



Phenomenological Philosophy and Orthodox Christian Scientific Ecological Theology

by Allan M Savage

Abstract

Contemporary philosophy, to be useful to Orthodox Christian theology, must capture the “essence” of the divine and human activity in the world in the scientific sense of Edmund Husserl. Scholastic philosophy is no longer an academically privileged supporter of theology in the interpretation of the universe. In its place, this paper suggests that phenomenological philosophy becomes the unique and transcendent partner, as it were, in the interpretive dialogue. The methodological thinking of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger offers a way of philosophical understanding that is more satisfactory than the traditional scholastic metaphysics in giving meaning to contemporary human experience. A phenomenological eco-theological approach captures the essences of a subject’s immediate and holistic perception of the environment.

A Phenomenological Eco-Theological Approach: Capturing “Essences”

This paper arose out of my studious attempt to develop a comprehensive theological understanding of ecology within the Western theological tradition. The Western tradition is rooted in scholastic philosophy, which has proved unsatisfactory, and I thus undertook a phenomenological approach to my studies. I soon realized that much of what I was discovering may be applied to Eastern Orthodox theology, since that theology does not rely on a scholastic methodology. This essay carries my discovery one step further and accordingly applies phenomenological thinking to Eastern Orthodox theology. One intended purpose of an ecological theology, or eco-theology, as I speak of it in this essay, is to encourage a method of thinking that will assist in our understanding of the various forms of the activity of the divine presence in the world. These forms arise within our experience of that active presence and not from a merely theoretical presence.

As William James (1902/1958) pointed out, there are a variety of religious experiences. To understand these various forms, we must capture the “essence” of both the divine and human activity in the world in the scientific sense of Edmund Husserl. Currently, in addressing the essence of divine and human activity in the contemporary world, Ünal (2005) identifies theological phenomenology as one component in his understanding of a practical and comprehensive phenomenology. Further, Esbjörn-Hargens (2005) lists ecological theology among the “Terrain of Cultures” in his understanding of an Integral Ecology. He notes that, “as new domains of inquiry and knowledge emerge, so do new approaches to ecology” (p. 25). He has identified four Terrains of Ecology: Experience, Behaviour, Culture and Systems, with ecological theology being contained within the Terrain of Culture. In our contemporary global context, there are many competing approaches by which to respond to ecological and environmental problems. An eco-theology, as one of them, attends to that which is essential and immanent, that is, the

divine and human transcendent aspects as well as the material aspect of our environment. Traditionally, in Western philosophical thinking, the scholastic method was the method taught in the schools of medieval Europe, especially in the 12th and 14th centuries, attempting an integration of Christian teaching with Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy, or some variation of them. The scholastic method is still being used to express our experience of transcendental reality or spirituality. However, other interpretive options have become available, such as the phenomenological method. It is generally admitted today that scholastic philosophy is no longer an academically privileged supporter of Western theology in the interpretation of the universe. This need not, however, cause inordinate anxiety because, according to Lenaers (2007), “what is uprooted is merely the presentation and formulation of our faith” and not its essence (p. 251). Sanchez (2007) more specifically discusses the role that phenomenological methodology plays in ascertaining the condition of knowledge with respect to everyday belief. With scholastic philosophy invalidated, the sciences have become partners in the interpretive dialogue with theology, and their particular methods must be taken into account when interpreting our experience of the global environment (Grondin, 2002). One result of this partnership, I suggest, is that phenomenological philosophy becomes a unique and transcendent partner, as it were, in the interpretive dialogue. By unique and transcendent I mean not merely one partner among others, but the partner who universally supports the others. As such, this partnership benefits both Western and Eastern Orthodox theology.

In interpreting their environmental experience, a phenomenological eco-theological approach is to be preferred by theologians. A phenomenological method of interpretation differs qualitatively from the scholastic method of interpretation, in that it apprehends personal subjective consciousness, or “essences”, in contrast to external and objective ideals understood in the Platonic sense. A phenomenological methodology does not apprehend any such ideal pre-understanding. When supported by scholastic philosophy, theologians are required to conceptualize mental objects as epistemological ideals characteristic of Hellenic understanding. But, when supported by phenomenological philosophy, theologians can inquire into the subjective meaning of religious experience and the transcendent presence in the world and capture its essence. Such inquiry into subjective understanding is not limited to religious experience and transcendent presence, but also includes an active encounter with so-called secular experience and material presence. Phenomenological apprehension, or the capturing of essences, is

particular to the active agent who is not bound to the inherited objective intellectual and external social constructs of any culture. In short, phenomenological apprehension is characterized by the subjective understanding of the culture by the agent. In the case of multiple agents, this understanding is inter-subjective. The philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger sought ways of philosophical understanding that would be more satisfactory than traditional Western metaphysics in giving meaning to human transcendental experience. The 10th International Conference on Greek philosophy held on Samos in 1998 (Boudouris & Kalimtzis, 1999) addressed “the relevancy of Greek philosophy with respect to our present day environmental crisis” (p. i). Notwithstanding the perspective of the Conference, in the theological methodology that follows I encourage the replacement of traditional Western metaphysics with a non-Greek, phenomenological eco-theological approach that captures the subject’s immediate, holistic and essential perception of the environment.

Phenomenological Eco-Theological Methodology

A phenomenological eco-theological methodology highlights the notion of becoming, an evolutionary and phenomenological understanding, more than the notion of being, a scholastic understanding, when interpreting experience or capturing essences. Yet, it is concerned with being and becoming as simultaneously present in each other. In practice these two concepts are distinguishable but not separable. Thus, they are equi-primordial. A full treatment of this distinction between being and becoming is presented by Macann (2008). Any inquiry about being and becoming in the phenomenological sense is not to be a philosophical metaphysics of the type that has been elsewhere described as the Queen of the Sciences, that is, philosophy in service to theology as its handmaid (Gilson, 1968). Rather, the intended action, or purpose, of a phenomenological theological methodology, according to Laycock, is to reach God without God, a phrase he acknowledges was coined by Husserl (Laycock, 1986). A phenomenological theological methodology interprets a present, pre-reflective human experience in a manner similar to the way in which poets and artists interpret experience. Theological interpretation through a phenomenological method of apprehension discloses an essential, not an idealistic, approach to the life-world. Søren Kierkegaard was among the first to initiate this style of inquiry into life experiences.

As a stage within the evolutionary development of theological thought, the so-called Modernist movement challenged the scholastic theological interpretation that had been introduced into Europe

and England through the universities. This stage of scholastic theological thought views doctrinal and dogmatic formulations as ideal expressions of religious experience and not as opportunities to grasp the essence (in Husserl's sense of the word) of experience. The early efforts on the part of some theologians to replace this scholastic intellectualism with a doctrine that would engage the feelings of the heart in the praxis of life became known as Romanticism. Other theologians went so far as to demand that all unchangeable and ideally fixed concepts be rejected and that all interpretation of life should be made through constantly changing notions. This movement became known as Nominalism. Clearly, either of these extremes is to be avoided and understanding sought through the balanced approach disclosed within phenomenological theology.

The scholastic method of philosophy is common to both Roman Catholic and Anglican theology and to some degree characterizes Reformed theology. In contrast to this approach, so-called Modernist theologians insisted upon the importance of an apprehended phenomenon as the starting point to describe and interpret experience (Liderbach, 2001). Such theologians were, in fact, subjectivists who lacked the uniformity of intent and objective purpose to undermine scholastic theology, as the Papal authority of the day claimed. They did critique scholasticism as a philosophical system, but not for the subversive purposes claimed by the official church. Alfred Loisy (1857-1940) and George Tyrrell (1861-1909) are significant representatives of this Modernist theological thinking, and their work may be understood to consist of an existential and phenomenological evaluation of the expressions of religious experience of their day. Their work has significant import for Orthodox (Eastern) and Western theologians today who seek to abandon a scholastic method of interpretation. Within the Anglican tradition, the Modernist theologians were known as modern churchmen, and the most influential among them were Henry D. A. Major and William R. Inge. Garbett (1947) has noted that large numbers of the modern churchmen of the day regarded the claims of Christianity, expressed in classical philosophy, as inconsistent with modern ways of thought. Phrases like "the Fatherhood of God", "Salvation through Christ", and "Life after Death", which had meaning for scholastic theologians, seemed to Modernist churchman to be meaningless platitudes. According to these churchmen, new theological understandings, not based on a scholastic philosophy, need to be constructed to prepare the way for the future of belief. The construction of future theological understandings will be phenomenological. In like manner today, eco-

theology must take on the new form of an essential phenomenological philosophy as outlined by Dewart's notion of dehellenization (Maurer, 1967).

Theological dehellenization is a process that is slowly replacing the classical theological interpretation characteristic of the West. As such, theological dehellenization presents a new philosophical threshold for contemporary theological interpretation. Unfortunately, philosophical dehellenization currently continues to be academically discounted. It was discounted by Davis (1967), who had reservations about Dewart's philosophical understanding of dehellenization as expressed in *The Future of Belief*, and it has continued to be discounted (dare I say rejected), with Pope Benedict XVI's reservation in this regard expressed in a lecture presented at the University of Regensburg on 12 September 2006:

The thesis that the critically purified Greek heritage forms an integral part of Christian faith has been countered by the call for a dehellenization of Christianity – a call which has more and more dominated theological discussions since the beginning of the modern age. Viewed more closely, three stages can be observed in the programme of dehellenization: although interconnected, they are clearly distinct from one another in their motivations and objectives. (2006, ¶ 9)

To my mind, theologians remaining with the Greek in this academic camp miss the opportunity to encounter the new threshold of theological inquiry initiated by the so-called Modernist movement. In scholastic thinking, as previously noted, theoretical questions and answers are formulated and governed by a fixed ideal of nature and being. The notion of contingency or relationship as anything but accidental is impossible to conceive in classical philosophy. In phenomenological philosophy, however, contingency, relationship and becoming are all apprehended as equi-primordial, that is, as constituting an original primary unity. Moreover, through a misunderstanding of the scholastic method, conceptual truth has come to be equated with, and to be perceived as equal in validity to, the terms used to express that truth. In short, the ends are equal to the means. Those thinkers, not aware of this aberration in which the means have become conterminous with the ends, continue to make erroneous interpretations. Such erroneous interpretations are not possible in phenomenological understanding. Since phenomenological intentions have no independent existence outside of the consciousness of the knower, phenomenological ideology has no opportunity to become fixed or to

take on an independent existence. Rather, phenomenological intended meanings are in perpetual flux within the consciousness of the knower. Thus, the interpretation of the fixed perception of truth continues to remain a problem for scholastic theologians. The problem of fixed perception is not exclusive to the discipline of philosophy, however. Ferguson (1992) records this same problem of fixed perception developing within the scientific disciplines. Keen (1970) also notes this problem occurring in psychology. In this scientific understanding, the new threshold of apprehension presented through the phenomenological approach constitutes a relational and dynamic understanding of truth that replaces the fixed ideal or perception of truth. In this sense, phenomenological philosophy is most beneficial to understanding an Orthodox ecological theology.

The approaches of the various theological schools of thought within Christianity, including the Orthodox, are culturally and historically identifiable. That is, schools of theological thought have evolved. They are a product of their times and environment. Theological terms change because new understandings arise within historical developments in epistemology. An example of such change is that, in phenomenological thought, being, which is a classical term, is re-conceived in terms of becoming. Union, a classical term, is re-conceived as a phenomenological unity. Necessity, a classical term, is replaced by the phenomenological notion of freedom. Becoming, unity and freedom are all relational terms common to Western and Eastern philosophical traditions.

Theologians continually search for new and meaningful ways to understand religious experience. Medieval clerics interpreted experience and sought hidden meanings through theoretical understanding. However, no hidden or ideal meanings are disclosed in a phenomenological interpretation of experience. Notions are constituted only in light of the subject's intent. Morreall (1983) concludes that appealing to hidden meaning in theological language is a negative undertaking, since no hidden meanings exist independently of the subject's consciousness. Our words are constituted through our intentions, and, if theological language is possible, then theological intentions must also be possible. We should not spend our time trying to appeal to hidden meanings that do not exist in theological language. Rather than attempt to identify hidden meanings, phenomenological theological interpretation constitutes the religious meaning of phenomena. Phenomenological theology is thus freed from all allegorical limitations in its language. Allegory depends on meanings independent of subjective consciousness. However, while the fact

that the phenomenological method of interpretation presents new thresholds for theological inquiry can be demonstrated to philosophers and theologians, whether they have accurately grasped what is demanded by these methods is doubtful (Ryba, 1991).

Maxwell (1986) suggests that phenomenological apprehension attempts to get inside the mind of the believer, or of the faithful. I suggest that poets and philosophers seeking "the essence of things" à la Husserl strive to get into the subject's mind. Getting inside the mind is a goal that poets and phenomenological philosophers have achieved with some degree of success. The poetic understanding of religious experience is, in fact, a type of phenomenological apprehension of the religious experience that discloses a new awareness of the essence of relationships. Koestenbaum (1967) reminds us that phenomenological theological inquiry incorporates insights from both rational and poetic thought. Phenomenological understanding is not uniform, and various phenomenological interpretations thus introduce new thresholds to theology. These various interpretations arise within a particular existential understanding. Thinkers like Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl and John H. Newman have shaped the contemporary problematic for theology. Insofar as these authors have helped to introduce a phenomenological way of thinking into contemporary theology, they are pioneers in providing alternative interpretations to the once dominant Hellenistic interpretive perspective of the West. They have also furthered a philosophical perspective that is an alternative to the Hellenistic perspective. Hinnert (1967) notes that any attempt to integrate and develop our Hellenic conceptual heritage does not develop a new perspective, but is merely an attempt at an academic updating, rather than an authentic re-appraisal of experience, and thus is inadequate in assisting in interpreting our belief. This applies to both the Eastern and the Western philosophical context.

Today, among philosophers unencumbered by scholastic philosophy, a renaissance is taking place as phenomenological apprehension reveals new thresholds of understanding within Western culture. Ryba (1991) notes that many observers, both inside and outside the Roman Catholic Church, make the inference that the church's theology may be on the verge of another grand synthesis that might supplant Thomism. This grand synthesis would be contingent upon the abandonment of traditional theoretical thinking, according to Tymieniecka (1962). But the abandonment of scholastic thinking by contemporary professional philosophers in the employ of academia is slow in coming. According to Dillenberger (1969)

and Lonergan (1969), traditional interpretations are slowly changing within formal investigative theology and popular devotional theology. In both Eastern and Western theological traditions, religious institutions and customs are no longer being perceived as given from on high. Historical, geographical and human agencies all play a role in shaping the cultural, social and intellectual environment of one's life-world. In our contemporary life-world, such activity must be interpreted eco-theologically, that is, with attention to our environment. In addition, an increasing number of theologians are coming to accept that no single entity, external to our experience, determines affairs in this life. A phenomenological approach reveals that there are many factors influencing the affairs of this life in conjunction with our own efforts. In light of the above, and with an eye to an application to Orthodox Christian understanding, I will now proceed to reflect upon three phenomenological thresholds that present opportunities for an eco-theological interpretation.

An Eco-Theological Reflection: Phenomenological Intention Replaces Scholastic Interpretation

According to Gilkey (1969), in Western theological understanding debate has moved from the question of the structure of religious language (an issue of scholastic interpretation) to the more radical question of a mode of meaningful discourse (an issue of phenomenological apprehension) in which the interpreter is part of the experience. It must be remembered that scholastic theological understanding does not falsify the interpretive task. Rather, scholastic understanding is inadequate for the contemporary theological task, including the Orthodox Christian interpretive task, of our existence. Phenomenological theologians, through their methodology, constitute essential interpretations that are intended to replace scholastic ideologies. Phenomenological theological interpretation itself constitutes an *aggiornamento*, an up-dating, or better, a *ressourcement*, a return to the sources, as theological interpretation becomes disengaged from a culture that no longer exists. A *ressourcement*, in effect, constitutes for phenomenological theologians new thresholds of interpretation. Through a phenomenological theological interpretation, the environment itself is changed. A co-responsible and co-creative relationship is introduced through a phenomenological approach to the environment. The significance of this is that theologians realize themselves as co-responsible and co-creative agents within the divine life. Skolimowski's (1994) insight here is that, unlike pseudo-responsibility, co-creative responsibility allows us to change the rules as we go along. This co-creatorship is not possible within scholastic ideology. Merleau-Ponty (1948/1964)

offers a criticism of the scholastic ideology, noting that Catholic critics wish for things to reveal a God-directed orientation of the world. They wish for humanity, like things, to be nothing but a nature heading toward its perfection. Skolimowski (1985) adds his voice to this criticism with respect to messianic theology: "In so far as the messianic theology has developed the expectation to wait for someone to redeem us, it has indirectly cultivated irresponsibility in our midst" (p. 23). Thus, we can become crippled by a belief that does not allow us to take responsibility for our redemption or salvation.

Steyn (1994) identifies the co-creator relationship as being characteristic of the New Age consciousness. The co-creator relationship is an evolution in understanding relational methodology that constitutes the development of a new threshold. The co-creator relationship is a new notion in the Western philosophical tradition that has become part of our contemporary consciousness, replacing the classical notion. Gilkey (1975) suggests that phenomenological interpretation reveals the holy or sacred, which is the condition for the meaningfulness of any form of theology. As a result, philosophically educated individuals are coming to understand themselves as faithful co-responsible agents seeking new thresholds for theological inquiry that will take into account their participatory role in the theological interpretation of their life-world.

In theology, no hermeneutic, no method, no set of rules guarantees the apprehension of essential religious experience. However, Husserl's intuitive approach to understanding essences comes very close to satisfying this contemporary undertaking. His approach suggests a participatory involvement within a phenomenological theological interpretation. This participatory involvement constitutes the difference between scholastic interpretation and phenomenological interpretation. The former is ideological, whereas the latter is dynamic. Christians living in a modern Western cultural context cannot employ interpretive criteria from another epoch. A modern Western culture must create interpretive norms out of itself (Habermas, 1992). According to Kaufman (1990), a phenomenological essential interpretation of theology becomes fundamentally an activity of construction and reconstruction, not one of theoretical description or exposition, as it has ordinarily been understood in scholastic theology.

An Eco-Theological Reflection: Unitary Knowledge Replaces Dichotomous Knowledge

Within a linguistic threshold of interpretation, due to the shift from scholastic epistemological thinking to a

phenomenological way of thinking, a theological replacement has occurred. Sontag (1969) suggests that, as philosophy regains its rightful place, asking questions that no science can determine for it, it becomes less certain, but also more flexible, so that theology can once again utilize its support. In the replacement of static scholastic knowledge with active participatory knowledge, we are not to confuse certain terms. Subjectivism and objectivism are terms that denote specific doctrines or systems of knowledge outside the knower, whereas subjectivity and objectivity are terms that connote a phenomenological and essential knowledge within the knower's consciousness. In scholastic ideology, characteristics, occasionally modelled after anthropomorphic perceptions, are predicated of that which is divine. When applied to the deity, these predicates are often interpreted by the public mind as concretely real and as composing the deity *in se*, that is, in itself. That such a divinity is believed to exist, or to be other than the knower, does not reveal anything of the divine composition, or even whether such a God exists. In contrast to scholastic philosophy, phenomenology does not present a separate or detached knowledge, but constitutes a universal essential unity of knower and known. Scholastic philosophy and theology posit that a true, absolute being, one who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and transcendent, personally exists over and above the temporal world, imparting knowledge to the knower. As a result, in scholastic theology the absolute being lacks the potential for any development or evolution. This contrasts with phenomenological philosophy and theology à la Husserl, in which an evolutionary understanding of becoming replaces a static understanding of being. Becoming is disclosed within relationships that are socially intended and consciously constituted, rather than through relations that are imposed and determined by external theoretical categories. A relational epistemology is an epistemology that constitutes a phenomenological essential apprehension of those social and cultural symbols that have not lost their power to convince us of meaning. Kaufman (1990) notes that we must see human existence in terms of these social and cultural symbols, or meaningful conceptions, that constitute a phenomenological unity.

An Eco-Theological Reflection: Participatory Language Replaces Idealistic Language

Within an eco-theological perspective, theological language is unique due to its participatory, and not merely descriptive, character. Furthermore, according to Raschke (1979), phenomenological theological language defies conventional semantics and is self-

consciously revelatory. There is no revelation without an individual or some group of individuals being conscious of it. Revelation and the one receiving the revelation must be in a conscious relationship, that is, in a relationship of presence. In identifying the field of participatory theology, Küng (1988) tells us that it includes everyday, common, human and ambiguous experiences. These common, human and somewhat ambiguous experiences are constituted in relationships of presence such that a person is individuated within the community and has significance only in this relationship and as expressed through a participatory language. Baum (1967) further observes that many Christians have desired to speak about reality in continuity with their ordinary experience, and hence not in idealistic terms. This participation in the continuity of ordinary experience has presented an opportunity for many to engage, in their daily lives, new thresholds for understanding within an eco-theological phenomenological perspective. Phenomenological philosophers in fact replace an idealistic language with a participatory language. In support of this view, Dewart (1989) suggests that the Berkeleyan view *esse est percipi* (being is perception) may be rendered *esse est referri* (being is relational) when interpreting our immediate threshold of experience. If he is correct, *esse est referri*, being participatory language, which excludes the understanding that language is merely descriptive, must be preferred to *esse est percipi*, which is idealistic and descriptive language.

In examining the phenomenological re-structuring of theological understanding, I have shown how epistemology, language and existential participation have served to identify an essential philosophical replacement of classical understanding with phenomenological understanding. Similar identification, or clarification, will need to continue into the future to supply the framework for the development of any Orthodox Christian scientific ecological theology. The last word I give to Skolimowski (1985):

Eco-theology spells out the new meaning of humanness in us which is neither rooted in the old fashion humanism: 'Man is the measure of all things' (Protagoras) or 'The root of man is man himself' (Marx); nor is man reduced to old theological schemes, being nothing but a speck of dust against the infinity of God (or against the infinity of the physical universe – Newtonian Physics), but the new meaning derives from the image of man as mind making, and co-creating the universe in the process. (p. 22)

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