

## **Towards theological thinking. Theological inspirations in contemporary phenomenology**

W stronę teologicznego myślenia.

Inspiracje teologiczne we współczesnej fenomenologii

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the evolving boundary between philosophy and theology within contemporary French phenomenology, tracing its development from Lavelle's spiritualism to Falque's turn to theology. By examining the roles of aesthetics, sacredness, and temporality – drawing from Baumgarten and Schleiermacher to Augustine and Heidegger – the research argues that the separation between philosophy and theology is fundamentally temporal. The conclusion highlights that theological phenomenology offers a unique and vital perspective on the experiential and eschatological dimensions of faith, thereby enriching both philosophical and theological debates.

**Keywords:** French phenomenology; theological turn; Louis Lavelle; Emmanuel Falque; Emmanuel Lévinas; Vladimir Jankélévitch; Martin Heidegger; Friedrich Schleiermacher; Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten; Wilhelm Dilthey; Rudolf Otto; Mircea Eliade; Jean-Yves Lacoste; sacredness; temporality; phenomenology of religion

**Abstrakt:** Niniejszy artykuł bada ewolucję granic między filozofią, a teologią we współczesnej fenomenologii francuskiej, śledząc jej rozwój od spirytualizmu Lavelle'a do zwrotu Falque'a w kierunku teologii. Analizując rolę estetyki, *sacrum* i temporalności – czerpiąc z dzieł Baumgartena i Schleiermacha, a także Augustyna i Heideggera – autor dowodzi, że rozdzielenie filozofii i teologii przybiera zasadniczo charakter czasowości. Wnioski podkreślają, że tzw. fenomenologia teologiczna oferuje unikalną i istotną perspektywę na

empiryczne i eschatologiczne wymiary wiary, wzbogacając tym samym zarówno debaty filozoficzne, jak i teologiczne.

**Słowa kluczowe:** francuska fenomenologia; zwrot teologiczny; Louis Lavelle; Emmanuel Falque; Emmanuel Lévinas; Vladimir Jankélévitch; Martin Heidegger; Friedrich Schleiermacher; Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten; Wilhelm Dilthey; Rudolf Otto; Mircea Eliade; Jean-Yves Lacoste; *sacrum*; czasowość; fenomenologia religii

## I. Genealogy of French theological thought. From Lavelle to Falque

Theological thinking has a well-established tradition that, in France, can be traced back to specific conditions, even to the classical rationalism of René Descartes and Blaise Pascal. It is, however, closely connected to the development of the philosophy of spirit, culminating in the monumental works of Louis Lavelle, especially *La dialectique du monde sensible* (Lavelle 1922) (sic!), and in the four volumes of *La dialectique de l'éternel présent: De l'être* (Lavelle 1947), *De l'acte* (Lavelle 1946), *Du temps et de l'éternité* (Lavelle 1945), and *De l'âme humaine* (Lavelle 1951). Not only does Lavelle's tetralogy represent perhaps the peak of French spiritualism, but the philosophy of life presented therein, flowing from the boundless source of experience, surprisingly aligns with the theses proposed in Germany by Heidegger. It is worth noting the way in which Lavelle initiates his reflections on being from a book with this very title (De l'être):

Being is a universal object. The word object is not used here as a correlate of the word subject. The affirmation of being is prior to the distinction between subject and object and includes both. It is taken in a purely logical sense and denotes every possible term of affirmation. Consequently, we cannot from the outset invoke the primacy of the subject that affirms in relation to the object of affirmation. For the subject itself, as subject, is the object of affirmation, which shows quite well, through this kind of doubling, that the role of affirmation itself is to enclose us in a circle of being, and since being is nothing more than the object of possible affirmation, affirmation in turn is nothing more than being insofar as there is a consciousness in it that affirms it.

It is hard to resist the impression that this text could have come from the pen of the author of *Sein und Zeit*. It is probably not without reason, therefore, that the tradition of religious thought has been further strengthened by insights from Heidegger, who was mainly introduced to France by Lévinas during his early articles inspired by his internship in Freiburg (Lévinas 1929,

395-431). A notable recent contribution comes from Vladimir Jankélévitch, an increasingly appreciated figure who ensured that French thought maintained its inspiration from Hegel (Jankélévitch 1957, 11-45). All this upheaval in the last decades of theological development is captured and described by Emmanuel Falque in his book *Passer le Rubicon. Philosophie et théologie: Essai sur les frontières*. However, he makes it clear from the outset that he abandons the dream of crossing these waters, seeking only to explore their currents and taste each of them a little (Falque 2013). The ambitious subtitle of his book, however, is surprisingly restrained: *Philosophy and Theology: An Essay on Boundaries*. This suggests not transgression but exploration of borders. The phenomenology of religion becomes a kind of game with the frontier, as French thinkers call it (Falque 2013). Falque, in the epilogue to *Passer le Rubicon*, notes that phenomenology has taught us the life of thought through the careful thinking of life, and this remains its primary legacy (Falque 2013).

Despite this rich tradition and ongoing dialogue, a fundamental question remains unresolved: What precisely defines the boundary between philosophy and theology? Is it a matter of method, content, or something more fundamental? Contemporary phenomenology, particularly following the theological turn, challenges earlier models of strict separation or simple synthesis, yet the nature of this boundary remains elusive. This paper explores this issue by proposing that the boundary is essentially temporal – a *distinctio temporalis* – thereby reframing the dialogue between philosophy and theology through the twin lenses of aesthetic and temporal experience.

## 2. Towards aesthetic thinking

### 2.1. Baumgarten and Schleiermacher at the origin of the aesthetic turn in the philosophy of religion

In the turn to sensuality, Baumgarten viewed a form of salvation from the extreme rationalism that had burdened the theory of cognition and the metaphysics, weighed down by the legacy of Cartesianism (Baumgarten 1750, 1750-1758). It appears that a similar aim would later accompany Schleiermacher when he formulates the now-classic definition of religion based on a sense of absolute dependence (Schleiermacher 1799, 36-40). According to him, the essence of religion is piety – a sense of direct self-awareness of absolute dependence on a divine being (Schleiermacher 1830, 12-14). The Christian Church is a community of believers rooted in piety. Dogmatics is the verbal articulation of piety through descriptions, concepts, and expressions (Schleiermacher 1830, 76-78). Embedding religion on a foundation of feeling, much closer to

sensuality, also introduced the distinction between religious intuition and intellectual intuition – an important development in the philosophy of religion. As we recall, for Schleiermacher himself, the consequences of assigning this direct identity to religious intuition were primarily apologetic (Schleiermacher 1830, 15-18). It is said that, from their time studying together at the seminary in Göttingen, he was already much more attuned to Hölderlin's poetic sensibility than to Hegel's hyper-rationality (Dilthey 1768, 1768-1806). This self-awareness of absolute dependence would eventually evolve into the concept of the sacred, which, in the ongoing debate between philosophy, theology, and the sciences of religion, would be incorporated into all cases and would carry Schleiermacher's insight further (Otto 1917, 7-12).

## **2.2. From neo-Kantianism to phenomenology: sacredness as a key to understanding religion**

In the nineteenth century, philosophy appears to have lost its exclusive dominance over the spiritual sciences. This becomes clear in the study of religion, where psychology becomes deeply involved. Nonetheless, resistance to psychologising tendencies is offered by neo-Kantists. Wilhelm Windelband, a leading figure of neo-Kantianism and the main founder of the Baden School, teacher of Heinrich Rickert (who promoted Edmund Husserl to the chair at Göttingen) and Emil Lask (Heidegger acknowledged that he learned a great deal from him and often recalled his untimely death in the Great War with regret), wrote in his famous essay on Holiness, included in the well-known collection *Preludes*: “the philosophy of religion cannot be placed in any of the three basic philosophical disciplines and cannot be regarded as part of or in addition to logic, ethics or aesthetics. These three fundamental sciences correspond to the ideal goals of truth, goodness, and beauty. [...] But alongside them there is another cultural force, perhaps the greatest, religion. Its goal, its norm, its ideal, we call holiness” (Wilhelm 1915, 265-267). An important contribution to the development of the study of this unique cultural force was made by the later neo-Kantian syntheses, particularly Dilthey's *History of the Humanities*, where he provided insightful analyses of the formation of a religious worldview (mainly Christian) (Dilthey 1924, 139-312). The concept of the sacred remains central to the study of religious life within phenomenology. It appears in the works of Otto (where it is also known as *numinosum*) (Otto 1917, 7-12), van der Leeuw (where it is called *power*) (Leeuw 1933, 26-31), and Mircea Eliade (where it is referred to as *sacrum* as opposed to *profane*) (Eliade 1957, 13-15). Sacredness in the strict sense is indeed a phenomenon of religion, which is why phenomenology is best suited to its examination. Sacredness as a phenomenon also makes it evident that religion is not con-

fined to, nor exhausted within, the realm of pure spirit. Paradoxically, what was thought to connect us with the hereafter finds its true place precisely in this world. Strictly speaking, this means that religion is as much an intellectual endeavour as it is a sensory experience. A religious encounter turns out to be both spiritual and physical. It is worth noting from the outset that it is no coincidence that the spiritual-bodily opposition here is not the same as the immaterial-material dichotomy. After all, a mother cuddling her beloved child to her breast holds something more than mere matter. It is difficult, however, to define definitively what exactly she presses to her heart with such – even pious – affection. But even if we cannot fully answer what our body truly is, one thing is clear: it is futile to seek it solely in matter. On the contrary: corporeality itself, along with sensuality, possesses a profound religious dimension. In turn, the philosophy of religion, like the phenomenology of religious experience that arises from it and remains closely linked, is born out of a confrontation with the sensual manifestation of the sacred. The accessibility of the inaccessible, the visibility of the invisible, and the tangibility of the immaterial, all features of that specific religious experience, certainly demand not only a new language but, above all, a new sensibility – a sensual sensibility that is, in large part, aesthetic. There are numerous indications that the close relationship between aesthetics and religion affirms their significant affinity.

### **3. Towards thinking temporality**

#### **3.1. Augustine, *kairos* and *kenosis*: the origins of theological thinking of time**

Augustine's reflections on time, especially in *De quantitate animae*, prefigure and underpin what later becomes Heidegger's existential ontology. For Augustine, temporality is kairotic – an echo of divine eternity within the soul's finitude – expressed through self-emptying kenosis and restless openness to fulfilment (Booth 2024, 399-425). In this context, it is worth referring to Augustine, who certainly represents one of many other such different moments from the one known from *Being and Time*. Dialoguing with Evodius in *De quantitate animae*, he points out that understanding the soul requires knowledge of its origin and the principles that govern it (Augustinus 1892, 409-510). However, the explanation of the origin of the soul takes precedence both chronologically and in terms of significance, especially since it is not possible to explain the essence of the soul or describe what elements it is composed of. On the other hand, it can be stated unequivocally that the soul comes from God and is thus similar to Him (Augustinus 1981, 72-73). God is, as it were, its paternal home.

Between God and man, therefore, there is both likeness and dissimilarity. This brings us to the statement that there is a peculiar dissimilarity between them, which is, after all, what we call analogy. The infinity of God corresponds by analogy to the finiteness of the soul (Augustinus 1905, 420-423). The problem of man's relationship with God is therefore, for Augustine, a problem of boundary. This boundary should not be imagined as a line or a veil separating God from man, and one should not attempt to describe it by means of the banal analogy of metaphor. Far more appropriate here would be the analogy of proportionality, where the analogue would be more about time than space. The difference between God and man, and thus the boundary between them and this radical otherness of God, is not so much that God is elsewhere, but rather that God is 'when else'. The infinity of God is His eternity, whereas the finiteness of man is his limited time (Augustinus 1981, 14-31). This is not a simple negation of eternity, but a modification of it. Again, this difference is not to be imagined by analogy with the proportions between a straight line, which in principle has no beginning or end, and a segment that is always limited on both sides. The difference is not quantitative but qualitative. Therefore, the temporal logic of Christian experience does not consist in stretching *Chronos* into infinity so that it ultimately reaches Heaven. The temporal logic of Christian experience is the logic of *kairos* (Lacoste 1990, 51-68). The choice of *kairos* is the choice of eternity, and thus of a temporality that is qualitatively, not just quantitatively, different. Paradoxically, however, this does not mean choosing time without end but rather choosing finitude – a decision for a finite eternity, which involves voluntary self-limitation: it means *kenosis*. It thus means preferring finitude over excess. Yet, the choice of finitude is also a choice of excess. To consent to the world is simultaneously to consent to more than the world. The present is also a choice of the future, as the choice of possibility is inherently a choice of fulfilment, although this fulfilment lies ahead. The choice of freedom is a choice of movement, of dynamism, and therefore a choice of fulfilment – Aristotle may have been right here: the first cause is the final cause, and the initial and primary conditions of existence lie at two opposite poles. The will is not the will of the past, or of what is initial, but of the future: it is the will of what is ultimate and fundamental. This is why inquietude explains reality better than souci and makes it possible to break free from the erroneous identification of the phenomenological conditions of experience with the phenomenology of the origins of experience. The *restlessness* (*l'inquietude*) mentioned here evokes a sense of peace, rest, and a sabbatical experience. In this context, it is worth noting that Jean-Yves Lacoste – the aforementioned prominent contemporary French philosopher of religion – in his book *Note sur le temps*, emphasises that the covenant with the Absolute (being-in-presence-Absolute) does not remove temporality but completes it

as the most human form of temporality (Lacoste 1990, 53-55). The cognitive restlessness ('inquietude), resulting from the possibility of a relation to the Absolute that opens to the subject, does not abolish the world. Being experiences this possibility in its condition of being-in-the-world (Lacoste 1994, 112-133). Heidegger inherits and transforms this Augustinian framework. In *Being and Time*, the three ecstasies of temporality – the ecstatic unity of past, present, and future that shape *Dasein*'s being-toward-death –resonate with Augustine's kairotic model, reinterpreted existentially. Genuine, Heidegger references Augustine on temporal measurement and historicity, and scholars maintain that Augustine underpins Heidegger's ontology of care and authenticity (Booth 2024, 399-425).

### **3.2. Heidegger at the origin of theological life**

In addressing this question, one should refer to Heidegger, who in *Sein und Zeit* advocates the necessity of taking a step backwards to examine *Dasein* itself as the primary relation to being (Heidegger 1927, 5-10). This step backwards has a temporal dimension: it is a kind of time travel, a return to a world prior to history, before culture, and also before religion. *Dasein* is thus being-in-the-world before time begins to move. It is an extraction from humanity of what is earliest in man – the first in a temporal, more specifically, a chronological sense. The overarching aim of *Being and Time* is to explain experience by describing its initial state. Conversely, the beginning requires negating history, art, all culture, and ultimately even God. This negation is not merely an ideological stance but an expression of the humility of the researcher, who submits obediently to the method necessary for obtaining objective results. However, this kind of abstraction risks disconnecting us from reality. Just as thought is not the same as the things it considers, the study of concepts does not equate to the study of reality. The concepts of *Dasein* and the world are only approximations of reality. Religious experience, however, seems to challenge these approximations, raising the question: is the world truly primordial? Or, if it exists at all, does it remain merely initial? The distinction between the initial and the primordial fundamentally concerns the difference between the temporality of the beginning and that of the primordial; although seemingly paradoxical, it is far from trivial. The beginning and the end mark the limits of a thing's presence, whereas the primordial and the ultimate mark its being. Presence is described by a theory; being is described by something that precedes it. Therefore, choosing a life is a choice of limits, but it does not entail a choice of limits in the sense of fixing them; rather, the paradox of temporality lies in its rootedness in pre-worldly life itself, making it inherently

elusive. Nonetheless, it manifests in every expression of life because each is somehow worldly, grounded in experience – what Heidegger calls the authentic world of life. Heidegger arrived at uncovering this primordial sense of life by analysing the manifestations of religious, or more specifically, theological life (Heidegger 1927, 45-53). Beginning with his early lectures dedicated largely to the philosophy (or more precisely, the phenomenology) of religion (Safranski 1998), Heidegger has consistently traced a route back to life (Heidegger 1995). On the one hand, he found the rationale for his hermeneutic of facticity in the reflection of a religious nature, particularly in the experiences of the early Christian communities, to which Dilthey mainly drew his attention (Dilthey 1924, 139-312). On the other hand, Heidegger performs a kind of reduction of religious, or theological, experience to return to life itself – that dynamic, living a priori from which life springs. To our surprise, it becomes clear that the path towards thinking life originates in theology. After all, the world of life that Heidegger discovered with such enthusiasm before his students – long before it became an object of profound philosophical analysis – was initially a world of theological life. Tracing this lineage shows Heidegger did not invent the temporal-ontological framework; instead, he phenomenologically reinterpreted Augustine's theological insight. Consequently, the temporal boundary (*distinctio temporalis*) between God and humans is both Augustinian and phenomenological, suggesting that philosophy and theology share a common temporal foundation (The 2006).

#### **4. Conclusions: phenomenology between philosophy and theology**

Returning to the sources that seem to flow from the waters of this Rubicon on the border between philosophy and theology may yet open more than one path for phenomenology. Certainly, this kind of frontier thinking requires considerable courage, but “such boldness is nevertheless necessary. The philosopher must embrace it fully. There can be no reserved questions. The judgment of reason is universal or not – provided, of course, that one employs a method suitable to its object. If the philosopher abandons religious positivism in favour of the theologian, he abandons one of his duties; Blondel has rightly pointed this out. In the theologian's view, the positivism of religion is accepted as a fact, not rationally considered as a law” – as Duméry argues (Duméry 1958, 129). However, as seen above, the positivity of religion does not necessarily imply that it cannot be a valuable source for contemplating life: “it is a paradox”, Falque stresses, “where we aimed to separate (philosophy and theology), we must unify (philosophy and theology). But it is through unifying (philosophy and theology) that we distinguish and at the same time consciously cross

the threshold: from ‘philosopher to theologian’, of course, but also mutually from ‘theologian to philosopher’. All held together and maintained in the unity of the same essence and through mutually fruitful research” (Falque 2013). It appears that over the last century, the study of the phenomenology of theological experience has made significant contributions to the field of phenomenology of religion. An important contribution was made by the grand syntheses of the neo-Kantists, especially Dilthey’s ‘History of the Humanities’, which provided insightful analyses of the formation of a religious worldview (mainly the Christian one) (Wilhelm 1924). The phenomenology of theological experience must, of course, respect established boundaries that have not yet been fully explored. Above all, it should heed Duméry’s warning: “Nor is the philosophy of religion the actual religion, though it explains its meaning, though it determines its kind of efficacy. It is a useful reminder of modesty for those who might be tempted to confuse knowledge with action” (Duméry 1958, 129). Nevertheless, despite many questions and uncertainties, the project of a phenomenology of theological experience appears well justified within the context of the historical development of phenomenology itself. It also seems to open broad prospects for further evolution of this (not necessarily new) way of thinking. Duméry rightly pointed out that both Scheler and van der Leeuw, as well as many others, hesitated to cross the Rubicon, that thin line separating philosophy and theology. According to Duméry, this approach held certain advantages: “religious phenomenology thus demonstrates respect, albeit only by suspending judgment” (Duméry 1958, 134). The phenomenology of religion is therefore, as it were, born out of the dialogue between philosophy and theology. It offers a distinctive approach to the study of religious phenomena. It nearly completely abandons the futile effort to draw strict boundaries between disciplines or the even more flimsy effort to confine religion within the sealed walls of temples. Instead, it focuses on describing religion from an intrinsic perspective, which is the only approach that simultaneously allows understanding and in-depth explanation. Phenomenology thus remains the spiritual adventure it was intended to be from the outset. Instead of being limited within the boundaries of external description, it seeks to uncover profound inner insights into the structure of experience itself and, consequently, into the inner life of consciousness, which we traditionally term spiritual life.

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