



International Political Anthropology



IPA Journal ISSN 2283-9887 - Journal Website: <https://www.politicalanthropology.org>

The Multiple Realities of Paul's Mystical Experience: A Phenomenological Perspective in the Anthropology of Religion

Marius Ion Bența

To cite this article: Marius Ion Bența (2023) The Multiple Realities of Paul's Mystical Experience: A Phenomenological Perspective in the Anthropology of Religion, International Political Anthropology journal, Vol. (16) 2, 127-143, DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.10447721](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10447721)

To link to this article: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10447721>



© 2023 International Political Anthropology



Published online 2018



[Submit your article to this journal](#) ➡

International Political Anthropology journal is hosted and published by
The International Political Anthropology Association,
Department of Political and Social Sciences (DiSPeS), Università Degli Studi Di Trieste,
Piazzale Europa 1 - 34127, Trieste, Italy

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
<https://www.politicalanthropology.org/ipa-journal/terms>

The Multiple Realities of Paul's Mystical Experience: A Phenomenological Perspective in the Anthropology of Religion

Marius Ion Bența

0000-0002-8930-1090

Abstract

This article¹ is a study on Paul's mystical experiences using an interpretive framework that relies on multiple grounds: Alfred Schutz's phenomenology of the "multiple realities" applied to the problem of religion, political anthropology and general scholarship on Paul. The aim of this study is also multiple: I seek to draw an interpretive insight into those mystical experiences that have been traditionally attributed to Paul by using a hermeneutic lens provided by Schutzian phenomenology, to clarify this hermeneutic method as such and explore its interpretive potential for the phenomenology of religion in general, and to interpret the results of this analysis from the reflexive-historical perspective of political anthropology.

Keywords: mystical experience; Alfred Schutz; Paul; multiple realities; hermeneutics; phenomenology; degree of reality

Introduction: A Question of Political Anthropology

In theological reading, the large project of redemption of humanity – God's "economy of salvation" – involved the choosing of twelve apostles as the "core team" that would spread the Gospel to Israel and to the whole world. Paul was a contemporary of Jesus, yet there is no sign in the New Testament that they ever met while Jesus was in the world (Guignebert 1938:8), and is likely that Paul has never had the chance of listening to Jesus's teachings or of witnessing any of his works. For three years, Jesus delivered his message to his followers and to the world, and the *point* of all this was for the εὐαγγέλιον (the "good news") to spread later not only to Israel, but to the whole world – as it actually did. In all this time, Paul was away in Tarsus and perhaps sometimes in the Holy Land, perfecting his study in the Torah and the prophets with his teacher Gamaliel and being zealous in the tradition of his ancestors. In today's world, obsessed with efficiency and rationalism, any leader experienced in managing promotion campaigns would find it difficult to understand why Jesus had to call for such an important mission as the conversion of the Gentiles and, indeed, the building of the Church, a man who was not in his initial "core team" even though *he could have been*. Why didn't Jesus pick one of his close disciples to appoint as apostle of the Gentiles?

Paul's role in the foundation of the Church was enormous indeed. Raymond Brown writes that, "[n]ext to Jesus Paul has been the most influential figure in the history of Christianity" (Brown 2016: Ch. 6 para. 1). Should one assume that all this incredible story of the birth of Christianity and all the history that emerged with Paul's work was actually based on a *delusional event* that he had one sunny day as he was getting close to Damascus at the end of a long and exhausting journey from Jerusalem?

Other things are unexpected in Paul's life: he didn't "convert" following a sermon he may have heard from Peter or another apostle. He didn't seem to receive a proper catechisation like other converts, and he didn't seem to have a typical spiritual growth in a Christian community like most people (Gal 1:21–23). Rather, he was an outsider to the community of the apostles. And yet, he successfully planted the seeds of the new ἐκκλησία everywhere he went with perseverance, efficiency and courage.

In a political anthropological reading, Paul is a liminal² figure *par excellence* and his mission has to do with a liminal stage in the history of the Church – the moment of passage from the activity of Jesus (which, too, was strongly liminal and earth-shattering for the life of the Jewish people and their religious institutions at the time) – to the emergence of the Christian communities in the hostile environment of the empire as well as their "settlement" into orderly communities that were trying to lead an *eirenic*³ life.

However, for the young communities that were followers of Jesus, leading a peaceful life actually entailed an ambivalent mode of existence, because they still saw themselves as *separated* from the world, as having renounced the glory and the wealth of *this world* and as ones who were looking forward for the eternal Kingdom of God, which was *not of this-world*. They had to live in the world *as if* not living in this world and as if they lived in the *eschaton* (the end-time that was "already here, though not yet") while still leading an orderly life of hard work and peaceful communion here on earth. It was probably this ideal of life, along with its ambivalent dimension, that may have been slowly abandoned once the Roman Empire became Christian and the Kingdom of God seemed to begin taking shape in the earthly empire. It was this abandonment – which would later turn into duplicity, corruption and spiritual decadence – that prompted many Christians who were searching for a genuine religious way of life of constant searching for God to withdraw from the world and to establish the Egyptian tradition of the Desert Fathers based on ascetic and mystical practices.

This fundamental ambivalence (or series of ambivalences) of early Christianity was rooted in the inherently liminal character of Christ's teaching and the inherent ambivalence that remained in the Church in her passage from a transitory-subversive "movement" (or what *appeared* to be a movement that sought to subvert the traditional institutions of Ancient Judaism) to a new institution that was settled, orderly and designed for *pastorality* and peaceful governance. While the foundations of the Church have been laid down by Jesus himself, the actual task of defining the realms, the hierarchies and the canon principles of the Church as an eirenic, pastoral institution have been left to the apostles – including Paul (or, one can say, *to a large extent* to Paul).

The genealogical significance of this fundamental ambivalence for the later developments in the history of Christianity and, eventually, for the genesis of modernity, are essential from the perspective of reflexive-historical sociology and political anthropology (see Szokolczai 2000). Significant, in this respect, is the work of Michel Foucault (2007) on the emergence of governmentality and the way the practices of *pastorality* of the Church have been assimilated into the apparatus of the modern state. Highlighting such genealogical landmarks as the emergence of *pastorality* or the ground motives of the early monastic phenomenon (which would become so important in the Middle Ages as centres of education and philosophical reflection) can help us understand

the way in which the great revolutions of modernity have inherited the drive of this fundamental ambivalence of *being-in-the-world* and *rejecting-the-world*.

The driving force of this fundamental ambivalence was *universalism*, and Paul's place in ushering the passage from *exceptionalism* (i.e. the religion of *one people*, which makes this people exceptional among all the others) to *universalism* (i.e. *one religion* that has an exceptionally high soteriologic power for the whole humankind⁴) has been acknowledged (Badiou 2003). This passage to universalism came into effect at full force with the work of Paul among the Gentiles.

This aspect brings to light the multiple meanings of the liminal dimension of Paul as pivotal moment in history and shows the importance of placing a lens upon him for the understanding of modernity. Of all Paul's life and work, there is one crucial liminal moment, one "foundational event", that we need to focus on, and that was his mystical encounter with Christ on the Damascus road. I am going to look at this event using the lens of phenomenological sociology, particularly Alfred Schutz's theory of "multiple realities", and I am going to treat this encounter of Paul as an experience that took place in the mystical realm, which can be seen as a particular "finite province of meaning" in Schutz's words. The mystical realm obviously bears a strongly liminal character,⁵ and this fact should add to Paul's liminal luggage, already large.

Phenomenological Sociology as a Hermeneutic Method

The phenomenological approach on religion consists of a number of authors and even schools that are more or less connected among themselves.⁶ They share some of the basic tenets of the Husserlian phenomenology and have known very diverse outcomes. In the present work, I will make use mainly of the work of Alfred Schutz – usually known as a theoretical sociologist belonging to the Weberian interpretive tradition and the founder of phenomenological sociology – and in particular of his theory of the "multiple realities" or "theory of the multiple realities" (Schutz 1945; Schutz & Luckman 1973) – as an interpretation method applied to a particular event: the mystical encounter that Paul had on the road to Damascus with Jesus from Nazareth, an experience described in Luke's *Acts of the Apostles* and mentioned in several of Paul's epistles, notably in *Galatians*.

A phenomenological hermeneutics based on Alfred Schutz's theory of the multiple realities can be a valuable tool in any context when multiple realities – such as everyday life, the world of religion, and mystical realities – are involved and a range of complex intrications of statuses and features tend to blur interpretation, such as fiction, reality, imagination, altered states of consciousness, play, disbelief, doubt, uncertainty etc.

The main tenet of Alfred Schutz's theory of the multiple realities (see Schutz 1945; Bența 2018) is that reality – or the social world – is not a single unity of objective facts and events, but a composite structure of "sub-universes" or "finite provinces of meaning" or realities or, simply, "provinces". The world of our dreams is one such reality, along with the make-believe worlds of children at play, the various fictional universes of the literary creations, the worlds of drama, the worlds of various religions, myths and traditional beliefs, and one could add today's world of the Internet, of the social media, of films, of computer games or virtual reality. In Schutz's view, each province is consistent in itself, in the sense that it is not self-contradictory, but may not be consistent with other provinces.

Significant in Schutz's theory is that he includes in the list of provinces the world of everyday life and the world of science. The latter in particular, when treated as a (mere) finite province of meaning, loses its special status as world of undoubtful truths or unshakeable statements and becomes a reality that is consistent in itself, but not necessarily enjoying any precedence over other provinces. The only province that *does* enjoy a special status is everyday life (which Schutz also calls "world of working"), whose status is called that of the "paramount reality", because everyday life is that world to which we always return when "awaking" from, or exiting, any other province and which works as a sort of "home-base". This "functional" feature of everyday life, namely the fact that one cannot "wake up" from everyday life into a "more real" reality (at least, not in Schutz's view⁷) is related to the idea that the character of "paramount reality" translates in fact into the highest degree of reality, as Schutz called it, or "accent of reality".

Applied to the Scriptures, an interpretive tool based on Schutz's multiple reality theory⁸ can unveil a range of complex intrications of statuses and features that tend to blur interpretation, such as fiction, reality, imagination, altered states of consciousness, play, disbelief, doubt, uncertainty etc. One of the main "bracketings" that takes place when one takes religion as an object of investigation on phenomenological grounds is the bracketing of what positive science has to say when it comes to religion. The researcher refrains from judging whether the truths of the religious man are verifiable using the scientific rationality and focus rather on the meanings that the faithful bestows upon religious experience, events, persons or scriptures. The researcher investigates the *experience* of the religious person (the actual mystic, the faithful who reads a sacred book, the priest who delivers a homily etc.) and the meanings that they attribute to their experience in the "natural attitude".

Methodologically, the first important step in an FPM⁹ analysis is to elucidate the exact inventory provinces at play within, and connected to, a particular narrative or a particular discourse as well as their reference systems that dictates the degree of reality of such and such event. The second step is to describe a province according to the Schutzian template. The third step is to identify connections and relations among the provinces at play.

Concerning the second step, the general mode of a finite province of meaning includes the following attributes or features:

- The *degree of reality* (or *accent of reality*) of a certain event when seen from the reference point of a province: when I read a piece of fiction, I experience a lower degree of reality compared to reading a news story; according to Schutz, everyday life always enjoys the highest degree of reality.
- The *paramount reality*: one particular province enjoys the status of paramount reality; to Schutz, this is always the everyday life; is this true in the case of mystical realities, too?
- The *tension of consciousness* (or *attention à la vie*): this refers to how "awake" we are in a particular province; everyday life has the highest tension of consciousness, according to Schutz, which he calls "wide-awakeness", while theoretical contemplation or day-dreaming may have a lower tension of consciousness.

- The *shock*: our moving from one province to another involves a certain transition, which forces us to adapt to the new province in terms of attention, tension of consciousness, time perspective, space perspective, rules of interaction etc.
- The special form of *epoché*: in every FPM, we bracket either our doubt or our belief in the existence of the things we see and hear. In everyday life, we bracket our doubt in the existence of the things we see, and Schutz calls this the *epoché* of the natural attitude.
- The *cognitive style* of a particular province: we don't learn things in the same way in all the provinces, and we don't make judgements in the same way in all the provinces; one is the cognitive style of children's play, another is the cognitive style of religion and another is the cognitive style of science.
- The structure of *action* and *potestativity*: in every province, there is a range of things we *can* do and things we *cannot* do; in a computer game, I can drive a "car" even if in everyday life I don't even have a driving licence; potestativity refers to all the potential actions at my disposal, but is also responsible for determining relations of power and domination among subjects.
- The *time perspective*: every province has its own temporal structure; there is a time of the novel, a time of the film, a time of the mystical experience etc.
- The *space perspective*: every province comes with its own perspectivity of space, its own subjective topology and its own geography; there are "places" that do not exist in everyday life but do exist in particular provinces.
- The special form of *sociality*: every province comes with its social structure and rules of sociality; the way we interact with strangers on the street is not the way we interact with them on social media; the hierarchies are different in every province: Mike can be subordinate to Jane at their office, while Jane can be subordinate to Mike in a game they play during a team building session or in an NGO they both work with.

Not all the elements enumerated above are relevant for every province in our discussion, so we will apply this template only selectively, as far as necessity requires it. Before looking at the FPMs that have to do with Paul's mystical experience on the road to Damascus, let us sketch the rationale behind choosing this particular object of analysis and the importance thereof to the wider picture of the genesis of modernity.

Analysis: Paul's Mystical Encounter on the Road to Damascus

Paul tells of himself that he was a great persecutor of Christians (Gal 1:13) and that, after having received a revelation on the road to Damascus when he saw and heard Jesus from Nazareth speaking to him, his life and his whole mindset changed into the opposite direction and he turned into a follower of Jesus. Speaking to the Galatians about his *calling*, he gave scanty details about what he did after the Damascus event: "when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles

before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.” (Gal 1:15–17) He made it clear that he did not receive his teaching about Christ from other people (i.e. from other apostles), and N.T. Wright suggested that he did so because “[h]e has apparently been accused of getting his *gospel* second-hand from the Jerusalem apostles” (Wright Ch. 3 para. 3). Wright also made a strong point about the meaning of the place “Arabia”. While this is geographically vague – being somewhere south of the Holy Land – Wright suggests that Paul saw a connection between his own story and the story of the prophet Elijah – who was also full of zeal, had fought pagans and at a certain point in his life ran away into the desert on the Sinai Mountain, i.e., Paul’s “Arabia”. The prophets of the Old Testament generally had a connection with the desert as well as with ascetic practices, and Paul understood his mission as prophetic indeed. It was on Mount Sinai that Elijah received the instruction, “[g]o back and announce the new king”, Wright reminds us (*idem* Ch. 3 para. 10) referring to the anointing of Hazael as King of Aram (1 Kings 15), and suggesting that Paul was aware of this typological relation between his own life and that of Elijah, as Paul, too, was to go back and announce the new King Jesus Christ to the world.

Paul’s “conversion”¹⁰ on the Damascus road is one of the most widely discussed events in the history of Christianity; numerous perspectives have been used to explain it. Many theologians and scholars from other fields who have approached Paul’s experiences described in his epistles and in Luke’s *Acts*, have tried to rationalise, psychologise or medicalise them, suggesting that Paul was hallucinating following a stroke; or that he had an attack of epilepsy (Landsborough 1987); or that maybe he was experiencing some deep psychological crisis, anxiousness or some inner conflict (e.g. a dissatisfaction with the precepts of the Torah that had been growing in him for years), which resulted in some condition from the range of psychotic disorders (Murray 2012) and may have led him (or his subconsciousness) to create a false Damascus story so that he could convert and become a follower of Jesus of Nazareth¹¹; or that the story was merely a “romantic” fabrication of Luke or the redactors of the *Acts* and the epistles etc. Such views stem out of the modern reader’s desire to force all realities into complying with the standards and the precepts of modern rationalism and scientific precepts. From a phenomenological perspective, this is a mode of projecting the truths that are valid within a particular finite province of meaning (the world of science) unto another province of meaning (the world of religion), which is an illicit operation.

Let us try and identify the various finite provinces of meaning that emerge from and around Paul’s Damascus event as it may have taken place at the time, as it may have been narrated later by Paul himself and other people, as it was written down in various texts and as it was read, received, and understood by others for many centuries later. These *realities* are numerous, and let us discuss the most important of them in the following lines.

Paul’s Everyday Life

For the Jew who observed the Law in Ancient Judaism, the multitude of precepts and requirements must have implied a constant effort that greatly affected their everyday life. One can say that the fact of the daily life being regulated so much by the religious law makes, in this case, the province of everyday life completely subordinated to the province

of religion. This is an important aspect for the Schutzian FPM theory, because it problematises the *paramount* character of everyday life.

Being an active member of the Jewish Diaspora and having been trained as a pharisee under Gamaliel, Paul held religion and the precepts of the Torah at high esteem in his life, and one can realise that for the ancient Israelites religion could hardly be conceived as a distinct finite province of meaning, as is today for many people. Religious life was deeply embedded in the fabric of society and regulated all aspects of everyday life.

The Heavenly Realm (FPM₀)

Paul's actual experience on the Damascus road can be considered an *irruption* of the heavenly realm into Paul's everyday life¹². The experience, which was of a mystical nature, was not the result of a process of ascetic practices meant to *invoke* the presence of Jesus. This irruption of grace, which was unasked for and totally unexpected, indeed one of those moments when grace invaded the course of human reality and changes dramatically the course of its history (Szokolczai 2007).

The "Actual Event" (FPM₁)

Paul says he had an experience on his way to Damascus that was to change his life; the event also marked the whole history of Christianity; he was suddenly overwhelmed by a strong bright light and had encounter with a person who identified himself as Jesus of Nazareth. We need to distinguish this actual experience of Paul from the way this experience has been described and narrated in *Acts* and in Paul's epistles. Paul's encounter with Jesus (or rather the *visitation* that Paul received from Jesus) was an event at a particular moment in his life that was reflected only as a partial and, probably, distorted manner in future reports, because reporting can never capture the actual event in full. Let us give the finite province of meaning that encompasses this foundational, actual event, the code-name *FPM₁*.

Paul's Story-Telling (FPM₂)

The textual sources of the Damascus event, which we have in Luke as well as in several epistles of Paul provides readers with a story that shapes the foundational event as it is reflected in this text-based history. But how did Luke manage to know the details about Paul's Damascus event? Today, we see Christianity as a Scripture-based religion, quite close from this point of view to Judaism, which is eminently "the religion of the Book". However, the main way of spreading the word in the Apostolic times was the word of mouth, and modern researchers have shown a tendency to ignoring orality and the implications of this mode of encounter and to focus excessively on texts and documents, which is somehow understandable, given that documents are the only material proof of their activity and that very few "transcriptions" of the apostles' oral proclamations, homilies and preaching have been passed down to us; the vast majority of the apostles' powerful discourses have been lost, at least in their verbatim form.

As it is widely accepted that Paul and Luke did meet and did collaborate together, one can assume that there was an occasion – or several occasions – when Paul has witnessed to other people what happened to him on the road to Damascus and that Luke

may have heard the story directly or indirectly. Let us then insert in-between the actual event FPM_1 , and the written history a hypothetical (yet very plausible) oral narrative, and let us call the corresponding province FPM_2 .

Paul's Experience as Depicted in the Writings of the New Testament (FPM₃)

Turning now to the New Testament texts that describe or mention the Damascus road event, we are presented with a number of passages of what is generally known as Paul's "conversion". Paul mentions the event rather briskly on three occasions¹³ (1 Cor 9:1; 1 Cor 15:3–8; Gal 1:11–16). In the *Acts*, the event is mentioned three times: the first time as a third-person narrative (Acts 9:3–9), the second time as a first-person account in a speech that Paul gave in Jerusalem on the occasion of his arrest (Acts 22:6–16) and the third time in the form of a speech in front of King Agrippa (Acts 26:12–18).¹⁴

In the case of this province, we have two possible modes of reading of these texts (two ends of a single continuum, in fact): the faithful's immersion into the story and the scientist's critical examination.

Looking at this event through the lens of the Schutzian template, the most striking fact is the one related to the *degree of reality*. From the way it is described and from the way Paul reacts to it, it is obvious that this mystical encounter imposed itself upon him as something deeply real and that it bore the highest accent of reality – comparable with, if not higher than, that of everyday life: "[n]ow as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven *flashed around him*." (Acts 9:3) The text stresses that light flashed around him as a real phenomenon, not as an appearance (e.g., "seemed to flash around him"). Paul *fell* (πεσὼν, from πίπτω, to fall, to prostrate, Liddel and Scott 1996) to the ground (9:4), and this is an obvious *bodily* experience of sudden disempowerment, awe and abandonment in front of an extremely powerful and superior entity. Then Paul "heard a voice saying to him" (9:4): this is about the sensorial experience of hearing (ἤκουσεν, from ἀκούω, to hear, to perceive by the ear, *ibidem*) and seeing, which are the definite condition for *witnessing*.

It is important to note that all along the event, Paul remained conscious, able to hear and to see (i.e. his tension of consciousness was the highest) to retain his responsibility and his freedom of action (he chose to answer Christ's calling) and to get up and continue his journey to Damascus. The blindness that remained with him for three days, as well as his fasting (9:9) show the persistence and overlapping of the mystical province FPM_1 over his everyday life.

Concerning the problem of the "paramount reality", at this point it is clear that the mystical reality enjoys a *higher status* compared to everyday life. Paul did not *wake* from this experience as if from a dream, getting back calmly to his old life and old mode of thinking; the experience remained with him as real and everything in his life was shaken and had to be reordered, reassessed and reorganised in terms of hierarchies, and that must have been a slow process of both healing and spiritual renewal. For Paul, the mystical encounter with Christ was *the* real event and the form of *epoché* that he performed there was complete bracketing of any doubt concerning the reality of the event, the encounter and the person he met.

This is also obvious from the way Paul would refer to the event years later, as an apostle of Christ: “Am I not an apostle? Have I not *seen* Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?” (1 Cor 9:1) and “[Christ] *appeared* to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he *appeared* to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he *appeared* to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he *appeared* also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” (1 Cor 15:5–9)

From these verses, we understand that Paul didn't see his encounter with Christ as a *mere vision*: he saw it as an event comparable in magnitude and importance to the *encounters* that the apostles Peter, James and the five hundred others had with the risen Christ, and he sees this as a legitimation of his status as apostle (following the calling he received) along with those who knew Jesus personally, yet the last one in the row and in status. Indeed, the words “Have I not *seen* Jesus our Lord” indicate that he took his encounter as proof that *Christ was alive*, that he had resurrected from the dead, because he *saw* him. To Paul, this was real, absolute *seeing* (έώρακα, from όράω, to see, experience, perceive, *ibidem*), not “having a vision”. Moreover, in the second verse mentioned above, Paul repeats four times the same verb that was translated “he appeared” (ώφθη, from the same όράω, to see, experience, perceive, *ibidem*) to emphasise that his experience was that of meeting the risen Christ who called him and entrusted him with an apostolic mission.

The “cognitive style” of this province is one of direct experience. Paul does not learn that Jesus Christ is alive, that Jesus Christ is God or that Jesus Christ is an overwhelming power; Paul experienced this and felt it in the form of a deep *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans*, to use Rudolf Otto's (1923) famous expressions or perhaps rather in the form of a *praesentia tremenda* and *praesentia fascinans*.

In terms of *potestativity*, he experienced a strong meltdown, a strong feeling of inferiority in front of the majesty of Christ. The encounter was thus an encounter of *power*, which was explicit in the words of Jesus, too, which emphasise that Paul was already finding himself in a situation of confrontation with him: “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (*Acts* 9:5 in NKJV).

Concerning the structure of sociality, we see that the mystical encounter completely reversed Paul's position in his social world: from a respectable position among the Jews, he became an outcast and an outsider, to the point that he would suffer extreme persecution from his fellow Jews: “Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning.” (2 Cor 11:24–25) At the same time, his new status as an apostle of Christ placed him among the other apostles (James, Peter and John) – whom Paul highly respects and recognises as “pillars” (στύλοι) and from whom he receives *recognition*.

The faithful's immersion into the story (FPM₄)

Roland Barthes (1972) called “zero-degree of reading” the situation when the reader not only accepts the content he or she is reading as true, not only that all doubt is being suspended (the “*epoché* of the natural attitude” – in Schutzian words), but the case when the reader is moved and compelled to action by the text. Such are the cases, for instance, of various manifestos, which invite others to action and to changing the world. This is the

“zero-degree of reading”, which the faithful wears when reading Paul’s story related to the Damascus road event. The faithful doesn’t bracket the veridicity of the story by a methodical doubt (*epoché*), as with Husserl, but puts between brackets doubt and the very possibility of doubt. This mode of reading then becomes loaded with *motivation* and *responsibility*, in that it gives the reader the assurance that Paul was indeed a true apostle of Jesus Christ and constitutes the engine that makes them move forward to reading Paul’s epistles and his exhortations not as mere “wisdom literature” – i.e. useful, morally instructive and theologically correct – but as texts emanating from the authority of the Church, which motivates them to act with the faith that one belongs to a community of “us”, which Paul also assumes in spite of having lived many centuries ago.

To quickly go to the Schutzian template now, let us note that, for the faithful, the degree of reality of the Damascus event is the one of Scriptures in general, that of a historically significant event that took place a long time in the past, yet was real and meaningful mostly as a lesson and an exemplum for today. The event by no means affects the “paramount” status of everyday life; the tension of consciousness is that of immersive literature and empathic contemplation; the special epoché implies mostly the bracketing of historical distance and cultural differences between one’s contemporary reality and the reality of the ancient world; the cognitive style is that of acquiring wisdom from the Scriptures, which goes beyond the simple acquisition of information, but stresses the importance of ethical values and principles that have a direct impact upon one’s everyday life; the time, space, and sociality perspectives become those of the story that is being narrated.

The Scientist’s “Critical Examination” (FPM_s)

With each author in the course of their research, the critical examination of Biblical texts involves various degrees of *doubt*, and this leads to parts of the texts or entire texts being discarded as inauthentic, redacted, exaggerated, illusory and so on. This mode of reading does not bracket doubt, on the contrary: it brackets truth and veridicity. The facts and events described by the texts are weighed against any existent external documents that might support them, against new discoveries and new theories (archeological, linguistic, literary, mythological etc.) related to the topic, against the scientific knowledge of the moment etc.

In this mode of reading,¹⁵ as the encounter experienced by Paul in *FPM_i*, cannot find any reasonable support in the scientific world, alternative explanations are being sought, and the experience may be treated as a case of hallucination, delusion, exaggeration or merely the product of someone’s vivid imagination. In Schutzian perspective, this is just a projection of the contents of the world of science onto the world of religion and has no relevance for phenomenological understanding of the meanings bestowed upon the event by Paul himself and by the faithful alike. If the faithful’s immersion into Paul’s story (i.e. the religious attitude) took place in the “zero-degree of reading”, then one can say that the scientist’s critical examination takes place in the “degree one of reading”, i.e. *maximum doubt*.

To look at *FPM_s* through the lens of the Schutzian template, one can mention that the degree of reality of the Damascus event has the lowest degree of reality in this province: it is being seen with the degree of reality of a typical fictional world. The special form of

epoché performed here is something close to the Cartesian “methodical doubt” or perhaps even stronger than that, in the sense that the conclusion of untruth precedes reasoning. The cognitive style is that of critical examination, which involves learning *about* the story, but not internalising its content or its teaching.

Relations Between Provinces

In the case of the provinces delineated above, we identify three types of relations: *genetic* relations, *feed-back* relations and *paradigmatic* relations. The first type refers to the way one reality *emerges* from another as *mode of experience*; the second type refers to the mode one reality is being *projected* onto another, i.e. in which way are the truths of one province seen when looked at from the vantage point of another province; the third type refers to relations of similarity or typology: two provinces find themselves in a paradigmatic relation if they belong to the same paradigm; this type does not involve direct, causal relations between events, but rather symbolic and “intertextual” parallels between events. The first two types of these relationships are being shown in *Fig. 1*, in which the main provinces described above are represented as ovals, genetic relations are represented as thin arrows, while feed-back relations are represented as thick arrows (paradigmatic relations are not represented).

Concerning *genetic relations* (modes of experience), we can see the following chain of connections:

- Paul’s actual experience (FPM_1) emerges following an *irruption* (or invasion) of heaven (FPM_0) into Paul’s everyday life.
- Later, when Paul starts telling others about what happened to him, the province of his oral storytelling is based on his own *recollection* of the actual event.
- *Recollection* and his own memory is the same source when Paul puts into writing the event, producing a part of what we called “Paul’s experience in New Testament texts” (FPM_3). The other part (i.e. Luke’s *Acts*) are the result of *witnessing* (we infer that there was a direct or an indirect witnessing of Paul’s storytelling by Luke).
- Years, decades, centuries or nearly two millenia later, the faithful’s immersion into the Damascus story (FPM_4) takes place by *reading without doubt* the texts that narrate it.
- Again, nearly two millenia later, the scientist’s critical examination of the event (FPM_5) takes place by *reading with doubt* (or, one may say, with the bracketing of faith) of the same texts.

Concerning *feed-back relations* – i.e. the mode a province is being projected onto another or the way one reality is being “seen” from another province – relevant for our analysis are the modes of projection of (FPM_5) and (FPM_4) upon all others:

- The scientist’s critical examination (FPM_5) tends to see the accounts of the Damascus event (FPM_3) as literary fiction, and hence the actual experience of Paul (FPM_1) as well as the way it may have been communicated orally (FPM_2) as simply *untruth*. The same attitude tends to see heavenly realities (FPM_0) as irrational and lacking scientific support. From the point of view

of (FPM_5), the faithful's immersion into the story is generally just the result of a naïve, unenlightened attitude.

- The faithful's immersion into the story (FPM_4) tends to see the writings of Luke and Paul (FPM_3) as genuine reports and truthful presentation of facts, values and ideas, and the actual experience of Paul (FPM_1) as true and real; the same holds for (FPM_2), yet it is likely that the faithful rarely infers the existence of this province. From the perspective of (FPM_4), heavenly realities (FPM_0) tend to be real, yet intangible and transcendent, while the scientist's critical examination (FPM_5) is simply atheism, faithlessness or blindness to the truth.

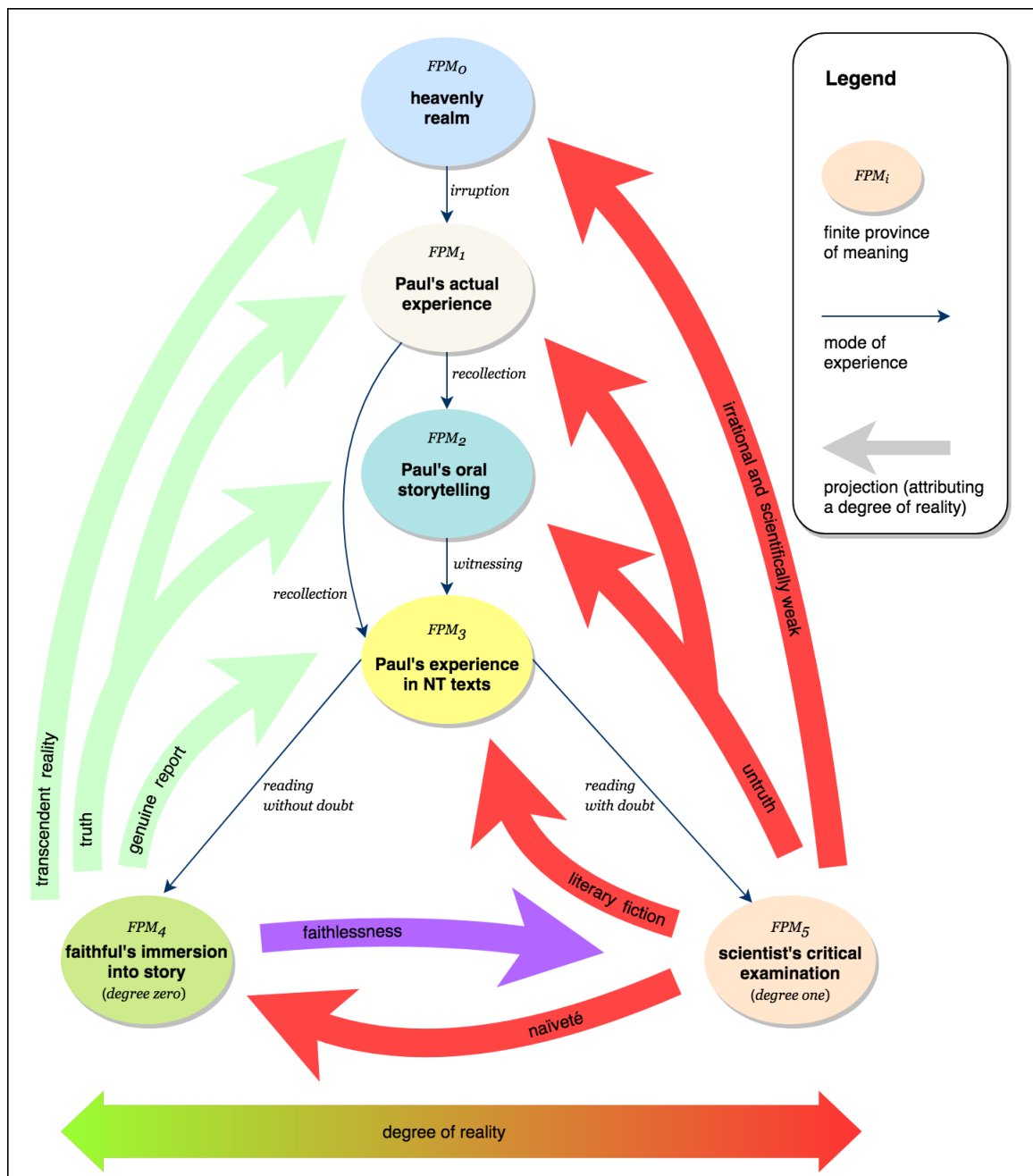


Fig. 1: Relations among realities (diagram created by the author using draw.io)

Concerning the third type, paradigmatic relations, the question is whether there are valid typological relations between Paul's Damascus road event and other Biblical events; generally, such typological connections take place in a third observer's mind who takes heed of the similarities. In the case of Paul, some theologians have noted that Paul was aware through allusions or direct hints that his encounter with the resurrected Christ followed the same pattern of the ancient prophets or that he saw his journey similar to that of Elijah on the Sinai mountain. This suggests that Paul was aware that his mission was prophetic and for this reason he assumed his mission like a prophet – with great courage and perseverance. To express this schematically, one may draw a paradigmatic connection between FPM_1 (as well as FPM_2 and FPM_3) and the province of prophetic experience (of Elijah, Isaiah etc.) FPM_6 . For the sake of the economy of the image, we didn't include the paradigmatic relation in the diagram.

The existence of this paradigm is important to our understanding of the rise of modernity and the place of Paul in the process, as we will see in the Conclusion.

Conclusion

A number of points emerge at closer inspection when looking at Paul's mystical experiences from the perspective of the phenomenology of religion: The problems of witnessing, the problem of power, the status of religion as a finite province of meaning and the problem of paradigmatic-typological relations between realities.

We understand that Paul's epistles have been driven by his great responsibility for the ones he spoke to, by the courage of telling the truth (*parrhesía*) and by the courage of *witnessing* for the truth, and by no means by playful *imagination* (Foucault 2011) or by the cunning tricks of a rhetor who strives to win the reader's hearts by all means. This is not the attitude that characterises Cervantes, the author of *Don Quijote*, or any modern fiction writer, who afford making use of their imagination freely in order to achieve the best literary and dramatic effects. For this reason, it is probably difficult for a modern reader, too much used to digesting all sorts of fictional stories and films ranging from the "realist" genres to fantasy or sci-fi, to bracket *this* huge cultural luggage of theirs and read an ancient text, such as the *Acts* or *Galatians*, with the eyes of an ancient reader.

We can see that Paul is not simply *communicating* some events that he saw unfolding and some words that he heard, as the author of a modern self-biography would do. Paul is *witnessing* them in front of his brothers and sisters in order to invite them to conversion, action, strength, patience and faith in times of harsh persecution.

Witnessing (as in a court) implies declaring things in a very serious and grave attitude, where no room for joking and entertainment is left. Even today in court witnessing is being done under an oath – that is, with an attitude and a setting where no lying or trickery are being admitted.

The centrality of witnessing as the main motive for speaking out is to be found in Paul's New Testament texts, which is exactly the same motive and the same attitude that the Old Testament prophets had, i.e. an attitude driven by *parrhesía* (Foucault 2011). In the Ancient world, *parrhesía* was "the courage of telling the truth" (as opposed to the false prophets of Ancient Israel who sought to please the political power of the

time, as opposed to the Greek rethors who sought to please the listeners' ears or as opposed to the trickery of the Cynics and the Sophists), a courage that risks even one's life. Paul was in chains and later executed for the word of God and for his testimony of Jesus Christ, a condition that he gladly accepted, as he accepted his death: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain" (Phil 1:21).

Another important point is that the mystical finite provinces of meaning are not just mystical and spiritual in character; they are realms of power and "potestativity", too, which makes them realms of *governance*. The encounter between Paul and Jesus on the Damascus road was an encounter of great power, which resulted literally into Paul's falling onto the ground – along with his companions. This was not an encounter with a fictional character, which one can pause or discard at any time (e.g. fighting an antagonist in a computer game, which the gamer can stop any time by just leaving the computer). The words that Jesus spoke had an extremely powerful impact on him, which was to last for his whole life and was to motivate him to change in all the aspects of his life and to resist all possible suffering and persecutions. This shows that Paul's calling resulted into his entering the service of Jesus like a knight who enters into a relationship of vassality and service to a king.

Concerning the provinces of religion and mystical experiences, one realises that the province of religion can hardly enjoy an "autonomous" status by respect to the other provinces, in particular to everyday life – contrary to Schutz's assumption. There is a "short-circuiting" at work here, and the province of religion has the tendency – via its moral sanctioning mechanisms – to control, supervise and adjust human behaviour in other provinces that might seem autonomous.

We also saw that Paul's Damascus road encounter, as a mystical reality, enjoyed the highest degree of reality and, moreover, it displaced everyday life from its status as "paramount reality". For the phenomenology of religion, this is an important consequence, because it shows that everyday life can be reduced at times to a lower status, and that there may be provinces where the experiencing subject feels more awake compared to daily life (again, contrary to Schutz's assumption). Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road was not a one-time event – as we tend to see it – but was the beginning of an experience that *stayed with him* for the rest of his life. The *foundational event* could not have been a singularity; it must have been the beginning of a mystical way of life that Paul had from that moment on as an apostle of Christ.

Concerning the place of Paul's mission in the divine economy, we can say that the meaning of his being the "apostle of the Gentiles" must be related to the *absolute certainty* that he had concerning his first experience with Christ, which he saw as a *real* face-to-face encounter and to what this means *for his posterity*. For the faithful, i.e. all those who haven't had the chance to meet Jesus during his mission on earth, the theological consequence thereof is that they could still meet Jesus *in reality and in person*, just as Paul did, without having any doubt about the "degree of reality" of their encounter with him.

Concerning the existence of paradigmatic relations between provinces – in our case, between Paul's experiences of the calling and the Old Testament prophets' experience of the calling is also significant, too, because this way Paul's experience and Paul's life-story becomes a source for novel typological/paradigmatic relations with his posterity. Just as, for Paul, encountering Jesus was a real event that changed his status into that of a real

apostle, in spite of the fact that Paul had never met Jesus during his earthly mission and never listened to his teachings (or if he did, he didn't take him seriously), then *so too*, for the faithful reader of the Scriptures encountering Jesus in prayer or mystical experience will imply a change that is being experienced with the highest degree of reality.

To return to the question formulated in the second section of this study, we note that Paul's posterity saw him to some extent as a model (a type) for the various revolutionary movements that gave rise to the modern world, such as the Protestant Revolution, the French Revolution, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Scientific Revolution etc. Paul was perceived as the artisan of a change in which an old Law (i.e. Ancient Judaism) became resignified symbolically and escalated from a particular (national) level to the universal (globally human) level. His the pattern was replicated in a similar fashion. The Protestant Revolution was a renewal of Christianity in the same logic of a symbolic "upgrade"; the French Revolution replaced its old regime not with a completely new one, but with a regime that had the old values resignified and reversed (Reason was the new goddess of the French Revolution). The Bolsheviks had great success in Russia, because, as Nikolai Berdyaev (1972) explained, they sought to implement not something completely new, but an idealised version of Christianity, which they couldn't see realised in the tsarist regime because of the high corruption in the Church and among the officials; and so on.

Notes

¹ The present work is based on the author's Dissertation for a BA in Theology submitted in June 2023 at the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj, Romania, under the supervision of Prof. Sorin Marțian. The author is very grateful to Prof. Marțian for his precious insights and guidance in conducting this research as well as to Paul O'Connor for his extensive comments on this paper.

² From the Latin word *limen*, which means "threshold" or "doorstep"; the notion is essential in political anthropology and may refer to liminal times, liminal spaces or liminal persons (see, for example: van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969; Szokolczai 2009).

³ I use the term, from the Greek *eirēnē* ("peace"), to refer to times of peace, ordinariness, stability, "normalcy", order, to familiar and safe spaces, to "typical" and ordinary persons etc., i.e. to any category that is *not liminal* and not transitory; the source of inspiration was a recent article by Emmanuel Falque, where he used "irenic" and "irenicism" with the meaning of "cheerful" and "cheerfulness" respectively (Falque 2022).

⁴ Universalism becomes the reflection of the unity of the *ekklesia* as the one body of Christ and the birth of the *new man* in Christ; as Paul develops this conception in Col.

⁵ I wish to thank Paul O'Connor for suggesting me to highlight the connection between finite provinces of meaning and liminal realms (thus, a connection between Schutzian phenomenology and political anthropology). While the problem is very important indeed, it would require a longer discussion, which I cannot begin here for reasons of space. Suffice it to mention that some provinces tend to be eminently liminal, e.g. those that Foucault (1984) called "heterotopias", while other provinces tend to be "eirenic", e.g. the world of daily life; however, liminality is a feature that can short-circuit the "multiple reality" structure of the life-world and there is no easy way of mapping these categories. Very interesting ideas on this matter can be found in Kate Bollard's article on social media in the current issue (97–113).

⁶ Among the scholars who have worked in the phenomenology of religion, one can mention Alfred Schutz, Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Otto, Michael D. Barber, Peter Berger, Martin Heidegger, Max Scheler, Emmanuel Falque and others.

⁷ The problem of mystical realities problematises this very assumption of Schutz, as we will see. Even some ancient philosophers, such as Plato or Zhuang Zi (or Chuang Zu), have given us views which suggest that

some people might experience other realms as *superior* to everyday life in terms of *accent of reality*. Plato's famous myth of the cave suggests that the things we see, hear and experience here in this world are mere shadows and partial projections of other things, which are in fact "more real", and which only some particular people can become aware of. The Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zi, too, in his story of the butterfly dream (see Tzu 1999), questions the character of paramount reality of everyday life and asks himself whether his waking from a dream was a real waking or rather a step into another dream: which one is the real reality, the one I experience right now or the dream I had moments ago?

⁸ Making use of Alfred Schutz's theory and model of the finite provinces of meaning as an interpretive tool for the study of Biblical texts hasn't been done before, to the best of my knowledge.

⁹ I use the terms "finite province of meaning", "province", "reality" or the acronym "FPM" interchangeably as synonymous expressions.

¹⁰ This term, which has been used very widely in the case of Paul, is misleading, because Paul did not "decide to convert" to a new religion, but was rather *visited* by Jesus and received a *calling* from him in a similar way to the prophets of the Old Testament.

¹¹ On the psychological meanders that Paul may have gone through, Alfred Loisy writes, "*Le travail intérieur qui aboutit à sa conversion n'est saisissable ni dans les Épîtres ni dans les Actes*" (*apud* Guignebert 1938: 8).

¹² When talking about the heavenly realm in the context of Paul's writings, it is important to also refer to his journey "to the third heaven" (2 Cor, 1–4), which we discuss in the last section of this chapter, as well as his references to the "rapture to the clouds" in 1 Thes 4, 15–17.

¹³ With one exception, all the Biblical passages quoted in the present work are quoted from the *New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* (NRSVCE) translation of the Bible.

¹⁴ It is not my purpose here to discuss the authenticity of the New Testament books nor to compare the differences between the various versions of the story – such problems have been widely discussed by scholars.

¹⁵ Another important distinction needs to be made: the scientist's critical examination of a text needs not be conflated with an atheist's polemic discourse against religion, because the latter clearly involves a sort of activism that has quasi-religious connotations, which places it in a religious province rather than a scientific one.

Bibliography

***, *Holy Bible: The New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition*,

www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Catholic-Edition-NRSVCE-Bible, accessed: 15th June, 2023.

*** (1982) *The Holy Bible: New King James Version*, Nashville (TN): Thomas Nelson.

Badiou, Alain (2003) *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press.

Barthes, Roland (1972) *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, Seuil, Paris.

Bența, Marius Ion (2018) *Experiencing Multiple Realities: Alfred Schutz's Sociology of the Finite Provinces of Meaning*, London (UK): Routledge.

Berdyayev, Nicolas (1972) *The Origin of Russian Communism*, Ann Arbor (MI): The University of Michigan Press.

Brown, Raymond E. (2016) *An Introduction to the New Testament*, New Haven (CT): Yale University Press.

Falque, Emmanuel (2022) *Outside Phenomenology?*, *Open Theology* 8(1): 315–30.

Foucault, Michel (1984) *Des espaces autres*, *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* 5: 46–49.

Foucault, Michel (1994) *The Birth of the Clinic. An Archeology of Medical Perception*, New York (NY): Vintage Books.

- Foucault, Michel (2011) *The Courage of the Truth (The Government of Self and Others II)*.
Lectures at the Collège de France 1983–1984, Basingstoke (UK): Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gennep, Arnold van (1960) *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press.
- Guignebert, Ch. (1938) *La conversion de Saint Paul*, *Revue Historique* 182, 1: 7–23.
- Landsborough, D. (1987) *St Paul and Temporal Lobe Epilepsy*, *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry* 50, 6: 659–664.
- Liddell, Henry George; Scott, Robert (1996) *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford (UK): Clarendon Press.
- Murray, Evan D.; Miles G. Cunningham; Price, Bruce H. (2012) *The Role of Psychotic Disorders in Religious History Considered*, *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 24, 4: 410–426.
- Otto, Rudolf (1923) *The Idea of the Holy*, New York (NY): Oxford University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul (1980) *Essays on Biblical Hermeneutics*, Philadelphia (PA): Fortress Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul (1981) *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences*, Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul (1989) *The Conflict of Interpretations*, London (UK): The Athlone Press.
- Schutz, Alfred (1964) “Don Quixote and the Problem of Reality”, in Arvid Brodersen (ed.), *Collected Papers II: Studies in Social Theory*, The Hague (NL): Martinus Nijhoff, 135–158.
- Schutz, Alfred (1945) *On Multiple Realities*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 5, 4: 533–576.
- Schutz, Alfred; Luckmann, Thomas (1973) *The Structures of the Life-World*, Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press.
- Soulen, Richard N.; Soulen, R. Kendall (2001) *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, Louisville (KY): Westminster John Knox Press.
- Szokolczai, Arpad (2009) *Liminality and Experience: Structuring Transitory Situations and Transformative Events*, *International Political Anthropology* 2, 1: 141–172
- Szokolczai, Arpad (2007) *Sociology, Religion and Grace: A Quest for the Renaissance*, London (UK): Routledge.
- Turner, Victor W. (1969) *The Ritual Process*, Chicago (IL): Aldine.
- Tzu, Chuang (1999) *The Essential Chuang Tzu*, ed. by Sam Hamill and J.P. Seaton, Boston (MA): Shambhala.
- Wright, N.T. (2018) *Paul: A Biography*, San Francisco (CA): HarperOne.
- Young, Frances M. (1997) *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.