

RETURNING TO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The Contemporary Challenge in the Dialogue Between Philosophy and Theology

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the relationship between philosophy and theology from the perspective of religious experience, drawing on the arguments developed by Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti and the insights offered in Max Scheler's philosophy of religion. Tanzella-Nitti's extensive scholarship provides a framework for understanding the interplay between philosophy and theology, avoiding confusion while fostering a synergy grounded in a renewed engagement with religious experience. By drawing on the sciences of religion and a philosophy of religion, theology uncovers traces of God's self-revelation in creation and history. It provides a framework to clarify the foundations of religious phenomena and what makes them possible. Engaging deeply with religious experience allows philosophy and theology to renew their dialogue, addressing metaphysical questions and the *quaestio Dei*.

KEYWORDS: Religious Experience, Revelation, Foundation, Theology of Religion, Understanding of the Human.

RIASSUNTO: Il saggio mette a tema il rapporto tra filosofia e teologia a partire dall'esperienza religiosa, ripercorrendo l'argomentazione offerta in merito da Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti e le sollecitazioni presenti nella filosofia della religione di Max Scheler. L'ampia produzione scientifica di Tanzella-Nitti aiuta ad articolare l'intreccio possibile tra filosofia e teologia senza confusioni, ma in una capacità di sinergia che viene anche dalla disponibilità a ritrovare il rapporto con l'esperienza religiosa. Nella lettura dell'esperienza religiosa, condotta attraverso l'apporto delle scienze del fatto religioso e di una filosofia della religione capace di metterne in luce la logica di senso, la teologia riconosce la traccia del dirsi di Dio nel creato e nella storia. Essa offre una chiave interpretativa del fatto religioso che ne illumina il fondamento, ciò che la rende ultimamente possibile. Accettando di muovere dalla lettura in profondità dell'esperienza religiosa, filosofia e teologia possono validamente intessere un nuovo dialogo in ordine alla domanda metafisica e alla *quaestio Dei*.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Esperienza religiosa, Rivelazione, Fondazione, Teologia della religione, Comprensione dell'umano.

SUMMARY: I. *The Dialogical Posture of Theology*. 1. A “*Theology of Religion*”. 2. The Specific Contribution of Theological Reflection. 3. For a Veritative Ontological Connection. 4. Expanding the Understanding of the Human. II. *For a “Free Handshake” Between Philosophy and Religion: Schelerian Insights*. 1. Redefining the Field of Inquiry. 2. Beyond Traditional Solutions. 3. Conformity Between Philosophy, Religion, and Theology. III. *Quaestio Dei and Quaestio de homine in Light of Religious Experience: Marginal Considerations*.

How can we reframe the relationship between philosophy and theology? Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti’s extensive body of work offers a way to explore the interplay between these disciplines without conflating them, highlighting a synergistic dynamic rooted in a shared engagement with experience—particularly religious experience. By examining religious experience through the lens of the sciences of religion and a philosophy of religion that reveals its underlying logic of meaning, theology discerns traces of God’s speech within creation and human history. This approach provides a broader foundation for understanding the mystery of revelation while offering an interpretive key that sheds light on the ultimate grounds of religious phenomena. Theology contributes uniquely to the philosophical understanding not only of religious experience but also of existence itself. By embracing a profound reading of religious experience, philosophy and theology can enter into a renewed dialogue, addressing the metaphysical question and the *quaestio Dei*. Engaging with God—beginning with God’s self-revelation within the fabric of human existence and history—is a pressing challenge and a pathway to deeper insight into the human person, continually created and sustained in this relationship. The *quaestio Dei* (the question of ultimate foundation) and the *quaestio de homine* (the question of the human person) illuminate and complement one another in a rich interweaving of knowledge. This synthesis remains distinct yet unified, rooted in the experience of God’s revelation and the profound depths of human existence and life.

I. THE DIALOGICAL POSTURE OF THEOLOGY

Anyone familiar with Tanzella-Nitti’s work cannot fail to notice his extraordinary ability to establish connections and integrate different disciplinary approaches, research areas, and fields of knowledge. One of the most significant aspects of his scholarship is his engagement with the sciences, a dialogue cultivated over time with both competence and passion, rooted in his personal journey and academic formation. More

broadly, his understanding of theology's mission is characterized by a dialogical posture—a rigorous engagement with topics and issues that respects the distinct domains of knowledge while articulating them in mutual relationship. This expansive horizon fosters the emergence of new insights and perspectives, grounded in a structured and thorough exploration of the truth of faith.

1. A “*Theology of Religion*”

Tanzella-Nitti's theological reflection on the phenomenon of religion exemplifies this dialogical approach.¹ Theology draws extensively from research conducted by the sciences of religion and from the knowledge they provide about the origins of religious phenomena in human history. However, the discussion presented in his volume on *Religion and Revelation* is not a detached foray into other fields of inquiry, only to return later to theological arguments. Rather, theological reflection on revelation as the foundation of faith is constructed in dialogue with the sciences of religion, listening attentively to their insights. This approach not only establishes a shared foundation for exploring the reasons for faith but also seeks those reasons within human history, recognizing their intrinsic connection to the history of God's self-revelation and the unfolding of the mystery of salvation.

The placement of the discussion on religious phenomena at the beginning of the volume on revelation underscores this perspective. It is not a theology of religions appended to fundamental theology, intended merely to argue the truth of faith in relation to other religious traditions. Instead, it offers an understanding of faith and God's revelation in Jesus Christ—its foundation and focus—starting from the comprehension of religious experience, which constitutes the living core of religions. This is a theology of religion as the primary and essential dimension of fundamental theology itself.

¹ We specifically refer to the 3rd Volume of his *Teologia Fondamentale in Contesto Scientifico*, titled *Teologia della Rivelazione. Religione e Rivelazione*, Città Nuova, Roma 2018. This remarkable four-volume work on fundamental theology, authored by Tanzella-Nitti and published by Città Nuova between 2015 and 2022, is distinguished by its development in close dialogue with science and philosophy.

Tanzella-Nitti emphasizes the unique contribution theology can offer in the study of religious phenomena, even as it appreciates the role of philosophy of religion. Theology does not merely describe religious experience in human history or identify its distinctive features. It also seeks to explain it, to inquire into its ultimate foundation and orientation. While phenomenological philosophy helps uncover the logic of meaning underlying religious experience, and ontological reflection—implicit or explicit in phenomenological readings—bridges the phenomenon to its foundation, theology addresses the “why” of this experience. It moves the inquiry toward the very foundation, starting from how this foundation is perceived and understood within religious experience.

The ontological level, shaped by philosophical inquiry, calls for integration and development on a theological level. If the philosophy of religion can discern the priority of the object and the infinite self-disclosure of this object as the condition and foundation of religious experience,² it still leaves unanswered the question of who God is as revealed through religious experience. This question, consistent with the logic attested by religious experience, can only be adequately answered by beginning with God’s self-revelation.

Focusing on the object without becoming trapped in abstract speculation disconnected from concrete experience requires understanding the object in its relational self-communication. It is within history and the depths of human experience—by allowing oneself to be led by them—that the face of God is discovered, and the foundation of religious experience named. The salvation history narrated in Scripture illuminates religious experience and its ultimate foundation, while the faith lived by the believing community conveys a thought expanded by grace. This thought opens onto the fulfillment of humanity and the cosmos, the ultimate destination of their intrinsic tensions.

² Such is the case, for example, in Max Scheler’s phenomenology of religion. See in this regard M. SCHELER, *On the Eternal in Man*, transl. by B. Noble, Routledge, Abingdon 2009, particularly the writings compiled in the section titled *Problems of Religion*, 105-356.

2. *The Specific Contribution of Theological Reflection*

According to Tanzella-Nitti, theology has a unique task that no other discipline can fulfill: it contributes to a “correct epistemology of religious phenomena.” Theology, he argues, “shifts the focus to the cause of religion,” because it cannot be confined solely to phenomenology and its exploration of the how of religion without addressing the deeper question of what religion is.³ Theology takes on the transcendence of religious phenomena, addressing aspects that the sciences of religion alone cannot explain—such as the essence of religion, its origins, and why it exists at all.⁴

Theology of religion, therefore, addresses religion as a concept “centered on the category of salvation.”⁵ It highlights that the personal and relational dimension of the bond between humanity and God is not merely a hypothesis deduced from material traces left by religious experience, nor can it be reduced to those traces. Instead, it is a “salvific proclamation.”⁶ Only the notion of revelation allows us to overcome the aporia inherent in examining religious phenomena—a revelation whose object and expression transcend anthropological horizons. The impossibility of grounding religion purely in human experience opens up the possibility of revelation as its origin. Tanzella-Nitti insightfully observes that “on closer examination, the concept of revelation is already present within religious experience itself, *as experience*. If human beings ‘experience the divine,’ it is because the divine approaches them—or, at the very least, they perceive its presence and action.”⁷

From the very beginning, religious experience is founded on revelation: in the contemplative perception of nature and the profound sentiments that move the human heart.⁸ At every level, religion and rev-

³ Cfr. TANZELLA-NITTI, *Teologia della Rivelazione*, 108.

⁴ Cfr. *ibidem*, 107.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 104; cfr. *ibidem*, 102-105 (our translation).

⁶ See in particular *ibidem*, 102-105.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 63 (our translation).

⁸ Beyond the concept of natural religion. “The close relationship that exists, at the phenomenological level, between religion, revelation and faith, finally justifies why it is convenient to overcome the classical distinction between *natural* religions and *revealed* religions introduced by the Catholic Apologetics of neo-scholastic approach” (*ibidem*, 62; our translation).

elation are intimately connected. Yet, this is not the vague manifestation of an indefinite mystery.⁹ “Religion and revelation are both terms of a personal *relationship*.”¹⁰

The personal nature of this revelatory relationship is particularly evident in the existential dimension of religious experience—in the aspirations it stirs within individuals, in their invocation of the Other, and in their search for a Face.¹¹ This dynamic is most clearly seen in the distinctive quality of religious experience: an invocation and an expectation that arise from an encounter, a relationship inwardly perceived and intuitively grasped in its transformative and mobilizing power. “There exists [...] a subtle but profound connection between religion and hope, between hope and revelation. The very movement of human self-transcendence can be interpreted [...] as hope, expectation, and ultimately, as an openness to revelation. Human beings know they are reaching for something—or, rather, Someone¹²—and *they know* this expectation is founded.”¹³

While the sciences and philosophy of religion already provide a “realistic and objective conception of religious experience,” recognizing it as an anthropological constant that expresses humanity’s openness to transcendent otherness, theology affirms and deepens this orientation.

⁹ What is instead the nameless mystery of post-theism. Cfr. C. FANTI, M. LÓPEZ VIGIL (a cura di), *Oltre Dio. In ascolto del mistero senza nome*, Gabrielli, Verona 2021.

¹⁰ TANZELLA-NITTI, *Teologia della Rivelazione*, 63 (our translation). “The salvation invoked is thus, in its deepest fibers, the expectation and gift of a revelation: the revelation of man to himself, the revelation of the Creator’s plan for the creature, the revelation of the Absolute to which human self-transcendence is directed, seeking it as truth and life, goodness and justice, happiness and love. The author of this salvation, if he exists, must also be the author of such a revelation. He is no longer the object of a philosophy of God, nor of a phenomenology of the Numinous. The author of this revelation and salvation must stand before man as a salvific event that comes to him in history, as a personal being on whom his existential aspirations can rest, as a name to be invoked, a face to be recognized, a heart to be loved. This is the theological, salvific-historical formality by which theology enters into a reflection on religion, illuminating it with the revelation of that event which it proclaims to have happened, and nourishing it with the contents that accompany it” (*ibidem*, 103; our translation).

¹¹ Cfr. *ibidem*, 64.

¹² *Ibidem*, 65 (our translation).

¹³ *Ibidem*, 64 (our translation).

It proclaims the identity between authentic religious experience, understood as an expression of our being *imago Dei*, and the experience of the one true God fully revealed in Jesus Christ.¹⁴ Theology thus affirms what Tanzella-Nitti terms “creaturely revelation” in nature and human conscience as “forms of revelation... of the one true God.”¹⁵ In this way, Judeo-Christian revelation can be presented as “the fulfillment of myth and the recovery of its truth-bearing elements.”¹⁶ Salvation history becomes “the fulfillment of what religion prepares.”¹⁷

The themes of expectation and fulfillment, and the category of promise, serve as guiding threads in this theological examination of religious experience. Theology does not hesitate to “positively evaluate the anthropological and natural dimensions of revelation and faith,” recognizing and valuing “what in the human religious journey originates from the one true God.” The specific character of Christianity, with the gratuity that defines it, must be understood “through the lens of fulfillment, not rupture.”¹⁸

The theological perspective recognizes the revelatory dimension of reality, conveyed through the Word present in creation. This revelation, inseparable from our identity as creatures, is not external to salvation history but integrally connected to it. As Tanzella-Nitti writes, “Creaturely revelation and filial revelation share a common origin in the same Word. Both establish a personal relationship between humanity and God [...] both are oriented toward salvation [...]. Their difference lies in how God enters into relationship with humanity [...]—either revealing a creaturely relationship or a filial relationship within the mystery of the Word made flesh [...]. Between them exists a relationship “propaedeuticity”, of preparation: the spoken Word, not yet sent, prepares for the acceptance of the sent Word. The revelation/awareness of being creatures prepares for the awareness/revelation of being children. Gratitude for the mystery of Being prepares for gratitude for the mystery of

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 108 (our translation).

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 114-115 (our translation).

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 115 (our translation).

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 112 (our translation).

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 34 (our translation).

sonship, equally and even more undeserved.”¹⁹ At the center is the relationship made possible by God’s revelation, which is itself relational.²⁰

3. *For a Veritative Ontological Connection*

Theology also contributes to an important conceptual step: it invites us to relate the findings of historical and phenomenological studies to the Absolute, which theoretical-philosophical thought identifies as cause (Necessary Being, Intelligent Cause, Foundation of Being, etc.). Theology balances and completes the portrayal of a supreme Being, which might otherwise risk being reduced to a mere projection of human expectations or existential desires.²¹ Furthermore, it prompts a formulation of the metaphysical question that reconnects the historical and existential dimensions, finding in lived experience the link to the *quaestio Dei*.

The ontological certainties contained within religious experience cannot be confined to the realm of subjective religious perception, as this would reduce the experience to something merely personal and incommunicable. Instead, these certainties “must also rest upon an Absolute, apprehended through reflective reason, which, while incapable of fully revealing a Face, can nonetheless assure us of the reality of a Subject that truly exists and is not merely desired.”²² This connection is not merely optional; it emerges naturally from the movement of meaning inherent in authentic religious experience. Moreover, it is rigorously argued by a theology of religion.

“Holding together these dimensions is both a challenge and a necessity. Neglecting this would impoverish religious experience itself, reducing it to a subjective and incommunicable event, while forgetting its vocation to unify existential and intellectual dimensions, orienting the individual toward the Absolute in the search for God.”²³ By supporting and guiding this dialogue between philosophy and religion,

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 420 (our translation).

²⁰ Cfr. *ibidem*, 417-418.

²¹ Cfr. *ibidem*, 108.

²² *Ibidem*, 69 (our translation).

²³ *Ibidem*, (our translation).

theology can effectively demonstrate how the Absolute, as the rational foundation of reality, corresponds with the living God encountered in authentic religious experience.

Tanzella-Nitti points out that “the concept of God’s personality in Judeo-Christian revelation manifests an unprecedented convergence between the religious and philosophical perspectives.” This God “unites in Himself the reasons for truth and those for life.”²⁴ Theology thus illuminates an understanding of Being that not only includes religious experience but also expands it when correctly understood and authentically lived.

This dynamic involves discerning the truth dimension of religious experience, which is intrinsically tied to its ontological dimension. Religious experience contains within it a thought of being, just as philosophical reason can elaborate a thought of Being that helps clarify the ontological and truth-bearing dimensions of religious experience.²⁵

4. *Expanding the Understanding of the Human*

Through this connection, theology also sheds light on the understanding of the human person, offering insights that confirm and clarify humanity’s orientation toward the Absolute and its capacity for transcendence—elements already attested by historical and phenomenological studies. Theology enhances this understanding by referring to the order of creation and the filial condition revealed in Christ Jesus, which form the core of Christian faith and revelation.

Tanzella-Nitti draws on Thomas Aquinas, who defined religion as *religio proprie importat ordinem hominis ad Deum* (“religion properly implies the ordering of humanity to God”).²⁶ This is not merely a relationship but an “ethically qualified, salvific relationship.” It signifies an existential tension, as the *ordo hominis ad Deum* applies to all human activity, which becomes religious insofar as it is oriented toward God.²⁷ This

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 109 (our translation).

²⁵ On the possibility of an ontological-truth development of the intelligence of religious experience, see C. GRECO, *L’esperienza religiosa. Essenza valore verità*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2004.

²⁶ S.Th., II-II, q. 81, a. 1.

²⁷ Cfr. TANZELLA-NITTI, *Teologia della Rivelazione*, 109.

is not an extrinsic or heteronomous ordering, but an intimate orientation of the human person that must be consciously embraced and lived. *Desiderium naturale videndi Deum* (the natural desire to see God) is intrinsic to the human being.²⁸ There is a religious nature within humanity that serves as a preamble to faith, finding its fulfillment in faith.

Romano Guardini similarly emphasizes that the *ordo ad Deum* characterizes the human person. It is an unmerited gift but also a continual pursuit.²⁹ In the convergence of religion and philosophy—made possible through theology’s theoretical insights—a more comprehensive examination of the relationship between faith, religion, and belief emerges. Religious belief, while not theological faith, can nonetheless be associated with the notion of faith because it involves entrusting oneself to knowledge—or better, to a relationship—that is given and comes forth to meet us. Thus, the term “faith” cannot be reserved exclusively for Christian faith or set in opposition to religion, as is sometimes the case in certain apologetic frameworks.³⁰

Faith, as an attitude linked to revelation, is revealed to be an anthropological structure, a key to understanding humanity, and the principle of its dynamic fulfillment. The human being is not only capable of relationship but is fundamentally constituted within a relational origin. Faith, as trust and reliance, testifies to an understanding of oneself within this relationship, a movement that is both intimate and transcendent, guiding existence and providing coherence and meaning. There is no opposition between faith and knowledge. Instead, there is a profound articulation that theological reflection on religious experience helps to recognize and understand.

The theological dialogue with the sciences of religion and the philosophy of religion once again points to unity—not a unity that confuses but one that connects, articulating the diversity of levels in their intrinsic correspondence and integration.

For this reason, Tanzella-Nitti emphasizes that “one of the most important fruits of renewed theological reflection on religion in the singular will be to foster a more accurate theology of religions in the

²⁸ S.Th., I, q. 12, a 1.

²⁹ Cfr. R. GUARDINI, *Religione e rivelazione*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2001, 10.

³⁰ Cfr. TANZELLA-NITTI, *Teologia della Rivelazione*, 62-63.

plural,” as well as a reflection on humanity and the religious sense that defines it, enabling deeper communication among cultures.³¹

II. FOR A “FREE HANDSHAKE” BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION: SCHELERIAN INSIGHTS

Tanzella-Nitti delineates the task of theology in relation to philosophy and the sciences that study religious experience primarily from the standpoint of theological speculation. However, philosophy itself, from its own vantage point, also seeks integration and completion.

A key reference here is Max Scheler, who, in the 1920s, addressed the relationship between religion and philosophy in a way that revolutionized traditional frameworks.³² While Tanzella-Nitti’s theology of religion does not derive from Scheler, it dialogues with the German philosopher’s innovative approach to the interplay between philosophy, religion, and theology.³³ The shared focus on lived experience, which phenomenology emphasizes, forms a point of contact between the two. In Tanzella-Nitti’s theoretical perspective, metaphysical and ontological insights integrate and transcend phenomenological analysis. Similarly, Scheler’s “Catholic” writings and philosophy of religion do not neglect

³¹ A dialogue that does not merely outline areas of potential cooperation between religions, but one that has the courage to arise from faith itself—from the experience of God—to actively contribute to the promotion of a new humanism.

³² In 1921 Max Scheler published *The Eternal in Man*, which collects his writings on the philosophy of religion and marks a turning point in the development of this research perspective. In the following, the quotations of Scheler’s texts will always be our translation from the Italian edition. On Max Scheler’s philosophy of religion see in particular the masterful study by G. FERRETTI, *Max Scheler. 2. Filosofia della religione*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1972. We also refer to G. DE SIMONE, *L’amore fa vedere. Rivelazione e conoscenza nella filosofia della religione di Max Scheler*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2005. Regarding the relationship between philosophy and theology as it emerges from Scheler’s “system of conformity,” see G. DE SIMONE, *Teologia filosofica e filosofia della religione. Spunti scheleriani e prospettive di ricerca*, in G. DE SIMONE, A. NUGNES (eds.), *Dare ragione della fede. In dialogo con Carlo Greco S.I.*, Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, Trapani 2017, 31-43.

³³ For example, see TANZELLA-NITTI, *Teologia della Rivelazione*, 65-69, 50-59. In particular, note 10 on page 50 states: “In the subject under discussion here, Max Scheler’s work stands out for its originality and depth.” Additionally, see the critical annotations on page 69 for further insights.

metaphysical concerns. His phenomenology consistently gestures toward being, reinforcing its resonance with Tanzella-Nitti's research trajectory.

Beyond these parallels and distinctions, Scheler's criteria for rethinking the relationship between philosophy and religion remain highly relevant. They demonstrate how philosophy, in its pursuit of truth, can open itself to new and complementary perspectives. When thought is reconnected with life in its full depth, reason expands and articulates itself in synergistic ways—necessary not only for advancing knowledge but also for grasping the human condition in its deepest truth.

1. Redefining the Field of Inquiry

The cultural context of Scheler's reflections bears a striking similarity to our own: a time marked by profound uncertainty and precariousness. A pervasive sense of disorientation affects not only human existence in all its dimensions but also the bodies of knowledge that traditionally served as anchors for understanding reality, human purpose, and the meaning of action and thought. In the aftermath of the First World War, the task of reconstruction extended beyond rebuilding destroyed cities and public spaces; it necessitated the reconstruction of humanity itself.³⁴ But where could one turn for guidance in such a monumental undertaking?

Philosophy and religion—whose alliance in metaphysical knowledge had once shaped the cultural universe of the Western world—seemed, by this time, equally uncertain.³⁵ The metaphysical tradition had been destabilized by the very modernity that exalted reason's cognitive capabilities. Confronted with the challenge of grappling with foundations, both philosophy and theology needed to redefine their fields of inquiry and their capacities for exploring reality and truth.

Scheler believed that an authentic dialogue—free of any claim to superiority or subordination—was essential for reimagining the relationship between philosophy and theology. This reimagining would not only enable a better understanding of these disciplines but also allow their contributions to flow into the broader project of reconstructing

³⁴ See, in this regard, M. SCHELER, "The Reconstruction of European Culture: an Address" and "The Renewal of Religion", in IDEM, *The Eternal in Man*, 403-448, 107-127.

³⁵ Cfr. IDEM, "Religion and Philosophy", in IDEM, *The Eternal in Man*, 128-160.

humanity.³⁶ The indispensable condition for such dialogue is the recognition of the specificity of both philosophy and religion: their autonomous emergence within the human spirit, their unique demands,³⁷ and their embodiment within relationships that define their origins and boundaries.

2. *Beyond Traditional Solutions*

Scheler critically examined the “typical solutions” historically proposed for the relationship between philosophy and religion, identifying their vulnerabilities while exploring the openings they offered for new insights.³⁸ His philosophical reflections engaged deeply with the history of

³⁶ Scheler directs his invitation particularly to religion, urging it to open up and offer what is inherently its own. He highlights a cry for help arising from a humanity that has profoundly experienced its own frailty, a deep sense of lack, and an emptiness of heart. While these feelings may inspire an awakening and the desire to see clearly, they are insufficient on their own to provide the answer (cfr. SCHELER, “The Renewal of Religion”). “We should expect at all events an age of *extreme vitality* in matters of religion”, Scheler writes, “an age characterized by quite new kinds of mighty spiritual conflicts. But for precisely that reason, in the coming age every existing positive religion and Church must cease to be a mere ice-box for old truths [...] the person who wishes merely to *preserve*, or at the most defend, his religious position: if he dare not see in it the positive means of salvation for suffering humanity, and will not extend to humanity this means in a gift of joy and love, then he will find even his more modest goal of self-preservation *no longer* attainable. [...] But the time will come when unbelief’s sterile negation and the apparent tolerance of religion by lazy indifference will have come to an end. Then religion will once again be recognized and attacked from all sides for what it is—the highest concern of man. Then will be an end of the easy life. And with it there will cease the perfunctory frontier-patrol of one’s values and ideas, or the airtight, quasi-paralysed self-mummification in the coffin of exclusive organizations and places apart. Only one alternative will then be valid—either one must gird up one’s loins and with open, succouring arms give, present or lavish something on humanity, heal its heart’s open wound, or one must be prepared to find that the world, though thirsting feverishly for religion, believes one has nothing to give [...]. But in the latter case one must also be prepared to find that that gesture of pride and avarice brings on the destruction of the very things which one wished to preserve. Any positive religion which today fails in the above sense to carry out its spiritual mission, to bear new and living witness to its cause in every way, is most certainly doomed to defeat and decline in the spiritual struggles which we have before us” (*ibidem*, 121-122).

³⁷ Cfr. *ibidem*, 146-170.

³⁸ Cfr. SCHELER, “Religion and Philosophy”, 130.

Western thought and culture, seeking in the past both new and ancient paths to be rediscovered.

He discussed the “system of identity”—whether partial or total—which had historically shaped the understanding of philosophy and religion but often led to their conflation, whether through rationalism or traditionalism. He also critiqued the “dualism” rooted in Kantian thought, which was later exacerbated by positivism’s exclusive exaltation of empirical sciences as the only valid form of knowledge.³⁹

Scheler highlighted the critical points in these systems, using them to clarify the distinctions and specificities of religion and philosophy. The two domains are marked by different “impulses,” “methods,” “purposes,” and “objects,”⁴⁰ each corresponding to distinct experiences of reality and ways of accessing truth.⁴¹ Underlying Scheler’s thought is the idea of the person as a relational being, a living unity of intentional acts through which relationships with being are realized. This relationality is multiform, reflecting the differentiated ways in which being manifests itself and becomes accessible.⁴²

Philosophy and religion, then, must be distinguished as distinct perspectives on the same object—an object that reveals itself differently depending on the approach of the subject, who can adopt multiple ways of engaging with reality. Just as colors are perceived only through sight and flavors through taste, each domain of reality and sphere of being

³⁹ “Doctrines of the relationship between religion and philosophy fall into two categories: those which assert a total or partial *identity* of essence between religion and that part of philosophy called since Aristotle the ‘prime philosophy’ or later metaphysics, and those which assert an essential *difference* between religion and philosophy” (*ibidem*). For Scheler’s detailed examination, refer to pages 130-146.

⁴⁰ Cfr. *ibidem*, 146-147.

⁴¹ Contrary to the subjectivism inherent in modern theoretical conceptions, Scheler asserts that it is not cognitive and spiritual acts or operations that determine the ontic realm; instead, it is the being of the object that governs the manner of participation in it.

⁴² The “theory of the spheres of being” underpins the multiform nature of knowledge, corresponding to the varied ways in which reality is apprehended. For a deeper exploration of this cognitive theory—particularly its articulation of the relationship between thought and life and the affirmed centrality of the person—see DE SIMONE, *L’amore fa vedere*, 34-39.

requires a specific intentionality—a unique openness of consciousness elicited by the object as it reveals itself. Scheler referred to this as the “logic of meaning,” the intrinsic laws that govern intentionality’s direction and development.⁴³ The intentional logic of philosophical inquiry differs from that of religious intentionality, as Scheler explored memorably in his *Phenomenology of the Essence of Religion*.⁴⁴

Religious acts are characterized by a tension toward what is perceived as salvation. Religions invariably present themselves as pathways to salvation, and the tension within religious experience is precisely the search for fullness. Religion—writes Scheler—“is founded in the love of God and longing for a final *salvation* of man himself and all things. Religion is thus pre-eminently a *way of salvation*. The *first* intentional object of the religious act is [...] the *summum bonum*”.⁴⁵ The purpose of religion “is the *salvation of man* through a communion of life with God-divinization”.⁴⁶ The goal of religious experience is “the salvation of man through vital communion with God”, and together with him the community of which he is a part, the whole of humanity. “*The God of religion is the god of the saints and the god of the people*. The fount of all religious truth is not scientific utterance but faith in the words of the *homo religiosus*, the ‘holy man’”, that is, of the one who experiences a “peculiar, real and vital relationship to the divine as the eternal source of salvation”.⁴⁷

While the God of religion and the foundation of the world are *identical* in reality, “as *intentional objects* they are *different in essence*”.⁴⁸ The *ens a se* of metaphysics is here grasped as the supreme good within a relationship in which the subject is affectively engaged. The traits of the God of religion retain this affective tone, reflecting the *pathos* of a relationship oriented toward the supreme good.⁴⁹

⁴³ Cfr. for example SCHELER, “Religion and Philosophy”, 160.

⁴⁴ Cfr. IDEM, “The Essential Phenomenology of Religion”, in IDEM, *The Eternal in Man*, 161-331.

⁴⁵ IDEM, “Religion and Philosophy”, 138.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 134.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ Cfr. *ibidem*, 149.

3. *Conformity Between Philosophy, Religion, and Theology*

The affective dimension does not diminish the cognitive value of religious experience, as Scheler argued that “love is the root of knowledge.” His philosophy demonstrated the value of emotional involvement in the process of knowing.⁵⁰ Nothing can be known—or even perceived—without a foundation in feeling. Affective perception holds absolute priority in the cognitive process, serving as its grounding tone and the perspective through which things exist for us. Religious knowledge, with its strong affective component, reveals the uniquely human mode of knowing.

While Scheler opposed any traditionalism that treated metaphysics as a mere philosophical transposition of religious concepts, he underscored the priority of religion and its distinctive approach within the human spirit.⁵¹ The necessary distinction between philosophy and religion, and the recognition of their autonomous origins, does not preclude demonstrating their convergence and collaboration. As Scheler noted, metaphysics and religion both point to an identical reality that gives ultimate meaning to their respective objects. There is “a connection lying in the nature of the intentional *objects* [...] a connection of the respective intentions in the human mind and a possible connection of the two intentional objects in one and the same reality. For *a priori* this much is clear: the essential peculiarity of the absolutely real—the reality underlying all things real—must of necessity be that which decides the salvation or non-salvation of all things, including men. It is, so to speak, the last court of appeal for

⁵⁰ See in particular M. SCHELER, *Love and Knowledge*, in *On Feeling, Knowing, and Valuing: Selected Writings*, ed. by H.J. Bershady, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992, 147-165; IDEM, *Ordo Amoris*, in *Selected Philosophical Essays*, transl. by D.R. Lachterman, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1973, 98-135.

⁵¹ “To the question of which is more original in its implementation—religious knowledge or metaphysical knowledge, both of which are constitutive elements of the human spirit—Scheler responds: I do not think there can be any doubt that the *religious* [knowledge] is the earlier, the more original [...]. The human being always ‘has’ some kind of credence and assumption concerning his own and the world’s *weal* or way of salvation before ever he adopts the metaphysical frame of mind. He ‘necessarily’ has this assumption, whether he will or no, and whether or not he is reflexively aware of it” (SCHELER, “Religion and Philosophy”, 152).

this salvation. And this is also clear *a priori*: the absolutely holy and divine, whose nature is to satisfy the longing of things, can only do this if it is in addition the absolute reality on which all else depends”.⁵² To achieve its purpose—“metaphysics and religion [...] must lead to one *identical* reality, a reality which lends real and ultimate meaning to the two essentially different intentional objects.”⁵³

This collaboration, which Scheler described as a “system of conformity,”⁵⁴ allows religion and metaphysics to join hands freely—without one overpowering the other. Philosophy acknowledges a form of knowledge distinct from its own, while religion and theology assert their truth without needing external justification.⁵⁵

This free relationship establishes the conditions for a spontaneous self-limitation of philosophy, which recognizes a form of knowledge distinct from its own and is willing to welcome it without succumbing to the temptation of assimilation. Similarly, religion and theology, liberated from the need for external foundations, are finally able to argue their truth claims within the dialogue with philosophy and the sciences.⁵⁶

Affirming the noetic nature of religious acts—that is, the cognitive value of religious experience—opens space for dialogue on the question of God, the question of the foundation. Metaphysics is no longer the base, the rational ground upon which the knowledge of faith is built. Instead, metaphysics meets theology freely, from a distinct perspective and a different experience.⁵⁷

⁵² *Ibidem*, 138.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, 139.

⁵⁴ “The thesis that religion (including natural religion) is independent and founded in itself does not exclude a definition of its relation to metaphysics which I call the *system of conformity between religion and metaphysics*, and which I would oppose to the above-named dualistic systems as well as to the systems of total or partial identity” (*ibidem*, 146).

⁵⁵ Cfr. *ibidem*, 150.

⁵⁶ Cfr. *ibidem*, 146-160.

⁵⁷ In this sense, “separating” entails a necessary distinction that avoids dualism and instead highlights the recognition of a profound correspondence and intimate connection between philosophy and religion. The concern raised by Tanzella-Nitti finds in this approach an answer that aligns with the direction he identified as essential (cfr. TANZELLA-NITTI, *Teologia della Rivelazione*, 69).

This encounter helps clarify and articulate the knowledge gained through religious experience, while simultaneously broadening our understanding of the foundation—of being itself—by integrating insights from affectivity. It recovers the original order of relationality, with lived relationships as the proper space for this knowledge. “Only metaphysics and religion together,” Scheler writes, “can provide a perception and representation of the eternal,” though both remain ultimately inadequate. “We cannot now avoid seeing”, Scheler writes, “that the most adequate possession of God, the maximal participation of our being in his, cannot be achieved unless we first attain to a *grand overview*, free from all contradictions and incompatibilities, of the religious God and the metaphysical ‘world-basis’ together”.⁵⁸

Religious knowledge is not reducible to mere emotion; it is full-fledged knowledge.⁵⁹ This implies that an ontology can be developed based on the knowledge emerging from religious experience—a comprehension of Being as it is disclosed in religious experience. This approach employs a phenomenological reading that maps a hermeneutic circularity between the ontology of the divine and the experience where this knowledge takes shape, originating from the very self-revelation of the object.

This connection between religious experience and ontology is far from foreign to twentieth-century philosophical reflection. For instance, Mircea Eliade, in reconstructing the archaic ontology found in the mythic-symbolic expressions of preliterate religions, underscores that metaphysics has much to learn from them.⁶⁰ A similar emphasis appears in Paul Ricoeur and Luigi Pareyson, particularly in the

⁵⁸ SCHELER, “Religion and Philosophy”, 141. “The *true* God is less empty and fixed than the God of metaphysics. The *true* God is less narrow and ‘human’ (life-like) than the God of simple faith” (*ibidem*, 142).

⁵⁹ The religious act is “*unity of operation* of the mind *trained upon the object*”, its essence is therefore not grasped by moving on a merely psychological plane. “Even the thinking comprised in the religious act (and, in our view, even forming the leading element) is embraced from the outset by the act’s specific, noetic unity of operation” (*ibidem*, 155).

⁶⁰ “The cardinal problems of metaphysics could be renewed through a knowledge of archaic ontology” (M. ELIADE, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, transl. by W.R. Trask, Harper & Brothers, New York 1959, xii). Cfr. also M. ELIADE, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, transl. by R. Sheed, Sheed and Ward, New York 1958.

hermeneutical developments of phenomenological philosophy. This philosophical tradition has the merit of restoring the primacy of the object and its self-giving within a lived relationship, as the condition that makes knowledge possible.⁶¹

III. *QUAESTIO DEI* AND *QUAESTIO DE HOMINE* IN LIGHT OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: MARGINAL CONSIDERATIONS

At the conclusion of this journey through Tanzella-Nitti's articulate argumentation and the insights drawn from Schelerian reflections, we offer a few considerations, framed as marginal notes. These are neither comments nor mere recapitulations of the themes addressed. Rather, they aim to highlight key intuitions and decisions that appear pivotal and, in our view, represent threads for potential avenues of further inquiry.

First, it seems essential to emphasize that beginning anew from religious experience allows us to articulate the relationship between philosophy and theology without reducing one to the service of the other. Theology does not dictate the boundaries of philosophy, nor does philosophy operate as a subordinate tool for theological aims. Instead, both are invited to rediscover their original source in lived experience—within that foundational relationship which serves as the womb of all other relationships. In this way, the question of being and of the ultimate foundation can be explored with new accents and developments. Freed from the rigidity of closed theoretical systems and their claims of completeness, the understanding of being emerges as a dynamic process that traverses existence and history. It connects with the search for meaning, the experience of meaning as given and received, and the continuous interpretation of reality and understanding of truth that shapes human existence.

Religious experience, distinct from institutional religions though constituting their essential core, appears as the original and defining experience of what it means to be human. It is the “fact” that coincides

⁶¹ Cfr. P. RICOEUR, *Existence and Hermeneutics*, in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. by D. Ihde, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1974, 3-24; L. PAREYSON, *Ontologia della libertà. Il male e la sofferenza*, prefazione a cura di G. Riconda, G. Vattimo, Einaudi, Torino 1995.

with the very reality of the person in all their dimensions.⁶² It stems from an openness—a reaching beyond oneself that originates in the innermost depths of one’s being, from that which constitutes and generates the person at their root, the inexhaustible source, the mystery that intimately inhabits and infinitely surpasses them.

Another important consideration concerns the implications of this approach: when one touches the depths of human experience, disciplinary boundaries become remarkably porous without dissolving entirely. Similarly, the distinctions between interpretative categories and models blur. This “encroachment”⁶³ corresponds to the very nature of humanity and the possibility of knowledge itself.⁶⁴

Immersing oneself in the living reality of religious experience—with its radical engagement and unifying orientation for life—undermines rigid divisions of spaces and categories (e.g., transcendence vs. immanence, historical vs. transcendental). What emerges instead is a weaving together of dimensions and domains that, while maintaining their distinctiveness, appear intertwined and necessarily demand to be thought of together. This reflects a logic of “double thoughts,”⁶⁵ or,

⁶² This is the interpretation of religious experience—or more precisely, the experience of God—offered by the Spanish philosopher Xavier Zubiri, who begins from a phenomenological perspective and arrives at a metaphysics of reality. See X. ZUBIRI, *Man and God*, transl. by J. Redondo and ed. by T.B. Fowler, University Press of America, Lanham 2009. For a detailed presentation of Zubiri’s thought, refer to P. PONZIO, *Verità e attualità. La filosofia dell’intelligenza in Xavier Zubiri*, Edizioni di Pagina, Bari 2007. It may also be helpful to consult T. TRUPIANO, A.M. VITALE, *Il vincolo del reale. Percorsi di riflessione a partire da Xavier Zubiri*, Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, Trapani 2019, particularly DE SIMONE, *Il fatto religioso e l’uomo come esperienza di Dio in Xavier Zubiri*, 203-220.

⁶³ The reflections offered by Stefano Bancalari in his work *Fenomenologia della religione. Parole chiave* (Morcelliana, Brescia 2024) strike us as both illuminating and insightful, particularly the discussion on the term “sovrapposizione” (“overlapping”) found on pages 109-119.

⁶⁴ The debate on complex thought is particularly noteworthy in this context. See M. CERUTI, *Il tempo della complessità*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2018; M. CERUTI, F. BELLUSCI, *Abitare la complessità. La sfida di un destino comune*, Mimesis, Milano 2020; and E. MORIN, *L’avventura del metodo. Come la vita ha nutrito l’opera*, ed. by F. Bellusci, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2023.

⁶⁵ We refer to I. MANCINI, *Frammento su Dio*, ed. by A. Aguti, Morcelliana, Brescia 2000, as well as to Romano Guardini and his concept of “polar opposition” as a key to understanding the concreteness and truth of reality.

if preferred, the logic of paradox,⁶⁶ which the human-divine form of Christian revelation attests so marvelously.

A theology that reconnects with the experience of faith and dares to relinquish rigid conceptual frameworks not only broadens its horizon of understanding but also reclaims the speculative power of contemplating mystery. Such a theology can assist philosophy in rediscovering the question of ultimate foundations, reformulating metaphysical inquiries, and expanding the understanding of the human person. It does so without betraying human finitude or losing touch with the concreteness of reality, with its struggles and tragedies.

The *quaestio Dei* and the *quaestio de homine* are intimately connected in a dialogue that inevitably extends to engage other fields of knowledge and the sciences. This dialogue—exemplified so skillfully by Tenzella-Nitti—reaffirms the inexhaustibility of the human person and their irreducible dimension of transcendence as both “creature” and “child.” It opens a perspective that allows for imagining and fostering a new humanism.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ See G. LORIZIO, *La logica del paradosso*, Lateran University Press, Città del Vaticano 2001. Also, refer to S. GABURRO, A. SABETTA (eds.), *Elogio della porosità. Per una teologia con-testuale. Miscellanea di studi per il prof. Giuseppe Lorzio*, Studium, Roma 2024. Particularly noteworthy are the insights offered in S. Gaburro’s essay, *Una teologia dai confini porosi... e mondana perché cristiana*, 157-178.

⁶⁷ It is in this direction that the dialogue between religions can be envisioned and fostered, grounded in a deeper understanding of religious experience and the ultimate foundation that makes it possible. See ASSOCIAZIONE TEOLOGICA ITALIANA, *Il dialogo tra credenti: profezia di pace*, Glossa, Milano 2023, particularly G. De Simone’s contribution, *Il dialogo: paradigma dell’esperienza religiosa*, 69-101.

