carried out in two steps: (1) through the suspension (*epoché*) of the natural belief in the existence of the world, which Husserl calls natural attitude, and (2) through the reconversion of the gaze of our mind towards what is given to us in an obvious way, which Husserl calls the pure phenomenon (Husserl 1964). In virtue of the phenomenological reduction, the researcher can bracket his own judgment about a particular religion and his own religious beliefs in order to study pure religious phenomena as they appear without any presupposition or prejudice from the part of the researcher. This reduction also allows an anti-reductionist view on religion (Allen 2005), due to which religion is not reduced to psychology (Hering 1925) or anthropology but is considered as a pure phenomenon, i.e., not more and not less than how it gives itself to the phenomenologist who suspends her own prejudices.

The phenomenological method provides two other advantages for religious studies. First, it offers the possibility to study the subjective lived experience of a human being without taking into account the objective value of this experience (Husserl 1970), but also without reducing it to psychological causes. Secondly, it unveils transcendental,

i.e., universal, structures of human experience at the core of each individual experience (Husserl 1983). The first feature can be highly relevant for interreligious studies since it allows the study of the concrete and diverse lived experiences of persons who take part in interreligious dialogue. One possible way of investigating the diverse lived experience of interreligious dialogue are phenomenological interviews. However, phenomenological interviews can be realized following different methods (Sholokhova et al. 2022). Hence, the question still remains open whether there is a particular method of phenomenological interviews that is more suitable for this investigation phenomenon. One criterion for selecting a specific method for this purpose would be the necessary degree of guidance of the interviewee by the phenomenologist. If this degree should be low, the two tier method (Høffding and Martiny 2016; Ravn 2021) could be appropriate. Contrary to other phenomenological interview methods, such as the explicitation interview (Vermersch 1994; Depraz and Desmidt 2022) or the experiential phenomenological interview of the first and second order (Mougin and Vion-Dury 2017), this type of interview is based on two distinct research levels, namely, on a qualitative research level, which corresponds to the realizing of interviews, and on a phenomenological research level, which interprets phenomenologically—i.e., by using phenomenological methods and concepts—the results of the first research level. It influences less the discourse of the interviewees following specific phenomenological expectations, since precisely the phenomenological dimension of the analysis takes place only on a second level.

The second methodological feature would allow the unveiling of universal structures that ground these diverse lived experiences of interreligious dialogue, offering thus a deeper understanding of how interreligious dialogue is experienced through its religious diversity. The following part of this paper focuses on this second feature, by developing a possible phenomenological concept of dialogue and reflecting on its possible application to the interreligious realm. At the same time, it leaves the possibility open to verify and to enrich these analyses by virtue of phenomenological interviews.

3.2. A Phenomenological Description of Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue can be studied from at least two points of view, i.e., from a normative and from a descriptive point of view. The normative point of view has been amply investigated in the field of interreligious studies. However, the question still remains open as to what dialogue is, how it is experienced, and how it is experienced in the interreligious realm. I argue that phenomenology can be relevant precisely for this descriptive perspective, which can deepen the normative perspective on this question.

From a *normative viewpoint*, several conditions for a genuine interreligious dialogue can be stated: "(1) interpersonal communication; (2) differing religious convictions; (3) a position of mutual respect and openness; (4) conversation on a religiously significant topic" (Hintersteiner 2005, p. 245). The first condition states the idea that interreligious dialogues take place first of all between several *persons* of different religious traditions, and not between religions in themselves. In the latter case, interreligious dialogue would be a mere comparative study of different religions, lacking the dimension of genuine dialogue, which presupposes precisely the presence of another person, belonging in our case to another religious tradition. One "cannot lead a dialogue with a religion or with a system of thought, but with persons" (Bousquet and de la Hougue 2009, p. 8). The experience of dialogue is, by its essence, part of a personal, incarnated and at the same time intersubjective experience. It cannot be identified to a mere theoretical study of other religions but can only be led with concrete persons by listening to and trying to understand their "profound spiritual experience" (Bousquet and de la Hougue 2009, p. 8).

This personal dimension that is essential for interreligious dialogue entails "a position of mutual respect and openness" between different persons that are involved in such a dialogue. This type of attitude implies first of all the capacity of an "uninterrupted listening" to the other (Gadamer 2006, p. 461). It requires the willingness to give the word to the other, even if one does not always fully understand the other or agree with

her. Secondly, this openness and mutual respect entails "the willingness to allow that the "other" may represent a standpoint that possesses a degree of validity" (Di Censo 1990, p. 100). This means that in order to lead a genuine interreligious dialogue with one or several other persons, one cannot act and speak as if these other persons cannot have any valid standpoint on religious topics, even if they belong to other religious traditions, and even if one considers her own religious tradition as being absolutely true. That is why an authentic interreligious dialogue cannot be the imposition of my own religion to the other and for this reason cannot aim at any form of proselytism. In this last case, interreligious dialogue transforms itself into "silence or violence" (Tosolini 2001, p. 38) because one does not take into account what the other has to say from her own religious perspective. Her word—and so, in a certain sense, her existence as a person—is denied.

Dialogue is the act of speech between two or several persons. It entails the necessity to open ourselves to the other and the readiness to be challenged and surprised[3] by the other into our most intimate views. That is why a genuine interreligious dialogue cannot be a mere exchange of positions on a certain topic, since such an exchange does not entail by itself the possibility to be challenged by the views of the other in our most intimate being. For this reason, true interreligious dialogue does not mean the readiness to lead a dialogue only with persons who share similar religious views, but it presupposes the readiness to lead a dialogue also with persons who share very different religious ideas. Consequently, dialogue is not equal to agreement, but agreement can only be a possible consequence of dialogue. Dialogue and so also interreligious dialogue entails as a necessary condition the readiness to listen and to attempt to understand the views of other persons through an act of empathy. Genuine dialogue requires thus a particular state of mind that we can call courage, which is to be conceived at the courage of opening ourselves to what seems to be strange and alien from the perspective of our habitual inner world. It requires also the courage of taking the risk of not being understood by the other or even denied by her. In this sense, dialogue presupposes the "language of risk" (Levinas 1994, p. 223).

However, these considerations tell us what interreligious dialogue should be, leaving open the question as to the deeper structures of experience which are involved in this type of experience. This question calls for a *descriptive viewpoint* on the phenomenon of interreligious dialogue.

Dialogue is not a prominent investigation object in classical phenomenology, which explains perhaps partly the reason why interreligious dialogue has been a neglected question in the field of phenomenology. Surprisingly, one can find a phenomenological concept of dialogue in Merleau-Ponty's work *Phenomenology of Perception*; I note "surprisingly" because the concept of "dialogue" appears very few times in this work and seems not to be a main concern for the economy of this book. We can, however, find a striking conception of what dialogue is in the following fragment, which appears in the fourth chapter of the second part of this book, entitled *Other Selves and the Human World*:

> In the experience of dialogue, *a common ground is constituted between me and another*; my thought and his form a single fabric (*tissu*), my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion and are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. Here there is a being-shared-by-two (*être à deux*), and the other person is no longer for me a simple behavior in my transcendental field, nor for that matter am I a simple behavior in his. We are, for each other, collaborators in perfect reciprocity: our perspectives slip (*glissent*) into each other, *we coexist through a common world* (*à travers un même monde*). *I am freed from myself in the present dialogue*, even though the other's thoughts are certainly his own, since I do not form them, I nonetheless grasp them as soon as they are born or I even anticipate them. And even the objection raised by my interlocutor draws from me thoughts I did not know I possessed such that if I lend him thoughts, he makes me think in return (Merleau-Ponty 2012, pp. 370–71, emphasis added, modified translation)

Merleau-Ponty states in this fragment that we coexist though dialogue in a common world. However, this common world does not exist before the dialogue, but it establishes itself through dialogue. It is indeed through dialogue that I am freed from myself, that means, from the restrained sphere of my internal world, based on my own, inner thoughts and feelings, and that I can open myself to a common—i.e., shared—world. The common world is thus not already pre-given (*vorgegeben* as would say Husserl) but has to be constantly created and recreated through dialogue. It is precisely this common world, that Merleau-Ponty calls also common ground, which constitutes one essential feature of the experience of dialogue. It is constituted as the intertwinement into a single fabric of my thought and the thought of my interlocutor, which is made possible by the fact that these thoughts are "called forth by the state of the discussion" "into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator". Dialogue, which manifests itself as discussion, i.e., as an exchange of words and acts of speeches, does not bring forth a mere fusion of the inner, psychic world of the interlocutors, since each interlocutor maintains her own thoughts and her own personality, due to which precisely the interlocutors *coexist* through dialogue, and do not lose their individual personal subjectivity into a new totalizing identity. Rather, dialogue creates a specific intersubjective dynamic that orients towards a common direction the thoughts and words of the interlocutors. This common direction is not created by any interlocutor taken in its individuality, but arises from the dynamic of the dialogue itself, and brings the interlocutors to transcend their own psychic world, while drawing from them thoughts they had no idea they possessed. Hence, we could say that it is not the thoughts of the interlocutors that fusion with each other, but their horizons. I refer here to Gadamer's idea of a fusion of horizons, that, according to him, characterizes the conversation, "in which something is expressed that is not only mine or my author's, but common" (Gadamer 2006, p. 390).

A second essential feature of the experience of dialogue is the being-shared-by-two, or, as Merleau-Ponty literally puts it, the being with two (*être à deux*). This new form of being does not only transform the experience of my subjectivity as an individual subjectivity, but also and most of all as a transcendental subjectivity. Indeed, my interlocutor is not experienced through dialogue as an object that I constitute as a transcendental subjectivity, as a "mere bit of behavior in my transcendental field". However, here again, this being-shared-by-two cannot be construed as a fusional single being, but rather as a way of being of each individual personal subjectivity, due to which each subjectivity collaborates—i.e., participates—in a common fabric of thoughts. This new, dual way of being of subjectivity can be considered as a particular type and actualization of the We-relation, which is "actualized in different degrees of concreteness and specificity" (Schutz 1964, p. 25). Alfred Schutz gives as an example of such a relationship the dual observation of a bird-flight, which is of paradoxical nature: although I do not have direct access to the mind of the other person that observes together with me the bird-flight, and cannot know for this reason whether this person has in this case an experience which is identical to my experience, still I can say that "*we* saw a bird in flight" (Schutz 1964, p. 25), i.e., that we had a common experience of the same object. The "We" relation constitutes itself in this case around this common experience, which is made possible, according to Schutz, by the synchronicity of both individual experiences and observations of the body of the other person that indicate her "attentiveness to the bird's flight" (Schutz 1964, p. 25).

We find a similar analysis in the *Phenomenology of Perception*:

> Imagine that my friend Paul and I are currently gazing across a landscape. What is actually happening? Must we say that we both have private sensations, a matter of knowledge that is forever incommunicable? Or that, with regard to pure lived-experience, we are locked within distinct perspectives? Or finally, that the landscape is not, for the two of us, *idem numero* [numerically identical] and that it is merely a question of a specific identity? [. . .] My friend Paul and I point to certain details of the landscape, and Paul's finger, which is pointing out the steeple to me, is not a finger-for-me that I conceive as oriented toward

> a steeple-for-me [. . .]. When I think of Paul, I do not think of a flow of private sensations in relation to my own sensations that are mediated through some interposed signs; rather, I think of someone who lives the same world as I (*qui vit le même monde que moi*), the same history as I, and with whom I communicate through this world and through this history (Merleau-Ponty 2012, pp. 427–28, modified translation)

However, both these examples of a "We" relation do not display any experience of dialogue, despite the fact that they reveal a common experience, and even a common world, as Merleau-Ponty states. Indeed, they lack one essential element for dialogue, namely language (a third essential feature of the experience of dialogue), through which thoughts could be exchanged. Merleau-Ponty goes even so far as to contend not merely that language is essential for dialogue, but that language as an act of speech is already dialogue[4]. At the same time, the question remains open whether joint perception is a requisite level for dialogue, and how does the common world revealed through the perceptual intersubjective experience and the common world constituted through dialogue relate to each other.

3.3. What Kind of Phenomenological Description of Interreligious Dialogue?

We have seen three essential features characterizing the experience of dialogue which emerge from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions: (1) the constitution of a common world; (2) the experience of a being-shared-by-two; (3) the use of language as act of speech. This description features one original trait with respect to the current literature from the field of interreligious studies, namely, the experience of the world, more precisely of a common world, as essentially bound with the experience of dialogue, hence also of interreligious dialogue. Moreover, this original perspective could allow to further investigate a particular characteristic of interreligious dialogue that has been already revealed inside the literature of interreligious studies (Basset 1996; Moyaert 2011; Moyaert 2014); namely, the tension between openness towards religious alterity and the tendency to preserve a religious tradition and identity. This tension can have variable degrees, ranging from rigid and closed identitarian experiences of the interreligious space to fluid interreligious experiences, which can entail belongings to different religious communities and traditions or can be even not structured around the experience of the membership of a specific religious community. This variable tension can be described according to the phenomenological dynamic opposition between homeworld (*Heimwelt*) and foreign world (*fremde Welt*) (Husserl 1973)[5].

Interestingly, Husserl defines the experience of a homeworld indirectly through describing how a foreign world is experienced. The foreign world is described as "another homefellowship" (*eine andere Heimgenossenschaft*), that "lives, behaves, conceives 'the' world differently, [. . .] has another cultural world which is valid for them, but not for us" (Husserl 1973, p. 214). By contrast, my homeworld is the world of "my homefellowship" (*meine Heimgenossenschaft*) (Husserl 1973, p. 214), thus constituted not merely in my primordial, monadic sphere, but intersubjectively co-constituted as a specific cultural world, with a specific worldview which is valid not only for me, but also for my fellowmen. Husserl seems to assume that the consciousness of belonging to a specific homefellowship, which is not experienced merely as a community but has also a mundane meaning layer (it is my and our home*world*), arises only by contrast (*gegenüber*)[6] and, on a second level, after and through the encounter with a foreign homefellowship. Indeed, he writes just after describing the experience of a different homefellowship: "It is precisely *through this* (*eben damit*) that 'our own' homefellowship, people's fellowship is constituted for me and for us, in relation to our cultural environment (*Kulturumwelt*) as the world of our human validations (*Geltungen*)" (Husserl 1973, p. 214, emphasize used). But there is a second form of consciousness that arises through this confrontation: namely, the consciousness that my own homeworld is distinguished from the world as such (Husserl 1973, p. 215). At the same time, the horizon of the world is constituted through a gradual process, which always progresses further (*immer weiter fortgehender*), of discovery of a new "foreign we",

of a new "foreign humanity" (Husserl 1973, p. 215), that constantly constitutes a "new world" (Husserl 1973, p. 216) and an "enlarged humanity" (*erweiterte Menschheit*)[7] (Husserl 1973, p. 215). This constitution process is possible by virtue of the open structure of the spatial–temporal horizon of the homeworld which, by its essence, allows the possibility of interrupting the continuation of a particular style (*Stil*) of experience in order to open the space for a different form of determination (*Andersbestimmung*) of this horizon (Husserl 1973, p. 216).

This phenomenological description sets the general framework of a phenomenological description of the experience of interreligious dialogue and delineates all together its key problematic point. The variable consciousness of belonging to a particular religious community (be it the Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox church, the *ummah*, the *sangha*, . . .) shares several common points with the consciousness of belonging to a homeworld: the communitarian dimension (which Husserl designates as fellowship), its articulation around common validations and worldviews (which can be shared with a variable degree) and its contrast to other communities which are experienced as foreign—more precisely, as a foreign world—since it challenges our own worldviews and the manner in which we constitute the world horizon. At the same time, the task of describing the experience of religious belonging requires a nuancing of this general descriptive model. Thus, although the consciousness of the existence of foreign religious communities is de facto present, at least in the contemporary world, it is not clear how far this consciousness is necessarily inscribed in the structure itself of the experience of being part of a particular religious community, in the same way as the possibility of experiencing a foreign world is grounded in the horizon of the homeworld. Is the possibility of religious alterity eidetically inscribed in the structure of the religious experience itself?

On the other hand, this general theoretical framework implies an acute problematic point, which has been highlighted already by Husserl himself: namely, how is it possible to open ourselves to a foreign world? Husserl notices this issue particularly in relationship to divergent religious convictions. He writes for instance:

> Can I consider as valid (*gelten lassen*) the mythical convictions of the other, which <determine> the sense of being of their world (of what they experience as being), their fetishes, their deities, their mythical causalities, etc.? If I keep my belief (they may see it as mere mythology) their belief is superstition, if I keep my world as it is, their world is not as it is (Husserl 1973, p. 217)

We discern a similar, although less radical questioning in this fragment:

> Religious symbols, dogmas, etc. are also part of the world, but direct access have to them those who dwell in the religion in question (*der in der betreffenden Religion steht*), all the others have an indirect access, insofar as, because they have an imperfect understanding as non-religious persons or as persons who belong to another religion, they understand them as something that the believer realizes in a certain way through real faith, similar to the way in which someone who is not an expert in a science has the indirect representation of an 'expert', for whom the misunderstood or half-understood propositions and justifications have full meaning and the power of real insight (Husserl 1973, pp. 227–28)

Hence, the possibility of "one and the same world" that is "constitutively common" (*konstitutiv gemeinsam*) for transcendental subjectivity (Husserl 1973, p. 228)—in other words, of a world that is valid for all of us, for the "open infinity of the transcendental others" (Husserl 1973, p. 210)—is formulated by Husserl as a problem that calls for further investigation. Husserl gives a first answer by contending that "each experience [. . .] remains valid for the common world as long as it does not disturb the intersubjective concordance (*Einstimmigkeit*)" (Husserl 1973, p. 230). It is not clear, nevertheless, to what extent a particular religious experience can be valid for the common world from this perspective, and if it can be understood in terms of concordance or non-concordance (*Unstimmigkeit*) with the common intersubjective experience. It seems indeed that a particular religious

experience (such as the experience of prayer to a particular God or deity) may not necessarily contradict this form of concordance and still not resonate with this intersubjective concordance, since a large number of persons (the transcendental others) could simply not have access to this particular form of experience (because for instance they do not believe in the existence of this particular God or deity).

In consequence, the task remains open as to how we can describe, phenomenologically, the possibility of the consciousness of a common world despite the divergent consciousness of belonging to different religious communities (religious homeworlds) or of not belonging to a specific religious community. The analyses of Merleau-Ponty indicate to us that this consciousness arises through dialogue, and hence, that it is dialogue rather than concordance that plays a fundamental role in the consciousness of a common world, at least insofar as this common world is interreligious. Hence the phenomenological description of interreligious dialogue appears both as a task and as a partial solution for a fundamental problem which arises in Husserl's phenomenology: namely, how the consciousness of belonging to a common world is possible.

4. Conclusions

This analysis highlights the interest of phenomenology for the study of interreligious dialogue. It shows that the phenomenological method can be relevant for the description of the experience of the interreligious encounter and interreligious space. It points out some deeper structures of this type of experience which are articulated around the constitution of a common world and the tension between the consciousness of belonging to a homeworld and the perception of a foreign world. At the same time, a phenomenological description of interreligious dialogue appears to have the potential to challenge not only the Judeo–Christian framework of current phenomenology of religion but also the phenomenological reflection on the constitution of a common world.

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Notes

1 We find references to Christian religion and to the figure of Jesus in Reinach's notes (1916/1917), both in his "Fragment of a Religious-Philosophical Elaboration" ("*Bruchstück einer religionsphilosophischen Ausführung*") and in his notes on loose leaves, which suggest that Christian religion serves as a background framework for Reinach's phenomenological analysis of religious experience. Thus he writes: "And perhaps it is only possible for the Son of God himself to experience "Thy will be done" in its ultimate depth"—"The 'authentic' (*eigentliche*) human being, as he is fundamentally and worthy of love, is finite and ultimately dependent; just like Jesus Christ" (Reinach 1989, pp. 594, 609).

2 Although Scheler aims at grounding an essential phenomenology of religion, which would unveil the eidetic structures of religion as such, Christianity (more specifically in its Catholic and Protestant form) is clearly in the background of Scheler's analyses and it seems even that he construes this specific religion as a point of reference for comprehending other religions, as this quote suggests: "To assume there may be germs of true revelation in other religions, outside the religious-historical framework of Judaeo-Christian evolution, contradicts *no* essential idea of Christian doctrine. In fact it only strengthens the true 'catholicity' of the Church to whose principles it belongs never to reject the true merely because it is either *inadequately* true, or only true in reference to objects relative in existence; or merely because the particular object of which the truth in question is true is not yet clearly known (such as when the institution of God known as the moral world-order is taken to be God himself–*scil.* the 'heaven' of the Chinese)" (Scheler 2010, p. 354).

3 This experience of surprise could be analyzed from a phenomenological point of view, drawing on current phenomenological investigations devoted to this question, particularly developed by Natalie Depraz (see for instance Depraz 2018; Depraz and Steinbock 2018).

4 "Each universal meditation, which cuts the philosopher off from his nation, friends, prejudices, and empirical being—in a word, from the world—and that seems to leave him absolutely alone, is in fact action (*acte*), or speech, and hence dialogue" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p. 378). We can find an echo to this conception of language in the analyses of the linguist Herbert H. Clark who defines the use of language as a form of joint action (Clark 1996).

[5] Husserl uses much more often in this volume the notion of *Heimwelt* than of *fremde Welt* (sometimes declinated as *fremde Umwelt*). Rather than being a technical concept, the notion of *fremde Welt* is an index for something that Husserl aims at thinking through multifarious concepts.

[6] "[. . .] *gegenüber diesem Wir ein fremdes Wir, gegenüber unserer Menschheit eine fremde Menschheit*": "opposite to this we a foreign me, opposite to our humanity a foreign humanity" (Husserl 1973, p. 215). The notion of *gegenüber* entails however also the nuance of a vis-à-vis, of a face-to-face situation.

[7] Husserl uses both German terms of *Menschheit* and *Menschentum* in this text, which dates from 1930 or 1931. Thus he writes: "*Es konstituiert sich also fremdes Menschentum, eine fremde Menschheit*" (Husserl 1973, p. 214).

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