

BOOK REVIEW

## Joseph Rivera and Joseph S. O’Leary (eds) *Theological Fringes of Phenomenology*

(London: Routledge, 2024). Pp. xii + 248. £108.00 (Hbk.) ISBN: 9781032472119

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(Received 1 August 2024; accepted 1 August 2024)

*Theological Fringes of Phenomenology* is one of the latest volumes within the wider movement known as the ‘theological turn in French phenomenology’. The collection contains four parts bringing together twenty-two essays, which are written by a wide variety of scholars – emerging, mid-career, and emerita – from around the globe: Australia, South Africa, USA, and Europe. A pro and con of the essays is their length, each being roughly eight to ten pages. The pro is that each essay is short, to the point, and doesn’t drag on, allowing readers to get a glimpse of a specific theme or phenomena at the confluence of theology and phenomenology; the con is that some essays feel under-developed, or in some cases I was just hoping for more! As I don’t have nearly enough space to comment adequately on even close to twenty-two essays, I will highlight a few that I think are exemplary.

Part I is titled ‘Phenomenologists in Theological Mode’, and includes six essays that focus on the two fathers of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, as well as Michel Henry. They all aim, in various ways, to bring to light the relationship between phenomenology and religious experience, and especially to locate this in these key phenomenological thinkers. Essays by James G. Hart, Emmanuel Housset, and Maria Villela-Petit all examine Husserl, and all hang around the idea of *telos*. In Hart’s essay, comparisons are made between Husserl, Aquinas, and Blondel on a motivating force: whether the ‘Good’, ‘First Truth’, or ‘God’ (Aquinas), ‘Action’ and the ‘willing will’ (Blondel), or ‘universal voluntarism’ and ‘God’ (Husserl), all thinkers conceive of a divine entelechy that is both immanent and transcendent to the individual subjectivity/consciousness. Frédéric Seyler’s ‘From Love to Auto-affection’ looks at the connection between Michel Henry and Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Through a reading of Fichte’s 1806 *Religionslehre* and then Henry’s reading and development of Fichte in his 1963 *The Essence of Manifestation*, Seyler shows that religion is central to life. However, whereas Fichte separates loving and knowing and does not account for the appearing of love, Henry conceives of auto-affection as an immediate knowledge or appearing of love, and thus ultimately as a manifestation of the absolute.

Part II, ‘Theological Themes’, which Rivera says is the ‘conceptual and thematic heart of the volume’ (11), explores some key Christian theological themes: incarnation, resurrection, ritual practices and liturgy, grace, patience, suffering, and joy. Christina Gschwandner

and Bruce Ellis Benson both examine liturgy and practice, areas that are increasingly coming under the purview of philosophy, and phenomenology in particular. Gschwandtner lists three ways that ritual is ripe for phenomenological analysis:

it is more open to phenomenological reduction than other types of religious experience, it is more available for categorical intuition and imaginative variation because of its repeatability and highly sensory manifestation, and it is a communal experience that protects against some of the charges of idealism and mere subjectivity often lodged against phenomenological analysis (100).

Although all religions have their doctrines, dogmas, and texts – the traditional foci for theology and philosophy of religion – what is more common and ‘everyday’ is ritual experience, which is a phenomenon that comes in all shapes and sizes, and the analysis of which can reveal a lot about the religious tradition and the human being. In his piece, ‘Becoming Living Works of Art’, Benson highlights that liturgy is ‘the work of the people’ in the sense that the purpose of liturgy is to shape people into works of art themselves. Art, then, both generally but certainly as used liturgically via icons, vestments, music, and so on, ‘is not something “tacked on” to life’ but that ‘flows from us precisely because we ourselves are works of art’ (116).

The focus of Part III is ‘Phenomenological Readings of Theological Classics’, and contains essays examining four Christian theologians: Augustine, Denys the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, and Karl Rahner. Looking at figures like Augustine and Eckhart phenomenologically is nothing new, as Heidegger did so a hundred years ago. Ysabel de Andia’s essay summarizes how Edith Stein, Jean-Luc Marion, and Jacques Derrida all drew on or had affinities with Pseudo-Dionysius, especially as it concerns symbolic and apophatic/negative theology. The rather different piece in this section is the one by Peter Joseph Fritz that explores the possibility of reading Karl Rahner as a phenomenologist – something that has been looked at before by others, but that definitely is not in the mainstream of discussion around phenomenology and theology. Rahner had been a student of Heidegger, and early works of his critically engaged with Heideggerian thought and sought out different avenues. Ultimately, Fritz conveys that ‘a Rahnerian phenomenology, should there be one, would ... effect a dual reduction to Mystery (God) and to experience of mystery through human imagination and affect’ (197–198).

The final part, ‘Reaching out beyond the Theological Enclave’, contains four essays that seek to go beyond the Judeo-Christian perspective. In the Introduction, Rivera duly acknowledges that the rest of the essays in Parts I–III have a Judeo-Christian perspective, and says that he and co-editor O’Leary had sought out contributions that focussed on other religious traditions (e.g., Buddhism and Judaism) and phenomenology; however, Part IV contains only one essay on a religion other than Christianity: Hinduism. (This piece of data continues to reveal how closely connected phenomenology and Christianity are.) In her essay ‘Hinduism and Phenomenology’, Olga Louchakova-Schwartz tries to find some touch-points between the two. While both Hinduism and Western philosophy/phenomenology have reductions and ontologies of consciousness, the ‘extremely heterogeneous, symbolic, and ritualistic consciousness’ of the former puts it at odds with the ‘natural/scientific attitude’ of the latter (244). The rest of Part IV contains essays of a more general ‘religious’ nature: one looking at the notion of ‘religion without religion’, one that tries to disambiguate the use of ‘phenomenology of religion’ in phenomenology, theology, and religious studies, and an essay that examines the ‘god phenomenon’ and its appearance via human invocation. Although the content of this section was interesting, I am a little stumped as to

why in a collection focussed on the *theological* fringes of phenomenology, there would be a whole part dedicated to 'reaching beyond theology'.

I want now to raise a few points of critique. I first have a minor point: in his Introduction, Rivera refers to the first essay as an 'opening salvo' (10), suggesting that the rest of the essays are also part of the salvo. But why this violent and militaristic language? The essays do not conform to this, nor should they: the best phenomenology may involve some critique, but it need not (especially if it focusses on the rallying cry of 'to the things themselves'), and when it does it need not come as an overwhelming barrage, what is implied by 'salvo'. But this might be quibbling over a word. On a more major note, I wonder about the conceptual framework of the collection. In their initial Acknowledgements section, the editors convey that part of their stated aim is that the collection will lead to dialogue that 'will hopefully open more questions than it resolves' (xi). I think that the editors are safe in their hope that there will be more monographs and edited volumes coming out on or by members of the 'theological turn' and the relation between phenomenology and theology. This volume, then, does well to keep the 'theological turn' turning, as it were. However, I wonder about the use of the term 'fringes' in the title of this collection: *Theological Fringes of Phenomenology*. Fringes are obviously borders and edges, and in his Introduction, Rivera does inquire as to 'just what constitutes the boundaries of phenomenology' (2). Yet he goes on to say that the boundaries are fuzzy at best. Indeed, the essays overall, and especially those that look at Husserl and Heidegger, point to the same thing, that the religious, theological, and even explicitly Christian ideas and phenomena, are core dimensions – that is to say, not 'fringes' – of phenomenology, and that phenomenology is the appropriate philosophical tool to analyse all experience. Now those (methodologically?) atheist phenomenologists may push back at these claims, and their pure vision of what phenomenology is, which of course would lead to more 'salvos', and firm borders that would have their fringes. The authors here, though, argue compellingly for the centrality of theology/religion to phenomenology, rather than its being on phenomenology's fringes.

Overall, *Theological Fringes of Phenomenology* presents readers with easy access to current questions and responses to the relation between phenomenology and theology. Although the essays are written quite accessibly, the content of the essays will still likely appeal primarily to those graduate students and academics working directly on these figures or this fairly niche field.