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ON SECULARISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS:
CHARTING PATHWAYS WITH A PHENOMENOLOGY OF
RELIGION¹

It was in Vienna where, nearly 90 years ago, Sigmund Freud's groundbreaking critique of modern civilization appeared. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, as it was entitled in the English translation, became one of the 20th century's seminal books and indeed has significantly shaped the modern worldview and self-understanding. The discontents – in plural form – about which it speaks can easily be reduced to one single finding: modern man is unhappy. Unhappiness is the consequence of man's life within the constraints of society and the enforced renunciation of his instinctual desires. The original German title *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, literally to be translated as "The unease in culture," i.e. the uncomfortableness, and unhomeliness of living in the "iron cage" (Weber) of civilizational constraints, adequately transmits the core issue of this enforced unhappiness.

Even though the striving for happiness and individual fulfillment has become the main task or rather obsession of many in the contemporary world, Freud's book still maintains its diagnostic validity today. Neil Postman's famous slogan "Amusing Ourselves to Death" has set the tone for a debate that offers variation on the same topic: does modern Western civilization, technology, media, etc., help us to facilitate and enrich our lives to the point that we become happier? However, the unanimous proliferation of this Western "life-form" – be it an aspired ideal or as the hated enemy image par excellence – also generates manifold new constraints, addictions, and discontents, with globalization epitomizing this ambiguous tendency. Today, without a doubt, its maelstrom-like character, the inequities, insecurities and threats that it engenders, also appear to shake the deeply felt boredom and depression that became structural attributes of our modern individualist social imaginaries. In the

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wake of this development, ideas of cosmopolitan justice, inter-religious hospitality, post-growth, and other instruments of long-distance empathy recently have been reanimated or even newly coined, emphasizing the pressing necessity to mediate the ambiguous side-effects of mankind's latest civilizational achievements. The abyssal dialectics of technology and the systemically embellished violences of neoliberalism in the age of late globalization clearly attest to this basic ambiguity.² It is becoming more and more intelligible that the pursuit of individual happiness is tied to the structural boredom and indifference of a perfectly wired but socially dysfunctional society. Yet this clearly reveals that the "maker-mind" is caught in the nihilist dream of finally coming to an end—something that our contemporary scientific visions of human enhancement, "post-humanism," and algorithmic governance indeed seem to promise—or perhaps, one rather should say, foreshadow.

Yet such ambiguity has arisen not only as a consequence of the various and often spectral processes of so-called "globalization." Freud's earlier view of the civilizational process and the all too palpable negative socialities of its progress already bore the mark of such inherent ambiguity.³ What forces man, according to Freud, to fight and suppress his innermost instincts and therefore to become (more or less) unhappy⁴ is at the same time also

² See e.g. J. L. Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2003); A. Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers. An Essay in the Geography of Anger*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006); J.-L. Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, trans. P. Raffoul and D. Pettigrew (New York: SUNY Press, 2007); N. Chomsky, *Global Discontents. Conversations on the Rising Threats to Democracy. Interviews with David Barsamian*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017).

³ The same also holds, by the way, for Norbert Elias' conception of the "process of civilization" which borders, as several among his scholars have shown, also upon related various processes of "de-civilization." See N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. E. Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books, 1978); critical against Elias is H.-P. Duerr in his extensive work *Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozess*, 5 vols. (Frankfurt on the Main: Suhrkamp, 1988-2002); see also S. Fletcher "Towards a Theory of Decivilizing Processes." *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* 22(2): 283-96; S. Mennell, "Decivilising Processes: Theoretical Significance and Some Lines of Research." *International Sociology* 5(2): 205-223.

⁴ See S. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton 1961), 39. The related passage, which is of importance for our overall argument, reads as follows: "Long ago [man] formed an ideal conception of omnipotence and omniscience which he embodied in his gods. To these gods he attributed everything that seemed unattainable to his wishes, or that was forbidden to him. One may say, therefore, that these gods were cultural ideals. Today he has come very close to the attainment of this ideal, he has almost become a god himself. Only, it is true, in the fashion in which ideals are usually attained according to the general judgment of humanity: not completely, in some respects not at all, in others only half way. Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times ... Future ages will bring with them

regarded as a necessary step for the taming of the "human beast within," i.e., a kind of sacrifice is necessary to assure the "good life" in human community. "Outward peace causes permanent inner discord," would be the shortest characterization of this process. Transposed onto the societal level, the formula epitomizes an intellectual position that does not reiterate simply a Hobbesian social contractualism, but also perfectly reflects the normative costs it entails for the individual. Yet this is not all. With its focus on the lasting discontents of this process, with the deification of man figuring prominently in this regard, it also presages the later movement: it is the sting of the "prosthetic God's" unhappiness that will undo the relegation of religious sentiments—due to their potential inclination to irrationality, fanaticism, and violence—to the merely private realm, something for which Hobbes already had explicitly argued.

Yet it is exactly in this context that religion has re-entered the game more recently with remarkable verve. In this regard, one might recall that Freud considered religion the oldest and probably most forceful tool to cope with both the unrelenting and unpredictable tendencies of the civilizational process. Freud, however, was not the first or only one to describe religion as a cardinal form of the cultural molding of human life-worlds. This of course is an insight that, for instance, also is integral to classical French social theory and the way its proponents linked the integration of the social bond to the appropriation of mankind's "affective fragility,"⁵ thus ensuring the transformation of dangerous, animalistic affects (*perturbatio animi*) into the malleable social orchestration of our genuinely human "moral sentiments."⁶ In this context, the significance of Freud's assessment derives from its insight into the reflective and expressive potential of religious systems of knowledge. As most forcefully demonstrated in his last book, *Moses and Monotheism*, religion indeed works not only as a trigger for, but also is itself the critical expression of such historical developments. Monotheism, in this sense, due to its sublime potential of abstraction and greater intellectual achievements undoubtedly testifies to a "progress" of mankind—ambivalent as this development may be.⁷ This view of religion as the historical shaper of mankind does

new and probably unimaginably great achievements in this field of civilization and will increase man's likeness to God still more. But in the interests of our investigations, we will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy in his Godlike character." (Ibid.)

⁵ This concept is introduced in P. Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, trans. C. A. Kelbley (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986).

⁶ T. Arppe, *Affectivity and the Social Bond. Transcendence, Economy, and Violence in French Social Theory* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

⁷ This ambivalence becomes focal in accounts that discuss the intrinsic relationship between religion, esp. monotheism, and violence; cf. .e.g., J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997); P. Sloterdijk, *God's Zeal. The Battle of the Three Monotheisms* (New York: Polity, 2007). That violence can be "inherent" to religious traditions, narrative semantics, and systems of knowledge, but as for its

not, however, point to a one-way route but is inherently ambiguous. As to Freud's conviction, religion's place in the contemporary world and its future is deeply questionable, if not negligible. He indeed harbored a clear preference for a more 'rationalized' solution concerning the ardent questions of the world as he knew it over the "straight jacket" of old religion. Yet the question still remains: why does this rationalized approach turn out to produce at least as many "discontents" as the older "mythological" worldview? Even though Freud insisted on this preference, he still was not willing to relegate religion wholesale to the realm of the mythological. In line with his general reassessment of the human condition, he rather demonstrated a great deal of sensibility to the always possible "return of the repressed," the extraordinary, or non-everyday as that which innervates the fabrics of social life. An all too rationalist exclusion of religion would itself call for a critique of reason as neo-mythic.

It is exactly at this intersection that our volume begins and, in a way, continues along the same lines of questioning as Freud. Yet it proceeds from a different, perhaps even opposite angle. Its idea is not at all simply to "recover the sacred,"⁸ to re-establish, re-gain or retrieve (original intuitions or normative potentials of) religion for (the sake of redeeming) the Western, secularized world. In our view, such a gesture still amounts to the idea that "the religious" and "the secular" were two clearly demarcated regions and that a broadened brand of reason will in the long run be able to assimilate religion's yet unthought cognitive potentials⁹ and instrumentally integrate its irrationality, obscurity, opacity, etc. into one unified and objective world-view. Opposing such an integrationist (and hegemonic if not imperialist) vision, our task is not to explore what kind of extrinsic challenge this "return" poses to the so-called "secular worldview"; as if a new rhetorics of the sacred simply were pouring the old wine into new skins, thus reminding us of our still unfinished attempts to reshape reason in the hermeneutic age of manifold difference and diversity. Following up on Derrida's hypothesis that the two sources of faith

actualization is dependent upon inherently contingent conditions, is demonstrated forcefully by H. Kippenberg, *Violence as Worship: Religious Wars in the Age of Globalization*, trans. B. McNeil (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). Assmann himself has more recently also explicitly opted for such an understanding of the relationship between religion and violence, thus correcting one-sided interpretations of his early work, see J. H. Tück, *Monotheismus unter Gewaltverdacht: Zum Gespräch mit Jan Assmann*, Freiburg, Vienna: Herder, 2015).

⁸ To cite an easily misleading title by C. Taylor, "Recovering the Sacred." *Inquiry* 54/2(2007): 113-125.

⁹ This is the tenor of Habermas' post-secularist inclusion of the religious other, cf. *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, trans. C. Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).

and knowledge intersect in constitutive ways¹⁰, we rather hypothesize that this "return"—the return of indeed novel and unprecedented religious expressions—is related intrinsically to the crisis of secularism and "secular reason." Religion, thus viewed, not only returns as the "repressed," as the "other" of reason, as an "opaque core" or "mysterium." Quite to the contrary, religion appears exactly in its transformation and "dispersion" into modern societies that creatively apply religious motifs, symbolisms, and semantics.¹¹ And furthermore even "authentic" religious practices for their part adopt and incorporate the assumedly expropriating means of tele-techno-scientific rationalism, finally to the extent of recovering in the very medium of performance and attestation of the "transcendent," "holy," etc., religion's "originary supplement," to use Derrida's terms.

More recently, this enigmatic situation has been reflected in terms of the "ambivalence" or "dialectics of secularization."¹² As a disconcerting variety of phenomena subsumed under this header indicates, secular or "disengaged reason" has rested self-assured about its liberating, "salvific" qualities and its near "deification of the human." And even if it still is highly disputed whether the "return of the religious" amounts to a sociological fact, a philosophical artifact, or a theological *phantasma*, the disconcerting historical evidence cannot but attract our attention with utmost acuity: secularism is not the clear cut solution to the problems of modern mankind, as many might have hoped, including probably Freud. The reign of secular reason rather makes us experience unprecedented discontents—this time indeed in the plural form. Even though many societies have profited enormously from a regulative orientation toward collective emancipation and personal autonomy, deep cutting fault lines constitute their flip side. This is especially true for the engulfing maelstrom of globalization that appears in the wake of these developments. A variety of troubling phenomena comes to mind: the revival of "tribalisms" and "identity politics"; the unpredicted return of extreme collective violence and the political usage of cruelty; a "new war on the poor" in neocolonial economic settings; the closely related flight and migration movements that recently came to affect the "old World"; the surge of ever growing precarious classes in the post-industrial states; the hazardous exploitation of natural resources and the creation of deserted wastelands heralding the anthropocene; the affective collapse of

¹⁰ J. Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone." In *Acts of Religion*, ed. G. Anidjar (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), 40-101.

¹¹ The idea of such a constitutive "dispersion" has been proposed by theologian H.-J. Höhn, *Postsakular. Gesellschaft im Umbruch - Religion im Wandel* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007).

¹² Most prominently, this title has been chosen by J. Habermas and J. Ratzinger (at that times Pope Benedict XVI) for their book, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006).

whole societies unified solely by the idols of instrumental reason and neoliberal efficacy; or the related spiritual pauperization and "transcendental homelessness" of exhausted ego-start-ups. All this, to name but some recent developments and problems, attests to a widespread feeling of profound unease that haunts our contemporary situation, self-understanding, and increasingly fragile social imaginaries. As these disconcerting developments demonstrate, the often referenced "disenchantment of the world"¹³ (which has been understood as perhaps the most important step in the history of man's rational self-empowerment and the related technological conquest of the world) has resulted, as Jean-Luc Nancy put it, in the creation of a "wasteland of sense."¹⁴ In this "wasteland," to quote Nietzsche, a "great hunt" for the "still unexhausted possibilities"¹⁵ of life is unleashed again and again. Thus viewed, the "great hunt" contributes to the constitution of a "spectacular society"¹⁶ that appears doomed to chase its ever fading sense in a never-ending proliferation of images and performances. According to Michel Henry, this dynamic embodies the archetype of globalization and results in the systemic reign of a truly life-negating inner "barbarism" that relegates the meaning of life to its ecstatic expressions.¹⁷ With the related categories of progress, popularity, and commodification converting into sacrosanct social values, the relentless pursuit of the project called modernity reaches its peak, perhaps also its transition point. The so-called "dialectics of secularization"

¹³ Here we reference M. Gauchet's *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. O. Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2007); on his account, the disenchantment of the world and the development of autonomy that it leads to, does not at all close the door to religion—since it would never have been possible without it and, thus, does not forsake "religious truth;" cf. also Charles Taylor's foreword to the English version.

¹⁴ J.-L. Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure. The Deconstruction of Christianity* (New York: Fordham University Press 2008), 4.

¹⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil. Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. J. Norman (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press 2001), 43.

¹⁶ Following G. Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. K. Knabb (Detroit: Black and Red, 2000).

¹⁷ See M. Henry, *Barbarism*, trans. S. Davidson (London, New York: Continuum Press, 2004). Interestingly, Henry himself alludes to Nietzsche's metaphor of the "great hunt" in his attempt to distinguish the knowledge (and culture) of life from "scientific knowledge" (*ibid.*, 69-70): "The original truth is historical in a mind and body as the flesh of the Individual and because this truth alone matters—the truth that is its own criterion and expresses what it is on its own goes without any 'interpretation' and, a fortiori, any discussion—and this marks the beginning of what Nietzsche calls "the great hunt." This is the hunt for all the inner experiences of humanity and all the truths that can be demonstrated and tested in life, as a modality of this life and that can be proved to the extent that it will provide this proof. This is what differentiates experimentation in life from what usually goes by this name: the experimentation of knowledge or science."

testifies to this abyssal condition of late modernity: it points at a condition that compels us to navigate between the Scylla of a disillusioned individualism with its moral sources drying out, and the Charybdis of an "impossible community," which is repelled for its totalizing dynamics.

At this point, where the crisis of secular liberalism converges with the collapse of a truly disembodied and fully procedural society, resources of meaning become scarce.¹⁸ Caught in this "bad infinity" of dis-realizing mediations, questions of contingency and human finitude do not, however, lose their sting but rather affect and push us more than ever. This is not only true for the disengaged "modern self," who pays for its newly won autonomy with manifold symptoms of being overburdened and for social emancipation with ever deepening experiences of loneliness and isolation.¹⁹ It is also all too true for our tapering visions of the "good life" and the "common good," since we nowadays experience a far-reaching and indeed uncanny alienation from the life-world that results from the successful attempts to liberate ourselves from the constraints of nature, human finitude, and social contingencies.

It is exactly within the context of these basic ideas of political modernity and their undergoing a profound crisis of legitimacy that religion emerges as a long traded tool to manage contingency and exposure, experiences of transcendence, and human finitude. Religion, however, is on its way back not only as a mere means to reduce complexity, to come to terms with contingency, and to assure "salvation," whatever this may mean.²⁰ In the global context of the disillusioning of the liberal ideals (or perhaps idols)

¹⁸ According to Claude Lefort, the disembodiment of "political bodies" by the "democratic revolution" in political modernity has always triggered attempts at their re-incorporation. However, it is not only the totalitarian movements that need to be taken into consideration in this context, but also the so-called *Permanence of the Theological-political* (in: *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. D. Macey (Cambridge, Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), 213-55). This affinity, however need not be exploited in order to project the logics of totalitarianism onto contemporary religious fundamentalism, a short-cut that can be found more and more often in recent debates. That, as Lefort concludes in the very end of the essay, "the religious is reactivated at the weak points of the social" and, finally, as a consequence of the "difficulty political or philosophical thought has in assuming, without making a travesty, the tragedy of them modern condition" (ibid., 255), mirrors the hypothesis proposed here.

¹⁹ See again Höhn, *Postsäkular*, op. cit.

²⁰ On the general importance of this "promise of salvation" for understanding religion beyond its functional or essentialist misconceptions, see M. Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation. A Theory of Religion*, trans. S. Rendall (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

of "discursivized reason"²¹, "reciprocal recognition"²² or "cosmopolitan ethos,"²³ religion today also returns in its community-instituting power.²⁴ Even if one may contest the view that religious communities today really are rising like a "phoenix from the ashes,"²⁵ the proliferating role of religion and religious semantics in the symbolic institution, emotive invocation, and performative construction of communities today cannot but attract one's attention. And indeed, even if the sociological facts may vary across the globe, there is no reason not to take the socially cohesive function and symbolic power of religion seriously again. We find strong evidence for this not only in regard to the persistent (sometimes even growing) power of traditional denominations in the global south, but also in the explosive impact of "global political theologies"²⁶ or, of course, in the surge of "fundamentalist movements" and communalizing forms of so-called "religious violence."²⁷ It is also a fact evidenced in the more specific Western context, especially with the birth of "new spiritual imaginaries"²⁸ and their challenging of secularism,

²¹ We use this expression to emphasize the teleological orientation in Habermas' account of "discursive reason."

²² In this context, the importance of the "theory of recognition," which dates back to Hegel's (or perhaps rather to Heraclitus') binding of struggle and recognition, cannot be overestimated. Let it suffice to note, however, that recent critique has rightly put the finger on the normativist over-determinations of the conception, which, in the last analysis, excludes those who are immersed in the "drama of globalization" since they are caught in a "double anxiety": exposed, on the one hand, to a "fear of inclusion on draconian terms" and, on the other, a fear of "exclusion from world history," "the underdeveloped and the truly destitute ones" (cf. A. Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, 35)) cannot even enter the arena of recognition. J. Butler's attempt to shift the discourse to the question of recognizability points into the same direction; see, e.g., J. Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006).

²³ For a recent take on this tradition, which reaches back to Kant and earlier, see K. A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism. Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

²⁴ See A. Braeckman, "Habermas and Gauchet on Religion in Postsecular Society. A Critical Assessment." *Continental Philosophy Review* 42/3(2009): 279-296.

²⁵ H. Kippenberg, "'Phoenix from the Ashes'. Religious Communities Arising from Globalization." *Journal of Religion in Europe* 6(2013): 1-32.

²⁶ For an exemplary compilation see H. de Vries, L. Sullivan, *Political Theologies. Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

²⁷ See again Kippenberg, *Violence as Worship*, op. cit.

²⁸ Cf. P. Heelas et al., *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); H. Knoblauch, *Populäre*

which often attempt to avoid the “religious emasculation” of citizens via a democratic imperative of mutual recognition.

Whether or not these findings point toward a triumphalist vanguard of a truly post-secular era, they tell us at least that the religious is far more deeply interwoven into our “formations of the secular” than we habitually are inclined to accept. This is especially true for contemporary “continental” philosophy of religion, which needs to adapt to the fact that the positioning of philosophy towards religion is all too frequently still caught in the traditional binaries already mentioned. That indeed, as the anthropologist of religion, Talal Asad, has demonstrated most convincingly, “the secular is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it [...] nor as simple break from it,”²⁹ that the concept of the secular rather requires “the religious” as its relevant but frequently accursed other (as he put it: “that it cannot do without it”), is the fundamental correlation we need to understand in this context—first and foremost from a philosophical point of view.

To this desideratum attests a booming trend of discussions in social and political theory as well. Especially with the proliferation of debates on “post-secularism,” the analytic accent clearly has shifted. It has moved to “shifting images”³⁰ and novel “tales of transcendence”³¹ which epitomize the fact that “transcendence” more and more appears to affect our contemporary political economies and social imaginaries again: sometimes subcutaneously as a kind of cultural reflex to our late modern melodrama of ever proliferating projections of difference, sometimes in all too blatant forms of violence that force their way into our cultures of mutual indifference and all-absorbing compromise.

Viewed against this general backdrop, the aim of this volume is to fathom the yet to be plumbed potentials that phenomenology bears to confront the challenges posed by the “return of the religious” and the unprecedented discontents of “secular reason”. The overall task is to reflect the capacities of philosophy (especially phenomenology) to overcome these discontents and to provide a new perspective on religion beyond the classical dichotomies of faith and reason, theism and atheism, or, more generally speaking, myth and Enlightenment—dichotomies the practical implementation of which has shaped the discontents of secular society. It is our wager that phenomenology provides us

Religion. Auf dem Weg in eine spirituelle Gesellschaft (Frankfurt/M.: Campus, 2009)

²⁹ T. Asad. *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 25, 200.

³⁰ See W. Stoker and W. van der Merwe, eds., *Looking Beyond? Shifting Views of Transcendence in Philosophy, Theology, Art, and Politics*, (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2012).

³¹ B. Giesen, “Tales of Transcendence: Imagining the Sacred in Politics.” In *Religion and Politics. Cultural Perspectives*, ed. B. Giesen and D. Suber (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 93-137.

with an appropriate methodology to think beyond these binaries and the bad alternative of either relegating religion to the “dark” and irrational residues of some mythological past or rationalizing and theologizing away its contents up to the point where the specific contents of religion vanish in rationalist indifference. The wager to overcome or rather think beyond the dichotomy of myth and Enlightenment in all its possible articulations, requires, however, a revision of phenomenology. Undoubtedly, phenomenology offers a vast tradition for studying the various modes of religious experience. Following its incipient phase in Germany (including Scheler, Stein, and Conrad-Martius, but also the young Heidegger), especially French phenomenological thought has in the last 30 years (from Lévinas, Ricœur, and Henry, to Marion, Lacoste, and Chrétien) contributed to further explorations into the phenomenology of religious experience and subjectivity. Altogether, phenomenology undoubtedly offers a rich host of key concepts that are of paramount importance for such descriptions, including transcendence, gift, revelation, epiphany, love, liturgy, etc. Thereby, it also has contributed to overcoming philosophically onto-theology and to embark on a post-metaphysical way of re-thinking the religious.³² Notwithstanding these important achievements, phenomenology thus far has contributed hardly any substantial impact on more recent discussions concerning the role of religion in regard to its collective articulations, not to mention its influence on contemporary society. To bring phenomenology to bear on the issues raised, we hence need to elaborate on its vast but largely unplumbed potentials.

With this general clarification of our intentions, it may now also become clearer why we started this introductory essay with an exploration of the peculiar discontents that seem to have an important impact on the rise of the “post-secular,” whatever it may finally turn out to be, past the last “post”. As the early Heidegger already insisted, the key problem for any “phenomenology of religion” consists in the fact that it must not surreptitiously focalize its assumed object in a quest for eidetic clarity and formal distinctiveness. As he put it, the phenomenon at stake rather needs “to be explained from out of our own historical situation and facticity”³³; that is, against the background of our own material pre-understanding of “religion.” This insight implies that “religion” must not be approached in the singular but may only be considered “like language itself, which is realized only in different tongues.” This fact, as Ricœur further argues, indeed “condemns phenomenology to run the gauntlet of a

³² Let it suffice to mention just one book here, the author of which managed lucidly to demonstrate the importance of phenomenology, in this case Lévinas, for conceiving a post-metaphysical philosophy of religion; see J. Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

³³ M. Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. M. Fritsch and J. A. Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 89.

hermeneutic."³⁴ It is exactly this well-known methodological problem concerning any phenomenological investigation of religion that is further aggravated in our contemporary context. With the "return of religion" it is, as Derrida among others observed, absolutely not clear at all what it is that "returns." Thus, any attempt to re-think (or perhaps one rather should say un-think) religion in the "hermeneutic age of reason"³⁵ not only needs to expose itself to the risky dialogue between religions³⁶ in order to avoid any "hyper-imperialist appropriation" of religion in the singular.³⁷ As we have here argued, rethinking religion also has to adopt the basic fact that faith and reason appear inextricably intertwined, especially in their joint uses of various media and tele-technology. To confront this intertwining or elliptical constitution of religion is, however, not an easy undertaking. It is a daring endeavor since it calls on us to avoid the undercurrents of modernist assumptions that have led us to oppose faith and reason in terms of rationality and irrationality; and it calls on us to assume at least the possibility that reason might obliquely constitute religion as its other, thus at once camouflaging and disavowing it as its own "originary supplement"³⁸ – its twin upon which it oftentimes clearly is parasitic.

If this is the case, however, we not only need to take care to avoid any "hyper-imperialist appropriation" of religion in the singular. We furthermore also have to be attentive not to succumb to any hyper-rationalist expulsion of "religious truth." This refers to a cardinal problem that is epitomized in the political solution that has been substituted for the philosophical problem of religion: relegating religion to the private realm, thus substituting the categories of discursivized reason to the existential problem of the "truth of religion."³⁹ This in fact amounts to a dodging of the

³⁴ P. Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse." in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn"*, ed. D. Janicaud, J.-F. Courtine, J.-L. Chrétien, M. Henry, J.-L. Marion, and P. Ricoeur, trans. B. G. Prusak (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 127-46, here 130. Whether or not this would need to be "a textual or scriptural hermeneutic" as he goes on to explain, or rather a "carnal hermeneutics" that is able to account for the turn from "text to action" also in regard to religious practice, as Kearney proposes, is not the essential point here but one that deserves further discussion.

³⁵ Cf. J. Greisch, *L'Age herméneutique de la raison* (Paris: Cerf, 1985).

³⁶ See, e.g., R. Bernasconi, "Must We Avoid Speaking of Religion? The Truths of Religions." *Research in Phenomenology* 39/2(2009): 204-223.

³⁷ J. Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 29

³⁸ As Derrida puts this: "No faith, therefore, nor future without everything technical, automatic, machine-like supposed by iterability. In this sense, the technical is the possibility of faith, indeed its very chance that entails the greatest risk, even the menace of *radical evil*." (Ibid., 83)

³⁹ As for this argument, we may not only refer to deconstruction (see below) but also to accounts that emphasize the anthropological-practical irreducibility of "religious truth claims," cf. T. Rentsch, "Worin

question of such truth, as Caputo argues, "Religious truth is more a matter of doing than of knowing, as when Kierkegaard said that the name of God is the name of a deed. That means that religious truth flies beneath the radar of both the theism and the atheism of the Enlightenment. Its truth has to do with a more elemental experience that precedes this distinction [...]."⁴⁰

Today, the wager is to confront this zone head on. It is a zone that opens up beyond the modernist dichotomies of rationality and irrationality, of theism and atheism, of myth and Enlightenment. This is not a stable zone but rather a "widening gyre" shining forth quite threateningly in contemporary social imaginaries and the ways they deal with their disavowed discontents. Since the ways the "truth of religion"—its "unexhausted force" (*das Unabgegoltene*)⁴¹ according to Habermas—is implanted back into the context of a soberly disenchanted world not only attests to a syndrome of its "spinning out of control" but also to a *poietics* of hope, liberation and recovery, the return of the religious cannot but remain inherently ambivalent. Embodied in performative expressions of the "force of God" as well as humble attestations of her "weakness," between "phenomenal violence" and "inconspicuousness," between spectacular "eventmentality" and insistent withdrawal, the ambivalence of the religious appears truly irreducible.⁴² This refers to a situation that is as challenging for philosophy as it is for theology since it calls for more and more rigorous retrievals of both reason and religion's assumed autochthony and autonomy. Contemporary political philosophy testifies to this impasse, too: in its unanimous orientation towards categories like discourse, compromise, or mediation it appears largely incapable of responding impartially to the appeal of the "religious other." Due to its foundationalist habit, it rather sticks

besteht die Irreduzibilität religiöser Wahrheitsansprüche?" In *Religion – Metaphysik(kritik) – Theologie im Kontext der Moderne/Postmoderne*. ed. M. Knapp, T. Kobusch (Berlin & New York: De Gruyter, 2001), 113-126, or again Höhn, *Postsäkular*, op. cit..

⁴⁰ J. Caputo, "Forget Rationality: Is There Religious Truth?" In *Madness, Religion, and the Limits of Reason*, ed. J. Bornemark and S. O. Wallenstein (Stockholm: Elanders, 2015), 23-40, here 33-34.

⁴¹ J. Habermas, "An Awareness of What is Missing." In *An Awareness of What is Missing. Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*. ed. J. Habermas et al. (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 18.

⁴² This enumeration associates a variety of positions that all, each in a specific way, seek to deal with this ambivalence without reducing it to some bad ambiguity: see respectively C. Raschke, *The Force of God: Political Theology and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); J. D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God. A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); idem, *The Insistence of God. A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); H. de Vries, "Phenomenal Violence and the Philosophy of Religion." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, ed. M. Jerryson, M. Juergensmeyer and M. Kitts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 496-520; J. W. Alvis, *The Inconspicuous God: Heidegger, French Phenomenology, and the Theological Turn* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

to the unconditional claim of securing some "true other"—an "other" unanimously conceived within occidental reason's totalizing framework of identity and difference.⁴³ Contemporary phenomenology, contrariwise, has brought an anti-totalizing and post-foundational tone into philosophy that might help us to overcome this impasse. In parting with "first principles" as well as "ultimate foundations," it can help to cultivate an attitude of reflection that is attentive to both the fragilities of human existence and its capacity to chart a course between the addiction to first principles and the self-abandonment to last ideas.

It is in this spirit that we think the contributions to this special issue should be understood. Considering themselves in such post-foundational terms, the papers assembled here meet the task to again take up basic questions in phenomenology of religion. Yet they explicitly do so with a view to the questioning and indeed collapse of both the eidetic and rationalist habit that phenomenology frequently has adopted. While the first section concentrates on a critical reassessment of various traditional and contemporary positions to ensure our discipline's openness towards a plethora of religious phenomena, the following chapters delineate several areas of discontent with secularism that at least in part appear to motivate the proliferating interest in such phenomena: firstly, this concerns a lack or even fear of transcendence that is met with "shifting conceptions of transcendence."⁴⁴ Since such conceptions are used to renegotiate the boundaries of immanence/transcendence, this problem secondly is interlinked closely with a preponderance of reason and the negligence of what used to be called "soul" respectively "care for the soul" in earlier times.⁴⁵ The related eclipse of the "moral emotions" in our modern social imaginaries would be a major consequence of this negligence and thus has to be understood as a paramount doorway for better understanding the "return of the religious."⁴⁶ Another axis, thirdly and finally, concerns a related loss of communality and the affective collapse of communities unified only by the globalized laws of

⁴³ See for a clear analysis of the feminine (qua gendered vulnerability) as an exemplary instantiation of this self-righteous habit of Western political philosophy, L. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2013)

⁴⁴ See W. Stoker, "Culture and Transcendence. A Typology." In *Looking Beyond? Shifting Views of Transcendence in Philosophy, Theology, Art, and Politics*, ed. W. Stoker and W. van der Merwe, op. cit., 5-28.

⁴⁵ The concept has been developed in detail by Jan Patočka; for its application on the "philosophy of history" see his *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. E. V. Kohák (La Salle: Open Court, 1996). For more details see the articles devoted to Patočka assembled in this volume.

⁴⁶ See on this correlation A. J. Steinbock, "The Role of the Moral Emotions in Our Social and Political Practices." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 24/5(2016): 600-616; see also his *Moral Emotions. Reclaiming the Evidence of the Heart* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

commodification and procedural governance. Again, one would need to trace this phenomenon back to the afore-mentioned eclipse of the "moral emotions" and what Ricoeur termed the "affective fragility of man" – this kind of irrevocable "alterity that we are," an alterity that has been instrumentalized or rationalized away politically in modern individualist social imaginaries.⁴⁷ One would indeed need to do so, since it is only in this context that the truly disconcerting complex of "religious violence" comes to the fore; a problematic complex that appears to be the true wager of our attempts to secure the liberating potentials of religion in a world broken apart between the all too unanimous images of order and disorder, theism and atheism, the autonomy of reason and the heterology of faith, or myth and Enlightenment.

Yet to investigate the intertwining of these assumedly *impossible* counterparts requires a novel understanding of phenomenology. Given the insight into reason's intertwining with its other, it would need to be a diacritical phenomenology. It would have to be one that is able to unveil reason's involvement in the shaping of the contingent "disarray"⁴⁸ that one is easily inclined to counterpose as its only opponent and danger. Exactly at this point, however, Husserl's struggle against a so-called "impenetrable destiny" (the "opacity" that seems to haunt discourse ethics still today) and a related hope for the restitution of "an essence of rationalism" remains one-sided. In considering the "crisis" as an only contingent accident happening to reason from without but not affecting its very heart and thus truly transforming it from within, reason here is rendered structurally sacrosanct: due to reason's assumedly pure nucleus and teleological essence, the "crises" that it confronts will forever leave reason unscathed and shall always provide room for a *restitutio ad integrum*. Like the Phoenix (alluded to by Husserl in the same paragraph) who rises untouched from the ashes of history (whoever may have been responsible for the preceding devastation), reason as such thus viewed knows no true crisis. Yet Husserl also seems to have some sense for the specificity of the "current crisis" and its power to reach deeper and perhaps affect the roots of reason. This is why he might speak, in a quite non-translatable idiomatic language, of the "non-essence" or rather "anti-essence of the current crisis" (*das Unwesen der gegenwärtigen "Krise"*), a meaning that is lost in the English translation in terms of "disarray." As his choice of words might indicate, we might be exposed to a "crisis" here that possibly contradicts or even interdicts reason's power for rebirth; it is a reminder for the remainder of irreducible otherness at the heart of reason—a reason that may be "spinning out of control" in its very attempt to colonize a "true other" at the price of sacrificing her very alterity.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ See J. Mensch, "The Animal and the Divine: The Alterity that I am." *Studia Phaenomenologica* 17(2017):177-200.

⁴⁸ E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. D. Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 299.

⁴⁹ This substitution of relative otherness (to be declined in totalizing terms of identity/difference, genus/species, etc.) for alterity is the

To see through this sacrificial jettisoning of otherness and to understand how it affects our idea of reason, is something Husserl barely is able to theorize. Here he seems to be in need of assistance from a thinker like Girard, who criticized so forcefully those "most tenacious myths of modernity" that masquerade in the guise of reason's purported purity:

"The modern mind still cannot bring itself to acknowledge the basic principle behind that [sc. sacrificial] mechanism which, in a single decisive movement, curtails reciprocal violence and imposes structure on the community. Because of this willful blindness, modern thinkers continue to see religion as an isolated, wholly fictitious phenomenon cherished only by a few backward peoples or milieus. And these same thinkers can now project upon religion alone the responsibility for a violent projection of violence that truly pertains to all societies including our own [...] [T]oday, more than ever before, we will encounter resistance when we try to rid ourselves of ignorance – even though the time has come for this ignorance to yield to knowledge. This resistance is similar to what Freud calls resistance, but far more formidable. We are not dealing with the sort of repressed desires that everyone is really eager to put on public display, but with the most tenacious myths of modernism; with everything, in short, that claims to be free of all mythical influence."⁵⁰

Given this, the "diacritical" phenomenology we envisage would be one that, again in Husserl's sense, explicitly avows the possible "weariness" affecting the heart of reason⁵¹; but it also would need to be one that retains trust in such a phenomenology's capacity to remain attentive to the disconcerting call of the other without relegating the other to any purely inaccessible beyond. To stay in the "trace of the other" (Lévinas) would therefore amount, first and foremost, not to lose sight of, to quote Kearney's felicitous rendering of Ricoeur's cardinal insight, "the dia-logos of oneself-as-another."⁵² Thus viewed, otherness, givenness, or vulnerability are but instantiations of the "greater reason" for which we might still hope. But we might do so only with the

heart of Levinas' account; its practical implications have recently been explored on anthropological grounds by the afore-mentioned L. Abu-Lughod, as well as in its implications for political and social theory by J. Butler, see *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), esp. 41-7.

⁵⁰ R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. P. Gregory (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press), 318-9. See also Derrida who warns against conceiving (ideological) secularism to ever be "pure of all religiosity" ("Reason and Faith," 63).

⁵¹ See E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. D. Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 299.

⁵² See, respectively P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. C. Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, and 1992); R. Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters. Interpreting Otherness* (London & New York: Routledge 2006), 18.

foreknowledge that such a "greater reason"⁵³ cannot be totalized in one concept—and that it will not come without its other, however, whatever, or whomever we may call it.

⁵³ Obviously, we are referring with this expression to Nietzsche but also give him a phenomenological twist the implications of which are still in need of being fully explored: "The body is a great reason, a multiplicity with one sense, a war and a peace, one herd and one shepherd. Your small reason, what you call 'spirit' is also a tool of your body, my brother, a small work — and plaything of your great reason. 'I' you say and are proud of this word. But what is greater is that in which you do not want to believe — your body and its great reason. It does not say I, but *does I*." F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None*, trans. Del Caro (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 23. On some phenomenological implications of this concept and how they might be brought to bear on rethinking the relationship of faith and reason, see J.-L. Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. C. Gschwandtner et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 145-154.