Religious Call in Eastern Orthodox Spirituality: 
A Theo-Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract: Drawing a clear line between phenomenology and theology remains a challenging endeavor. This article has two parts: The first one argues that, from a methodological point of view, there is a need for a *theo-phenomenology*, a phenomenology which acknowledges religious faith as a given. The second part of the article tries to present the essence of religious call in Eastern Orthodox spirituality. Using ideas such as appeal and communion, divine grace, love, prayer, fidelity, apophatic intentionality, and a hyper-intelligible gaze before the Revelation, I will describe the phenomenon of religious call—God calling man and man calling God. The conclusion shows that religious call and answer are existential and theandric experiences, where one can work on askesis, the fidelity of thought, and mystical experience. Life in the Holy Spirit no longer distinguishes between call and answer for one who became a son of God by grace, faith, and good works.

Keywords: phenomenology of the world; phenomenology of life; theo-phenomenology; theological counter-reduction; Eastern Orthodox spirituality; religious call; mystical experience; divine grace

1. Introduction

The religious call is a theological topic and an experience of spiritual life. Using philosophy to describe a theological phenomenon could enrich the results and provide a better understanding. Some philosophies are more suitable than others for such an endeavor: for example, a phenomenology that tries to understand human experience is more appropriate than rationalist metaphysics. In Eastern Orthodox tradition, theology is firstly life experience and participation in the mystical body of the Church; secondly, theology is a theoretical expression of this religious life.

Nevertheless, such an encounter between theology and phenomenology raises and has always raised problems. Phenomenology cannot take God into account, because God is not a phenomenon amidst other phenomena. As I will show further, Husserl’s empiricism and Heidegger’s existential ontology rejected a theological phenomenology. When the “theological turn of French phenomenology” claimed the possibility of such an encounter, some phenomenologists accused that there was no more phenomenology, but theology (Janicaud 1991). It became clear that phenomenology could not be unconnected with theology, and that there are influences between them. Even though Jean-Luc Marion tried to keep the two disciplines separated, his phenomenology is Catholic, as is the case for other French phenomenologists as well (Gschwandtner 2019, pp. 197–98). Besides this, in my opinion, a phenomenological approach maintaining a strict distinction could impoverish theology because, for a rigorous phenomenological gaze, *either theology appears poorer than it is, or it does not appear at all.*

This problem could be solved if one admits an area where the two disciplines are intertwined. I have named this area “theo-phenomenology” (the name is borrowed from Depraz and Mauriac 2012); according to the described phenomena, “theo-phenomenology” could be closer to theology or phenomenology and it could even be absorbed by one or the other (it is a similar idea to that
of phenomenological psychology, which could be “absorbed into transcendental phenomenology” (Zahavi 2019)).

In the remaining pages, I will argue for this theo-phenomenology, which borrows its method from phenomenology and its faith from theology; it is an “impure” theological phenomenology. Then, I will use it in describing the religious call in Eastern Orthodox spirituality. The intention is to use phenomenology without impoverishing such a theological phenomenon.

2. Phenomenology and Theology

The encounter between phenomenology and theology is problematic. According to Husserl, the phenomenological method excludes the possibility of a theological phenomenology because God, who is not a mundane phenomenon able to appear to the intentional consciousness, remains in absolute transcendence following the transcendental-phenomenological reduction (epoché) (Husserl 1976, para. 58). Husserl’s phenomenological reduction means bracketing the existence of the world to obtain its pure phenomenon. The reduction aims to liberate all phenomena from theoretical presuppositions in order to come back to the things themselves as they are given to human consciousness. This reduction removes God from its equation and, while the transition from the natural attitude to the phenomenological one has an ascetic dimension (Lacoste 2011, p. 63), this form of askesis refuses God. In Husserl’s phenomenology, following the phenomenological reduction, intentionality offers a phenomenon, which should be described starting from itself and not from the assumptions of the observer. Husserl’s principle—“Back to the things themselves!”—is not possible without other successive reductions, which lead to one abandoning all subjective opinions, including faith. Nevertheless, the autarchic role of the Husserlian transcendental ego remains a problem and influences the less obvious autarchy of Heidegger’s Dasein.

Moreover, the Husserlian reduction to the sphere of the transcendental ego was accused of solipsism, hindering the appearance of the other as a human person, as more than a mere reduced phenomenon. Naturally, such a reduction makes the phenomenon of God impossible (Manoussakis 2004, pp. 56–57). As a consequence of an undertaken methodological rigor, Husserl regarded phenomenology as being blind towards religious phenomena; thus, God was left outside the sphere of phenomenality and phenomenology, but this choice did not exclude other, more suitable forms of discourse regarding the Absolute, such as theology, metaphysics, or even a phenomenology with no transcendental reduction (epoché) (see Turcan 2017, pp. 54–55). Indeed, Husserl himself has occasionally written about God in his manuscripts (cf. Mall 1991, p. 1), practicing an implicit reduction to reason (sola ratio) (see Bello 2009, p. 30) and accepting other discourses on God but phenomenology.

To Heidegger, who embraced the same methodological, transcendental, or existential atheism (Lacoste 2000, chp. 1, I), theology was nothing but an ontic science, similar to the positive sciences. In his view, the object of theology was a historical being (Jesus Christ), which means that it lacked the ontological dimension of philosophy—an ontological discipline par excellence (Heidegger 1998, pp. 39–62). Nevertheless, Heidegger considers that human existence (Dasein) is a part of the phenomenological experience and his emphasis on experience is equally relevant for theology.

The theological turn of French phenomenology has the merit of bringing into discussion, starting with Emmanuel Lévinas, the existence of phenomena which are neither purely objective (as in Husserl’s writings) nor purely ontological (as in Heidegger’s writings), but rather related to alterity. Ethics becomes the prime philosophy (see Lévinas 1979, sec. III) capable of escaping Heidegger’s “ontological solipsism”: by appearing, the other obliges me, but I cannot oblige the other, which creates an asymmetrical relationship; the other makes me his or her “prisoner” to the extent of self-sacrifice, asking me to stop reducing him/her to myself and to my transcendental sphere (Lévinas 1990, pp. 179–88). This applies even more so to God, who is more than alterity in Lévinas’ philosophy: God is in an absolute transcendence, phenomenologically irreducible to our consciousness. To the Husserlian intentionality of the transcendental ego, Lévinas opposes the counter-intentionality of the other (Christina Maria
Gschwandtner 2013, pp. 43–44), an idea of great importance for any encounter between theology and phenomenology.

Following the footsteps of Levinas’ theological opening, Michel Henry proposes an even more radical turnover of Husserl’s and Heidegger’s phenomenology. To the phenomenology of exteriority, which he sees as a phenomenology of the world, he opposes a phenomenology of life, of pathos, of interiority, capable of describing religious phenomena, particularly one phenomenon of the utmost importance—the life that Christ has given through His incarnation and to which He calls people, so that they become sons of God. In Henry’s philosophy, life is an experience of interiority as self-affection of the body. One cannot see life from the distance of intentionality, but rather by using the “prime impressions” that Husserl had previously spoken about without developing them further (Henry 2000, pt. I).

According to Henry, there are three ways of slandering life, each of them revealing the incapacity of creating a proper phenomenology of life: biology reduces life to material processes; philosophy confuses life and being manifested as being-in-the-world; life is the metaphysical principle of the universe—a sort of “blind entity” (Henry 2003, p. 50) when deprived of its essence.

The truth of Christianity, as interpreted by M. Henry in his three books on Christian faith, is life in itself and not only from a biological perspective. If the truth of the world differs from what is true—an alienation which speaks about exteriority and out-of-itself-ness—then the truth of Christianity does not know that alienation. The Truth is the same as its revelation, because God reveals Himself and nothing less than Himself (Henry 2003, pp. 24–26). God does not reveal Himself as truth of the world, but rather as life; He is the self-revelation of life (Henry 2003, p. 27). From the perspective of this phenomenology of interiority, life is more than man, more than the logos (a theme of Greek thought), and, therefore, more than reason and language. Life is more than living, and this assertion also holds true for God (Henry 2003, p. 51). “Christian truth is not of the order of thinking” (Henry 2000, chp. “Introduction”), the French philosopher writes, but it is of the order of life. Henry deliberately avoids the philosophical language of being: “Life ‘is not.’ Rather it occurs and does not cease to occur” (Henry 2003, p. 55). Jean-Luc Marion will continue this post-metaphysical attitude by speaking of God “without being” (Marion [1982] 1991)—an expression belonging to Pseudo-Dionysius.

A relevant and helpful idea of this relationship between theology and philosophy belongs to Jean-Yves Lacoste. He claims that there is no border between theology and philosophy, but rather an area where the two of them intersect. Philosophy encounters theology insofar as it is a way of life, not just of thinking (Lacoste 2011, pp. 19–20).

This very short history of essential moments in the encounter between phenomenology and theology raises another question: how adequate is Western phenomenology for Eastern Orthodox theology? Husserl and Heidegger’s methodological atheism pointed especially to Protestant and Catholic understandings of Christianity. In an excellent book on the phenomenology of liturgy, Christina Gschwandtner claims that Orthodoxy can profitably engage and use phenomenology because “Orthodoxy has traditionally stressed the importance of experience” and experience is “the most authentic marker” of the Orthodox tradition (Gschwandtner 2019, p. x). A second answer is Christos Yannaras’ idea that Heideggerian nihilism and theological apophaticism can share the critique of Western onto-theology in their quest for a more mysterious and experiential God (Yannaras 1996). Therefore, both Orthodox authors emphasize experience as a fundamental keyword which can bind phenomenology and Orthodox theology today.

But the Orthodox experience and the phenomenological experience are still different. As an experience which is founded on faith and communion, the Orthodox experience differs from the phenomenological experience of appearing to an intentional consciousness; one can stress that religious phenomena give themselves to the phenomenological gaze only as a secondary experience. What kind of empathy, analogy, or hermeneutics should one use to grasp a phenomenon of religious experience? An exclusively phenomenological discourse about religious experiences risks not to grasp them adequately. Jean-Luc Marion suggested to speak about theological phenomena only as a possibility,
not as an actuality (Marion 2013, p. 387), but, in my opinion, this distinction does not solve the problem. When a phenomenologist accepts faith to better describe a theological phenomenon but claims that his description is only a possibility, his description still remains a description from within faith. In conclusion, by accepting faith while doing phenomenology, one should recognize that one is doing a kind of theo-phenomenology.

3. Theo-Phenomenology

In order to describe the phenomenon of religious call, we should build this area of intersection between phenomenology and theology as a theo-phenomenology. In a well-known book, Vladimir Lossky spoke about a “mystical theology” (Lossky 2005, chp. 1). The two concepts seem to be analogous to two distinct phenomenologies: theology—a phenomenology of exteriority and intentionality; and mystics—a phenomenology of life. Lossky does not separate them; rather, he speaks about a dynamic link between them, which obliges us to outline a “theo-phenomenology” capable of encompassing both dimensions and, at the same time, capable of letting the Christian faith appear—a faith which structures the tradition of the Church along with its loyalty to that tradition.

To begin with, theo-phenomenology contends that there are three kinds of phenomena: (1) those appearing on the transcendental scene of consciousness, into the openness and the distance of the world; (2) those appearing as “prime impressions” manifested in the interiority of our body; and (3) those bestowed through religious experience and, exceptionally, through the grace of the Holy Spirit (even though this way of appearing is not phenomenal, but rather supra-phenomenal). This third meaning combines the first one and the second one, because there are religious experiences, such as love and mystical life, in which the description could be made from within the phenomenology of the world and of life. Moreover, theo-phenomenology is a discourse which describes Christian faith, life, and experience, situated within the more or less narrow intersection between theology and phenomenology. Although the theo-phenomenological discourse borrows its method and some of its concepts from phenomenology, it nonetheless remains faithful to the mystical theology of the Church, to its teachings, and to the experience of God. Therefore, apart from phenomenological reductions, theo-phenomenology also uses a theological counter-reduction inasmuch as it accepts the faith expressed and kept within the tradition of the Church as a given.

What is this theological counter-reduction? There are many religious reductions in Jean-Yves Lacoste’s philosophy, all of them expressing man’s placement before God (coram Deo): “liturgical reduction”, “ascetic reduction”, and even “theological reduction”. When compared to Husserl’s transcendental reduction (epoché), however, one may observe that they have different meanings. The first two are reductions in the self in order to free the phenomenon from any assumptions and previous theories; the last one, the “theological reduction”, “which does not nullify what brackets” (Lacoste 2011, p. 27), is instead a counter-reduction; it differs from Husserl’s reduction through its use of dogmata and teachings of faith, although it has the same purpose: to free the phenomena of religious experience. “Faith appears as an unnecessary and insufficient condition and, from a phenomenological point of view, as a counter-reduction compared to the Husserlian reduction” (Turcan 2018, p. 148).

In contrast with onto-theology, which believes that it knows the existence of God through mere concepts and without any experience (Kant 1996, A 632, B 660), theo-phenomenology attempts to describe the phenomenality of the visible and the hyper-phenomenality of the Revelation based on experience. Insofar as this discourse is faithful to religious teachings, it is theological; however, through its use of the phenomenological method to describe life and spiritual experience, it is also phenomenological, hence the name “theo-phenomenology.” Theo-phenomenology is a theological and philosophical phenomenology; it is also a method. As a theory, it tries to be the opposite of onto-theology and to speak about a living God, not only about the God of metaphysics. As a method, it describes phenomena by taking into account, as a counter-reduction, belief/faith; therefore, it is a phenomenology with faith. In fact, the phenomenology without reduction can be successfully applied to other fields (Zahavi 2019). Different kinds of faith (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox) could lead to
different types of theo-phenomenology. It is neither a new kind of phenomenology, nor theology, but an already used one. For example, in my opinion, the phenomenology of Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Yves Lacoste is, in fact, Catholic theo-phenomenology. The objects of theo-phenomenology are primarily religious phenomena, such as mental entities and religious experience. Theo-phenomenology differs from phenomenology by accepting Christian faith as a counter-reduction, without eliminating other phenomenological reductions. It differs from Eastern Orthodox theology in the following ways: (1) by accepting the phenomenological method in an attempt to describe the essential features and relationships of the phenomena of religious and liturgical experience that are given to consciousness; (2) by accepting the phenomenological language in order to enrich the expression of theology; (3) by using both types of experience, phenomenological and religious; and (4) by offering the essence of religious phenomena, as any other phenomenology. Last but not least, theo-phenomenology, which can be applied only to religious experiences, resembles Orthodox theology in two ways: both of them start with experience and attempt to describe this experience as accurately as possible.

In order to understand why there is a need for theo-phenomenology, let us see some examples about knowledge in the spiritual life of the Eastern Church. St. Gregory Palamas made a distinction between universal knowledge (a philosophical one)—“human knowledge that is common to all people”—and the knowledge that “is bestowed by the Holy Spirit” (Gregory Palamas 1977b, para. 68). Additionally, St. Gregory of Sinai wrote: “Consider the proper knowledge of truth to be the feeling of grace. All the other pieces of knowledge must be called interpretations of meanings and proofs of things” (Gregory of Sinai 1977, para. 3). Consequently, there is a way of appearing—through the work of the Holy Spirit and of the uncreated grace—for which neither the phenomenology of the world nor the phenomenology of life are sufficient. The same Saint Gregory Palamas writes the following about spiritual vision: “In which manner do we receive and see this glory of divine nature? By the knowledge of the reasons for things and inferring thus the knowledge of God’s power, wisdom, and providence? There is another eye of the soul seeing those, and it cannot see the divine light [. . .]. This is not the light of consciousness, but another light. Thus, God does not dwell in every person who knows things and sees according to this kind of knowledge. That person only has the knowledge of things and infers God from it by analogy. The person who can mystically see that light does not infer God by analogy but knows and has God in him/her. His/her seeing is a truthful one and beyond all beings” (Gregory Palamas 1977a, para. 16).

It stands to reason that the phenomenology of the world or of life cannot grasp such knowledge that could apophatically be named “unseeing” and “unknowledge”: firstly, because God bestows His grace upon the few people who are worthy and obey His commandments; secondly, because one cannot adequately describe such a hyper-phenomenon without faith (the theological counter-reduction). Therefore, a theo-phenomenology which sees faith as experience in the Church tradition and as an irreducible foundation might be able to better describe spiritual life and the phenomenon of the religious call.

4. God’s Call

Questions are the life of philosophy and the dynamic of thinking. The history of philosophy raises troubling and provocative questions. In fact, more often than not, they are more provocative than the answers themselves; sometimes, these answers depend on the contexts in which they were formulated to such an extent that they have become irrelevant. The fundamental questions, however, are always provocative, because they address us directly and stimulate our interest.

A theology which remains solely in the horizon of questioning is not enough. Any attempt to describe life in Christ must follow a different dynamic: the relationship between the call and the answer adds to the relationship between the question and the answer. Contemporary French phenomenology discusses the subject of the call (see Chrétien 1992), whereas Jean-Luc Marion answered Heidegger’s ontological difference between Being and beings with a new difference, between the world and God’s call (Marion [1982] 1991, p. 137). There could be God calling man, but also man calling God.
God’s call precedes us: “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). Complex and ineffable, it is not identical to Socrates’ daimonion, nor is it identical to “the call of consciousness” developed by Heidegger (Heidegger 1967, paras. 56–57).

As a personal calling, only the person to whom it is addressed can hear it. Engaging the abyss of man’s many pursuits, God speaks to man in a language that is understood differently from the language of the world, even though it might be formulated using its words. Not anyone who hears or reads the words of Christ becomes a believer. A paradoxical recognition of God—Who is not known yet but calls the man from the depth of His being—fulfills the hermeneutical level.

In God’s call, one discovers the promise of an answer to the most profound suffering and the most abyssal quest of man. Any philosophical lucidity knows that to be means to suffer (Cioran 1997, p. 215). Atheists consider facticity—the thrownness of man into the world—to be enough to affirm the failure of this universe. However, this facticity is also enough to begin a quest for a higher meaning. The problem of evil is irresolvable, especially when innocent people are suffering. In His call, God does not necessarily provide a solution for all those problems, but rather a different horizon, one of such joy that its power is more significant than evil, failure, and the entire universe. Admittedly, from a rational point of view, one could dismiss all these realities as a pile of illusions. However, by living in the Church’s tradition as in a critical instance, the person who “hears” God’s call can decide whether it is an illusion or the most powerful of realities. Man’s decision can be either an answer or a refusal. God exposes himself to the absolute freedom of man. Man is the powerful one, although the force of his possible refusal can throw him into the most significant of weaknesses: that of being mortal in a meaningless world, of failing to understand that God’s call created him, giving him the possibility of answering (Chrétien 1992, p. 27) and especially of living.

If man accepts God’s call, the result is more than just an all-encompassing theory. By overcoming theoretical philosophy, man’s answer is an existential engagement and a sacrifice in the horizon of ineffable joy. Man offers himself, body and soul, to God (Chrétien 1992, p. 11), standing at His disposal, practicing self-renunciation and askesis, by which he seeks He who had already found him. No act of finding is definitive, though, just as no act of seeking can genuinely end. There is a repetition that reveals love; any call is a recall (Chrétien 1992, p. 35). God’s infinity and His never-ending love justify the continuous spiritual advancement from one state to another, a movement that St. Gregory of Nyssa, referring to the eschatological reality and life in the Kingdom of God, calls epektasis. Man’s answer overcomes theoretical philosophy and becomes a self-examination, a self-sacrifice, an abnegation (see Lacoste 1994, para. 59) in order to find himself, according to the words of Christ: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

If man hears the personal calling of God, which can be heard anytime and anywhere, even in the most unexpected and ordinary of circumstances, God answers by bestowing His divine grace. God’s answer goes deep into all our abysses and failures, illuminates or annihilates the force of the evil, speaks or remains silent, always acting with overwhelming love and peace. Saint Silouan the Athonite, known for his account of the personal experience of grace, describes God’s love for the entire world, without exception. As if love were the true and unique reality, creation and man are saved from destruction and nothingness only inasmuch as they participate in them. In the language of philosophy, being is to the extent to which it participates in the love of the One who is (Exodus 3:14) and of the One who transcends being, who is “beyond all being and knowledge” (Pseudo-Dionysius (the Areopagite) 1987, 997B, chp. I, para. 1).

In this context, the uses of verbs of being surely refer to more than a mere presence, progressing towards the meaning of life and towards spiritual perfection. God’s call reveals itself as having essentially been not only about words, which it does not erase, but about the entire life of man. Living the experience of grace, which is synonymous with the experience of God’s love, finitude and death, the nonsense of life and suffering, evil and absurd—they all diminish and sometimes become, against themselves, helpful in the ascetic fight against the fallen self. There is such a richness in the experience of the saints from whom we understand what the uncreated grace of God is that no description can do
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it justice. Still, man does not receive theoretical answers, suitable for a theodicy, but the suspension of questions and philosophical problems—such as the problem of evil—in an overwhelming experience of the grace of God. It is obvious that, after such an experience, one could formulate, if need be, a theodicy as well. The theological expression, however, is an effect of a previous experience, similar to how the highest theology is an effect of prayer, a manifestation of a way of life in the communion of the Church, as well as an expression of an existential stance.

5. Man’s Call

Man’s call essentially takes the form of prayer. The conditions of prayer are faith and previous knowledge. Whether it precedes prayer or establishes itself on it, theo-phenomenological thought involves a sort of fidelity which the autonomy of modern reasoning might not like. Nevertheless, in the absence of this fidelity, the theological dimension of theo-phenomenological thought would have no meaning. The intentionality of faithful thought grounds itself on prayer, which can sometimes become a mystical experience. Regardless of its magnitude, such an experience is based on a way of life within the horizon of God’s love.

Fidelity, however, raises doubts about one’s freedom of thought. For theology, inasmuch as it is distinct from philosophy, autonomous reason is not at the top of the noetic hierarchy. Theology is characterized, by contrast, by a truthful thought that might question the freedom of reason and, thus, reason itself. The Kantian imperative of “man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage” (Kant 2020) could be an argument against any devotion which might limit reason. Arising as the results of a choice, the constraints of fidelity do not originate from reason itself—as do logical constraints, for example—but from an exterior, imposing reality named God. Fidelity, external constraint, limit—do all these disqualify theological reasoning? The short answer, which we will argue in the remaining pages, is that they do not.

First of all, if religion were the result of pure speculation, God would be a mere creation of man, the God of Feuerbach, and anthropology would be the secret of theology. What is needed instead is a preliminary givenness of the sacred, a Revelation which does not result from any human philosophical exercise, from any instinct, from any transfigured desire, from any transcendental, or from any projection of human ideas as transcendence (Turcan 2016).

Furthermore, the fidelity of theological thought is intentional in relation to this primary givenness. The Absolute not only finds its place in human intentionality, but it creates or causes this place because it precedes it. A fidelity to—the structure of a movement dependent on an Alterity who calls it either through love and the promise of eternity or by giving commandments and demanding them to be kept. First of all, this a fidelity to the visible, to a proximity which is clear enough to impose itself—sacred book, icon, dogmata, or sacred place. This fidelity seems to bring about either a “self-imposed nonage” synonymous with no freedom or an inauthenticity equal to a lost destiny. Nevertheless, what the intentionality of truthful thought seeks is, in fact, the Divine Alterity. God prompts a never-ending adherence, which calls to a fascinating and absolute captivity. We keep coming back to this word, the absolute, for its echo can be found in every type of fidelity.

Secondly, apart from the fidelity to the visible, there is also another kind of intentionality—the intentionality to the invisible. Christina Gschwandtner stresses that intentionality is always at work: “We are not intuitively overwhelmed to such a degree that no intentionality can be at work” (Gschwandtner 2019, p. 118). Any form of visible also comes with an invisible that overcomes it—a principle more even more obvious when it comes to God. Though God can choose to never appear in a way similar to the things of the world, He appears through symbol, analogy, paradox, or Incarnation, on condition that the invisible overcome the visible—and this in itself might be a definition of the Revelation as a saturated phenomenon (Marion 2002).

God’s historical manifestations are never so empirical or devoid of mystery that they annihilate the possibility of belief. There are plenty of phenomenological signs which justify the birth of an intentionality to the invisible in the consciousness of the spiritual man. The manifestations of the
invisible are not necessarily manifestations of power, as in the example of love which is more of a weakness for the beloved. There is always a human choice in these phenomena of religious consciousness, which are created not by objective phenomena, but by meanings, epiphanies, etc. Theological thought addresses us, gathers us, and involves us all with all our abysses. As a choice to believe, it provides the measure of our freedom and, at the same time, of our fidelity to God.

The thought which stays true to the invisible can advance towards the apophatic overcoming using structures of imagination, concepts, and analogous representations. Such a way of thinking denies the God-related realities within our consciousness one by one without annihilating or abandoning them. Instead, it overcomes them into an ineffable synthesis, whereas the horizon remains in a perpetual unknown—the place of God’s mysterious presence. Thought becomes prayer and man’s call shows an intentionality of love, an apophatic intentionality directed towards mystery. Berdiaev spoke about two kinds of intentionality: one to the objective world, where necessity reigns, and the other to the kingdom of God, where freedom reigns (Berdiaev 1999, p. 70). In Kantian terms, apophatic intentionality is without intuition; a void concept which a saturated phenomenon—in Marion’s words—could fulfill with a dazzling intuition, overwhelming the concept. From intentionality as waiting for the desired One to the encounter as a mystical union, one might speak about a spiritual movement. In Marion’s and Levinas’ words, this is a counter-intentionality where God encounters and deifies man. As an uncreated energy, the work of God’s grace unifies intentionality and counter-intentionality, whereas the knowledge that we have from gnoseology is replaced by a supra-phenomenal and ineffable experience—a form of knowing by unknowing, “the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing” (Pseudo-Dionysius (the Areopagite) 1987, 1001A, chp. I, para. 3).

Thus, to the iconic distance, which Marion used to distinguish between idol and icon (Marion 1977), we should add a distance of apophatic intentionality which characterizes spiritual life; the human being encounters God through a non-mundane activity. The event of this encounter, qualified as an event of love, does not cancel the distance of the ontological difference between the Creator and His creation.

Theological apophaticism—understood as an experience of the ineffable mystery of God—limits reason’s ambition of venturing forth into a realm it can no longer grasp. Theology is “reduced to silence” (Lacoste 2012, pp. 151–70), and its configuration changes as it passes from the field of discourse to the doxological field of prayer. More profound, given that it operates at an existential level, prayer addresses the mystery and grows in the presence of mystery, losing its words as it advances. In fact, the terminology of unknowing can describe the contemplation of the abyss of God better than scientific language. It is an unknowing that has nothing to do with nihilism or agnosticism; instead, it only shows the overcoming of the conceptual and discursive space of general knowledge. Any work of man before God and any prayer has at least a small part of that mystical silence. Regardless of the spiritual level that man has reached, the silence of God’s mystery can accompany any activity and even any word. From this point of view, such silence does not necessarily contradict the work of the human being; instead, it accompanies it, granting it its true horizon, its true opening. The terminology of faith is veiled in this silence of the super-conceptual, ineffable, and mysterious experience. The deeper the silence is, the more distant words are; the more the silence fades, the more paradoxical, full of love, and theologically relevant words become. Any theology by words comes from the experience of knowledgeable silence and of the presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit.

Outside of love, there is no such thing as true fidelity. Therefore, to speak of fidelity of thought means to make the game of thinking meet the life and love of God; it is the only piece of the puzzle which reason cannot add on its own. The fidelity of thought is the fidelity of a love one does not want to lose. Any time theology is involved, the dynamic of thought should ultimately become a dynamic of the movements of love. Through its theological dimension, theo-phenomenology inevitably describes this decisive fidelity which knows God’s love.

As a result, a theo-phenomenology of call is inevitably a theo-phenomenology of life and love: the more it looks towards the theandric process of human spiritual progress, where the grace of the Holy Spirit deifies man (theosis), the better its description is. The phenomenon is offered not only by
intentionality on the stage of exteriority—which would lead to a mere form of religious philosophy—or by “prime impressions”, but also by an interior “theo-affection”; an experience of God’s presence in our life. This becomes even clearer when the work of the grace of the Holy Spirit is involved. In fact, instead of a simple presence which appears before reason, one may notice a mysterious presence, one in which we stand before God. It is a movement of communion and an encounter between the human being and the personal God.

In conclusion, God’s call and man’s call meet each other in the answers of man and in the answers of God. These are theandric experiences, divine and human, in which the grace of the Holy Spirit works as an uncreated energy: (1) as askesis, abnegation, and the total renunciation of self, body, and soul in front of God; (2) as thought attentive towards fidelity to faith and to the tradition of the Church; (3) as super-intelligible contemplation through the grace of the Holy Spirit and a form of “knowing by unknowing”, which is synonymy for mystical experience.

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