



Existential precariousness as an essential condition of understanding for religious experience in contemporaneity

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Abstract

This study deals with the ontological background reference of religious experience in general, and it aimed to demonstrate how our existential condition of finitude is imposed to understand the most varied forms of manifestations of religious phenomena that arise in the contemporary world. Thus, we will start from the distinction between a hermeneutic-phenomenological conception of the religious experience in its essence and the empirical approaches on its diverse concrete configurations. In the end, we will try to point out that the possibilities of apprehension of religious phenomena in general lack an existential element that is essentially constitutive for us, namely, the condition of the precariousness of the finite being faced with the opening of meaning that exceeds it in its horizon of transcendence. As general contribution, this way of understanding must foreclose every claim to make absolute a background meaning that should remain open as the most radical condition of possibility for the religious phenomena. For this, we will show, at first, how our existential condition as ephemeral beings requires an interpretative bias for the religious dimension circumscribed by the opening of the world in which we are launched and from which we build our feasible projects. Then, we will see how this delimitation of sense implies a fragmentation of the absolute conceptualization.

Keywords: Existential precariousness, religious experience; contemporaneity.

1. Introduction

For many modern scholars, the current metamorphoses of religious experience imply their permanence, because their apparent transformations - when compared to historically traditional forms - must be understood as strategies of adaptation to the contextualized ambience in time and space. In such a scenario, "religious phenomenon" would be a subsistent notion through any and all experiences that received from the subject or collectivity this denotation made possible by their sociocultural framework. In this way, the experiences of the phenomena considered as religious could not be referred to any kind of background epiphenomenon that transcends time and space.

Faced with this situation, researchers also question how we could establish a possible unitary reading key for the concept of religious experience, dispensing with references that go beyond the range of collections of the various pragmatic categories, through analytical procedures of objectively measurable data, in a strict way empirical, since this experience would necessarily imply a conception of the human person that should not be reduced or distorted by a functional or merely utilitarian rationality.

As a representation of one side of this conflict, we would have, still in synthetic terms, a substantive concept of religion that, on its part, brings with it the pretension of describing the intrinsic composition of a more general sense for the notion of religion that, in essence, does not depend on any external structural constructs, to which it must precede. A conception that in general is based

predominantly on the presupposition of a certain spiritual connection of the human with the transcendent elevated above our concrete reality, being determinant for it. In summary, it would be a question of thinking about religion from elements internal to the human spiritual condition.

In contrast, the functional concept of religion basically implies the conception of religion as a social ordering vector, operating as a giver and receiver of sense in relation to the historical-cultural ambience to which it is integrated, thus permeating the context of the world that embraces the subject from of their axiological references. The logic and validity of a religion must be justified and demonstrated with a view to plausible human demands associated with interpretative values and in accordance with certain life conducts. It is fundamentally a normative idea, which presupposes and establishes religion as a horizon of meaning in close correlation with the concrete parameters essentially constitutive of the social structure that encompasses the human person as a historical agent. Religious phenomena, in this context, would be all the manifestations to which we could attribute some religious connotation in terms of socio-cultural integration.

For our part, we think that an essential understanding of the religious phenomenon cannot be intended to escape entirely the limits of our existential condition circumscribed in a fundamental way to the horizon of finitude. The major milestone of this delimitation rests on the observance of the fundamental fact that "finitude clashes with the claim of the definitive, the absolute, the objectivity" [1].

To take as a central reference the precariousness of our finite understanding (limited in time and space) about religious phenomena in last instance is what we propose here as a fundamental presupposition. The primary acceptance of this condition implies the recognition of a certain radical impotence of human thought in the face of the projection of absolute determinations, through qualitative attributions whose intention is to adjudicate to religious experiences a specific prior formatting as its objectively maximum expression. In this proposal would rest our response to the current challenge posed by that

religious-secular dichotomy [...] that it leaves undeveloped or invalidated alternative reasonable discourses to enable people who reject religious discourse for any number of reasons, to give voice to or communalize shared ineffable experiences, existential challenges and ethical imperatives that are an integral part of everyday human experience [2].

The finitude sustains an opening of sense that becomes a condition of possibility for understanding the phenomena that constitute religious experience in general. It is from the suspension of the ultimate meaning that we can situate not only the different modalities of manifestation of the phenomena constituting the religious experience, but rather also the very possibility of being and not being of that experience, that is, of the presence and absence of the own religious sense that, in confrontation with other worldly phenomena and experiences, can always dynamically resize itself to the point of becoming fleeting in the face of attempts at apprehensions addressed to it.

The set of possibilities for the various forms of religious experiences marked by the sign of finitude is essentially committed to the phenomena of the world that make up the tessitura of totality of meaning in which our own horizon of existential understanding is enmeshed. Recognizing the very precariousness of finite understanding of religious phenomena in the last instance is what we claim here as an opening of sense that must be reported to the possibility of a fundamental experience. This experience is radicalized precisely by reaching the radical impotence of thinking in the face of the need for absolute determination about any objective attribution of the divine that intends to attribute reducing categories to it.

It is through the experience of this precariousness, arising from our insertion in a totality of the world that exceeds our finite capacity for the factual understanding of sensitive and intelligible data, that we understand that the opening of the meaning of being, in its essentially abyssal character, can become key from understanding to a sense of religious transcendence that exceeds our own factual condition, without, however, breaking with the same. We believe therefore that only from this ontological-existential basis will we be able to deal with a certain "religious facticity" that is not

restricted to the mere empirical-deductive dimension and that, at the same time, shows itself according to the horizon of religious sense of the contemporaneity. A scenario marked essentially by the fracture of the absolute, with which mortals, whether those of faith or, in a way, even unbelievers, have to constantly confront themselves while defining - not necessarily in a theoretical way! - its existential status beyond the merely empirical level, although always in a sensitive commitment to this. Perspective that, according to our specific proposal, must contemplate more closely our existential character of precariousness placed in a relationship of understanding with a conception of the divine from a horizon of renunciation about the ultimate sense of determination.¹

For this, however, our proposal, in previous formal terms, cannot be carried out freely abstracted from any relation with the empirical data, but must rather establish, in a propaedeutic way, that empirical ordinations in general need to be reported to their broader background condition, and of a delimiting character as a whole². We propose a questioning about the first condition of possibility of the phenomenon, without, however, claiming to stipulate a specific objectification for this opening of meaning in the last instance.

Conceiving religious experience as a radical index of human finitude itself, this understanding also fundamentally implies detachment from the perspective that sees the relationship between God and the human being as an isolated dimension of human life or as an inner experience in opposition to external attitudes [7].

2. Hermeneutics of finitude as a means of approaching the religious phenomenon

Empirical discernment has the function of proving the validity of a phenomenon in accordance with a certain elective criterion applied strictly to a specifically objective cut of the reality given immediately. On the other hand, phenomenological understanding, in a philosophical-existential sense, must fulfill the task of apprehending phenomena in general based on their supposed essential background dynamics.

Empirical sciences operate from certain objectifications of what their own spectrum allows to understand by "reality". They proceed from certain characteristics of the phenomena, without questioning the formal condition of their first possibility. Consequently, both in their method and in their constitution in general, they must start from the validity of the assumptions conditioned to their own concrete field of action, putting into practice an effectiveness restricted to their own constitutive bases.

In contrast, phenomenological openness as a condition of possibility for the meaning of phenomena is transcendental when understood basically as follows: it exceeds what it is, and cannot be reduced to any specific objectification. Given this fundamental opening character, this horizon of phenomenological sense cannot be made an "object" of knowledge, not at least in the strict sense of the term.

This shift in perspective would simultaneously make it possible to change the question by the essence of what would be the phenomenon substantiated for its modality of sense that occurs concretely from an opening of background meaning as a condition of hermeneutic possibility for the apprehensions and interpretations arising. If this form of understanding can now only be established from its modal character, the meaning of the phenomenon needs to be understood from its most radical dynamics, which can no longer be univocally fixed on a given object.

¹"The possibility that the own Being appears as the necessary precariousness of the gods" [3]. This precariousness is rooted in the very absence of the divinity. This is fundamentally because "sacred names are lacking" and what is characteristic of that lack must be understood precisely "through the experience of its origin, which is supposedly guarded by a reserve of the sacred and refuses a name of convenience to clarify it" [4]. Consequently, also the "gods", however, are not here thought of as the supreme, in the sense of metaphysical thought and poetry until then, but as belonging to the precariousness of Being" [5]. In such a way that, in reciprocity, "The Being is the precariousness of the gods" [6.]

²We would operate reductively if here we take uncritically as synonymes the mere general orderings of empirical data in the most technical sense of the term and the theoretical approaches of an analytical-empirical order that, according to precisely what we are proposing, can, in a broader sense, refer in a proper way to a treatment of the religious phenomenon, gathered in a key of understanding that is not guided only by cut out analyzes of a given reality!

As it cannot be defined in the last instance through a given objectively configuration, which is, however, through which the concrete reality takes effect, the phenomenon in question must also be necessarily investigated from its essential condition of openness of sense. Therefore, it must be recognized at the outset that such understanding, in its essential constitution, is not reduced to the modalities of knowledge that in general have their *modus operandi* based on the procedure of fitting the positive empirical data, which can be substantially verified in specific constructions or logical systems, previously determined. Such understanding is revealed as a condition of possibility for these forms derived from understanding that, in turn, become effective conditions for the phenomenological manifestation of this opening.

This phenomenological dynamic in a hermeneutic key would thus constitute a relational horizon between the empirical universe and a background sense that transcends it as a condition of open comprehensibility. To the openness of interpretive possibilities must be reported the various apprehensions realized in the factual horizon, which essentially constitutes a means of effecting the phenomena in general. This will require us to understand that the phenomena are not reducible to immediate data, precisely because they depend on a open field of previous sense, from which they receive their possible meanings.

What needs to be admitted, therefore, is that here there is no guarantee of a safe and univocal understanding of the phenomenon's underlying sense, but only limited apprehensions of certain phenomena situated within their contexts of interpretive possibilities. What, to a certain extent, goes against the modern "epistemological pathos"³. But that, on the other hand, does not contradict the condition of fundamental finitude of the human who understands only while projected in a totality of meaning that escapes him at last instance.

By applying this reading key to the current religious scenario, we understand better why most of the possibilities for new religious experiences that emerge in contemporary times, compared to traditional paradigms, are relatively abstract, subjective or even too vague for even the most refined empirical approaches to systematize them in an absolutely homogeneous framework. And yet, at least as it seems to us, these horizons of spirituality continue to constitute themselves in significant measures as essential components of the forces of a present reality, even though it can be seen as fragmentary or in a minimally concrete way, as they seem to still respond by certain functions or vectors of meanings essential for a resilient portion of human lives. These are experiences that do not allow themselves to be reduced entirely to the apprehension spectra that are applied to them, but that become objective in the action and in the existence of individuals, by delimiting, albeit in a relative measure, directions of life conduct.

Current alternatives for religious resignification can only - perhaps more than ever! - be minimally understood according to the inter-subjective perception of the other's view. The point is that this "other", launched in partitioned spheres of dynamically unstable realities, is only partially effective through its resolutions that clash with an opening of sense that far exceeds its capacity for finite apprehension of the phenomena in its totality of possibilities. That is why, in this scenario, insisting on wanting to treat faith as a belief in a "something" and, furthermore, seeking to analyze the epistemological plausibility of that belief escapes completely our proposal. This does not mean that we can only approach religious problems in general exclusively through a single method, but that even if we do need to apply in the end an analytical or scientific reading to them, we must not lose sight of the fact that, in the last instance, opening up the possibility for religious experiences in general rests, fundamentally, under the phenomenological-hermeneutic look [8].

In a complementary way, the notions still in force of "religion" - or even "religiosity" or "spirituality" - are rooted in a symbolic framework firmly planted through the great narratives of tradition in general. And as much as the today's forms of constitution of new religious sense show in the vast majority in an apparent disagreement with the guidelines of that tradition, it does not

³The form of procedure in question here would be better classified as being of an excessively "scientism" order than properly "epistemological"!

seem possible to understand them in depth detached totally from this tension with its previous plan, which precisely because of this conflict still remains as a reference for this very understanding.

Faced with this dilemma, the alternative of understanding that we want to suggest here rests on the following: how the essence of the religious phenomenon in general must be understood need to be necessarily reported to a fundamental existential plane. This framework should have as a crucial reference the experience of precariousness essentially constitutive of our own condition of finitude which, limited in time, that is, in its historical context, has its horizon of transcendence marked by a determined relationship of denial or refusal of the divine. Negation that, however, should not, in a superficial and stationary way, relapse only in to reductive judgments such as "relativism of values", "religious indifferentism", "fragmentation of beliefs", "atheistic revolt", among many others; but rather to be redirected to a horizon of open possibilities that corresponds precisely to the suspension of any and all pretensions to determine absolutely (through universal categories) a meaning for the background opening of religious experience in general.

3. Openness of meaning as a dilution of the absolute in contemporaneity

What becomes a phenomenon must first be preserved by its own possibility of manifesting itself. For the appropriation of this possibility, phenomenology is necessary: "we need phenomenology because the phenomena are not given immediately" [9]. The phenomena are *not* given immediately because they depend on a previous field of sense from which they receive their possible signification. These meanings are embraced by empirical sciences in general, while it is hermeneutic phenomenology that turns to that opening of sense as a condition of possibility for the whole phenomenon. It's in these terms that phenomenology requires a kind of "step back" before the sciences in general.

As the condition for the possibility of phenomena must remain open, this requires us to understand that a significant part of a phenomenon, that is, its own source of meaning, is not at all apprehensible. Consequently, that its first ground is denied in order not to be reduced to a specific configuration. Hence, metaphysics or theology in the strict sense cannot be treated here.

Faced with this key of understanding, traditional forms of knowledge can only find their validity insofar as they allow themselves to be put at stake in the face of what exceeds them. It is through this limitation, in fact, that we believe that phenomenological understanding can be placed in a certain link with the empirical sciences. For it is precisely from this confrontation that hermeneutic understanding must also assume the impossibility of taking over its own foundation as its condition of possibility. It must retreat before what exceeds it. And insofar as it's forced to retreat, it also opens the way for what overpasses it. It's thus launched in the very crisis of knowledge that tries to say the phenomenon in its openness, in its abyssal transcendence. And we can only approach that distance as long as it remains preserved as such.

Therefore, this understanding proposed here, in a broader sense, must assume a risk of disparity that is constitutive of the very essence of the phenomenon that, as a possibility, can also be put on hold, thus betraying any claim to univocity. In a somewhat propaedeutic way, we believe that it is from this perspective that hermeneutic phenomenology can contribute to broaden the spectrum of understanding of the empirical sciences. Forms of scientificity that, acting in isolation, seem to us to present a strong tendency to sediment the field of meaning interpretation with an increasing exacerbation of the degree of factual objectivity that aims at the search for absolute security through the prescriptive use of an analytical and instrumental rationality.

In contrast, the purpose of the hermeneutic appropriation of this whole circle of understanding is to prepare the possibility that especially the status of the essence of the religious phenomenon can be understood fundamentally from an instance that refuses as such so that certain religious senses are made possible from that retreat movement. At the moment when we can think of this essence based on this retraction dynamics, then we will be ready to assume this reserve as a depository of possible meanings.

When projecting - reactively to the traditional horizon of empirical research - the origin of the religious experience beyond the limits of the measurable, a present ethos is stripped that

becomes fragile or unstable in the face of the intention of sustaining conceptions of the deity through certain objectifications of absolute sense.

The postulate of a certain primacy for the existential aspect in the approach of the religious field should not be intended to exclude the empirical constituents of this dimension, since the axis of existential understanding must be guided precisely by this transit, since it is the major reference of existentialism here taken as a basis precisely the conception of a being linked to the factual world, from which it cannot be detached due to its finite condition, but also to which it must not be limited due to its horizon of transcendence of sense.⁴ It's this overlap that we understand to be at the background of the clashes of religious vectors that emerge in contemporaneity.⁵

In this scenario, the very concept of God can no longer be unilaterally apprehended. It must now be reported to concrete existential conditions, in such a way that religious experiences come to precede - or even to revoke, in certain cases - the traditionally a priori conceptions of absolute and universal values.

According to what we try to reiterate, there is not here, contrary to what can be led to think immediately, a hostile opposition or even a complete detachment about the empirical approaches of the religious universe, since also the scientific conceptions in general turned to this field are limit, as a rule, to dealing with the relation of man with those elements that he himself understands as having a religious meaning.⁶

It's undeniable that this proposal presented here as a key to reading proves to be subordinate to the horizon of understanding prevalent in contemporaneity. This is basically because the notion of religious experience in force in many postmodern contexts is no longer a necessary response of the integral subject to the conception of an ultimate reality, losing, at the same time, the exclusive status of the most powerful or intense experience of this subject, thus diluting its imperative of ineluctable driving actions. And even in fundamentalist scenarios or in claims of absolute radicalization of religious beliefs, what we have today is precisely the imposition of the impossibility of fully implementing these postulates of faith through the very conflicts directed between them. A situation that, in our view, would reinforce our thesis of fundamental human precariousness as a condition of possibility for the religious sense in general today, since what the limitation of our finite understanding requires is the importance of not confusing representations of the real with the very opening of possibilities from which the phenomena that give rise to these specific configurations emanate.⁷

⁴The possibility of faith that subsists here, in basic terms, is as follows: "Faith is what makes it possible to perceive the unconditionality present in conditioned accomplishments" [10].

⁵"However, this complicates the lives of those who prefer to see reality as if it had rigid boundaries between values, ideas, people. Which often makes the experience of the other destitute as alienated, superficial, cheap, spectacle, in alleged opposition to a legitimate experience, more true, purer than the others, less corrupted by the world and its attractions. A sweet illusion. These aspects are mixed in all the experiences, making it a challenge and a interpellation to the millenary and not very flexible structure of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy, entangled in theological disputes, carrying an incredible diversification" [11]

⁶"The subject does not meet the numinous in a state of ontological nudity, but rather does it with the clothes provided by a set of knowledge that enable the constitution of this symbolic-existential connection" [12].

⁷We know that, in the case of an extremely multifaceted universe, we cannot split the "postmodern reality(ies)" into just two exclusive poles of meaning! However, what we take here as a central field of action on this specific issue is basically constituted by two possible interpretative paradigms that seem to us to be understood as significantly in force and relatively agglutinating in the fragmentary horizon of contemporaneity!

4. Conclusion

The existential condition of the finite being meets the religious experience insofar as the mortal must be understood as being launched into a world of phenomenic senses that exceeds it in apprehensible totality. This fundamental way of being in the world constitutes an opening to everything possible that cannot be reduced to a single experience, nor can it be objectified through a single definitive configuration.

The dimension of refusal that opens up through this modality of understanding the horizon of transcendence constitutes a fracture or a kind of relational hiatus that needs to be understood as the margin of action for an experience of precariousness in the face of the abyssality of totality of possible phenomena in the last instance. The new religious or spiritual movements that in general are configured through the most varied concrete modalities present in the contemporary world must, therefore, be fundamentally related to a certain underlying perception of human insufficiency. And it's extremely important that such an analysis, in its existential background, goes beyond any evaluative references, since these only find their possible and relative legitimacy in the midst of social, historical and cultural contexts that is, from reality derived from the phenomenological horizon.

Understood under this reading key, the emergence of new religious or spiritual movements, as well as their resulting deregulating effects of traditional parameters, may allow the resignification of a wide potential for creating meanings or ways of being in the world through the most varied experiences in addition to those that traditional religious institutions historically intended to direct and objectify in a univocal manner through their discursive rationalities of absolutist pretensions. From this perspective, contemporaneity would become a fertile ground for the subsistence of new religious alternatives that would carry in their essence a constant dynamic of revitalization of possibilities of open senses collected in a horizon of transcendence of irreducible background as such.

End Notes

- [1] Wilhelm Wachholz. In: CRUZ / MORI: *Teologia e ciências da religião*, p. 210.
- [2] HORSFIELD: "Rethinking the Study of 'Religion' and Media from an Existential Perspective", p. 55.
- [3] HEIDEGGER: *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, p. 485.
- [4] HEIDEGGER: *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, p. 232.
- [5] HEIDEGGER: *Besinnung*, p. 231.
- [6] HEIDEGGER: *Besinnung*, p. 255.
- [7] Walter Salles. In: SOUZA: *Teologia em diálogo*, p. 114.
- [8] See STUMP: *Wandering in Darkness*, p. 27.
- [9] HEIDEGGER: *Sein und Zeit*, p. 36.
- [10] GROSS: "O conceito de fé em Paul Tillich", p. 22.
- [11] SILVEIRA: "Pluralidade Católica: um esboço de novos e antigos estilos de crença e pertencimento", p. 169.
- [12] LUDUENA: "Dos Experiencias Místicas do lo Numinoso", p. 111.

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