Research Article

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After the Theological Turn: Towards a Credible Theological Grammar

<https://doi.org/10.1515/oph-2022-0198>

received November 07, 2021; accepted February 03, 2022

Abstract: The theological turn provokes much debate on the nature of phenomenology but almost none on the definition of theology. I argue, however, that the theological turn not only enlarges the field of phenomenological exploration but also provides theology with a conceptual apparatus that can contribute to formulating rigorous theological positions. In the first step, I question the debate dominated by philosophers of religion which created a normative – restrictive – category of the theological turn. Instead, I argue that the full potential of the theological turn in phenomenology will only be revealed when we accept it as a descriptive category – a tendency that has always in fact been present in phenomenology. In the second step, I move towards theology to argue that the phenomenological engagements with the original theological thoughts are less de-theologized than they are transformed and in their new version offered back to theology, for which they can have crucial relevance. Hence, what is truly interesting after the theological turn is not so much the boundary between theology and phenomenology but their mutual and undeniable encounters.

Keywords: the theological turn, phenomenology, theology, Dominique Janicaud, philosophy of religion, theological grammar

Introduction

Three decades have passed since the publication of Dominique Janicaud's short but influential treatise *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (1991). The intervening years have seen no cooling of the (in) famous debate and lively response it triggered. Indeed, the debate is still hot. Competing perspectives on the problem continue to be aired and reflection in scholarly literature is flourishing. In 2018, *Philosophy Today* ran a special issue entitled "The Futures of the Theological Turn," and in 2020, *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* published a thematic issue called "God in Recent French Phenomenology," which offered more than twenty articles devoted to the principal protagonists of the theological turn as identified by Janicaud, and to the current generation of authors who critically elaborate on the questions opened up within the field.

One of the most keenly debated questions in relation to the theological turn remains the boundary between phenomenology (or philosophy in general) and theology. This is a debate, it should be stressed, which is largely perpetuated by philosophers – many of whom have a personal affiliation to religion, usually to Christianity in its various traditions, and who often describe themselves as philosophers of religion – and from which theologians are all but absent. We can only speculate as to why this should be, but one way or another it complicates matters.

My hypothesis, which I will seek to prove in the following pages, is that a debate dominated by philosophy has created a *normative* concept of the theological turn which is detrimental to a genuine

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drawing of lessons from this fascinating movement (if we can call it a movement). The attempt to protect phenomenology and the philosophy of religion from theology – a legitimate endeavour, it should be said, on the part of philosophers – seems to prevent us from seeing what is really at stake among the family of authors usually associated with the theological turn. Instead of focusing on Janicaud's normative (and evaluative) notion of the theological turn, which is presented as the curse of phenomenology; instead of continuing to argue over whether Janicaud was right or wrong in his diagnosis; instead of protecting philosophy through zealously rejecting the theological turn and applauding Janicaud's requirement that phenomenology and theology *font deux*; instead, therefore, of repeating the same old arguments, I will suggest that the full potential of the theological turn in phenomenology will only be revealed when we accept it as a *descriptive* category – a tendency that has always in fact been present in phenomenology (but not necessarily in all phenomenology).

What is truly interesting after the theological turn is not so much the boundary between theology and phenomenology but their mutual and undeniable encounter. The questions we should now be asking therefore include: On the part of phenomenology, can we do philosophy better if theology is taken into account? On the part of theology, is it plausible and legitimate to do theology in the phenomenological register? Is it possible, that is, to develop a phenomenological theology?

1 *Ils font deux*: The question of orthodoxy

Janicaud is concerned for the purity of phenomenological orthodoxy, and to defend, most crucially, §58 of Husserl's *Ideas I*, in which "The Transcendence, God" is "Excluded" from phenomenological inquiry. Janicaud reads Husserl's text as if any and all forms of religious consciousness were excluded. The result is a total separation of phenomenology and theology, which therefore *font deux*. For Janicaud, phenomenology simply "reveals the correlation between the world and intentional transcendence."¹ Phenomenology is not ontology. It is a descriptive science. Hence, phenomenological orthodoxy must remain minimalist, that is neutral, and neutral means methodologically atheistic – as already prescribed by Husserl.

Nevertheless, to remain on the plane of immanence is not the same as to exclude God or the theological from our sensible experience. Christopher Yates recalls Erazim Kohák, who reads Husserl's imperative as the exclusion of God as described in §24 of *Ideas I*. That is as the exclusion of a positive God, the scientific investigator of nature,² a God who acts as the noetic principle and, to borrow Heidegger's vocabulary, as the onto-theological *causa sui*. However, as Emmanuel Housset makes clear, the question of God is certainly present in Husserl, even rigorously so.³ Husserl has no interest in affirming or negating the existence of God – this question, indeed, has no place in phenomenology – but he never gave up the question of how God is given in experience and consciousness.

Kohák affirms Housset's position in his *Idea and Experience*: Husserl's move has nothing to do with the existence of God. It is, rather, an argument that the human experience can be explained only from within the world and not by referring to any extramundane agent.⁴ Husserl's point is to warn against making unjustifiable metaphysical speculations and against subscribing to extramundane (theistic) explanations. And according to Yates – and here I agree with him – this is something different from forbidding God to enter the debate:

Husserl places "absolute" and "transcendent" in scare quotes for a very specific reason – to set apart their authority as rational grounds from that of absolute consciousness. He is concerned about a specific motivation of religious

¹ Janicaud, "The Theological Turn," 37.

² Yates, "Checking Janicaud's Arithmetic," 88.

³ Housset, *Husserl et L'idée de Dieu*, 23.

⁴ Kohák, *Idea and Experience*, 41.

consciousness and not, as far as one can tell, a strict exclusion of all religious manifestations in phenomenological reflection and description.⁵

Religious experience matters. And where is religious experience thematized better than in the field of theology? Hence, an interesting aspect of the debate is not whether the philosophers seated on the bench of suspects are theologians. The history of phenomenological inquiry, including that of its founding father, has produced a complex set of propositions that defy inquisition-like attempts to accuse one position or another of contravening orthodoxy. Rather, the truly interesting question is: Where does the debate on the theological turn lead phenomenology and what does this debate contribute to both phenomenology and theology?

2 *Cum et contra*: Paradoxes of the philosophy of religion

Janicaud's originally ironic designations "the theological turn" and "new theologians" drew a good deal of attention, perhaps too much attention, especially in philosophical circles, and the result is still with us: a formal debate occupied with problems such as: Has the theological turn happened? Should the theological turn have happened? What, indeed, happened? In fact, Janicaud introduced a *normative category* – a concept that presupposes an evaluation and a judgement. To be more precise, the theological turn has been associated with an evaluation that is highly critical and negative.

Now, imagine scholars who deal with Marion, Levinas, Henry, Chrétien, and more recently Lacoste and Falque, or even with (later) Heidegger in the context of the philosophy of religion. Janicaud sounds a warning that in (re)turning to concepts of high theological importance, those giants of twentieth-century philosophy betrayed their philosophical vocation and committed a grave, if not the gravest heresy against phenomenological orthodoxy. The defence of these authors and their writing comes naturally as the polemical answer to Janicaud's criticism. The situation is clearly far more complex, however.

The counter-position to Janicaud, which aims to defend the relevance of the authors of the theological turn, always follows the same logic: (1) agreeing with Janicaud's requirement for a strict division between theology and phenomenology, that is, subscribing to the axiom of *font deux*; (2) rejecting Janicaud's diagnosis and arguing that nothing like a theological turn ever happened. Benson and Simmons offer a blueprint for this strategy, which I suggest calling *cum et contra* Janicaud. Their introductory book *The New Phenomenology* presents the following thesis:

New Phenomenology can be legitimately considered an heir to historical phenomenology when understood as a general path of inquiry into phenomenality, rather than a rigid perspective that holds a set of stable doctrines regarding phenomenality and the modes in which particular phenomena appear.⁶

In other words, the authors argue that the point is a reconsideration of Husserl's project, a reconsideration that goes beyond Husserl himself. Hence, their second thesis, that new phenomenology is distinct from philosophical theology and *ergo* no theological turn happened. In response to Janicaud's theological turn, Simmons and Benson prefer to talk about *the new phenomenology*. Simmons had already used the term in "God in Recent French Phenomenology" (2008) and was probably the first to do so. New phenomenology appears subsequently in, for example, Tengelyi and Gondek's *Neue Phänomenologie in Frankreich* (2011). So, what is at stake in this counter metaphor?

Benson and Simmons argue that Janicaud is wrong not only in associating Marion, Levinas, Chrétien, and Henry with the theological turn but also in describing their respective philosophies as a specific movement that diverged from mainline phenomenology. Rather, they see new phenomenology not as a

⁵ Yates, "Checking Janicaud's Arithmetic," 89.

⁶ Simmons and Benson, *The New Phenomenology*, 7.

unified movement but as a “family,” a living philosophical tradition still in the making. Benson adds further that the debate is not really about the theological but about the nature and task of phenomenology.⁷ A similar argument can be found in the volume *God in France* (2005), edited by Peter Jonkers. The contributing authors unanimously assert that there is no theological turn. What happened was the unfolding of phenomenology as a philosophical discipline.

Nevertheless, family members, all be they different and unique, usually bear some family resemblance. Benson and Simmons are clear in suggesting that the family likeness arises from a common Heideggerian heritage (something already noted by Janicaud himself). Furthermore, they focus on excessive and liminal phenomena, and this is also why religion as a theme and theological vocabulary enter the discussion. Theology has a tradition of thinking excess in order to understand (*fides quaerens intellectum*). Phenomenology, however, refuses to accept the authority of transcendent revelation and sends thinking excess down to earth. This leads phenomenology not only to enlarging the phenomenal field but also to reconsidering intentionality, reduction, and the role of horizon.⁸

Despite the differing and even competing perspectives among the authors associated with the theological turn/new phenomenology, the golden thread can be identified as: (1) decentring the modern subject (i.e. the post-Kantian subject constituting the world and further disintegrating the Cartesian subject still present in Husserlian phenomenology); (2) favouring otherness and the intersubjective (i.e. intentionality loses its prime position; the external world becomes important and autonomy is interrupted by heteronomy); this leads, finally, to (3) thinking excessive phenomenality, and thus explains the train of thought which alongside religion is capable of excess, hyperbole, saturation, and even ruptures.

How, then, are we to deal with the theological turn? Simmons concludes that no such turn exists: Among phenomenologists, religion and the theological function as archive and, Simmons further argues, the theological heuristic enlarges the field of phenomenality and offers useful concepts for reconsidering relevant political and ethical terms; nevertheless, the *possibility* of the theological by no means inaugurates its *actuality*.⁹ With Janicaud, Simmons rejects apologetic and confessional concerns. Phenomenology must remain the illumination of experience, not the means of the sacred illumination of thought. In short, by its turn to the theological, new phenomenology offers an alternative ontology to modern metaphysics.

It should be noted, however, that this line of thought had already been presented, more than twenty years ago now, by Hent de Vries in his comprehensive work *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (1999). Without reference to Janicaud, de Vries argues that in the second half of the twentieth century we witnessed not a theological turn but a philosophical return to the religious. The religious archive provides the philosopher with a genealogy of ethically and politically relevant concepts. Jonkers adds that theology, as a heuristic, is a useful critical theory.¹⁰ One way or another, philosophers of religion seem to agree that phenomenology rigorously secularizes former theological topics:

Our suggestion is that the new phenomenologists have been interested not in God or religion *as such* but in exploring the ways in which non-intentional intuition may be possible such that there may be things given to consciousness that do not “appear” in any straightforward way.¹¹

The argument against theology, as presented in Janicaud, makes sense for philosophers who defend the relevance of the family of new phenomenology. This is what I describe as being with – *cum* – Janicaud. *Contra* Janicaud, however, it is suggested that new phenomenology is characterized not by the theological conversion of philosophy but by its renewal.

A critical account of Janicaud’s thesis in terms of *cum et contra* – the impermissibility of the theological within phenomenology; nothing like a theological turn ever happened – ultimately turns Janicaud’s

⁷ Benson, “Introduction,” 1–12.

⁸ Simmons and Benson, *The New Phenomenology*, 8.

⁹ Simmons, *God and the Other*.

¹⁰ Jonkers, “God in France,” 1–42.

¹¹ Simmons and Benson, *The New Phenomenology*, 74.

original analysis upside down: phenomenology does not suffer from theological imperialism but is liberated from the conceptual idolatry of metaphysics; there is no theological turn but rather a philosophical recuperation of theological topics and a philosophical understanding of the world in its immanence.

Interestingly, this *cum et contra* strategy is still present and flourishing in the Anglo-American reception of new phenomenology, much more so, in fact, than in France, perhaps because continental philosophers of religion have found in new phenomenology an alternative discourse to the predominant analytical philosophy and philosophical theology. In contrast to Plantinga-style philosophy, which privileges confessional allegiances, phenomenologists tirelessly stress that they always observe phenomena from below – from being-in-the-world. In other words, whereas analytical philosophy proudly crowns its efforts with its transformation into theology (and the philosopher becomes a theologian, even a “supreme” theologian as Plantinga once expressed it),¹² the continental tradition finds in the theological inspiration and critique for genuine exploration of human experience.

Interestingly, we shall note that almost all the participants in this debate are philosophers. True, most are working in departments with a strong or at least some theological affiliation; some even express their personal confessional allegiances. Nonetheless, even though they spend their time thinking of God, revelation, and religious experience, they appear to stand resolutely on the side of philosophy.

This observation leads to an often overlooked but important conclusion: after the theological turn, there is much debate on the nature of phenomenology but almost none on the definition of theology. Does the struggle between the theological turn and new phenomenology lead to a grave reduction of theology? Is this reductionism present both in Janicaud (dogmatism) and among continental philosophers of religion who favour the metaphor of new phenomenology (archive and heuristics)? Can we say, without further classification, that theology is merely a heuristic tool? Is hyperbolic language and sensitivity to liminal experience the only critical apparatus that theology offers to philosophers, enabling them to thematize that which seems to be beyond categories?

An ambition to become *new philosophers of theology* is clearly present among certain contemporary phenomenologists. Marion, for example, earned respect with his more theological works, at least in the international arena. More recently, Lacoste and Falque have moved between the two disciplines much more freely than did the older generation. My questions, then, are these: Is it helpful to perpetuate the endless debate about the theological turn as a normative category? Would it not be preferable if both parties stopped debating the legitimacy of the theological turn (formal discussion) and turned their attention to the current encounters between mutual transformations of the disciplines? In phenomenology, the state of play allows some philosophers to notice the relevance of theological inspiration. In philosophy of religion, its self-assurances regarding the absolute de-theologization of its agenda led the discipline into a crisis of its own identity.¹³ Finally, theology that ignores the most recent developments in phenomenology misses the opportunity to see, think, and understand its task in new terms.

3 A theological becoming of phenomenology

For Janicaud, the crucial problem is that phenomenology becomes a springboard to transcendence. In reply, Ian Leask argues that: “Phenomenology was never quite as neutral as Janicaud imagines it to have been, and there was never really *un tournant théologique*; rather, theology was always phenomenology’s hidden truth and animating centre.”¹⁴ In other words, an alternative perspective on the debate after the theological turn claims, contra Janicaud, that the theological turn never happened; and contra Janicaud once more, phenomenology and the theological have always been close cousins. For example, in *The Rigor*

¹² Plantinga, “Christian Philosophy,” 340–1.

¹³ Rose and Smith, “Hexing the Discipline.”

¹⁴ Leask, “Was There a Theological Turn,” 150.

of the Things (2012), an extended conversation with Dan Arbib, Marion rejects the theological turn with a similar argument and claims that there is a general and somewhat natural tendency in phenomenology to search approximations towards the theological.¹⁵

This is obviously something different from the position presented in Section 2: the position associated with philosophers of religion. The argument concerning new phenomenology claims that there is a phenomenological interest in liminal phenomena and phenomenality as such. The focus on thinking excess and the unapparent therefore leads phenomenologists to look for inspiration in religion and its theological vocabulary. However, phenomenological analysis remains, in Janicaud's words, methodologically orthodox while introducing a theological heuristic and archive into its explorations.

Tengelyi also opposes Janicaud's announcement of a theological turn in French phenomenology and suggests that what we are witnessing is a third form of phenomenology, following on from Husserl's transcendental inquiry (and transcendental reduction to objectivity) and Heidegger's hermeneutic thinking (and ontological reduction to being). Why, then, the interest in theology? Tengelyi explains that the authors accused by Janicaud are "interested in theological issues, but this interest by no means testifies a theological turn.... It rather arises from the insight that, in the post-Nietzschean era, some problems, which in earlier times could only be formulated in theological terms, can now be vindicated for philosophy."¹⁶ In other words, if the ultimate aim of analytical philosophy of religion is to turn itself into a theology *par excellence*, we see the reverse dynamic taking place in phenomenology: the theological becomes – quite naturally – part of the philosophical.

Moreover, and to continue answering the question as to why the theological interest enters the field of phenomenology, new phenomenologists turn from particular phenomena to the appearing of phenomena as such. They also analyse phenomena which clearly appear but at the same time "withdraw themselves from appearing."¹⁷ This is why they turn to the theological. In spontaneous phenomenality, they recognize an event (revelation):

The leading idea of this phenomenology is that the sense of meaning of a phenomenon cannot be reduced to a sense-bestowal by the intentional consciousness, because it arises from an interrelation, intertwinement, and even interpenetration with other senses or meanings.¹⁸

Tengelyi leaves the question open – "It remains, however, to be asked whether [the authors of the deemed theological turn] simply transgress the border between phenomenology and theology, or whether they succeed in removing and retracting it"¹⁹ – but engages with the efforts of Marion and Henry et al. with sympathy and affirms the natural inclination of phenomenology towards the theological. Even more radically, instead of using the pejorative and somewhat ironic label the theological turn, Tengelyi describes the development positively and suggests that new phenomenology offers "a radically renewed sense of theology – a sense made discernible only by phenomenology."²⁰

An elucidating perspective is offered by Jean Greisch, a philosopher with close knowledge of theology and of the original French context of the debate.²¹ Greisch agrees that Janicaud's diagnosis is, in principle, correct: phenomenology has a tendency towards the theological and this tendency unavoidably transforms phenomenology. In support, Greisch turns to Jean-Yves Lacoste, an author overlooked by Janicaud and whose writings indeed undermine any strict differentiation between the two disciplines. Lacoste calls for "the prudent abolition of boundaries and limits," and for acknowledgement that theology and philosophy partake in "the common tasks of thinking – and therefore thinking without boundaries."²²

¹⁵ Marion, *The Rigor of Things*, 126.

¹⁶ Tengelyi, "New Phenomenology," 298.

¹⁷ Ibid., 299.

¹⁸ Ibid., 301.

¹⁹ Tengelyi, "On the Border," 34.

²⁰ Ibid., 21.

²¹ Greisch, "The Same and the Other," 49–73.

²² Lacoste, *From Theology*, 82–3.

For Greisch, the disciplinary boundaries remain in place and are important, but phenomenology is under pressure to take seriously a broader phenomenal field: “This does not mean that the law of immanent description of phenomena will be undermined by transcendent premises borrowed from a particular theology or dogma, as Janicaud would certainly suspect.”²³ Greisch suggests that saying the theological turn contradicts phenomenological orthodoxy, and using Husserl to back this argument up, is unjustifiable. There is the published Husserl, free from religious and theological aspirations, but there is also the unpublished Husserl, including manuscripts that deal with theological questions.²⁴ One way or another, Greisch acknowledges the natural tendency of phenomenology towards the theological and therefore rejects Janicaud’s theological turn.

The mutual encounters between theology and phenomenology are a fact. Or as Emmanuel Falque once put it: “The famous theological turn in French phenomenology should not be viewed with suspicion but rather recognized and taken as given.”²⁵ In what sense should we understand this statement? Considering the number of mostly philosophical accounts which claim that nothing like a theological turn happened, it clearly needs some qualification.

I have suggested that Janicaud introduced, unwittingly perhaps, a *normative category* of the theological turn. This category is then adopted in the subsequent philosophical discussion and polemic. The normative category applies to both of the strategies presented above: *cum et contra* Janicaud, and the strategy I labelled a “theological becoming of phenomenology.” Nevertheless, in contrast to these two interpretations, I suggest that now is the time – three decades after the critique of the theological turn appeared – to start using the theological turn as a *descriptive category*. There is a stream of phenomenology which is open to theology. This phenomenology transforms itself in dialogue with the theological and also has the potential to transform theology. The theological turn does not necessarily mean the prescription of a phenomenological method. It could be taken as a challenge to move around freely within the boundary zone between theology and phenomenology, yet without denying the particular characteristics of each partner in the dialogue. To borrow from Falque once more, the theological turn as a descriptive category is a signpost to “crossing the Rubicon.”

4 Who is afraid of theology?

Janicaud’s insistence on a minimalist phenomenology is intriguing because it seems that Janicaud presents a clear, perhaps all-too-clear, vision of what phenomenology is and what it is not. In this respect, Benson’s argument that the theological turn/new phenomenology concerns the essence of phenomenology itself makes perfect sense. I would like to add, however, that the same could be said of the status of theology in Janicaud.

Janicaud’s *font deux* is much more than a problem for the theological inspiration of phenomenology. It is a problem for theology itself and even a problem for the possibility that phenomenology could assist theology. Why is this? Yes, Janicaud holds a reductive definition of theology, but he is not alone. The same perspective can be seen in other authors, mostly in philosophers of religion. How else are we to explain those authors’ need to pronounce their engagement with the theological turn/new phenomenology as strictly de-theologized? How shall we understand the controversy that followed Falque’s *Crossing the Rubicon*, with its central claim that “the more one theologizes, the better one philosophizes”?²⁶

²³ Greisch, “The Same and the Other,” 69.

²⁴ Ibid., 70.

²⁵ Falque, “The Collision of Phenomenology and Theology,” 216.

²⁶ Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 25; and also 151–52. The debate following Falque’s thought-provoking request for a new alliance between philosophy and theology is thoroughly mapped in Koci and Alvis, *Transforming the Theological Turn*.

Janicaud, as if suspecting the arrival of someone like Falque, writes: “The dice are loaded and the choices made; faith rise majestically in the background. The reader, confronted by the blade of the absolute, finds him- or herself in the position of a catechumen who has no other choice than to penetrate the holy words and lofty dogmas.”²⁷ This strikes me as the crux of the entire problem: theology is understood as a totalitarian and imperialistic sovereign which reduces the philosopher to an apprentice who needs to be introduced to the mystery of unchangeable eternal truths; whereas philosophy is an open, horizontal discourse rooted in history and thus free from bias, theology is a singular, vertical, discursive strategy which merely repeats ahistorical given truths revealed with ultimate validity. Without doubt, here is an echo of Heidegger’s critique of theology as a positive science.²⁸

Of course, some theology does present itself in this way. Lieven Boeve shows, for example, that the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, which addressed the relationship between philosophy and theology, could give the impression that theology is the master and philosophy the docile handmaiden.²⁹

Let us return to Heidegger’s famous essay “Phenomenology and Theology,” in which he argues that theology is a positive – ontic – science: the science of faith. For Heidegger, theology has its *positum*: the given content of its explorations. By contrast, the field of philosophy is open to any human question, so philosophy is not simply an *ontic* but an *ontological science*. Heidegger set the scene; the problem now has a life of its own.

For many scholars, the suggestion that theology is an ontic science implies that there is a positive content, that is, an authoritative volume of propositions *revealed* by God and accepted in *faith* by the theologian’s reason. In other words, the task of theologians is to unfold this ready-made content and to make it meaningful in a given time and space. However, the *positum* itself is ahistorical and immovable. This concept of theology is what lies behind Janicaud’s understandably wary critique regarding the theological turn in French phenomenology.

Heidegger may speak of theology as a positive, ontic science, but the way he presents the matter is not as schematic as it first appears, and it is often recuperated into theology, although with a victorious caveat: “Aha! You see! Even Heidegger claims that theology is objective science.”³⁰ For Heidegger, however, the *positum* of theology is not objectively given propositional content. What is it, then? What is given to theology to make it a positive science? But also, what prevents theology from being an objective science like any other ontic sciences?

Heidegger is in no doubt that theology belongs among the ontic sciences – only philosophy has the right to claim to be an ontological science, the science of being (*Sein*). He is equally clear, however, that theology is not an ontic science like, say, physics or biology. The foundation of theology is not objective content or axiomatic propositions, but faith: “Theology is constituted in thematizing faith and that which is disclosed through faith, that which is ‘revealed.’”³¹ What matters is the mode of being in believing, and thus partaking in the disclosed event of Christianity. Theology as the *science of faith*, Heidegger notes, is not objective knowledge of God. Theology as a positive science is a conceptual inquiry into Christian existence.³² The *positum* of theology is therefore *lived experience*, and the task of theology is to cultivate this experience. In other words, theology, in Heidegger’s sense, is about the ontic, but it is closely tied to the

²⁷ Janicaud, “The Theological Turn,” 27.

²⁸ We shall not forget that Janicaud was a scholar of Heidegger. And even though he accuses Heidegger to be responsible for inappropriate development of the theological turn, his critique is by no means the rejection of Heidegger’s thought in its totality. Janicaud has an issue with the late Heidegger, the Heidegger of the Zollikon Seminars where the unapparent, or alternatively the inconspicuousness, appears. Nonetheless, the early Heidegger, who demands the methodological atheism in phenomenology, is Janicaud’s principal source of inspiration.

²⁹ Boeve, *Theology at the Crossroad*, 112–35. However, to be fair, Boeve shows that even within the mentioned encyclical there is also another opinion; the one that is more hermeneutical, dynamic, historical, and open.

³⁰ This (pseudo-)scientific perspective on theology is fiercely defended by Torrance, *Theological Science*, and even more strongly criticized by Lacoste, *From Theology*, 64–8.

³¹ Heidegger, “Phenomenology and Theology,” 45.

³² Ibid., 48–9.

ontological. For this reason, Heidegger clearly differentiates between theology and philosophy (phenomenology) but at the same time argues that theology, as a positive science, the science of faith, needs philosophy as “the ontological corrective of the ontic.”³³ In other words, in order to maintain an autonomous and rigorous discourse, theology uses philosophical concepts that precede the notions deduced from faith, where faith is considered a mode of existence in the world and an undertaking of the world.

To summarize this excursus into Heidegger, we can suggest that despite a clear-cut division between theology and philosophy, and despite their essential differences, it is still possible – and even desirable – to build bridges between the ontic and the ontological. Heidegger’s critique is not a blueprint for the flawed apologetics of theological objectivity. The case against the onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics is a clear refutation of (mis)using Heidegger to defend the “hard” character of the science of faith:³⁴ “Theology can only render faith more difficult, that is, render it certain that faithfulness cannot be gained through the science of theology, but solely through faith.”³⁵

At one point, Heidegger proclaims: “Without this theological origin, I would never have arrived at the path of thinking.”³⁶ His *Phenomenology of Religious Life* explores the basic human experience and draws inspiration from a Christian way of life that offers protection from a certain type of objectifying manipulation with being *qua* being-in-the-world. In other words, in order to properly formulate the question of authenticity, Heidegger allows his phenomenological analysis to be transformed by engagement with the theological. This does not mean that he turns theology into philosophy. Rather, he adopts the task of thinking, which is common to both theology and philosophy, even though throughout history, these disciplines have tended to obfuscate rather than elucidate the fact that thinking is the task given to human beings.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the entire debate is not the formal discussion on the status of the theological turn but the relevance of this tendency within phenomenology for both phenomenology and theology. And since the phenomenological part is covered well and in detail – as I sought to show in Sections 2 and 3 while discussing a number of phenomenologists who critically elaborate on Janicaud’s critique and those who are criticized by Janicaud while pursuing philosophical ends – I will now turn to the task of theology after the theological turn, or rather to the question of where the theological turn leads theology.

5 The task of theology

I have referred to Benson’s opinion – undoubtedly shared by others in the field of philosophy – that the theological turn is, in fact, a debate about the nature, essence, and task of phenomenology. Here, I would like to suggest that to the same extent, perhaps even more so, the centre of gravity in this debate concerns the definition of theology.

Tengelyi readily sees new phenomenology as a catalyst for a radically renewed sense of theology – a sense that can be discerned only by phenomenology.³⁷ Falque challenges theology to allow itself to be liberated by philosophy (in his case, phenomenology).³⁸ In his preface to Lacoste’s *From Theology to Theological Thinking*, Bloechl defines phenomenology as the suitable and most fruitful *ancilla theologiae* of the day.³⁹ Finally, Wardley talks explicitly about the new philosophers of theology.⁴⁰

³³ Ibid., 53.

³⁴ Heidegger, “The Onto-theo-logical Structure of Metaphysics.”

³⁵ Heidegger, “Phenomenology and Theology,” 46.

³⁶ Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 96.

³⁷ Tengelyi, “On the Border,” 21.

³⁸ Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 151–2.

³⁹ Bloechl, “Eschatology,” vii.

⁴⁰ Wardley, *Praying to the French God*, 5–6.

The theological turn/new phenomenology draws inspiration from the theological, which is radically reinterpreted through a phenomenological lens. However, the original theological thoughts are less de-theologized than they are transformed and in their new version offered back to theology, for which they can have crucial relevance. Hence, the theological turn/new phenomenology not only enlarges the field of phenomenological exploration but also provides theology with a conceptual apparatus that can contribute to formulating rigorous theological positions.

John D. Caputo, otherwise a tireless critique of theology, the prophet of its doom, who once suggested that “today, nobody believes theology and for a good reason,”⁴¹ recognizes theological motivations in contemporary phenomenology.⁴² In the context of traditional, metaphysical (for which read onto-theological), ahistorical theology of objective truths, propositions, and objectivist knowledge (which is, in fact, a very modern conception of theology and a parody on Heidegger’s definition of theology as a positive science), Catholics were especially eager to follow the inspiration coming from phenomenology and existentialism. Edward Baring’s extensive historical study shows how creative, viable, and important was the intellectual encounter between phenomenology and the Catholic theological tradition.⁴³ Félix Murchadha adds that the authors associated with the theological turn were formed and heavily influenced by the tradition of *nouvelle théologie* in France and the developments issuing from the German-speaking world (Rahner, Balthasar, etc.),⁴⁴ the train of thought which became highly influential during the Second Vatican Council.

So, what happened in French phenomenology, and why is it relevant for theology? I suggest that the philosophers, almost all from a Catholic background, took seriously the challenge of Vatican II and its preceding theology to read the signs of times, to be firmly rooted in the world, and to scrupulously examine phenomena in order to develop a genuine interest in the human condition.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, after Vatican II, theology rapidly became stuck in a self-referential debate concerning ecclesiology, authority, and hierarchy. Pope John XXIII opened the windows and let in some fresh air, but the heavy smell of incense filled the church once more. Theology has failed to capitalize on the opening made by Vatican II, and what theologians all too quickly left behind, philosophers (with theological inspirations and aspirations) adopted as their own challenge. The theological turn can thus be understood as the continuation and unfolding of the progressive Catholic thought of the twentieth century, and also, in a sense, a parallel movement towards the Protestant existential theology that is deeply inspired by philosophy and driven by German theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich.

What we see, therefore, is a reverse movement to that in analytical philosophical theology. In the latter, the philosopher becomes a philosophical theologian whose endeavours are crowned by subordinating philosophical – human – thought to the epistemic authority of the revealed. This is also why, for example, Simmons and Benson are so fond of the distinction between theology and new phenomenology. Both disciplines have, in their opinion, distinct sources of epistemic authority immediately available to them: for phenomenology, it is experience; for theology, Scripture, tradition, and belonging to the confessional community. In other words, Simmons and Benson postulate the discursive openness of philosophy and the somewhat unequivocal obedience of theology to its sources. I am convinced that this view on theology is limited, wrong, and actually missing the most inspiring parts of theological thinking. In my view, the centre of gravity is not the epistemic but the hermeneutical. It is not right to claim that Scripture and tradition provide immediate evidence for theology. What Simmons and Benson actually mean is that in certain theological traditions (American Evangelicalism, for example), Scripture is the given fact which functions as an evidential source of authority. However, there are numerous theological hermeneutics and we should not miss these nuances. For example the Catholic perspective clearly recognizes the human as its starting

⁴¹ Caputo, “The Sense of God,” 27.

⁴² Caputo, “Continental Philosophy of Religion.”

⁴³ Baring, *Converts*.

⁴⁴ Murchadha, “The Passion of Grace,” 120.

⁴⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.

point. This does not displace Scripture and tradition but takes them as hermeneutical–phenomenological accounts of experience *coram et cum Deo*. However, unlike the Qur'an, for example, which is said to have been dictated verbatim, Christian sources, although inspired and ecclesiastically institutionalized, inhabit the intersection of the human and the divine. In other words, both the theological and phenomenological sources are firmly rooted in the world and as such call for constant (re)interpretations. The argument of clearly delineated epistemic authorities presents somewhat simplified vision of theology as a confessionally tied discourse. Moreover, this is not how the French authors associated with the theological turn understand it. Christian tradition is not only a reservoir of religious phenomena; it is also a philosophical perspective on being in the world and the hermeneutics of human existence.⁴⁶ To give an extra-theological example, for Jean-Luc Nancy, Scripture and tradition are authoritative but not tied to confessional alliances or immediate authority. Hence, in the theological turn of the continental philosophical tradition, the theological comes into discussion among philosophers who reinterpret and transform the theological and offer it back to theologians. Like the doctrine of the Incarnation, the theological comes into the world, walks on the earth, and gives itself in terms of the human *per se*. As such, the theological is worked out according to the available (philosophical) grammar. The theological turn offers this grammar, or competing grammars, to be used in theology.

I heartily agree with Joseph Rivera's suggestion that phenomenology says to us (theologians) that the key to everything is *experience*:

A renewed focus on the subjective structure of intentionality enables phenomenology to lift the given out of the empirical prejudice of sense-impression immediacy, without at the same time eliminating the given as a reality that truly gives data to the conscious mind. Theology provides data analogous to sense data. Theology names its data divine Revelation, a mode of manifestation in which God's self-disclosure obtains in texts, creeds, ritual and prayer. How it is experienced is a theme phenomenology can in principle explore according to the logic of intentionality, whereby texts and rituals (handed down to the community of faith) are appropriated only in faith by the individual.⁴⁷

In the midst of these reflections, Falque cries out: "We have no other experience of God but the human experience."⁴⁸ From the perspective of phenomenology, we can read Falque's words as marking the way to a philosophical approach to the question of God which cannot leave the sphere of immanence. But we are not done yet. Falque crosses the Rubicon and confronts the theologian. Like any philosophy that forgets the question of being, theology often loses sight of the fact that she has no other experience but the mediated human experience of being *coram Deo*.

Naturally, the difference between theology and philosophy is that theology does not settle for the possibility of thinking God but allows for the real existence of transcendence. However, this truism does not negate the weight of impassable immanence – something the theologian can and even should learn from the phenomenologist. With Falque, I dare to say that *being and time* is the first chapter of any theology that is not only rational but also credible. What comes first, Revelation or the world? Do we not encounter Revelation – make our experience with it – in the world? And, after all, is an interest in the book of revelation (*liber scripturae*) not instrumental to the ultimate goal of understanding the whole of the book of the world (*liber mundi*)?⁴⁹ What is the real task of theology? Achieving "scientific" knowledge of God, or the coming of God to mind? To gather and pass on knowledge of the experience of excessive givenness, or to care for the human *per se*?

I believe that exploring the boundary zone between phenomenology and theology will help us to emancipate ourselves from defining theology as a positive science. Such a theology remains in the clutches of Cartesian empiricism, or, worse, of pseudo-scientific positivism. The point is that theological data are

⁴⁶ The historical context which formed the theological turn in France and the broader religious turn in Europe is the era of the church's attempts, post-Vatican II, to formulate theologies from below, theologies of secularization, and so on. See, for example, McCaffrey, *The Return of Religion in France*; Koci, "The World as a Theological Problem."

⁴⁷ Rivera, "The Myth of the Given?," 184.

⁴⁸ Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 6.

⁴⁹ Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 43.

phenomena (mediated givens, not given immediacy). How often does theology forget this? I am convinced that the theological turn is capable of transforming theological practice, but equally that the task remains to be truly taken on.

6 Conclusion

Although some thirty years have passed since the appearance of Janicaud's book, all the evidence suggests that the debate is still with us. Differing claims exist regarding the theological turn in phenomenology: (1) no turn happened because from theology phenomenology merely draws heuristic inspiration and a conceptual apparatus; (2) no turn happened because phenomenology has always been naturally inclined towards the field of theology; phenomenology as the exploration of the human experience – lived experience – always begins from the given of being-in-the-world but is capable of ascending to an exploration of the human experience, which Lacoste would call *coram Deo*. (3) Finally, there is still Janicaud, who claims that phenomenology has been contaminated by the theological but also that this maximal, unorthodox phenomenology aspires to serve theology as its new *ancilla* and first philosophy.

When we consider the consequences of these three competing positions, we find in them very different perspectives on the relationship between theology and phenomenology. Respectively: in position (1) we see a one-way stream of inspiration from the theological archive to phenomenology (which is perhaps not surprising as this is the position favoured by philosophers of religion); position (2) describes a one-way theological becoming of phenomenology (which could justify some of Janicaud's warnings); position (3), however, allows for a two-way exchange between the disciplines – the theological enters into phenomenology, which is thus transformed and can in turn inspire and further transform theology. Paradoxically, it is Janicaud's critique which opens the door for a genuine encounter between disciplines that in his own scheme *font deux*.

Of course, Janicaud would not approve of this reading of his critical pamphlet; in fact, he has vast problems with the slightest possibility that phenomenology could help theology (and thus contribute to theological imperialism); nonetheless, it becomes clear once again that it is not the content of Janicaud's book but the reception of his critique that is most interesting in our situation after the theological turn.

It seems to me right to adopt the thoughts of the theological turn, critically reflect upon them, and turn them into the new philosophy of theology. The intention of the authors who write of the theological turn is highly constructive. They seek to go beyond theology as archive, to contribute to the fecundity of thought that simply cannot disregard the possibility of religious experience and experiential evidence of existing religions, and to equip Christianity – and theology – with conceptual tools that will boost its rigor and credibility.

Where are we after the theological turn? There is no need to see the theological turn – descriptive category – as a tragedy (Janicaud) or to develop a sophisticated apologetic against it, as do philosophers of religion. The major challenge after the theological turn is to think theologically on the basis of a phenomenological exploration of human experience and thus draw conclusions for theological reflection in terms of both doctrine and method.

The point is that there are *theological openings* in continental philosophy – the disciplinary distinction remains in place, but the open space allows for a blurring of the boundary. We need to focus not on the formal aspect of the debate (Did the theological turn happen?) but on the space between theology and philosophy. The two disciplines remain autonomous and follow their respective modes of procedure, but there is a space in which both theological and philosophical reasoning is present and where these two ways of thinking clash, or rather are engaged in a perichoretic dance, touching questions common to both disciplines – God, the Absolute, finitude, morals, human nature, and so on. This space of blurred boundaries is what will interest us in the future. It is a space where, to echo Falque's point about crossing the Rubicon back and forth, we can look for theological openings in philosophy and philosophical impetus in theology. Instead of protecting our respective theological and philosophical kinships, it would seem more

productive to dive into the space between, a space where (almost) anything is permissible, then bring it back to test it, apply it, and see whether we are truly on the path of thinking or merely replicating and parodying the other and making it conform to the standards of our own discipline.

If we do not engage seriously with the questions I posed in the introduction, we are missing a golden opportunity. Even worse, if I as a philosopher of religion or a phenomenologist interested in the theological turn do not take the theological seriously, if I do not see the relevance of crossing between disciplines, why should I talk about phenomena with a theological origin at all? Is it not then all just a game? To borrow from Falque once again, do we not proceed masked, hiding our interest in theology, an interest in thinking theologically and thus thinking better? And if I as a theologian with no choice other than to engage with philosophy in order to say anything reasonable, meaningful, and credible, if I reject the complex works of phenomenologists who clearly have theological interests or are reinterpreting concepts of high theological relevance; if I as a theologian think that I possess everything I need and have no need to look beyond the boundary, or to visit the other side of the Rubicon, what is my theology worth?

Acknowledgment: This article was written with the generous financial support of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) for the project “Revenge of the Sacred: Phenomenology and the Ends of Christianity in Europe” (P 31919).

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interests.

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