

Faith as Experience: A Theo-Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract

This text proposes an analysis of the phenomenon of faith in the tradition and spirituality of the Eastern Church. Starting from the relationship between phenomenology and theology, the article uses a theo-phenomenological method to depict the phenomenon of faith both theologically and phenomenologically. This article also argues that non-religious faith—either natural or philosophical—is the foundation of religious faith. According to Orthodox spirituality, faith is not reduced to a set of theoretical teachings and dogmas; they constitute only the first type of faith, “simple faith”. At the same time, faith is also a form of experience, which has ascetical, ethical, and mystical dimensions; they characterize the second type of faith, faith as contemplative sight and knowledge.

Keywords: Faith, Orthodox spirituality, religious experience, Eastern Orthodox Church, theo-phenomenology

Phenomenology and Theology: Theo-Phenomenology as a Method

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE (which we will discuss in this article, distinguishing it from a phenomenology of religion¹) inevitably has to do with faith understood *as experience*, as a “non-intellectualized phenomenon”², in line with Kierkegaard’s assessment that “faith is a

¹ This distinction refers to that between philosophy of religion and philosophy of religious experience, see Emmanuel Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology*, trans. Reuben Shank (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 104.

² Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch, and Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 245.

passion".³ There are phenomena more visible and more relevant to the religious experience than the set of ideas that constitute the core of faith; that theological, doctrinal core, which is perhaps the furthest one from a phenomenological approach. However, even if we were to admit the primacy of experience—a view supported by the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which we will present below—the importance of faith remains.⁴ In Orthodoxy, faith is inextricably linked with experience, according to a principle that could be worded as follows: different theological doctrines lead to different mystics, and vice versa. Therefore, a question about a phenomenology of religious experience must necessarily pass through an analysis of the *phenomenon* of faith. Nevertheless, two questions arise: is there a risk that phenomenology might become theology? Also, isn't religious faith merely a particular and external, often *inexperienced*, adherence to a set of norms and ideas that its adherents support unconditionally and try to impose as truth?

To answer these questions, we will first make use of the way in which faith appears as a general human phenomenon, not as religious faith. Thus, we will start from a phenomenology of philosophical faith, and then we will move on to religious faith. Instead of speaking *theologically* about a particular faith, we will describe the phenomenon of faith starting from what it means to every human being in its *phenomenological* universality. We will accept that every human being understands and knows from his or her own existence what it means to *believe*, even if this knowledge does not involve the religious dimension. Then, after a phenomenology of philosophical faith, we will approach religious faith to find out what makes it unique and different from the common experience of non-religious faith, while also trying to understand whether phenomenology can be useful to such a discourse and in what way. A description of the phenomenon of Christian faith involves exploring the intersection between the realms of phenomenology and theology.

There are several strands to the *phenomenology* of religion, as we have already noted: that of religious studies, which looks for common patterns in different religions; that of Husserlian philosophy, which engages

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Frică și cutremur* [Fear and Trembling], trans. Leo Stan (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2002), 134.

⁴ Cristina Gschwandtner, in a remarkable phenomenology of the Holy Liturgy, agrees with the importance expressed by one of the Desert Fathers, who accepts every accusation except that of heretic, Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Welcoming Finitude: Toward a Phenomenology of Orthodox Liturgy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019). However, she does not introduce a chapter on faith, precisely because of the departure from phenomenology that such an approach would entail, as she explains in Christina M. Gschwandtner, "Philosophy and Theology. Again. Two Attempts at a Response," *Crossing: The INPR Journal* 2 (2021). In what follows, we will go on a different path, in which faith will also be understood as *experience*, even if it is expressed through theoretical teachings (dogmas).

religion; and that of the theological turn of French phenomenology, which argues for a phenomenology of religious experience.⁵ Focusing on faith in the tradition of the religious experience of the Orthodox Church, our article engages in a dialogue particularly with the third direction, looking to highlight the specificities of religious phenomena and the appropriate methodology for letting these phenomena speak for themselves, as required by a principle of phenomenology. Without a doubt, the theological dimension will enrich the phenomenological one without confusing them, because to remain only within phenomenology means to risk an impoverishment of the understanding of religious phenomena. Our method will, therefore, be a theo-phenomenological one⁶, to ensure that we do not lose the deeper meaning of religious phenomena by remaining only within the realm of philosophy, thus ignoring the warning of Avva Diadochos of Photiki: "For nothing is so destitute as a mind philosophizing about God when it is without Him".⁷ What will prove relevant, however, will be the connection between faith and religious experience in the case of the Orthodox Christian tradition. And, since a phenomenology of religion needs either empathy towards the phenomenon of faith or towards faith itself to be edified, we will continue our discourse from the perspective of faith. Our view is that a phenomenology of religious experience becomes, in this case, *theo-phenomenology*; in other words, a phenomenological theology that accepts decisive theological premises in order to better and more adequately understand the religious phenomenon that it describes.

Let us consider once again the usefulness of theo-phenomenology.⁸ The existence of religious phenomena is indisputable. For example, an Orthodox liturgy highlights a series of phenomena that can only be understood through a proper theological hermeneutic. The question that arises, then, is whether the concern with religious phenomena remains phenomenological or whether it has already become theological.

⁵ Christina M. Gschwandtner, "What is phenomenology of religion? (Part I): The study of religious phenomena," *Philosophy Compass* 14 (2019).; Christina M. Gschwandtner, "What is Phenomenology of Religion? (Part II): The Phenomenology of Religious Experience," *Philosophy Compass* 14 (2019).

⁶ The term "theo-phenomenology" is borrowed from Natalie Depraz, and Frédéric Mauriac, "Théo-phénoménologie I : l'amour – Jean-Luc Marion et Christos Yannaras," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 74, no. 2 (2012). The major relations between theology and phenomenology can be different, from exclusion to partial overlap (Nicolae Turcan, "The Phenomenology of Prayer and the Relationship between Phenomenology and Theology," *Religions* 14, no. 1 [2023]).

⁷ Sfântul Diadoh al Foticeii, "Cuvânt ascetic" [Ascetical word], in *Filocalia*, vol. 1, (București: Humanitas, 2013), 313, par. 7.

⁸ Another description can be found in Nicolae Turcan, "Religious Call in Eastern Orthodox Spirituality: A Theo-Phenomenological Approach," *Religions* 11, no. 12 (2020), 4–5 In relation to this first description, we now offer a clarification of the term, emphasizing the methodological dimension of theo-phenomenology.

The solution cannot be formulated without considering at least two elements that have been related to phenomenology ever since its inception: (1) the noetico-noematic dimension and (2) the transcendental *ego*. (1) Let us begin with the former, which refers to the contents present in our intentional consciousness and to the processes of access. A religious phenomenon cannot be understood in its non-phenomenological dimension in the absence of a theology that explains it. However, it is no less true that such a phenomenon *arises* for the consciousness of the believer. Even if a miraculous phenomenon, for example, does not appear for all, but only for certain believers, it is no less true that the appearance is still an appearance, which means that it can be analyzed from a phenomenological point of view, provided that such an analysis accepts the revealed, superrational dimension, even when it cannot decide on its truth.

Let us divide, therefore, phenomena into phenomena which occur to *any* consciousness—a *general*, non-religious *phenomenology* usually deals with these—and phenomena which occur only to people worthy of receiving them; mystical phenomena par excellence, some of them invisible to the eyes of others. There is an undisputed phenomenological dimension in the latter, which we might call *regional phenomenology*. This might reveal something about the ways in which these phenomena appear. Given that they cannot be understood without recourse to theology and faith, they are phenomena with a double dimension, theological and phenomenological alike; a *theo-phenomenology* can deal with them. Thus, theo-phenomenology would be the method that applies intentionality, hermeneutics, as well as theological and phenomenological methods in order to best describe a religious phenomenon. The goal is the same: to describe the phenomenon in the best and most adequate way. (2) In this case, an important issue related to the status of the *ego* arises: how could an *ego* that has nothing to do with religion adequately describe a religious phenomenon? Is there not a risk of impoverishing it through misunderstanding? Is a form of empathy enough or is the existence of faith even more appropriate? In other words: should the religious phenomenologist be doubled by the theologian? Our answer is affirmative: only someone who experiences faith and, at the same time, knows the phenomenological method can describe a religious phenomenon in a satisfactory manner. The theo-phenomenological method therefore implies the use of both phenomenology and theology, because, as Natalie Depraz points out, both are legitimate gestures of reason that can enrich understanding and bring greater accuracy to the description of religious phenomena.⁹

⁹ Natalie Depraz, *Corpul slăvit. Fenomenologie practică plecând de la Filocalie și Părinții Bisericii* [The Body in Glory. Practical Phenomenology from Philocalia and the Church Fathers], trans. Maria Cornelia Ică jr (Sibiu: Deisis, 2022), 336–37.

The Phenomenon of Philosophical Faith

Faith as a Phenomenon of Anticipation

As a universal phenomenon, unrelated to religious experience, the phenomenon of faith has to do with what is not fully manifested, with what is *still* invisible, with what has not been fulfilled yet. Given that to believe does not mean to know, the phenomenon of faith reveals itself as a phenomenon of anticipation, in which time plays its part. When faith comes true, it becomes knowledge. Involved, therefore, in gnoseology itself, in the manner of the project, of the hypothesis, faith opens up a horizon in which knowledge can be acquired either as a confirmation of anticipation or as a refutation of it. In all his projects, man is committed to the belief that they can be achieved—which is why he does not doubt this belief, nor does he question it.¹⁰ On the other hand, belief as a preliminary energy of the project vanishes once the project is either accomplished or abandoned.

From an existential perspective, faith is part of the ontological structure of the *Dasein* and accompanies any project as an affective disposition towards authenticity or inauthenticity. Unsurprisingly, it is portrayed in Heidegger's writing in the everydayness of the *Dasein* and in its authenticity, although it has a greater weight in the latter.¹¹

Following phenomenological reduction, the noematic content of consciousness involves a series of invisible sides, which are in turn anticipated, assumed, waiting for experience to fill them and to confirm them. Faith finds its place in this expectation of confirming or denying the invisibility of phenomena; it is precisely this intentionality towards what is *still* invisible, only to gradually disappear with the certification of experience and the arrival of the phenomenon to visibility; it is "faith as an eye"¹², which ensures the "seeing" of the unseen. Certainly, there are phenomena for which the visible does not replace all that is invisible, phenomena that involve mystery or lack of knowledge. They can be affirmed as "negative certainties"¹³ and may contain forms of belief that cannot be eliminated.

As existential, faith anticipates that an essential characteristic of the *Dasein*, which is now only a mere supposition or desire, will come into being in the near or distant future, following an appropriate path. A

¹⁰ St. John Damascene, after stressing the importance of faith for both human and spiritual matters, defines faith as "an assent that does not isolate things". Sfântul Ioan Damaschin, *Dogmatica* [Dogmatics], trans. D. Fecioru (București: Scripta, 1993), chap. XI.

¹¹ See Martin Heidegger, *Ființă și timp* [Being and Time], trans. Gabriel Liiceanu, and Cătălin Cioabă (București: Humanitas, 2002), §§ 54, 60, 62.

¹² Petru Damaschinul, "Învățăături duhovnicești" [Spiritual Teachings], in *Filocalia*, vol. 5, (București: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, 1976), 31.

¹³ Jean-Luc Marion gives us this phrase in *Certitudes négatives* (Paris: Grasset, 2010).

“becoming into being”¹⁴ as Noica put it, which would be impossible without the horizon of faith, because the possibility of such a becoming opens up precisely within this horizon. One could say that any horizon of possibilities involves a belief that they have a chance of materializing.

Belief in the reality and rationality of the world

The generality of the phenomenon of faith concerns the *world* that we have consciously or unconsciously constituted over time, particularly our belief in its reality. “Is it therefore possible to *hypothesize* that all things around us exist?”¹⁵ Wittgenstein wondered. Few doubted this, but philosophy is the field in which the most unusual questions are asked. There were, for example, the questions of skepticism, which challenged this confidence in the existence of the world, deeming it unwarranted. What Descartes offered through his *cogito* was precisely the certification of the existence of *the ego* and, with the help of God, the certification of the existence of the world.¹⁶ To Heidegger, the modes of being of the *Dasein* presuppose a belief in a certain rationality that precedes us and, why not, in the reality of the world that appears to us as a positional phenomenon. According to Husserl, acts such as faith are interwoven with all the other types of intentional acts and therefore “with all forms of consciousness in general”.¹⁷ This often pre-reflective trust is precisely the phenomenon of faith: things and the world itself are as they are (with faith being involved here); what is left for us to do is to deepen our knowledge of them.

Confidence in other sciences

Faith also arises in relation to scientific truths that we do not understand and whose arguments and history we have not studied. As limited beings, we exercise our knowledge in the few areas that we master, accepting the expertise of our more knowledgeable peers in all others. This acceptance, however, involves *confidence*, which is also a form of faith, in the competence

¹⁴ Constantin Noica, *Devenirea întru ființă* [Becoming into being] (București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1981).

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Despre certitudine* [On certainty], trans. Ion Giurgea, and Mircea Flonta (București: Humanitas, 2005), par. 55.

¹⁶ René Descartes, *Meditații despre filozofia primă* [Meditations on the first philosophy], in *Două tratate filozofice: Reguli de îndrumare a minții. Meditații despre filozofia primă* [Two philosophical treatises: Rules for guiding the mind. Meditations on the first philosophy] (București: Humanitas, 1992).

¹⁷ Husserl differentiates between “positional belief”, i.e. actuality, reality, and its “neutral counterpart”, which consists in the simple representation of a thought, Edmund Husserl, *Idei privitoare la o fenomenologie pură și la o filozofie fenomenologică. Cartea întâi: Introducere generală în fenomenologia pură* [Ideas concerning a pure phenomenology and a phenomenological philosophy. Book I: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology], trans. Christian Ferencz-Flatz, vol. 1, (București: Humanitas, 2011), 421 [H 262].

of others, just as we demand their confidence in our own competence when it comes to our field of research. We advance in our research by virtue of unquestioned beliefs; the most eloquent example here is that of the sciences which advance without questioning their foundations, as if the rationality and reality of the world were self-evident.

In the aforementioned cases, faith comes in the form of *trust*: a natural, unquestioned form of trust in the reality and rationality of the world in the first case and trust in science in the second case. What is important here is that the phenomenon of trust conceals an assumed *ignorance*: we trust precisely because we have little knowledge of the fields in question, unlike specialists. It is as if we were saying that *what is invisible to us* — the ignorance we mentioned previously — takes the form of trust, constituting an essential component of this type of faith.

Religious belief

Characteristics of religious faith

The characteristics of the phenomenon of religious faith are similar to those of philosophical or scientific belief, with the difference that their finality is not empirically certifiable in the same way. *Invisibility* takes the form of experiencing the inexhaustible mystery of God and does not await a scientific and definitive confirmation in this life, contenting itself with iconic, symbolic, and mystical experiences which cannot be considered empirical phenomena accessible to the positive sciences. *Anticipation* is not limited to the horizon of the world; instead, as “the confidence of things hoped for” (Heb 11:1), it goes beyond this life and into the next one, becoming eschatological anticipation. *The truth*, which is believed, has a dimension that an autonomous reason cannot truly grasp, because it is no longer about the horizon of the world. Various religious faiths all have in common the idea that there is something that will not be fulfilled in this life, nor will it end with it, but will manifest itself in the age to come.

By embracing faith in Christ as the Son of God, and thus as an ultimate revelation in history, man puts into action a decision of an essentially religious nature. Its consequences are both ethical and theoretical: “The Christian is one who imitates Christ in thought, word and deed, as far as is possible for human beings, believing rightly and blamelessly in the Holy Trinity”¹⁸, writes St. John Climacus. There are effects of an ethical, liturgical, or mystical nature in which the work of God can be seen. Obviously insufficient from an atheist’s point of view, these changes/emotions

¹⁸ Sfântul Ioan Scărarul, “Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș” [The Ladder of Divine Ascent] in *Filocalia*, vol. 9, (București: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1980), I, 6.

on the part of the believer are nevertheless a response from God. When they take the form of works of the Holy Spirit, becoming spiritual experiences and graces, they remain largely incommunicable, lacking the philosophical universality of the concept, demanding from others an acknowledgment which in turn implies faith.

To the extent to which they arise from spiritual life, i.e. as an experience of the unutterable mystery of God, these experiences, even when expressed as paradoxes and dogmas of faith, do not offer—*only by simple reading and hermeneutics*—a repetition of the experience. Therefore, their *confirmation* requires a similar effort and way of living which is fulfilled in the life and communion of the Church as the body of Christ.

It has often been pointed out that the truths of faith come from Revelation and go beyond reason. Phenomenologically, we could argue that the affectation of *the ego*—as a change of the self on the path towards virtues—is essential and signifies its transfiguration, its partial de-situation from the objective world and its engagement in a *believed* reality of the future Kingdom, anticipated in the present. Even if religious tradition, understood as hermeneutics, already offers the teachings of faith, faith is not reduced to these teachings, instead advancing towards love: “Just as the thought of fire does not warm the body, so faith without love does not actualize the light of spiritual knowledge in the soul.”¹⁹ Only the unity of faith with experience—the experience of love in this example—offers knowledge; a religious knowledge, of course.

The definitive invisible

Philosophical faith, which we have discussed earlier, appears as the basis of religious faith. We agree here with Emmanuel Falque: a phenomenology of faith—in the non-religious sense—, a philosophical faith, is the foundation of religious faith, with the latter involving a personal decision of a different kind.²⁰ This idea can also be found in Orthodox spirituality: “He who does not know the truth cannot truly have faith; for by nature knowledge precedes faith.”²¹

Religious faith accepts that the invisible in which it believes will not reach successive fillings and confirmations that lead to the disappearance of its invisibility, as in the case of empirical phenomena. The invisibility of religious faith does not become completely visible, even if it makes itself known *through* the visible—as an icon, a symbol, a liturgical work, etc. In this case, we are dealing with faith as the truth of things hoped for (Heb. 11:1) and which,

¹⁹ Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul, “Cele patru sute capete despre dragoste” [The Four Hundred Texts on Love], in *Filocalia*, vol. 2, (București: Harisma, 1993), 65, Suta întâi, par. 31.

²⁰ Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 77, 99.

²¹ Evagrie Ponticul, “Despre legea duhovnicească,” [On the Spiritual Law], in *Filocalia*, vol. 1, (București: Humanitas, 2013), 226, par. 110.

according to St. Mark the Apostle, differs from faith in hearing (Rom. 10:17).²² Even if any revelation goes beyond what we already know, appearing as a saturated phenomenon that overflows our conceptuality, it does not exhaust the invisible and does not make it available as a metaphysics of presence would. Through the phenomena that show the work of God—and which can be of various kinds—the invisibility of God does not disappear, but manifests itself as definitive invisibility. Faith as a gaze would be suspended if the religious phenomena that take place on the stage of the visible did not point iconically to what remains infinitely hidden. We would then have only empirical phenomena that do not require faith, only perception and intuition. Therefore, the phenomenality of faith does not nullify the unknowable mystery of God. However much we know through Revelation, He whom our mind cannot comprehend will remain in His being, unknowable, even as He imparts Himself to the creature through His uncreated energies and through the revelation of the dogmas of faith.

Knowledge by faith: dogmas and experience

To talk about faith means, first of all, to take into consideration simple faith²³, i.e. to believe in the words of Christ, in the Church's proclamation of faith (*kerygma*), and in "the great faith of seeing"²⁴, "which is born in us from the practice of the virtues"²⁵, synonymous with the knowledge of God (theology):

The intellect that begins its search for divine wisdom with simple faith will eventually attain a theology that transcends the intellect and that is characterized by unremitting faith of the highest type and the contemplation of the invisible.²⁶

It is a faith that will be the basis of future virtues, the first of which is the fear of God, from which the observance of God's commandments is born. This link, which we find in the spirituality of the Christian East, shows us that the dogmas of faith are linked to a way of life—ascetic, liturgical, and mystical at the same time.

²² Evagrie Ponticul, "Despre cei ce-și închipuie că se îndreptătesc din fapte" [Of those who think they are justified by works], in *Filocalia*, vol. 1, (București: Humanitas, 2013), par. 100.

²³ There are different degrees of faith, all presupposing different degrees of personal relationship with God, as we find in Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, trans. Keith Schram (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 11–14.

²⁴ Petru Damaschinul, "Învățăături duhovnicești" [Spiritual teachings], 193.

²⁵ Teognost, "Despre făptuire, contemplație și preoție" [On the practice of the virtues, contemplation and priesthood], in *Filocalia*, vol. 4, (Sibiu: Tipografia Arhidiecezană, 1948), par. 39.

²⁶ Talasie Libianul, "Despre dragoste, înfrânare și petrecerea cea după minte" [On love, self-control and life in accordance with the intellect], in *Filocalia*, vol. 4, (Sibiu: Tipografia Arhidiecezană, 1948), Suta a patra, par. 80.

Faith is associated with the observance of the commandments and is therefore a form of ethics: "For faith is not only to be baptized into Christ, but also to observe his commandments"²⁷;

Therefore every man who has been baptized in the name of the Triune God and of the life that makes you alive must observe all that the Lord has commanded. For this reason the Lord has joined the keeping of all the commandments to the right faith, knowing that it is not possible to bring salvation to man by one of them alone, separated from the others.²⁸

But faith is also a form of mysticism, with a unifying function:

...he who only believes and does not love, lacks even the faith he thinks he has; for he believes merely with a certain superficiality of intellect and is not energized by the full force of love's glory. The chief part of virtue, then, is faith energized by love.²⁹

The theoretical premises of faith are overcome by the experience of the mystery of God, and the principles of demonstration in this case are different from those presupposed by philosophical or scientific knowledge. A theological gnoseology should take into account the indemonstrability of the principles of faith and the insufficiency of reason, as St Maximus the Confessor pointed out:

To the devout believer God gives something more sure than any proof: the recognition and the faith that He substantively is. Faith is true knowledge, the principles of which are beyond rational demonstration; for faith makes real for us things beyond intellect and reason.³⁰

Faith cannot be understood merely as the acceptance of a doctrinal set, inaccessible to reason, but, more profoundly, as an experience of the ineffable that has a simultaneously adequate and inadequate relationship with our theological knowledge: adequate because the believer does not experience a God other than the one expressed by the faith of the Church, but "makes it even more certain" through the faith of seeing,

²⁷ Marcu Ascetul, "Răspuns aceloră care se îndoiesc despre dumnezeiescul botez" [Answer to those who doubt the divine baptism], in *Filocalia*, vol. 1, (București: Humanitas, 2013), 258.

²⁸ St Maxim Mărturisitorul, "Cuvânt ascetic" [Ascetical word], in *Filocalia*, vol. 2, (București: Harisma, 1993), 26, par. 2.

²⁹ St Diadoh al Foticeii, "Cuvânt ascetic" [Ascetic Word], 318, par. 21.

³⁰ St Maxim Mărturisitorul, "Cele două sute de capete despre cunoștința de Dumnezeu și iconomia Fiului lui Dumnezeu" [The Two Hundred Texts on the Knowledge of God and the Iconomy of the Son of God], in *Filocalia*, vol. 2, (București: Harisma, 1993), 152, Suta întâi, par. 9.

“that is, of knowledge”;³¹ inadequate because these teachings are, by themselves and without the help of experience—practice and contemplation—, insufficient.³²

Faith is, therefore, a form of knowledge and also a condition of possibility for higher knowledge.

A perfect intellect is one which by true faith and in a manner beyond all unknowing supremely knows the supremely Unknowable; and which, in surveying the entirety of God’s creation, has received from God an all-embracing knowledge of the providence and judgment which governs it – in so far, of course, as all this is possible to man.³³

As we can observe, knowledge is higher than knowledge, for there is no knowledge of God that is not faced with an even deeper lack of knowledge; at the same time, it is also a knowledge of God’s providence and judgment, that is, a higher knowledge of God’s will, received as a gift on the foundation of faith.

Community and tradition

From the perspective of the experience and life of the Orthodox Church, faith is bestowed upon a community, primarily upon the apostles and those who followed them. Those who became believers were baptized and entered the communion of the Church, thus becoming members of the mystical body of Christ. Without eliminating the decisive importance of the person, the Church’s proclamation of faith (*kerygma*) is not uttered in a philosophical school in which disciples embrace the teachings of the master, but rather is affirmed as a way of living in communion. To become a member of the Church means to pass through the mystery of Holy Baptism and to confess the faith of the Church. Baptism, as the first Sacrament, is also given to children precisely on the basis of the faith of their godparents. This transfer of faith— unimaginable if it were limited to an individual decision— attests to the capital value of communion. Of course, once someone becomes an adult, they will, by their own confession of faith and participation in the mysteries and life of the Church, affirm their membership in the body of Christ. Faith is confessed through the symbol of faith at every Holy Liturgy, where the

³¹ Petru Damaschinul, “Învățăături duhovnicești” [Spiritual teachings], 194.

³² For the importance of experience in relation to the dogmas of faith, see Nicolae Turcan, *Postmodernism și teologie apofatică* [Postmodernism and apophatic theology], (Florești, Cluj: Limes, 2014), 98–105.

³³ St Maxim Mărturisitorul, “Cele patru sute de capete despre dragoste” [The four hundred texts on love], 123, Suta a treia, par. 99.

Holy Eucharist is celebrated. In this way, the personal freedom of the believer in communion with the entire Church is emphasized.

Communion by faith resembles the communion in the Kingdom of God. St Maximus the Confessor even goes so far as to put the sign of equality between faith and the Kingdom of Heaven, while at the same time admitting their difference:

...faith in God is the same as the Kingdom of God. It differs only in thought from the Kingdom, for faith is the Kingdom of God without form, and the Kingdom is faith which has been given a form in a godly manner.³⁴

According to Saint Maximus, through the observance of the commandments, faith becomes the Kingdom of God, a kingdom “known only to those who have it”. As a “binding power”, faith achieves “the immediate, perfect, and supranatural union of the believer with the God in whom he believes.”³⁵ Thus, the unifying power of faith is based on the doctrine man believes in, but seeks through it the One in whom he believes, the living God. The dogmas of faith now appear as the visible reference points of a path towards encountering the God who has become man.

Conclusions

By analyzing examples from Orthodox spirituality and making use of phenomenology, we have managed to highlight the complex dimension of the phenomenon of faith. Ever-present in our non-religious human attitudes, philosophical faith or natural faith constitutes the phenomenological foundation of religious faith. The faithful disposition and the openings made possible by the horizon of faith are naturally present in all humans, insofar as they deal with the future, thus reflecting their existential dimension.

Religious faith, however, differs from natural faith, even if it is based on it, by broadening the worldly horizon towards the eschatological one, in search of the living God. By setting in motion a subsequent thought and thus encountering philosophy, it nevertheless goes further and gives rise to a non-objectual knowledge, which has more to do with inter-personality, relationship, and communion than with the analysis of objects based on theoretical principles. In fact, Christ, who defined Himself as the Truth (cf. Acts 14:6), has become the “criterion of truth,” even if this statement is made explicit by tradition and is linked to the decisions of

³⁴ St. Maxim Mărturisitorul, “Răspunsuri către Talasie” [Answers to Thalassios], in *Filocalia*, vol. 3, (București: Harisma, 1993), 131, Question 33.

³⁵ St Maxim Mărturisitorul, 131–32, Question 33.

the Ecumenical Synods.³⁶ And this identification of the truth with the divine-human person of Christ necessarily refers to a connection between reason and life, as well as to an understanding of faith as a way of life in the communion of the Church. In this case, an interpersonal knowledge in accordance with the living tradition of the Church takes the place of objective/object-oriented knowledge: “faith is an event and experience of relationship, a road radically different from intellectual certainty and ‘objective’ knowledge.”³⁷

By observing God’s commandments and practicing the virtues, faith changes man, bringing him, by likeness, into union with God. The complexity of this process of deification is set in motion by faith: being knowledge, asceticism, and union at the same time, faith can be found on every step of spiritual life. Faith is a response to the phenomenality of the empirical world, enriching the visible with the data—*incredible* from the world’s perspective—of the invisible. The phenomenon of faith now appears to us in all its richness, as the adventure of man who chooses to give up the banality of life and the horror of death in favor of encountering the God who, by conquering death, has brought true life to those who believe. Far from being reduced to the adherence to a set of opinions and convictions, Christian faith is life in Christ and communion of love, constituting a form of knowledge which is neither reduced to philosophical knowledge, nor completely excludes it, but only goes beyond it on the path towards the interpersonal and mystical encounter in the communion of the Church.

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³⁶ For the way in which the question of hermeneutics is posed in the debates of the early centuries concerning truth, see Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont, Massachusetts: Nordland Publishing Company, 1972), 97–100.

³⁷ Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, 13.

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