

## Article

# From Philosophy of Religion to Philosophy of Religious Experience: On New Tendencies in French Phenomenology of Religion

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**Abstract:** Contemporary thinking on religion is confronted with the challenge of shifting from a ‘philosophy of religion’ to a ‘philosophy of religious experience’. This challenge, on which the common future of philosophy and theology depends, is not to draw a line between the two, but rather to cross that very line. Crossing the boundary between philosophy and theology, which is what is being discussed here, means transcending its naive geometric understanding in order to take up the old task of thinking in a new way. This is a challenge to both philosophy and theology because it is an existential, or rather an experiential, task. It is about a specific experience and a specific way of life that emerges from it, which must be described in philosophy and at the same time elaborated in theology. This is perhaps the greatest challenge to religious thought. The most representative recent attempts to meet this challenge will be traced below. As we shall see, the best method for both philosophical and theological description of religious experience seems to be phenomenology. The latter allows a free exploration of this experience, while avoiding the trap of falling into the limitations set by either philosophy or theology unduly separated by the boundaries set by a conventional academic rigor. The problem of this article is the quest of exploring religious experience itself: the possibility of such an undertaking, its method, and its future. The considerations presented beneath will lead us to conclude that religious thought, to survive and develop further, needs a specifically understood conversion: its future lies, namely, in converting to experience.

**Keywords:** philosophy of religion; phenomenology of religion; theological phenomenology; religious experience; theology



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## 1. Introduction: Rebuilding the Bridge between Philosophy and Theology

Dan Zahavi once wrote that phenomenology promises to rebuild the bridge between consciousness and reality. The problem, however, is that this bridge does not lead to the other side of the river (Zahavi 2003). Phenomenology in France attempts to bridge the gap between consciousness and transcendence, between the accessible and the inaccessible, between what is revealed in phenomena and what remains veiled. But does this impressive structure, painstakingly constructed with the considerable efforts of several generations of thinkers, touch the other shore?

Remi Brague and Jean-Yves Lacoste, two contemporary thinkers in the philosophy of religion, in a lapidary manifesto opening the *Théologiques* series launched in 1990 and published by the prestigious PUF, stated that: “a peculiarity of France, the reasons for which are attributed to history, is the expulsion of all theological questions from the domain of knowledge that claims to be universal. Everything that concerns the absolute and requires a final decision is thus removed, and other areas of culture lose the weight given to them by its influence, or, on the contrary, are burdened with a weight that does not suit them and that distorts them” (Lacoste 1990). They went on to set an ambitious goal: “The reintegration of the theological field into university culture is a task that still remains to

be accomplished” (Lacoste 1990). In order to accomplish this task, it is necessary “. . .to measure the influence that theology has had and continues to have on everything that has been said and thought in history—in philosophy, in science, in literature, in law—as well as on what has been done—in politics and in the arts. It is also important to show, through the publication of contemporary French and foreign contributions, that the theological view of reality still remains instructive” (Lacoste 1990). We are likewise confronted with the following question: can religious thought still be instructive to us?

This question gains in weight in the context of French culture, which is characterised by a specifically distanced approach to religious problems, if only because of the well-known principle of *laïcité*. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely there, in the specific context of secular France, that religious thought does not stop developing and continues to show surprising potential. Phenomenology seems to show the most creative energy in this field.

## 2. Three Hypotheses Regarding the French Phenomenology of Religion

The first hypothesis is that of a happy mistake, as Edward Baring (2019) calls it in his book *Converts to the real*. Encountering Husserl’s phenomenology, especially in its early form, if one may so call the *Logical Investigations* and the postulate of a return to the things themselves and the closely related theory of eidetic reduction, has provoked extreme reactions. On the one hand, we have examples of thinkers who were reasserted in sceptical or agnostic attitudes towards the whole religious sphere, while on the other hand, we have a wide range of Husserl’s disciples who were converts to Christianity, especially to Roman Catholicism. Husserl himself, although he decided to become a Christian at an advanced age and was baptised in the Lutheran church, considered himself a free Christian and was reluctant to speak out on religious matters. He was only to make a succinct remark towards the end of his life, written down by sister Adelgundis, that with his phenomenology he was leading people to God in a philosophical way, which was the only way available to him. It is worth noting that phenomenology owes its popularity above all to the hopes that Catholic neo-Scholastics placed in it. The main contributors in the early years were Herman Leo Van Breda and Alphonse de Waelhens in Belgium, Sofia Vanni Rovighi in Italy, Joaquín Xirau from Mexico, and Herman Boelaars from the Netherlands. It could be said that the phenomenon of phenomenology’s great worldwide career lies in a certain fortunate mistake, which led it to be initially regarded as an attempt to return to the realism familiar from classical metaphysics, and therefore to appear useful in the attempts of Catholic circles to restore scholasticism after the great exhortation of Pope Leo XIII. Matters became complicated, however, when Husserl supplemented the phenomenological method with transcendental reduction and thus sealed its idealist slant, ultimately nullifying any hopes of using the phenomenological method to restore realism. The eventual grounding of the foundations of the phenomenological method in philosophical idealism did not, however, discourage Christian and especially Catholic commentators from seeking inspiration for the philosophy of religion in phenomenology. Among them, we find representatives of philosophical traditions from different countries: Henri Duméry and Henri Birault in France, Angela Ales Bello in Italy, Krzysztof Michalski in Poland, Júlio Fragata in Portugal, and Robert Sokolowski and William J. Richardson in the United States.

The second hypothesis is that of the so-called theological turn. Proponents of this hypothesis claim that phenomenology in France has taken a new direction, different from that originally intended by Husserl. It is now thirty years since Dominique Janicaud published his essay *The theological turn in French phenomenology*. The term itself, however, has had time to become firmly established in the literature on contemporary continental philosophy. The diagnosis in this book was not at all promising: phenomenology in France, from the first attempts at its reception still made by Lévinas, has been moving away from Husserl’s intentions and taking a new direction which, to Janicaud’s disappointment, is precisely a religious one. Several different turns in French phenomenology have already been diagnosed. Emmanuel Falque (2013, p. 40) mentions further the hermeneutic turn in phenomenology made by Paul Ricoeur, the phenomenological turn in hermeneutics diagnosed by Jean

Grondin as a result of his reinterpretation of Gadamer's works, and various kinds of phenomenological turns in theology. Phenomenological Christology probably plays a leading role in these turns (Manzi and Pagazzi 2006). But can phenomenology make any sense here? Are we not dealing here with a confusion of methods of philosophical inquiry?

Not necessarily: there is a third hypothesis that I would like to present here. Let us call it the second step hypothesis. In the light of this hypothesis, the research inherent in classical phenomenology is the first step towards understanding the way in which this immanent logos, whose explanation phenomenology aims at, becomes accessible to our cognition. It is at the same time the first step in understanding human life, because it leads us to understand how experience sets boundaries and leads to the emergence of the Self from the stream of consciousness and, further, of the human person. This hypothesis is explicated in various ways by many contemporary French phenomenologists of religion, such as Emmanuel Falque (Falque 1999, 2004, 2011, 2015, 2017), Jean-Yves Lacoste (Lacoste 1994, 2000), Emmanuel Gabellieri (Gabellieri 2019), Emmanuel Housset (2010), and Philippe Capelle-Dumont (Capelle-Dumont 2011, 2013, 2016). It bears some similarities with the hypothesis described earlier but differs from those two in one fundamental aspect. It does not interfere in any way with the phenomenological method, nor does it attempt to bend or alter it. There is no attempt here to spiritualise phenomenological concepts by giving them new meanings, placing them in new contexts, or attributing spiritual dimensions to the qualities inherent in consciousness. The first step has already been taken, it is recognised as necessary, and no attempt is made to shorten, lengthen, or change its direction. The question is no longer: can the primary structures of consciousness tell me anything about God or my life? But the question is rather: can the same method that has proved so successful in investigating the primary structures of experience also be used to investigate what is considered to be secondary? (Hence, the actual lived experience with particular reference to the spiritual and the religious experience.) As can be seen, this is a question of boundaries. However, it is important to remember that it is experience that sets the boundaries of the Self and not vice versa. It seems, therefore, that if our experience allows us to take this second step, it is legitimate. This is where the real revolution in method proposed by the new French phenomenology of religion appears before us: is it not the case that, paradoxically, by accepting the boundary set for us by phenomenological inquiry, we can cross certain boundaries, or at least inhabit the boundary between the natural and the supernatural? As we shall demonstrate in the subsequent course of the analyses, this approach, although somewhat innovative, is nevertheless deeply rooted in the French tradition of religious thought.

### 3. Towards Philosophy of Religious Experience: Crossing the Boundary between Philosophy and Theology

In the introduction to the book *The Burning Bush and the Light of Reason*, Jean Greisch explains the significance of the unusual title: "The general title of the book *The Burning Bush and the Light of Reason* was chosen to resonate with the title of the first book of the trilogy: where there is a 'tree of life', there is a 'burning bush' not far away! Or, to put it less metaphorically, assuming that the philosophy of religion deals with the manifold 'hierophanies' that have marked the history of mankind from its beginnings to the present day, and assuming that religion is one of the most powerful machines for the production of 'meaning', which is above all an attitude, this meaning becomes comprehensible only if we can perceive in it more or less obscure or illuminating traces of the absolute Life itself" (Greisch 2002, p. 27). Jean Greisch identifies three typical pillars upon which the edifice of the philosophy of religion rises. The first is the question of onto-theology, the second is secularisation, and the third concerns the problem of spiritual experience and its relation to philosophy. The prior and perhaps most elaborate, as it is also the oldest of these great scaffoldings, rests on the question of how God comes to philosophy: "Nothing better illustrates the relevance and highly controversial status of philosophical theology in contemporary philosophical debate than Heidegger's questioning of the 'onto-theo-logical'

constitution of Western metaphysics, from Plato and Aristotle to Nietzsche. From the beginning, philosophers have been interested in the divine" (Greisch 2002, p. 37). However, problems related to onto-theology, such as the nature of God and, subsequently, the specifics of His relationship with the world, remain primarily issues relevant to philosophical theology and only marginally concern the philosophy of religion as such. Ontotheology therefore does not exhaust the field of the study usually covered by philosophy religion and remains insufficient. Paradoxically, it seems that the philosophy of religion is much more interested in strengthening the second of the aforementioned pillars, which is the study of secularisation: "The question, which is also highly controversial, of the socio-political, cultural and religious effects of secularisation seems to me to fall squarely within the scope of the philosophy of religion. It is a matter of questioning the genesis, nature and foreseeable evolution of the complex process referred to by this name, by asking what it owes or does not owe to the Christian religion" (Greisch 2002, p. 39). Secularisation offers the already discussed onto-theology an unexpected and surprisingly effective support: it challenges its claims and thus puts them to the ultimate test. Hence, by challenging the established paths of religious thought, it compels it to pave new ones. Exploring one such recently rediscovered pathway, we thus finally reach the last, but not necessarily the youngest, pillar of philosophy of religion, which is religious philosophy, or rather the philosophical study of religious experience. According to Greisch this area of the contemporary reflection on religion revolves precisely around the often-blurred boundary between philosophical theology, philosophy of religion, and religious philosophy. Hence, in order to advance the analysis presented in further parts of this article, of the three most prominent areas of current developments in the philosophy of religion identified here, we shall focus on the latter.

Therefore, it is in the context of the rich background sketched by Jean Greisch that contemporary French religious thought calls us to abandon the 'philosophy of religion' in favour of a 'philosophy of religious experience'. This call first resounded as early as 1957 in Henri Duméry's book *Critique et religion. Problèmes de méthode en philosophie de la religion*. Duméry, the great translator and interpreter of the writings of Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, inscribes the transition discussed here from philosophy of religion to philosophy of religious experience in the old dispute over the boundary between philosophy and theology. Duméry's focus, however, is not so much on drawing the old divisions between disciplines or the boundaries between the two types of philosophy of religion in a new way, but on distinguishing two types of philosophers of religion. The first, whom he calls philosophers of religion, because of the requirements imposed by the scientific method, shy away from any particular religious belief. They look at religion in a purely philosophical way from a safe distance of sceptical attitude. Duméry includes among them some of the classical scholars such as: Hegel, Schelling, and Fichte. Philosophers of religious experience, on the other hand, decide, as it were, from within the very faith they have chosen, to bring to light and carefully examine the reasons for their own decision. Among the philosophers of religious experience, Duméry mentions Augustine, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Blondel, Edith Stein, and Simone Weil. There seems to be little difference between these two ways of thinking about religion. The transition from one to the other, on the other hand, is seemingly as simple as crossing that little stream in Cisalpine Italy called the Rubicon. Once we decide to take this step, however, we quickly see that the change turns out to be revolutionary, as Emmanuel Falque convinces us in his book *Passer le Rubicon. Philosophie et théologie: Essai sur les frontières*. The very change of optics proposed by Duméry constitutes a breakthrough. Instead of two disciplines (philosophy and theology), instead of two philosophies (philosophy of religion and religious philosophy), he shows two ways of thinking. Thus, it turns out that crossing this Rubicon does not at all mean abandoning philosophy in favour of theology. Nor should it be equated with an abandonment of the rigours of the scientific method in favour of considerations of a poetic nature or some form of religious essayism. Just as once for Caesar, for us today crossing the Rubicon means taking up a challenge. This challenge, on which the common future of philosophy and

theology depends, is not to draw a line, but precisely to cross a line. The crossing of the boundary between philosophy and theology, which will be discussed here, means rather transcending the naïve geometrical understanding to take up the old task of thinking in a new way. This challenge is the challenge of thinking (*la tâche de la pensée*), as Jean-Yves Lacoste in turn convinces us in a book with the telling title *From theology to theological thinking*. This is a challenge to philosophy and theology in equal measure, but it is far from sticking merely to the requirements of the respective disciplines (to remain a philosopher and not a theologian, a phenomenologist and not a metaphysician, etc.). The challenge must be existential, or rather experiential: it is about a specific experience and a specific way of life emerging from it, which must be described in phenomenology and at the same time elaborated in theology. Contemporary religious thought thus faces the challenge of moving from a ‘philosophy of religion’ to a ‘philosophy of religious experience’.

Many thinkers are aware of this fact, and the crossing of this Rubicon is already underway. Already Lévinas (1929, 1932, 1970), in his works on intuition in Husserl’s phenomenology, which was the first broad study of its kind in French, as well as in his early works on Heidegger, emphasises the primacy of experience in phenomenological research. Claude Romano (2010), in his syntheses of phenomenology, for which he has been awarded the *Grand Prix de Philosophie* of the French Academy in 2020, states that the basic premise of this method is the conviction of the existence of a pre-predicative order governing all experience. By returning to the very origins of the phenomenological method and thus concentrating on experience, it avoids the methodologically important and simultaneously significantly difficult problem of delimiting the boundary between philosophy and theology. At the same time, it avoids the temptation to excessively “theologise” philosophy, a temptation to which religious thinkers sometimes succumb. The phenomenological method, as it were, forces the researcher to take a step back to focus on discovering that primordial order of experience which is prior to language and even prior to the conscious Self. It is at the same time an order that precedes the division between philosophy and theology. Contemporary French phenomenologists also emphasise that this division was only born in the late Middle Ages because of the reception of Aristotle’s metaphysics in the West and the birth of the institution of the university. However, they do not do so to attempt a return to the better old days, but only to show that this division, like the drawing of a hard line between the disciplines described here, is not necessary. Instead of nostalgia, therefore, the new French thought offers us an original methodological postulate: let us apply the phenomenological method to the classical problems of philosophy of religion, and even to the classical problems of theology. Let us start with the classical problems, because there is no philosophy completely detached from the philosophical tradition, just as there is no theology detached from the theological tradition. Philosophy, however, has only micro-traditions, which we more commonly used to call philosophical currents or schools. Theology, on the other hand, finds its primary source in Tradition. An ill-conceived rooting in Tradition, however, is detrimental to both philosophy and theology because it renders them incapable of thinking. After all, philosophy can be reduced to neo-phenomenology just as much as theology can be reduced to neo-Thomism. The task of thinking, however, as Lacoste emphasises, is not reduced to re-reading and rewriting the classics (Lacoste 2014, p. 79). Even a good understanding of theological or philosophical traditions is still no guarantee of thinking. Unlike ‘non-thinking theologies’ and ‘non-thinking philosophies’, which get lost in the thicket of constant repetition, the task of thinking is not working with a text, but with experience. The challenge of thinking means that, to follow the tradition, we must take a step backwards to reach the experience from which the tradition was born, and therefore from which the text that constitutes the record of that tradition was also born; we are persuaded of this by Falque in his book *Le livre de l’expérience: D’Anselme de Cantorbéry à Bernard de Clairvaux* on the phenomenological study of the tradition of religious thought. Hence arises the demand, which is the culmination of Lacoste’s book *From Theology to Theological Thinking*: “getting rid of labels and letting people think where they think” (Lacoste 2014, p. 87). The specific liberation of the disciplines such as philosophy and theology (after



all, this is only the beginning of this liberation) flows from a return to experience as the source of thinking. It therefore flows from the reception of the phenomenological method in the specific context of a border area where different ways of thinking meet.

#### 4. Phenomenological Explorations of Religious Experience

In the following section of this article, we will take a closer look at phenomenological explorations of religious experience conducted by Philippe Capelle-Dumont and Emmanuel Falque. These two prominent contemporary thinkers provide representative examples of the above-mentioned thinking within the border area between philosophy and theology. Neither is afraid to boldly take the second step in the phenomenological study of religion referred to at the beginning of this article. Thus, they shall help us to better understand what exactly prompted the French school to shift away from philosophy of religion towards philosophy of religious experience. However, before delving into a detailed answer, it is worth making a few introductory remarks that will introduce us to a better understanding of the reasons for this: yet another turn in French phenomenology. First of all, the clear primacy of the analysis of experience confirms that both Capelle-Dumont and Falque consistently use the phenomenological method, despite the prevalence of religious themes throughout their work. This is also indicated by the fact that they both refer to the pre-predicative order of experience, to which both philosophical and theological discourse remain secondary. Thus, it is precisely here that we reach the very origins of religious thinking. At the same time, we can clearly see the enormous significance of this new direction of analysis of religious experience for religious thought in general. One may argue that there seems to be a slight blurring of the boundaries between philosophy and theology, but this is not due to a lack of clarity in the analyses, but on the contrary: it is the result of a sharper focus on what is more primary, more original, more meaningful and at the same time more significant. Contemporary French religious thought offers us not only a reception of the religious tradition of Christianity, but a genuine evaluation of it through a critical analysis of its very source, which, after all, is precisely the religious experience specific to it. The distinctive turn towards experience proposed here represents both a challenge and a great opportunity for religious thought. Thus, the new methodological approach to religion that values its fundamental experience rather than a restrictive adherence to philosophical or theological traditions constitutes both its critique and its liberation.

##### 4.1. Philippe Capelle-Dumont and the Three Irreducibles Transcending Experience

Philippe Capelle member of the French Academy and both the founder and the first president of the Catholic French Academy, in his book *Finitude et mystère*, explains that the roots of that seemingly new approach lie deeply in the origins of the phenomenological method itself: “Historical phenomenology is essentially the testimony of a constant effort to think, reduction by reduction, of irreducibility, that is, of finitude. To think truly phenomenologically, on the other hand, means for him: to think of irreducibility, of excess, as a possibility that lies at the foundation of phenomenology as such. Phenomenology, therefore, is concerned with both the reducible and the irreducible” (Capelle-Dumont 2013, p. 107). The irreducible, on the other hand, this excess (l’excès), opens it up to the religious and makes it at the same time have the potential to become a philosophy of religion. Among the thinkers following this path we find, among others, Emmanuel Lévinas, Jean-Louis Chretienne, Michel Henry, Jean Greisch, and Jean-Luc Marion.

What we have here, therefore, is the formation of a new paradigm for the phenomenology of religion. As we can see, it is gradually but increasingly becoming the very philosophy of religious experience mentioned in the title. With this modification, the phenomenological method itself is also changing. Thus, the question arises as to the extent and nature of these changes. Philippe Capelle-Dumont asks a similar question in his essay “Que devient la phénoménologie française?” published in “Cités” (Capelle-Dumont 2014). In response, he notes that, in this process of “becoming”, it manifests three main characteristics: a radicalisation of phenomenology (*la radicalisation de la phénoménologie*), a theological

retreat (*le détournement théologique*), and a metaphysical vein (*la veine métaphysique*). He counts Jean-Yves Lacoste, together with Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Housset, among the latter thinkers with ‘theological overtones’ (*à résonnance théologique*). It seems that Capelle-Dumont would also include himself in this group. However, he does not necessarily identify himself with what he calls the ‘metaphysical vein’. On the contrary, he wants to remain a phenomenologist and, as a phenomenologist, pose the question of the world of religious life. He devoted the second volume of his aforementioned 2013 trilogy *Finitude et mystère* entirely to the historical and contemporary relationship between philosophy (especially phenomenology) and theology. There he concludes that “this discussion has taken the form of two distinct, even hostile strategies: a. the strategy of reconciliation between faith and reason, which is clearly evident in Hegel and Blondel although in each of them they derive from very different conceptual and thematic foundations; b. the strategy of a complete separation of the two speculative exercises, as in Husserl and Heidegger” (Capelle-Dumont 2013, p. 111). Capelle-Dumont points out, however, that, notwithstanding Janicaud’s critique, “Something happened in the French reception of historical phenomenology that did not so much constitute a turning point but revealed the impossibility of understanding phenomenology without reference to the idea of a ‘turning point’” (Capelle-Dumont 2013, p. 115). And phenomenology itself, in France, “never ceased to be shaped in a unified and yet multiple reference to three precise operations: reduction, intentionality and constitution” (Capelle-Dumont 2013, p. 127). Capelle-Dumont rightly considers the former to be the most important. In the context of reduction, he puts forward his main thesis: reduction reduces the phenomenon to unity: to essence, *ad essentiam*. In this process, however, the irreducible is also revealed. The irreducible, on the other hand, is different from that which undergoes reduction. This difference consists primarily in the fact that the irreducible does not reduce to such a unity. This is why Capelle-Dumont calls for the development of phenomenology to be understood more broadly, that is, not only through the prism of what is reducible, but also through that excess which remains irreducible. He explains at the same time his interpretation of phenomenology: “From now on, then, we should think in a more radically phenomenological way. To think truly phenomenological, on the other hand, means: to think of irreducibility, of excess, as a possibility that lies at the foundation of phenomenology as such” (Capelle-Dumont 2013, p. 130). Then, a question arises: is such thinking theological thinking? After all, it is theology that claims the right to explain the irreducible, that which is excess, that which “by looking we do not see”, “by hearing, we do not hear”. In response to these questions, Capelle-Dumont invokes three irreducibles: “1. the irreducibility of consciousness itself; 2. the irreducibility of the excess of the world [or, in other words, the irreducibility of the world of what is in excess]; 3. the irreducibility of God, who speaks, at the same time never speaking—he speaks in his own proper way only, as the excess of all excess (*l’excès de tout excès*)” (Capelle-Dumont 2013, p. 139). Capelle-Dumont is convinced that, by recognising this irreducible excess, which is revealed in all phenomenological research, he indicates, as it were, a third strategy for conducting the discussion between phenomenology and theology. At the same time, it dismisses accusations of a simple dialectic of overcoming (*l’aplomb*) or interweaving (*l’entrelacs*), of which Dominique Janicaud (2009) accused thinkers he identified with the theological turn. From his reflections on the relationship between theology and phenomenology, it is clear that he is not really trying to transcend or, still less, to overcome anything, but only to point out the excess that emerges from any phenomenological investigation. At the same time, he postulates that the attempt to study this excess is not yet to transcend the limits of phenomenology. Phenomenology deals with both the reducible and the irreducible. Capelle-Dumont, on the other hand, attempts to navigate the boundary between what is given in the phenomenon and what is given in this excess: that is, the boundary between the reducible and the irreducible, rather than the boundary of the phenomenological method itself.

#### 4.2. Emmanuel Falque: *Triduum Philosophique* as an Example of Philosophy of Religious Experience

The observations on the application of the phenomenological method to the description of religious experience made by Capelle-Dumont, although of paramount importance for the analyses carried out here, nevertheless remain heavily theoretical. The time has now come for us, too, in this study, to finally abandon the philosophy of religion, to cross the proverbial Rubicon and turn towards the philosophy of religious experience. If one adopts the systematisation of religious thought proposed by Duméry, as quoted at the beginning of this article, the aforementioned Emmanuel Falque appears to be one of the most significant contemporary philosophers of religious experience. In his monumental three-volume work, *Triduum philosophique*, he attempts a phenomenological study of the experience of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection<sup>1</sup>. Drawing abundantly on biblical sources, the writings of the church fathers, as well as other outstanding writers of Christian antiquity, a centuries-old tradition of great mystics and thinkers of both a philosophical and a theological background, Falque is the first to undertake the project of Christological phenomenology on such a grand scale. A secondary, but not unimportant, aim of Falque's *Triduum philosophique* is an attempt at describing human experience in general in the light of the phenomenological analysis of the crucial three days in the life of Christ Himself—one of the most important religious figures of all time.

The philosophical analysis moves through those three days, revealing the *existentials* of each of them. The *existentials* of the first day are suffering and death, of the second are birth and rebirth, and of the third are eros and the body. In the preface, Falque explains that the way to God is through man. In his view, this follows directly from the meaning of the words: God created man. However, he states that Christian thought over the centuries has tended to indulge in various types of angelism, thereby abandoning an accurate interpretation of human life. Falque calls angelism the abandonment of the doctrine of the incarnation in favour of the doctrine of divinisation. This tendency is expressed, among other things, in interpreting Christ's death "in the light of the Resurrection", which means overlooking its tragic dimension and involuntarily shallowing its meaning. The source of these tendencies, interestingly enough, is not at all the confusion of the concepts of soul and body or the predominance of the spiritual aspect in the interpretation of man. The source is the confusion of the concept of boundary with the concept of limitation. As he writes in the introduction: "by confusing 'boundary' and 'limitation', we most often take our created being for what it is not: that is, for a sinful tendency towards unlimitedness ('you shall be as gods' [Gen 3:5]) rather than for a respect for the boundary by which we are constituted ('this is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' [Gen 2:23])" (Falque 2015, p. 9). The rejection of boundaries, wrongly understood as limitations, in favour of the search for some sort of utopian unlimited humanity is the source of the errors creeping into the Christian interpretation of life. The first boundary that man should inhabit, and love, is the body. Corporeality introduces many limitations: birth and death, suffering, and relationship to place. A boundary, however, is necessary, it is what defines us and what allows us to live. To be human is to be within certain boundaries.

It is significant that this way of thinking is certainly no stranger to philosophy. Already, the Greeks recognised the existence of boundaries in the world and in man. Therefore, infinity conceived as limitlessness both terrified them and was absurd to them. Paradoxically, Greek concept of infinity always remained limited. Hintikka (1966), in his classical essay on the subject pointed out that Aristotle, in *De interpretatione* as well as in many other of his works, defined infinity as uncountability, understanding the concept in a practical way—infinity is something that cannot practically be counted. Purely theoretical uncountability as unlimited infinity was an absurdity to him. Similarly, long before Aristotle, the Pythagoreans already regarded unlimitedness as something bad (the source of disorder), whereas they conceived of the limiting principle as good (the pinnacle of harmony). This is reflected in Plato's unwritten teachings, from which we learn of two opposing principles: the One and the Dyad (Gk., *ahóristos dyás*).



It appears, thus, that in our culture, the fear of the infinite is as primordial as the fear of the finite and goes to the very roots of thinking, both theological and philosophical. The fear of finitude is, according to Falque, primarily the fear of mortality. However, there is a difference between the fear of the limit and the fear of limitation. Falque points out that man emerges, as it were, from death, because each day of life brings us at the same time closer to death, each step towards life is at the same time a step towards death. In this sense, paradoxically, death simultaneously creates us (*la mort nous fait*) and annihilates us (*la mort nous de-fait*). Life is thus mixed with non-life, with death. Man, therefore, inhabits this boundary, balancing on it. Hence the question of why it is worth living is closely linked to the question of why it is worth dying. Learning to live is at the same time learning to die. The question about the meaning of life is at the same time a question about the meaning of death, but also the fear of the meaninglessness of life is the fear of the meaninglessness of death.

Therefore, it is not without reason that Falque, in his 'Philosophical Triduum', builds Christological phenomenology precisely around the death and resurrection of the Son of God. The struggle with the ultimate limit of experience and, at the same time, the ultimate limit of existence, which is death, represents a real return to the source of the utterly relevant, thus the most universal philosophical and theological problems, hence a return to the source of thinking itself. Thinking, after all, before it becomes philosophical or theological—thus prior to it being structured and subjected to one academic discipline or another—is precisely experiencing and existing. This is why the philosophy of religious experience focuses on the subjective, experiential aspect of religious phenomena rather than on the dogmatic content of this or that religious doctrine. Falque, among other representatives of this approach, draws on the assumption that subjective religious experience is the gateway to understanding experience as such and, hence, the surest path to understanding not only religious existence but religion as such. For this reason, just as phenomenology excludes from reflection the problem of the truthfulness of the world, Christological phenomenology brackets and excludes from reflection the questions of the facticity of the historical figure of Christ and of the claim that he is the Son of God, and therefore the assertion of his divine and human nature. In this way, instead of stopping at the threshold of religion and looking at it from a safe distance of sceptical detachment, philosophy ventures into the world of religious experience and uses the best available tools for its exploration, namely those provided by phenomenology. In doing so, she not only unlocks the potential for a better understanding of the multi-level depth of the teachings of Christianity, one of the world's major religions, not without reason, as it may turn out, inspiring great minds for generations. At the same time, it brings together the exploration of the divine and the human, the sacred and the profane, building a bridge over the divide that has hitherto separated them. In doing so, it challenges both the traditions of Christian philosophy and theology on the one hand and the nowadays widespread secularisation of religious thought on the other. This challenge, however, is not aimed at undermining the truth of Christianity; for this truth, as we have mentioned, has been unreservedly accepted as a necessary precondition for any analysis within the framework of Christological phenomenology and then bracketed as self-evident. On the contrary, it is intended to deepen the understanding of the issues central to the life of Christ himself and, subsequently, to Christianity as a religion altogether. After all, for a Christian as a follower of Jesus, their religious life-world is a reflection of the life-world of Christ himself. Therefore, the approach suggested by Falque indeed calls us to traverse the boundary, to cross the proverbial Rubicon, and to truly bring the researcher into the world of religious experience. There is no room for distance here, no place for scepticism of any sort, no chance for the researcher to emerge from the waters of that Rubicon unchanged. Perhaps now it is only becoming clear as to why all the previous philosophers of religious experience were also people of profound faith. It turns out that the very attitude of the approach matters here as much as the attitude of the one attempting to employ it.

Eventually, it seems that, despite some doubts, it is nevertheless worthwhile to not shy away from the approach offered by Christological phenomenology. First of all, this manner of conducting the phenomenological study of religion opens a new level of analysis. It thereby reaches into areas inaccessible to both prior philosophy of religion and theology. Moreover, the potential of this approach goes even further, extending well beyond the boundaries of Christianity. Suppose we regard this application of phenomenology to religion, which we have called here after Falque a Christological phenomenology, as a kind of thought experiment, and there are many indications that this is exactly what our attitude should be. In that case, we can expect the same thought experiment to be conducted successfully with different inputs since the output here was Christological, merely because of the fact that the examination of the life of Christ served as an input. Consequently, the philosophy of religious experience conducted based on the application of the phenomenological method presented by Falque can also apply to other religious traditions and, at the same time, render them great services. Hence, it is safe to say that it can serve as a model for a new approach to reflecting on religion. Thinking back to the ‘second step’ hypothesis posed at the beginning of this article, it can be concluded that, from a methodological point of view, taking this step is always legitimate, whether it means venturing into the world of Christian experience or into those of experiences specific to any other religion. Consequently, the new method of practising the phenomenology of religion presented here—although, of course, in this case, we shall no longer call it Christological—is merely on the verge of unveiling all its still unexplored potential.

### 5. Conversion to Experience: The Great Hope for Religious Thought

Embedded, as it were, in the analyses proposed by Falque, an example of which we have outlined above, are all the new trends in French religious thought. A phenomenological analysis of the experience of Christ’s passion confidently and effectively guides an eager observer through the often-convoluted paths of onto-theology, secularisation, and of the problem of spiritual experience and its relation to philosophy. At the same time, it transcends the limitations set by philosophy and theology defined merely as academic disciplines, thus opening a new path. This path is no longer the path of practising this or that academic discipline, but rather simply the path of thinking itself, which is not afraid to take up a challenge and is by no means timid in crossing some boundaries. Therefore, it is now clear that religious thought, to survive and develop further, needs a specifically understood conversion: its future lies, namely, in converting to experience. The specific ‘conversion to experience’ discussed here means that it is not only oneself (hence, a researcher or a scholar) that matures through immersion in the tradition, but rather it is the tradition that develops and at the same time matures in my experience. It is not so much me that sinks into the text (hence, often the main carrier of religious experience) and lives its life, but rather it is me that brings the text to life and allows it to live my life. Not so much *Lego, ergo cogito*, but *Cogito, ergo lego*, as Falque brilliantly points out in his book with a telling title: *Le livre de l’expérience*. Instead of trying to root myself in tradition or enter the world of tradition, tradition roots itself in my experience and thus becomes my life. The source of the world of religious life is therefore not a religious text, even if it is a sacred text. Nor is it a religious tradition, even if it is a time-honoured tradition. Nor is it some religious concept, the so-called *theologuomenon*. The source of religious life is religious experience. This statement becomes more powerful in the context of the phenomenological method. To move from a philosophy of religion to a philosophy of religious experience is to move from a philosophy focused on religious phenomena to a philosophy focused on religious experience. On the grounds of the phenomenological method, this—strictly speaking—means a transition from a phenomenology of religious essences to a phenomenology of religious life. This paper aims at demonstrating that the transition in question, like crossing the waters of the Rubicon, is not merely a possibility, but rather a necessity.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Falque devoted a separate volume of the trilogy to each of the three days, respectively: (Falque 1999, 2004, 2011). All three volumes have been subsequently expanded and reissued in 2015 in a single book: (Falque 2015).

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