

God Without God: A Divine Limit to “The Phenomenon”

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Abstract

The background concern of this paper is the well-rehearsed debate on the “theological turn” (or “veerings”) in French Phenomenology that was ignited by Dominique Janicaud some 25 years ago in his vociferous critique of several leading French thinkers. It also responds to subsequent contestations against Janicaud by numerous scholars defending these thinkers radicalising of phenomenology in their attempts to account for what Emanuel Levinas had “stirred up in the phenomenological field” by re-posing the question of the philosophical status of the idea of God. What is pivotal to Janicaud in his exclusionary critique and drawing of phenomenological boundaries is to hold dearly to the method as Edmund Husserl intended. In doing so, only describable phenomena that appear (or are logically subtended to appear) provide the litmus for a bona fide phenomenology. In opening and broadening the method to include experiences of a transcendent, religious nature as the French thinkers do, orthodox Husserlian thinking places these projects into question. The purpose of this paper is to question these post-Husserlian thinkers with a more faithful reading of Husserl. I analyse three key areas to suggest a ‘divine limit’ to phenomena: first, the concept of “the phenomenon” as developed in Husserl’s project; second, the ‘status of the idea of God’ in Husserl’s writings; and third, the relevant philosophical discourse on God that emerges from the Janicaud-led debate through critical commentary on the phenomenology of the “inapparent”. As a consequence, God is argued to be a divine limit to Husserlian phenomenology, but not religious belief itself.

Keywords: Religious Experience, Phenomenology of Religion, Phenomenological Limits, Theological Turn, Husserl, God

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What is pivotal to Janicaud in his exclusionary critique and drawing of phenomenological boundaries, is to hold dearly to the phenomenological method as Edmund Husserl intended. In doing so, only describable phenomena that appear (or are logically subtended to appear) provide the litmus for a bona fide phenomenology. In opening and broadening the method to include experiences of a transcendent, religious nature as the French thinkers do, orthodox Husserlian thinking places these projects into question.

The purpose of this article is to introduce one key argument that (like Janicaud) questions post-Husserlian thinkers in the phenomenology of religion who go beyond his thinking with a postmodern or postphenomenological approach to account for concepts like the ‘ineffable’ and ‘inapparent’, or use metaphors of light and darkness to describe God in a kataphatic or apophatic sense because they view Husserl’s philosophy as limiting¹. Rather than following either of these two paths, my project ultimately suggests (unlike

¹ In McNeilly (2016), I analyse postmodern tendencies in negative theology to further demonstrate that God is a divine limit to the phenomenon. With the assistance of Derrida’s attack of negative theology to save deconstruction from the same fate, I demonstrate that the problem in keeping with a postmodern apophatics to deal with this non-phenomenon is that there is a continual postponement to an inevitable limit, and that in the perpetual wheel of negation the theologian will not overcome ontotheology as they aim to, and will suffer the effects of deconstruction *deconstructing* their negating efforts. Finally, I hint at a Husserlian-based approach to a phenomenology of religion *sans* the issue of ontotheology. When God is taken as a divine limit, there is no longer any need to speak of or even avoid speaking of him. Only by turning a light on the negating, affirming and metaphorising activities about a transcendent being beyond being, that is, the structure of our constituting beliefs, will we prevent the hesitancies of postponement that never examine one’s faith in a philosophical sense, but does, in all sincerity, evoke interesting poetry. See also Derrida (2008).

Janicaud) that we can undertake a phenomenology of religion with Husserl's philosophy. The following analysis argues more broadly toward a Husserlian phenomenology of religion that is neither ontotheological in the most negative sense of the term, nor attempting to go beyond metaphysics (the project of Heidegger's taken up by Marion), but concerned with a belief basis to faith formation.²

In this paper I will argue in three parts why there is a divine limit to a Husserlian philosophy of religion. The first part of the discussion will focus upon Husserl's concept of the phenomenon as it was considered in his 1907 lectures from the Göttingen period and which form the book *The Idea of Phenomenology* (first published in German in 1950 and English in 1964).³ Pursuing this particular orientation in Section 1, I will in Section 3 of the article return to the simpler, albeit more ambiguous, understanding of phenomenon as 'that which appears' where I critically address a phenomenology of the inapparent. Section 2 of the paper will begin to examine the role of God in Husserl's writings.

1. Husserl's concept of the phenomenon

The concept 'phenomenon' takes on a special sense in the practice of phenomenology. Husserl makes a distinction between the common sense, empirical notion of phenomena as a simple object that we 'see/experience' in the everyday, and the kind of phenomena that we are meant to 'see/intuit' once

² The constitution of religious belief may be understood to be *epistemic* (the joining of *pistis* 'faith' to *eidos* 'knowledge'), *imagistic* (images and imagination, icons and idols) and *aesthetic* (the bodily and kinetic aspects of faith). These three dimensions form what I have come to call, a *prism of belief*. All three modes of constitution are examinable processes that in their appearing accord with the principles of Husserl's method.

³ Indeed the concept of phenomenon changes over the course of Husserl's writings. For the purposes of this paper, I stay with his conceptualisation in the 1907 lectures as it offers an early, post *Logical Investigations* clarity of his phenomenological method before it is fully expounded in 1913. For a thorough and more critical tracing of the concept of phenomenon from Brentano to the later Husserl, see Emanuele Mariani's article "Couvrez ce phénomène que je ne saurais voir. Sur le droit de tout voir (ou pas) en phénoménologie : Husserl entre Brentano et Natorp" on this journal.

we engage the phenomenological attitude, producing what he calls *pure phenomena*: “The phenomenologist is in search of a ‘pure’ or ‘reduced’ object, the essence of a special thing or of a process, such as seeing. He [or she] supposes that the process is unclear and indistinct in its every day context” (Nakhnikian, 1964: XVIII).

The first reduction of the method (the phenomenological or transcendental reduction) transforms ‘mere’ phenomena into ‘pure’ for the further reductive procedure of eidetic analysis that permits us to see the essential structures of the thing, and to ensure that we are engaging in the new science of phenomenology (Husserl, 1990: 36). Through the reduction, the ego “as well as time and the world” are put into question to “display a pure phenomenon” (34), described as “the truly absolute datum” (35). This transformation of objects is necessary for the investigation to be clear of all obstructive, taken-for-granted theories and presuppositions that an object will, in its constitution, carry without question; and this movement helps to perform the critique of cognition that Husserl undertakes.

But what can we understand about the special character of ‘pure’ phenomena in relation to being an object seen simply in the world? Husserl states that “[i]n the seeing pure phenomena the object is not outside cognition or outside consciousness; while being given in the sense of the absolute self-givenness of something which is simply seen” (33).

First, it appears that for something to transform into a pure phenomenon, the object needs to be self-given in an absolute sense and is never, once reduced, outside of cognition or consciousness. Thus, transcendent objects, which only possess a “quasi-givenness” [*Quasi-Gegebenheiten*] cannot transform into pure phenomena as do the absolute givenness of non-transcendent objects simply seen (35). And so,

[...] this pure immanence is first of all to be characterised, in our approach, through *phenomenological reduction*: I mean, not with respect to what it refers to beyond itself, but with respect to what it is in itself and to what it is given as. All this discussion is, of course, only a roundabout way of helping one to see what is to be seen in this regard, viz., the distinction between the quasi-givenness of

transcendent objects and the absolute givenness of the phenomenon itself (Husserl, 1990: 35)⁴.

Thus, the role of self-givenness in understanding which phenomena are ultimately phenomenological (that which can be seen as pure, or not) becomes important to my discussion regarding the status of the idea of God in Husserlian phenomenology, and where a divine limit can be drawn in regards to his concept of the phenomenon.⁵

Developing on from this quote, the logic of the argument is formulated as follows: God is not given absolutely like non-transcendent objects, it is not even clear that God has a quasi-givenness like other transcendent objects because he is of a very special kind; therefore, it is safe to say that God, like other transcendent objects, can never convert to pure phenomena available for eidetic examination. However, if we consider the constitution of a belief in God, this is different from (1) taking God as a special kind of transcendent object or

⁴ „Dergleichen Reden sind natürlich nur Umwege und Behelfe um anzuleiten, das erste zu sehen, was hier zu sehen ist, den Unterschied zwischen den Quasi-Gegebenheiten des transzendenten Objektes und der absoluten Gegebenheit des Phänomens selbst.“ Cf. Husserl (1950: 45).

⁵ The problem of “self-givenness” requires a little more discussion with respect to the difference between ‘givenness and revelation’ and ‘givenness and constitution’. It is a difference which bears significantly on the French debate, especially the concentration upon revelation rather than constitution in three thinkers whose phenomenologies claim to escape metaphysics: Jean-Luc Marion (with phenomenality), Michel Henry (with radical manifestation) and Jean-Louis Chrétien’s corporeity, where the soul manifests itself through the body. My main response to the French debate is to restore constitution and demonstrate how a phenomenology of religion can be undertaken without resorting to revelation, or manifestation however immanent. When it comes to the self-givenness of a phenomenon, one that a pure phenomenology can examine, there is no mistaking Husserl on the necessity of constitution — as Hans Georg Gadamer, in a discussion at a conference on “The Idea of Phenomenology: Idealism-Realism, Historicity and Nature” held in Canada in 1969, adamantly pointed out: “‘self-givenness’ was only another expression for ‘constituted self-givenness’. Self-givenness is not a ‘natural’ feature of what there is that could be found without any preparation. Constitution is the inverse form of reduction and this means that by constitution what is intended receives the character of self-givenness. As you remember, that is Husserl’s concept of phenomena” (Gadamer, 1972: 168).

being, and (2) from believing in God as the object of belief; it is instead a “belief of a belief” about some transcendent being, and is self-given to consciousness in an absolute sense.

A belief is a non-transcendent object that is given. It may very well refer to a transcendent object of any sort outside in external perception that is not given, but it along with intention will always be “an absolute” (Husserl, 1990: 40). A belief is a perception easily isolated and abstracted from its relation with empirical ego during the performance of the phenomenological reduction: “The perception which is thereby grasped and delimited in ‘seeing’ is an absolutely given, pure phenomenon in the phenomenological sense, renouncing anything transcendent” (34-35).

A “belief in God”, constituted in and by perception of another belief, permits an examination of the logic and movement of the formal structures of believing that in a religious context form one’s faith. In Husserl, a belief is perceptual; for almost always a “perceptual experience can transform a mere thought into knowledge” (Hopp, 2008: 219). Thus, perceptual beliefs within a context of religious experience are the objects of phenomenological concern, and that at a purified level expose the meaningful structures of the believing process rather than some preconceived conceptualisation of God that posits his existence positively in a kataphatic sense, negatively in the apophatic, or motions towards his conceptual death—*à la* Nietzsche.

By and large, God is not some existent Being to consider in terms of givenness; for God is never given. This is arguably the case if we are attempting a phenomenology of religion with integrity toward Husserl’s concept of phenomena as he discusses it in the 1907 lectures, rather than resorting to concepts or approaches that radicalise or emphasise revelation. For Husserl givenness is always a matter of constitution. Furthermore, the ‘quasi-givenness’ [*Quasi-Gegebenheiten*] of transcendent objects that Husserl offers in contradistinction to the ‘absolute givenness’ of non-transcendent objects does not help one’s case if their desire is to ascribe the divine some givenness (if only to a certain degree) and remain within the frame of the phenomenological—something that the French tradition has needed to sustain with their insistence on revelation and manifestation over constitution. God, or religious phenomena if taken as something ‘quasi’ can only give the impression of being given without actually being.

To find an end to the present discussion, but by no means having exhausted it conclusively: *God is a divine limit to pure phenomena*. Such a determination does not, however, close down the possibility for a Husserlian phenomenology of religion; for our perceptual formations of belief are reliant phenomena that are non-transcendent, absolutely given and never 'outside' cognition and consciousness in their purified form.

2. The "status of the idea of God" in Husserl's writings

The second part of my analysis involves an investigation of the 'status of the idea of God' in Husserl's writings. To do this, I have focused upon Husserl's references to God mainly in relation to his methodological concerns sourced from (in non-chronological order): the *Cartesian Meditations* of 1929, *Ideas I* of 1913 and a letter to Rudolf Otto from 1919.

There is no mistaking the strong relation between Husserl's phenomenological method and Descartes' procedure in the *Meditations* if we are to follow the enthusiasm shown by Husserl in his *Cartesian Meditations*. Both question in a radical way how we can have an absolute and certain foundation to knowledge, and are suspicious of the means by which we ascertain this knowledge through the sciences⁶. Husserl, however, is more radical in his attack of the sciences in his critique of cognition (a theory of knowledge that resembles Kant's critique of reason) than Descartes ever stressed. This is even despite Descartes' extreme scepticism, which is so-far reaching that 'what' we perceive or think is doubted in terms of its existence because the very apparatus with which we perceive is inconsistent and untrustworthy for the foundational certainty we require for knowledge.

What is interesting about the Cartesian character of Husserl's method is the selective way in which he takes up "Cartesian motifs" to support his

⁶ Scholars of Husserl who are more dismissive of these Cartesian ties in Husserl's project interpret his work as 'non-foundationalist' in order to avoid the problematic trappings of metaphysical idealism that negatively characterises his transition from the Logical Investigations to the transcendental period. See Drummond (1990). My feeling here is that we do not need to dampen the Cartesian spirit of Husserl in his methodological enterprise, but perhaps look more closely at it.

philosophical challenge of the sciences through phenomenology, seemingly to create a blind spot on the matter of God (Husserl 1960: 1 [§1]). He says of Descartes' project: "*The aim of the Meditations is a complete reforming of philosophy into a science grounded on an absolute foundation*" (Ibid. emphasis mine). But in coming to this assessment from Descartes' own motivations, was it *purely* the aim of Descartes to reform philosophy into a science? Was it not *also* his aim to provide a philosophical proof for the existence of God to help theologians overcome the problem of the rampant atheism they were experiencing in the 17th Century⁷? Indeed, the Meditations did offer more than a philosophical proof of God. For not only does God hover inexplicably for the most part in Descartes' experiment while the "subject/self" takes centre stage upon the pages and subsequent centuries of Western thought, his 'aim' for the meditations was deeply entangled within a theological controversy that sees his preamble and Third Meditation as a means to appease the devoutly religious Deans at La Sorbonne⁸. The point I wish to make here is not related to what Descartes' intentions actually were, but consider a little more seriously why Husserl puts aside the status of the idea of God and religion in Descartes' meditations, and his stressing of Descartes' challenge to the sciences to "demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations."⁹

The reduced ego resulting from Descartes' method of doubt differs somewhat from Husserl's transcendently reduced ego of the *Ideas*. The latter posits a pure ego trusted and capable of seeing and intuiting the very structures of consciousness once "empirical subjectivity" ("Human being as natural being and as person in personal association, in that of 'society'") has been excluded (Husserl, 1983: 132-133). Thus, in interpreting Descartes' undertaking in the

⁷ See, for instance, Descartes (1996: 3-6).

⁸ These debates of a theological and philosophical nature continued for Descartes well after the second edition of *Meditations on First Philosophy*, first published along with six sets of *Objections and Replies* in 1641, and can be seen to continue in his *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* of 1648. These comments were a response to criticisms appearing as 21 articles in two pamphlets, the first entitled "An account of the Human Mind, or Rational Soul, which Explains What it is and What it can be" was published in 1647 by Henri de Roi (Henricus Regius), and the second entitled *Two Metaphysical Disputes Concerning God* was published by Jacques de Rives (Jacobus Revius) in the same year.

⁹ Descartes quoted in Cottingham (1992: 2).

Meditations as an outright challenge to the sciences via a reduced subject that is a secure foundation for building "a new and reliable system of knowledge" strategically supports Husserl in his phenomenological agenda that is first and foremost motivated by a desire to revolutionise the sciences (Cottingham, 1992: 27). Playing the Cartesian card when necessary, provides Husserl the strongest of connections to the Idealist tradition. In the *Cartesian Meditations* he enthralls his readers to finish what Descartes started in a more radical way: "to uncover thereby for the first time by the genuine sense of the necessary regress to the ego" (Husserl, 1960: 6). Notwithstanding the adverse consequence of criticisms brought on by his claimed connection to this tradition, Husserl insists that the movement started by Descartes should be taken up by all philosophers in a joint manner: "Should not the continuing tendency imply an eternal significance and, for us, a task imposed by history itself, a great task in which we are all summoned to collaborate?" (Husserl, 1960: 6).

But in his call to reawaken "the impulse of the Cartesian *Meditations*...to renew with greater intensity the radicalness of their spirit" the status of the idea of God is elided (Husserl, 1960: 6). Husserl cherry picks what he feels is unproblematic in Descartes in order to fortify his project against the sciences, but suspiciously appears to turn a blind eye to the major purpose of the *Meditations*: the significance of God and theology in this historical argument that sets out to prove the immateriality of the soul.

God indeed complicates Descartes' project and, as mentioned earlier, hovers inexplicably in the deconstructive phases of the argument, preserved omnipotently and unaccused in the symmetrical creation of an evil doppelganger that hoodwinks our reality. Presumably if Husserl were an atheist or nonbeliever then the role of God would be either polemically discounted in Descartes' project with any one of the many arguments that history has brought to bear on Descartes' project, or met with an atheist-based neutrality. And yet Husserl is not an atheist, so does not raise any explicit objections to the existence or presence of God in the *Meditations*. But then again he also refrains from engaging in a theistic debate about the philosophic means by which God could exist¹⁰. Beyond the non-philosophical conjecture about Husserl's own

¹⁰ In a closer reading of Descartes' Meditation III, and in considering the way he understands the relationship between ideas, substances and reality, there is some

religious belief, it is my contention that the very fact that God is never entirely absent from Husserl's philosophy (due to scattered mentionings) demonstrates that he is neither sceptical of God's existence, nor interested in God's inexistence¹¹. But God is never brought back, like in Descartes' reconstruction phase of building the world upon an irreducible thinking subject and 'concern' for God's existence (*Meditations* III-V)¹². As a consequence, God troubles

accordance between Descartes' 'concern' for the existence of God, understood as the highest of conceptions having no less "representative reality than the ideas by which finite substances are manifested" and Husserl's equal valuing of intentional content (noemas), acts (noesis) and objects,—that is, in their having the same phenomenal reality that may be eidetically seized. Cf. Descartes (1964: 81). Arguably, Husserl's identification of an 'analogous structure' or resemblance between his and Descartes' system might have been a motivation for him to not directly engage with Descartes' idea of God at the time of the *Cartesian Meditations*. For an alliance with Descartes on this strong metaphysical point would have been compromising to his phenomenological project; and—as I argue in this paper and broader research—Husserl was never able to examine religious questions and experiences without the threat of these metaphysical trappings with the painstaking rigour and scrutiny that his method demands.

¹¹ God is noted in the following passage, then left aside: "[Descartes] seeks apodictically certain ways by which, within his own pure inwardness, an Objective outwardness can be deduced. The course of the argument is well known: First God's existence and veracity are deduced and then, by means of them, Objective Nature, the duality of finite substances—in short, the Objective field of metaphysics and the positive sciences, and these disciplines themselves" (Husserl, 1960: 3). In the Göttingen lectures, Husserl declares that Descartes' appeal to the veracity of God is a place in the method where we can "expect difficulties", therefore, we must be "very sceptical, or rather critical" (Husserl, 1990: 39).

¹² Here I am toying with the possibility that Descartes is not presenting a hard-ontological proof of God's existence (arguing existence by means of concepts), but addressing the facets of a "religion in which [through] God's favour [he] was brought up in from childhood" with both reason and a respect for the truth. (Descartes, 1964: 24). If so, then Husserl's avoidance of the topic of God cannot be easily explained by his having a legitimated right to avoid ontological proofs when doing phenomenology. In his book *Cartesian Questions*, Marion logically addresses the possibility that Descartes' argument concerning God in the *Meditations* is not completely ontological and does not become genuinely so until Malebranche, who abolishes any and all mediation between divine essence and Being, and seeing the ontological argument to its logical end. Descartes' "(conceptual) determination of the essence of God maintains a gap between essence and existence, which is designated and filled by the notion of perfection: God thus does not yet exist immediately as a result of his concept [...] The

Husserl's methodological project as a divine limit to phenomena. And it is precisely the nature of the relation between Husserl's method and the figure of God within the Cartesian Meditations and across his other writings that interests my line of thinking here.

There is no core doctrine outlining the role of God with respect to his phenomenological method beside section 58 in *Ideas I* where Husserl outlines God's exclusion in the very process of the first reduction (Husserl, 1983: 133-134). Even though God is treated equally in the reduction like the other transcendencies, it is considered a very different kind of "absolute"; one that is "cognised in a highly mediated fashion" and "in polar contrast to the transcendency pertaining to the world" (Husserl, 1983: 133). Approaching God as an 'individual reality' to be included in the reduction presupposes that it has a consequential bearing on our thinking. Presented with such a status one would think that like consciousness and the rest of the world, God would resurface from abeyance as a transcendently purified phenomenon, or at least explicated in some other manner akin to Husserl's refined mode of analyses. But the last we hear of God is in the final line of section 58: "It shall remain excluded from the new field of research which is to be provided, since this shall be a field of pure consciousness" (Husserl, 1983: 134).

In *Ideas I*, Husserl stresses the absolute character of pure consciousness, thus all transcendencies are held in abeyance to enable an eidetic examination of the structures of consciousness. Nature is understood to be "the field of transcendent, specifically, spatio-temporal realities", and is excluded in the phenomenological reduction, with all general positings and judgments about it modified (Husserl, 1983: 3). By *Ideas II*, the constitution of perceptual objects and the natural world is reintroduced to his study with the same care and rigour as consciousness (Husserl, 1989). But what about God? Why does God remain excluded?

Eternal exclusion is directly at odds with the purpose of the *epoché*. This is noted by Husserl as early as 1907, wherein critiquing cognition, the cognition doubted "cannot remain in such doubt"—arguably a condition extended to all else held in abeyance (Husserl, 1990: 22). By *Ideas I*, we understand the nature

argument thus is not yet absolutely ontological, and Descartes very logically does not consider it to be so." (Marion, 1999: 142).

of exclusion in the first reduction as a type of ‘parenthesising’ of a spatio-temporal thing, and a ‘putting out of action’ the general positings or judgments about that thing; exclusion is not, however, eradication, negation, nor denial of its actual existence. Thus, God’s exclusion should not be an absolute extinguishment; our judgements about his nature/existence are merely and momentarily suspended to allow for Husserl’s forthcoming study to concentrate on the structures of consciousness. He says:

[T]hus the whole natural world which is continually ‘there for us’, ‘on hand,’ and which will always remain there according to consciousness as an ‘actuality’ even if we choose to parenthesise it.

If I do that, as I can with complete freedom, then I am not negating this ‘world’ as though I were a sophist; I am not doubting its factual being as though I were a skeptic; rather I am exercising the ‘phenomenological’ ἐποχή which also *completely shuts me off from any judgment about spatiotemporal factual being.* (Husserl, 1983: 61)

That God’s transcendently parenthesised companion ‘the natural world’ is brought back, what can be understood about God’s ongoing exclusion? The problematic I raise here is that God cannot be reduced to a transcendently purified phenomenon like consciousness and the natural world. We cannot pertain to the essential structures of God as an absolute transcendent being through eidetic procedure, thus modification from a ‘mere’ to ‘pure’ phenomenon (as defined in section 1 of this paper) is not possible. In effect, God becomes a divine limit to the kind of phenomena that phenomenology demands. To this end, Dominique Janicaud is right in his assessment that a theology is not possible with Husserl’s phenomenology if we strictly adhere to the method (Janicaud, 2000). Janicaud is unequivocal in his determination that Section 58 makes access to religious phenomena impossible. With God out of the way, the possibility of any kind of theology, ontotheology, or even phenomenology of religion is out of the question. So if God is a divine limit to the type of phenomena we require for a proper phenomenology we accept (along with Janicaud) that God’s exclusion rightfully remains. But should we close the door completely on the problem of God for Husserl, and deny his phenomenology the right to examine theological matters? Before considering

this question, let us consider the final text in my analysis.

In a letter to Rudolph Otto in 1919, Husserl expresses his impressions of a theology student called Oxner, a contemporary of Heidegger's who comes to study Husserl's new method while he is teaching in Freiberg. Phenomenology was approached by Oxner to 'clarify' and 'rationally illuminate' with scientific rigour certain theological matters. Husserl notes that for Oxner:

[I]t must be an honest, serious, scientific philosophy which, in concepts of a faithfully ancillary reason, gives to the depths of religious life and to the religious objectivity revealed therein an adequate expression and more: a purification, clarification, rational illumination, and a sure defence against scepticism (Husserl, 2010: 23).

In this same correspondence to Otto, Husserl points out (with the utmost politeness) some shortcomings in Otto's recently published book *Das Heilige* [*The Idea of the Holy*]. Husserl deems Otto's book to be the first and most original contribution to the phenomenology of religion, while at the same time critical of its metaphysical overtones: "the metaphysician (theologian) in Herr Otto has carried away on his wings Otto the phenomenologist" (25). Husserl's solution for remaining phenomenological is to keep with "pure description" and an "analysis of the phenomena themselves", and so hints at a possible Husserlian phenomenology of religion that was never developed in his lifetime. Husserl says:

It seems to me that a great deal more progress would have to be made in the study of the phenomena and their eidetic analysis before a theory of religious consciousness, as a philosophical theory, could arise. Above all, one would need to carry out a radical distinction: between accidental *factum* and the *eidōs*. One would need to study the eidetic necessities and eidetic possibilities of religious consciousness and of its correlate. One would need a systematic eidetic typification of the levels of religious data, indeed in their eidetically necessary development. (Husserl, 2010: 25)

There is no mistaking that Husserl supported a phenomenology of religion as long as an eidetic analysis was undertaken: a method not leading to facts, but to essences. This kind of rational approach to religious phenomena is very

different to what Otto himself points out in the beginning pages of *Das Heilige*. Rational approaches to religion work only with concepts to “name” and “attribute” this or that meaning to our experiences, and by doing so, do not apprehend the inexpressible (Otto, 1959: 19). A Husserlian phenomenology is not in the business of conceptualising, nor participating in the kind of reason that his own project seeks to critique, for to do so would compromise the main aims of phenomenology. Rather, Husserl intimates that his transcendental philosophy can rationally approach what Otto terms the “overplus of meaning” without an ontotheological bid for a metaphysics of the *ineffable* (19). All in all, Husserl’s letter to Otto provides a legitimate historical precedent for a Husserlian phenomenology of religion that is rational and eidetic, and one not demanding the existence, nor possibility of the givenness of God or any other transcendent object.

In examining religious consciousness, we are concerned with its intentional status: the process and structure of intentionality. We inquire into how our intentional states and their deeper structural relationships form and modify our religious beliefs. What is paramount to the phenomenologist here is to eidetically consider the constitution of these beliefs that can within the single believer shift between the belief poles of certainty and doubt as continual modifying movements (Husserl, 1983: 249-253). The constitution of these beliefs within experience is understood through three interrelated but non-exhaustive ways: the *epistemic*, *imagistic* and *aesthetic*.

Husserl’s special (and final) exclusion of God in a method that echoes on many fronts the most metaphysical and ontotheological one of all, Descartes’, appears strange, especially when there is little discussion of how this phenomenon needs to be dealt with once one’s abeyance is successful. Acknowledging that we are not dealing with the same kind of phenomena like consciousness and the natural world, the move that Husserl clearly could have made, but one that he for unknown and highly speculative reasons does not do in any formal way, is to investigate with his method ‘religious consciousness’ such that what we take as an object of our religious intentions is not the impossible encounter with a God, conceptual or mooted otherwise, but beliefs as they are constituted in and by themselves. Our intentional states are about something. In religious experiences they are beliefs, often beliefs about beliefs: a supervening process that moves us in our faith. A phenomenology must

inquire into these fine-grained structures of overlapping beliefs within the single believer and at deeper more complex levels of noetic-noematic play¹³. To do so justifies Husserl’s bracketing of a God left suspended without further recourse in a phenomenologically purified world and legitimates no further reflection on the status of God in his work—now a divine limit in his philosophy; such an approach permits his method to facilitate a thoroughgoing phenomenology of religion and/or theology, just in the way that Steven Laycock (1986) describes: “Phenomenological theology proceeds directly to the heart of the matter [...] its task [...] is primarily that of clarification, elucidation and the dissolution of whatever would cloud the crystalline lucidity of eidetic registration”.

3. The relevant discourse on God that emerges from the Janicaud-led debate (“God-talk”)

Moving onto the third part of my analysis I begin to investigate the relevant discourse on God, or “God-talk” that emerges from the Janicaud-led debate—or as is often now called—postmodern apologetics¹⁴. Keeping with the core argument that suggests God is a divine limit to phenomena in Husserl’s phenomenology, I look critically at one particular attempt to establish a phenomenological theology with Husserl’s theory of perception through the postmodern concept of the *inapparent* which is enabled from a widened approach to the concept of *appearance*. I also develop upon the ambiguity that Husserl notes about the term phenomenon in his Göttingen lectures of 1907.

In its proper sense, phenomenon (φαινόμενον) simply means “that which appears” (Husserl, 1990: 11). But given the “essential correlation between *appearance and that which appears*” there is more of a “preference” for the

¹³ See J. McNeilly (2015).

¹⁴ A postmodern apologetics is “primarily phenomenological depictions of religious experience in a variety of registers. Their depictions do not always agree . . . [but] [t]heir method, however, is strikingly similar. They all employ phenomenological depictions for certain excessive experiences, experiences at the ‘limit’ of human experience” (Gschwandtner, 2013: 209).

“appearing itself”: the “subjective phenomenon” within Husserl’s theory of knowledge: «[T]he positive task of the theory of knowledge is to solve the problems of the relations among cognition, its meaning and its object by inquiring into the essence of cognition» (Husserl, 1990: 17-18).

And it is indeed this ambiguous relation between that which appears and the appearing that has formed a contentious site of debate and many reconstructive ventures that recast the meaning of appearance for new thinking in phenomenology.

I would like to draw attention to one position within the literature that challenges Janicaud to argue that “there has not been a [devastating] theological turn in recent French phenomenology” (Simmons: 2010: 15); it is a position suggesting that any widening, or radicalising of the concept of appearance to account for phenomena that is “inapparent” is in line with Husserl’s thinking. I will argue in the remaining pages that this is an misreading of his thought which ultimately works against the possibility of engaging a strict Husserlian phenomenology of religion; one that Janicaud would like, but says is not possible.

The idea of a “phenomenology of the inapparent” comes from Heidegger and was discussed during one of his seminars in Zähringen in 1973: “Thus understood, phenomenology is a path that leads away to come before [...] and it lets that before which it is led show itself. This phenomenology is a phenomenology of the inapparent” (Heidegger, 2003: 80). This quote is used by J. Aaron Simmons to argue against a more conservative understanding of ‘appearance’ in Husserl’s philosophy that Janicaud and orthodox readers generally have. The “thus understood” in Heidegger’s quote is the idea that “in philosophy, there are only paths; [while] in the sciences, on the contrary, there are only methods, that is, modes of procedure” (Simmons: 2010: 15). Such a characterisation of philosophy is distinctly un-Husserlian, and so the notion of the inapparent presupposed by an understanding of phenomenology as a path weakens the proposed view by Simmons that permits the appearance of God and other *inapparents* that the French phenomenologists of religion manifest from the darkness. Simmons launches further into a quasi-Heideggerian reading of Husserl on perception claiming that:

If phenomenology, as phenomenological, is willing to give an account of the "appearance" of the underside of the table and the backside of the computer screen why should there be an automatic, *prima facie* exclusion of the "appearance" of Marion's givenness, Henry's Life, Girard's mimetic desire, and Lacoste's liturgy? (Simmons: 2010: 18)

Simmons (thankfully) sees a problem with comparing God to the underside of the table, and so attempts to salvage this analogy through Husserl by declaring first that the "underside is a structural claim and not merely an empirical one" implying it is applicable to anything; and second, that "there is always a side that does not appear" and that "the side that I do see always points to, or indicates, the side that must be filled in." (Simmons: 2010: 19) A critical reading of Simmons is necessary since his idea represents many postmodern approaches to a phenomenology of religion that engage with Husserl's thinking.

The idea of an 'absence-presence' in Husserl's theory of perception comes from Robert Sokolowski who identifies with a postmodern rather than classical interpretation of Husserl's philosophy. Along with two other structural themes ('parts and wholes' and 'identity in manifolds') he reformulates the problem of appearance in Husserl with a third "original" claim in phenomenology, that of 'presence and absence' (Sokolowski, 2000: 5). For Sokolowski, "[...] it seems that [with Husserl] we now are flooded by fragments without any wholes, by manifolds bereft of identities, and by multiple absences without any enduring real presence" (3).

The classical view of absence (the just seen or yet to be seen sides of an object) in relation to presence (the appearing sides or aspect of the object) states that "absences make no sense except as played off against the presences that can be achieved through them" (4). This 'playing off against the presences' is true of Husserl's thinking: «In line with our experiential motives we draw inferences from the directly experienced (perceived and remembered) to what is not experienced» (Husserl, 1990: 13).

The 'underside of a table' and 'backside of a computer' is inferred from experience because of the temporal connections occurring in our internal time consciousness (our 'retentions' and 'protentions'), but also because these unperceived aspects of our experience "enter into logical relations" with the

perceived «[...] they follow from one another, they ‘cohere’ with one another, they support one another, thereby strengthening their logical power» (Husserl, 1990: 13).

Temporality and logic are what help Husserl *describe* the connection between what is directly experienced and what is not; thus there is no accounting for what is “inapparent” if it has no temporal or logical connection to the experienced. On this front, one wonders how an automatic inclusion (rather than exclusion) “of the ‘appearance’ of Marion’s givenness, Henry’s Life, Girard’s mimetic desire, and Lacoste’s liturgy...” can still be considered phenomenological on Husserlian grounds as argued by Simmons¹⁵. Sokolowski’s novel reading opens up Husserl’s philosophy in order to account for phenomena that are not usually given like normal objects in experience (i.e. religious phenomena like God), but it radically departs (as Sokolowski admits) from Husserl as an “original” reading of appearance and perception. In theologies that claim to be Husserlian, there is a need to at least take him at his word and abide with the methodological limits of phenomenology. The widening of concepts to account for limit phenomena like the divine is a non-Husserlian gesture. More often than not, it is a strongly Heideggerian reading of his phenomenology, a reflex that has its historical roots within the French tradition of a phenomenology of religion¹⁶. While it seems unfair to cast aspersions at genuine attempts to keep with Husserl when doing a phenomenology of religion or phenomenological theology when the author does just this, there is a strong need to stay as close to the contours of Husserl’s own thinking and hopes for the method, and to not explode the limits with new concepts to account for non-given phenomena.

¹⁵ I find Simmons argument that a phenomenology of the inapparent is possible because it can be found in Husserl’s theory of perception further weakened by using the Sokolowskian tradition of postmodern thinking on appearance without recognition or attribution, and not citing any of Husserl’s texts directly—only thanking in a footnote a non-Husserlian scholar for helping to construct his position (Simmons, 2010: 255, n.18). But rather than dismiss his project altogether, Simmons and Sokolowski’s style of thinking is characteristic of many postmodern scholars in a phenomenology of religion still wanting to ground their work in Husserl to account for non-presentational phenomena in their negative theologies.

¹⁶ See Courtine (2016).

In this article, I have considered three ways in which a divine limit persists in Husserl's philosophy, insofar as: (1) the concept of 'the phenomenon' does not extend to God (as argued in section 1); (2) that God, whose existence is never doubted, becomes a methodological problem for Husserl who leaves this transcendency excluded and unaccounted for despite his indebtedness to the Cartesian method (section 2); and (3) that we cannot widen Husserl's concept of appearance with a postmodern approach to make visible what is not temporally or logically connected to our experience (section 3). Drawing together the consequences from these three parts, I have argued that a divine limit does not mean the impossibility of examining religious beliefs if taken as reducible objects within a Husserlian phenomenology; for only then is it possible to "reach God without God" in a non-apophatic, and/or speculative sense¹⁷.

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¹⁷ Husserl writes in a letter to Edith Stein in 1935: «I have tried to arrive at the end without the help of [speculative] theology, its proofs, its methods. In other words, I wanted to reach God without God». Cited in Laycock (1986: 169).

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