

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY AND MODERN SCIENCE

SCIENCE AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

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Orthodox Christianity and Modern Science

*Theological, Philosophical, Scientific and Historical Aspects
of the Dialogue*

Edited by

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Knowledge of God and Phenomenological Foundations of Religious Experience

Modern Interpretations

The question of the knowledge of God in modern Orthodox theology is usually raised on the basis of the traditional meaning of Church Fathers, on the basis of hermeneutic and philosophical experience of medieval thought. However, the reconstruction of tradition does not always lead to theological conclusions and can be built into the academic dialogue. Even in the Middle Ages, the question of the knowledge of God included the theory of knowledge, the platonic tradition of contemplation or the genre of philosophical Aristotelian commentary. In modern philosophical theology, however, the idea of the subject, the human being as a creature, becomes the result of the sum of philosophical methods and scientific knowledge. The knowledge of God is considered like the experience of thinking and the phenomenon of consciousness which nature is understood, through philosophical forms of reflexion.

In this paper, special attention will be paid to the phenomenological direction which, after the ‘theological turn’ of the French school becomes significant for the continental tradition, not only as description, but in terms of theological understanding of the internal experience of thinking. In particular, the ideas of E. Husserl, which further discourse is based on will be considered, as well as the hypotheses of J.-L. Marion and J.-P. Manoussakis—the view of postmetaphysical philosophy on religious experience, in which both science as a form of thought and faith as a form of being become unified in the special dialectics of God knowledge.

Experience as a Category of Faith and of the Knowledge

The question of knowledge of God in the context of natural theology leads to contemporary discussions present in the dialogue of scientific knowledge and religious experience (including that of Revelation). What then is the sense of such a dialogue between science and religion from the philosophical point of view, in particular in the perspective of phenomenology?

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In the history of varieties of the mutual influence of scientific knowledge and religious interpretation of experience, it is anthropology that provides a sufficiently large scope of interaction of theology with modern philosophical and scientific questions. Natural theology can be understood solely as part of metaphysics, that is, it includes all the fundamental Thomist provisions that are necessary for preserving tradition and coordination between the everyday life of faith and the most general conditions of experience as such. However, from the standpoint of the current state of knowledge, such a traditional function does not exclude the possibility of using Thomistic thought for scientific knowledge, and therefore for understanding of social progress, as it happened in the seventeenth century, when the most fundamental principles of rationalism and mathematical thinking were formed thanks to the tenets of Christianity.

In this regard, in parallel with the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition of natural theology, the tradition deriving from Augustine became influential and, thanks to Anselm, Bonaventure, and Duns Scott, represented a fundamentally different proof of the existence of God and knowledge of him. The difference between these two traditions is that the latter included the question of free will, which was a topic considered in the first book of Augustine's *De libero arbitrio*, and which received a rather detailed reflection in later philosophical theology. Not only the idea of salvation but, in general, the proof of the world order and its hierarchy¹ proceeds from experience of direct contemplation given to humanity as an element of its free action. One can state that it is at least starting from Augustine that the question of freedom is implied in a philosophical understanding of experience. It is experience as the basis of understanding that remains the starting point for the proof of any existence, so that an epistemological approach to proof of the existence of God turns out to be a reason for analysing both the empirical and transcendental levels of consciousness and self-awareness in the twentieth century. Before the twentieth century, the concept of experience was developed in two key traditions — British empiricism and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. From a phenomenological point of view, experience is given in reflection and implies its treatment as passivity (or a gift). Experience demanded reflection, not just descriptions or articulations, but of explanation of the transcendental dimension of human reason and its boundaries. This approach to experience undoubtedly unifies several questions in one issue: how is religious experience possible? Why does the question of the existence of God remain an integral part of the problem of defining the boundaries of human knowledge? In addition, this approach accentuates the role of phenomenology in establishing some commonality in modern approaches to the dialogue between natural theology and science. Experience in this approach includes any conceptualisation that can be based either in schemes grounded in the rational causality or unmediated existential or aesthetic experience.

In modernity it is possible to allocate the sum of representations about the person and to symbolize the given dialogue in terms of a 'philosophy of the person', or scientific representation of the person. Then philosophical anthropology has been shaped due

1 Louis Mackey, *Faith, Order, Understanding. Natural Theology in the Augustinian Tradition* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2011), pp. 16-18.

to the theory of evolution, including its critique and the synthesis of the general ideas of Max Scheler and phenomenology, existentialism, psychoanalysis — that is those approaches to understanding of humanity, which, summarizing results of the biological sciences, nevertheless, create their own holistic ideas. Thinking about knowledge of God on the borders with definitions of humanity, is one of the ways to actualize the experience of Revelation.

Theology as a reflection upon Christian experience and doctrine, as well as the tradition of knowledge of the highest truths, is not always considered as something important for the scientific outlook of the early twenty-first century; however it is precisely because of its paradoxical status that it is relevant in some topics of intellectual culture and political debate. Can knowledge of God in the light of modern philosophical methods be defined through the knowledge of nature? Or does knowledge of God remain no more than religious experience, which includes specifically phenomena of individual mystical experience, those phenomena which may not be transmitted intersubjectively? From a phenomenological point of view it is possible to do both, but in order to describe in more detail the state of modern 'natural theology' we need to develop a certain criticism in order to clarify its methodological basis.

The Question of Method in the Contemporary Theology

What is the sense of religious science in the modern academic community, where the very notion of science is itself under constant revision? In the philosophy of science, the problem of delimiting the criteria of scientific rationality has been studied for several decades, at least since the beginning of post-positivism, and even earlier, and remains one of the central issues in the debate early in the twenty-first century. The famous principle of falsifiability by Karl Popper² expresses the expectations that the scientific community had of scientific theory, and thus the possibility of a reasoned criticism was spelled out for any research at the level of a hypothesis. In the latest period of science there is an equal value of subject and object, as well as the socio-cultural context and the formation of scientific knowledge, but the principle of falsifiability remains a criterion not only for natural sciences, but also for the humanities if they lay claim to being scientific. Can such an idea of science be applied to theology? And if so, what result for religious reflection and for religion in general does this possibility have? Or does theology as a dogma not permit criticism, and is it then in this case inherently unscientific?

Modern theology has inherited the same fragmentation as philosophy, and reasons should be sought for this fragmentation by appealing to the experience of twentieth century philosophy as a practical guide for analysing theology in modern post-secular society. The scientific criteria of the natural sciences are often built upon empirical verification. However, does the term 'empirical' mean only experimentation in a laboratory? The scientific status of theology may undoubtedly be established as the

2 Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1963), p. 36.

scientific status of philosophy, but only if we include the history of theology in the definition of theology and *recognise historical experience as a part of empirical verification*.

This conclusion entails switching to the revision of the philosophical methodology of the twentieth century. The second half of the twentieth century was a time of eclectic hermeneutics, an era which continues until today. During this period, different ways of analysis and work with the text were tested for the interpretation of the Bible: for example, experiments with French structuralism, reader-response theory, feminism, hermeneutics of liberation, and postcolonial hermeneutics belong to the latest biblical hermeneutics, as well as other post-modern approaches. It should be emphasised that both in history and especially in the present state of the humanities, the boundary between the biblical and philosophical hermeneutics is very thin. A Christian exegesis, like theological science as a whole, is formed by the fusion of two traditions, the Hellenistic and Judaic. Biblical hermeneutics goes back to the Old Testament period, in schools whose origins were in the time of Babylonian captivity, and to the allegorical method of the Alexandrian school. The latter is undoubtedly the most important for philosophical thought in the history and methodology of hermeneutics, in which the Judeo-Alexandrian allegorical interpretation reached its completion. The allegorical method was not only a technique and interpretation of the anthropomorphisms and commandments which were obscure to the Gentiles, but it was a constitutive element for later theological schools and thus demonstrated that one must discuss its unique worldview and philosophical synthesis. The allegorical method was prevalent in the Catholic theology in the Middle Ages up to the restrictions imposed on it by Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas turned to the theology of Augustine, in which the epistemology of Neoplatonism became the method of knowing God and understanding the Word. From a Christian perspective, the sense of the dogma of the Incarnation of the Word of God (John 1.1) was, among the others, established on the basis of faith by Augustine, illuminating the very mystery of language and revelation. In the philosophical reflection of this dogma it is necessary to distinguish between the ancient idea of the Logos in its cosmic potentiality and embodiment of language in a concrete historical-semantic content. Since the basic principle of interpretation of Scripture is the principle of divine inspiration, the moral and didactic sense should only be supplemented by the historical. Language should be used only to serve theological purposes. Until the Reformation, biblical hermeneutics blended the ambiguity of philology and the mystery of Revelation, which limited human understanding. Before the Reformation, Western Christian theology expressed itself in Latin, and afterwards it established two religious languages: the Roman Catholic and the Evangelical Protestant. Immediately, this philological difference led to different approaches to biblical hermeneutics, which served as the ground for philosophical methodologies.

In the hermeneutics of the twentieth century, both philosophy and theology, in particular in the form of biblical studies, were more closely intertwined. The Protestant philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher, and subsequently Hans-Georg Gadamer,³

3 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Warheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), pp. 478–94.

established the potential of hermeneutics as a basic method in philosophy and in the humanities in general. Gerhard Ebeling suggested the idea of hermeneutical theology placing hermeneutics to be an intermediary tool between historical-critical and dogmatic theology, reconciling the traditional exegesis with post-reformational reflection. Language as a means of expression for human spirituality has a special function for theology. Ebeling assumes the main features of a theological language, such as absolution, responsibility, and foundation for explanation and understanding. A theory of a theological language is necessary as a separate religious reflection that can solve the problem of the modern understanding of 'Babylonian' culture.⁴ One also finds the continuation of a philosophical hermeneutics in the works of a protestant philosopher, Rudolph Bultmann, and ideas of Wilhelm Dilthey,⁵ according to whom hermeneutics not only provides ways of understanding texts, but is the basis of historical science as such, which in turn becomes the method of understanding history. Gadamer and Bultmann were influenced by the phenomenology of Heidegger, so that the problem of understanding becomes not so much an epistemological problem as an existential challenge, creating a special kind of sense of 'event'. This happens partly because of the fact that this phenomenological dimension, which transformed hermeneutics into a philosophical anthropology, was suggested by Paul Ricoeur as the idea of hermeneutics of the subject in the second half of the twentieth century that took into account all the traditions. But the hermeneutics of the subject does not extend to theology; instead it embraces psychoanalysis and social theories.⁶

The absence of the unity in the overall discourse was caused not only by different confessional goals, but also by the postmodern crisis of philosophy that affected the position of the humanities in the continental tradition. Despite the historical differences in the formation of continental and analytic approaches, in the postmodern period they converge. However, there is an exception to this rule, namely the phenomenology of Jean-Luc Marion, in which he returns to the ideas of Descartes and Husserl and performs the 'theological turn'.⁷

Phenomenology in Knowledge of God

In the unpublished manuscript A V 21, which dates from the years 1924–1927, Edmund Husserl provides a consistent description of a phenomenological understanding of theology, as well as of those functions which it performs in a system of philosophical knowledge. The ancient distinction between philosophy as a science of nature and theology as knowledge of the supernatural is still present in the concept of scientific thinking. It is necessary to distinguish phenomenologically, in the first place, "theology

4 Gerhard Ebeling, *Einführung in die theologische Sprache* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1971), p. 43.

5 Rudolf Bultmann, "The Problem of Hermeneutics," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 47 (1950), pp. 47–69.

6 Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. by Don Ihde, trans. by Willis Domingo et al. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

7 Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

in the now conventional sense, as the science of religion, for our Christian religious sources of knowledge and, secondly, theology as a science about God and the divine (*von göttlichen Dingen*), also, the science of the natural light.”⁸ When it comes to the “natural light of reason” (and science is understood in terms of rationality in the modern European sense), the rationality of judgments becomes the primary criterion for the validation of scientific knowledge. Rationalism amounts to the belief that there are a-priori principles of knowledge, or knowledge finds its justification in experience. Husserl points out that rationalism often involves empiricism; apriorism and verification complement each other in a search for justification. This method (rationalism) reveals its inconsistency when it comes to the super-rational or nonrational (*arationale*) justification that pertains to a religious understanding. There is a need to clarify the theological grounds, as well as the basic facts, when there are non-rational (*ausserational*) reasons.

Religious faith is based on the tradition of fundamental religious principles. Tradition is the active resource of beliefs but it does not claim its absoluteness; for Husserl, the religious tradition is not related to the credibility of the knowledge derived from a ‘simple’ vision (*Sehen*) or recognition (*Einsehen*). Faith is a judgment but not a judgment of the doxological or axiological order. Husserl argues about what is the structure of judgments in scientific knowledge, pointing to the difficulties which are found phenomenologically — the difference between the proposition and its ground, between cause and motive, between judgment and premise. This issue, known more from the *Logical Investigations*, is considered in the manuscript with respect to religious judgement, or, as the author writes, “the faith of reason” (*Verstandesglaube*). Judgments reflect all areas of human knowledge: social and cultural values and norms are also judgments. The same can be said about religious values.

However, phenomenologically, it is important to clarify the foundation of faith as an act of consciousness present in the foundation of any judgment, in the mode of the evident self-giveness, “pure vision.” In faith understood as the self-giveness of judgments, I take belief in its “true self”, “I have decided on faith, because I see the believed as such (*Geglaubte selbst*)”. Pure vision corresponds to faith as the foundation of judgment. Thus, distinguishing between the proposition (as one of the opinions on those or other values) and the judgment (as it is based on faith in its self-giveness), we are talking about the origin of value itself. Husserl sees some kind of a ‘need’ for a judgment in the soul (*Gemüt*), for “causes” or a “will”, which enable us to appreciate judgments (*wertlegen*). In this sense, the motivating force (*motivierende Kraft*), is different from a causality that would create a kind of obligation (*Sollen*) in judgments, as set out precisely in sensuality.

Klaus Held, commenting on the post-Husserl phenomenology, emphasised that from the position of a neutral phenomenological observer it is important not to expose God as such, but to understand God and to understand the meaning, which

8 Tatiana Litvin, “Temporality and philosophical theology in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl”, *International Journal of Decision Ethics*, 9.1 (2013), pp. 59-76 (p. 68).

in his unity creates a certain subject meaning.⁹ Therefore, the process of constitution of any logical category and the process of constitution of any phenomenon for phenomenology turns out to be more primary [primäre] than the field of application of constitution to the object. The object turns out to be a kind of a consequence of reflection, a consequence of this process, which is essentially intentional and can be studied by itself.

The philosophical response of E. Husserl would be that we are not talking about a sort of mysticism in the origins of philosophical thinking. Mysticism may be present as an element so that one can say that phenomenology is a form of Neoplatonism. On the contrary, it is a more accurate clarification of all the nuances in the cognition of God and all the nuances in the objectification of any idea, its formation.

Jean-Luc Marion and John Panteleimon Manoussakis, reproducing the Augustinian tradition, set as their task the phenomenological description of each structure involved in the knowledge of God. The knowledge of God is, first of all, the process that includes self-knowledge: the formation of the human 'Ego' is impossible without an idea of God (implying that the formation of an adequate image of the human 'Ego' is impossible only by means of the biological sciences or scientific discourse). Correspondingly, within the framework of the phenomenological description of the cognition of God, there appears the idea of the cognizing subject, that is the subject becomes cognizant, the 'Ego' itself appears.

J.-L. Marion builds the unity of the aesthetics of icons with the phenomenology of perception, and the theology of the gift of grace with the metaphysics of free will.¹⁰ Each part of the system is connected to another, and Husserl is similar to Malevich, Descartes to Levinas. Since the task of my article is not to include an exhaustive analysis of the philosophy of Marion, I limit my criticism to one essential point — the systematics of Marion does not solve the problem of the postmodern crisis, but rather emphasizes it. The transcendental subject becomes an aesthetic subject and the questioning of God takes the form of artistic experience.

Conclusion

Which of the above methods is more influential in the twenty-first century? It is an approach that includes phenomenology, namely that of Ricoeur and Marion. The benefits of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the subject are that the latter relied on an anthropological analysis. In other words, Ricoeur does not take the 'living' person out of consideration; he provides a balanced approach to psychoanalysis and pays a special attention to language and its many layers. Accordingly, Ricoeur's study of patristics, such as the anthropology of Augustine, remains a relevant example of the application of methods of the twentieth century to the analysis of classical texts.

⁹ Klaus Held, *Phänomenologische Begründung eines nachmethaphysischen Gottesverständnisses* (Freiburg: Herder, 2009), p. 11.

¹⁰ Marion, *God Without Being*.

However, a disadvantage of the theory of Ricoeur is that the hermeneutical question of the ‘conflict of interpretations’ switches into a plan of social criticism, and Ricoeur resolves this ‘conflict’ by appealing to Marxism.¹¹ This move is interesting in terms of social philosophy, but within the philosophy of religion it transforms hermeneutics into a tool of political rhetoric, leading to an ever increasing secularisation, in my opinion. As for Marion, his transcendental project undoubtedly has a much larger impact than that of Ricoeur, including French phenomenology and philosophical anthropology. This approach is recognized in philosophy and theology as the most systematic. But the Cartesian nature of this project, in particular, leads to systematic disadvantages in the use of Marion’s philosophy. As was noted above, Marion’s philosophy does not reconcile systematic eclecticism and emphasises the inner contradiction even more. It is important to add that the optics of Marion’s work can lead to dogmatism, which returns the disadvantages of medieval metaphysics in the twentieth century. A Greek Orthodox theologian, J.-P. Manoussakis, also develops a modern philosophical anthropology and the philosophy of time.¹² But the question of the theology of creation for the newest philosophical theology remains open.

In the dialogue of science and religion, phenomenology can be a mediator and a guarantor of their “convergence”. The phenomenological difference between the act of reflection and the subject of reflection is the basis for each type of knowledge, including knowledge of God. Religion and science are similar to the two wills (Maximus the Confessor) in human nature, which dialectically construct each act of experience. E. Husserl, as a mathematician, revises the foundations of mathematics and raises the question of the ultimate sense of axiom, how the meaning of axiomatics as such is constitutive, returning mathematics to its Pythagorean forms in some way. That is why mystical knowledge suddenly acquires the accuracy that may never actually be implied in it. Summing up, as an intermediate variant of knowledge between scholastics and mathematics, phenomenology is still a way to create a more accurate system of distinction for science knowledge, and remains a way to describe the inner spiritual experience.



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- 11 Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*.
12 John Panteleimon Manoussakis, *Self and Time: Post-Subjectivity: Philosophical, Theological and Historical Considerations on Subjectivity after the Enlightenment* (Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars 2014).