

## The Ambiguity of Lived Religion: A Phenomenological Proposal for Reconceptualizing the Relationship of Religion and Violence<sup>1)</sup>

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The following reflection do not intend to provide the reader with theological speculation that is not in need of claiming any evidence for its speculations. Nor should they be read as an ideological attempt to save occidental rationalism by once again attempting to demonstrate the irrationality of its “relevant other,” thus disavowing its own, constitutive violences, which are complicit in creating this presumed “other.” What follows is rather a first attempt to apply the means of social, that is, non-foundational phenomenology to develop an outlook on the vexed relationship between religion and violence. This couple indeed attests to a disconcerting and highly ambivalent correlation, one that has all too often been misinterpreted in essentialist or reductive terms, or has been misconceived in merely functional terms. By using the social theoretical account of Alfred Schutz, I propose to develop an analytical framework to pose this question in a different key, from a different perspective. I hypothesize that this account will not only help us to understand the *intrinsic role* of violence in religious systems of knowledge; rather, it will also enable us to reveal the inherently *contingent* character of any such violence. Schutz’s generally underrated account seems to be promising in this respect. On a variety of occasions it has already been applied productively for the sake of comparative, inter-cultural analyses of the life-world. (See e. g., V. H. Storr (2010) and Yu (2019)) Thus far, however, it has hardly been applied to the complex phenomenon of *religion*, not to speak of so-called “religious violence.”<sup>2)</sup> The following reflections take up this desideratum and develop Schutz’s thoughts into this direction.

More specifically viewed, I wish to develop an analytical framework for confronting the ambivalent role of violence in the constitution of religious *life-worlds* that can stand the test of *inter-religious verification*. As my knowledge of other religions and especially of Islam<sup>3)</sup> is, as I have to confess, marginal, or rather superficial, and as I accept Heidegger’s insight “that *religion* needs ‘to be explained from out of our own historical situation and facticity’” (Heidegger 2010, 89), I cannot claim any such evidence. Therefore, I will not be able to provide but a few remarks about how I think this framework might be applied to the constitution of other religious life-worlds, something which indeed does not exist in the singular.

To embark on this project, I will start with a few general remarks concerning the relationship of religion and violence. In a second step, I will present Schutz’s major concepts and theoretical premises that I will subsequently apply to develop an account of the “religious

life-world.” In a third step, I will use this framework to explore how violence and religion are not ontologically enmeshed but interrelated on various levels. This will lead me to argue for a *relational* understanding of “religious violence,” that is, one that refutes any causal nexus but rather insists on its inherently contingent character.

## 1. Introduction

There is no doubt that a kind of “dark attraction” between violence and religion is endemic to religious traditions. A plethora of religious images, imaginaries, and practices is indeed pervaded by violence, or at least a “language of violence” and a related “intercorporeal semantics,” including sacred texts, (sacrificial) rituals, or the selective social technologies that revolve around “systems of religious knowledge.” There is also no doubt that religion frequently figures as a major reason for or is a medium of violent conflict. But there is also no doubt that it frequently works as a vessel of peace, esp. in the case of so-called wisdom traditions and by way of the phronetic resources they offer (cf. Kearney 2011). Given this, we are perhaps, as W. Cavanaugh (2011) holds, rather duped by the “myth of religious violence,” as if assuming all too quickly that inherently religious justifications of violence exist. The evidence one might provide, thus viewed, is definitely split. Given this, the ambivalence of religion and the sacred, an often remarked topic (cf. Ruin & Bornemark 2012), appears irreducible. This insight, however, must not lead us astray in our scientific and specifically in our philosophical attempts to confront this peculiar phenomenon in an unprejudiced manner. That religion and violence are hardly strangers to each other must not, in other words, lead us to accept any shorthand reference to “religious violence,” as if religion (and esp. Monotheism, the assumedly most rationally defensible and civilized form of religion) was particularly prone to violence and the major culprit for violence, both historically and in the contemporary world. While this is indeed a misconception, we still must accept that “violence [often] masquerades as purported sanctity.” (Pope Francis) Put differently, it mimics the splendor of “divine violence,” which is in many religious traditions indeed taken to reside “beyond good and evil,” in the attempt to justify itself—a justification that resonates strongly in the “permanence of the theologico-political” (Lefort 1991) which is still part of our late modern social imaginaries (cf. Staudigl 2019a). According to this logic of legitimization, the “weakness of God,” as John Caputo (2006) has called it, is surreptitiously claimed not only as one’s rightful claim for emancipation, liberation or empowerment—but is rather mimetically outplayed as the very entitlement to use violence in order to *assure* such power. Yet not only this shorthand reference is clearly wrong and dangerous. It is also wrong to conceive of such “violent incidents” only in terms of some “*temporarily* misdirected behavior fostered by the (wrong interpretation of) narrative semantics of religion” (Srubar 2017: 502). As Hans Kippenberg has demonstrated most convincingly in his research on various religious traditions, “violent scripts of action,” which are in fact sedimented

in various sacred texts across all religious traditions, are always reactivated under *inherently contingent conditions*; that is, no causal necessity to act violently may be derived therefrom (Kippenberg 2011). Violence, in other words, is always to be viewed as an *option* of action; one may act violently, but one need not, under no circumstances, however pressing they may appear. In other words, there are no violent “basic acts,” as there is no natural proclivity to violence.<sup>4)</sup>

The more specific, but strongly related debate whether or not violence is intrinsic to religion or is rather due to wrong interpretations of some assumedly original religious message (holy texts), is a notorious one. As is widely known, this discussion has gained specific traction in regard to monotheistic religion, and especially in regard to the average misperception of Islam’s alleged otherness and abject medievalism. While this orientalist habit of occidental reason and its self-righteous posture has come under pressure more recently (Fanon 1988; Said 2003; Mbembe 2016), the truly disconcerting realities of so-called religious violence still call for comprehensive as well as context-sensitive analysis. Otherwise, the problem would be relegated to a kind of “black box” that enlightened reason is not capable of unlocking and hence is justified to counter, with sometimes even worse violent means (cf. Derrida 2005; Whitehead 2015); thus, however, it contributes to a *parasitic* kind of self-constitution, as Zygmunt Bauman (1988) perhaps would have put it: in his terms, ordering reason is dependent or rather parasitic upon “imagination of disorder” since it needs this kind of “raw material” to keep alive its very project. This is a problem that has recently become intelligible with the crisis of secularism in the West or the so-called “return of religion.” Whether or not it is a sociological fact, a philosophical artifact or even a theological phantasma, it testifies to the simple fact that our “modern social imaginaries” (Taylor 2004) and beloved individualist social ontologies cannot do without its “others” and therefore participate in their (re)production. This becomes also intelligible in the mutual intertwining of faith and reason in the context of globalized tele-technologies, where, on the one hand, the search for “lost origins” or an assumed “purity” is always already disavowed by the media that it utilizes, and where the media of reason, rationality and deliberation, on the other hand, are themselves rendered sacrosanct. Derrida’s famous treatise “Faith and knowledge” has explored this chiasmatic intertwining in detail. As he argues, it is against this backdrop that we may understand the predicament of our post-secular constellation, in which we find ourselves besieged with violent images of religious otherness, opacity, and irrationality on the one hand, and yet feel that “something is missing” in our social imaginaries, for which no-thing but religion in its imaginative potential is frequently taken to step in.

This “melodrama” (or rather tragedy) of ambiguous difference (Baudrillard 1990) in the post-secular context, which is out on a “great hunt” for “yet unexplored possibilities” (Nietzsche) and unconquered otherness but also fears the breakdown of forms, offers the general background for my further reflections. To my understanding the ambivalence that is constitutive not only for the very problem of “religious violence” but for the very concept of religion, requires a phenomenological account. It is by way of such an account, which is able to articulate the lived

but forgotten meanings and significative articulations of the “things themselves” that will prove helpful to better understand religion, its specific experiential qualities, and the vexed quandary of “religious violence” that in fact permeates religious experience, practice, and representation—albeit in always differing ways. To some reader this proposition may sound astonishing: it is indeed true that phenomenology with its starting point in subjective experience has furnished us with a host of concepts to explore “religious experience.” Until today, it has, however, hardly contributed to current debates on the role of religion in contemporary societies, religion as an inherently “social phenomenon,” not to mention the issue of religious violence. Yet religion undoubtedly is a kind of “inter-phenomenon” (*Zwischenphänomen*, to use an expression coined by Bernhard Waldenfels), the meaning of which cannot be reduced to the meaning bestowing acts of a transcendental subject. How may we therefore approach the phenomena of “lived religion,” and study the phenomenology of religious subjectivity *in concreto*, that is, at the juncture of individual and collective articulations of religious experience?

## 2. The “life-world,” the “religious finite province of meaning,” and “symbolic communication”: Some Fundamental concepts for a socio-phenomenological analysis of the religious life-world

As is well known, it was Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, who coined the term “life-world,” *Lebenswelt*. He did so with the intent to support his life-long philosophical fight against naturalism and psychologism by including a yet largely overlooked dimension: the full-fledged “transcendental field” of experience that he termed *subjectivity*. Subjectivity, on Husserl’s late account, is not to be misconceived in terms of a “transcendental I” that would be the only meaning bestowing principle (*Sinngebung*); as to his conviction, it is inherently *intersubjective* as well as *enworlded*. With the concept of the life-world, Husserl accordingly anticipated the integration of various meaning generating layers like historicity, intersubjectivity, and embodiment. With the related inclusion of concepts like “sense formation” (*Sinnbildung*) and “institution,” (*Sinnstiftung*) the cardinal concept of “constitution” received a substantial twist: in this revised form it indeed attests to a pluralism of “absoluta” (Steinbock 1995) functioning “in the back” of active consciousness. Yet not Husserl himself but rather his followers (see Tengelyi 2007) have systematically explored the most important conclusions from this *turn to the life-world*.

For the purpose of this paper, let me recall the specific appropriation of the topic of the life-world by Alfred Schutz, the Austrian born sociologist who was forced to emigrate to the US in 1939. Schutz, in his sociologically inflected account, refuted Husserl’s transcendental position and emphasized the primacy of *mundane intersubjectivity* (Schutz 1975). Already in his early book titled *The meaningful constitution of the Social World*, but more comprehensively so in his

unfinished master piece *The Structures of the Life-world*, he provided a full-fledged framework for phenomenological explorations of the life-world. His focus was especially on its foundational social structures and the ways they extend in space, time, as well as in the realms of lived sociality and the symbolical dimension. Departing from the everyday life-world as the “paramount reality” in which we always already live without reflecting upon it, Schutz’s account can be called a *pragmatic theory of the life-world*. As Srubar (1988) claims, it basically revolves around mankind’s “fundamental anxiety” and our related capacities to disclose the world in pragmatic terms in order to come to terms with it. With this “pragmatic motive” (Schutz 1962, 228) at its core, he considers the human landscape and fabrics of social life in terms of intrinsic, interpretive, as well as imposed “relevance structures” that afford the world its specific socio-cultural impregnation, practical typicality, and communicative patterning (see Schutz 1970).

In his analyses of the life-world, *religion* has, however, never moved into the focus. Yet I am convinced that we can bring his account to bear fruitfully on this topic. In particular, two elements of Schutz’s overall account strike me as important in this regard. This concerns first Schutz’s understanding of *transcendence* and, secondly, the concept of “*multiple realities*” and his related theory of the symbol and symbolic communication. Let me briefly outline the significance of these dimensions before I will proceed to a more concise analysis of how we may conceptualize religion within this framework.

1) The notion of *transcendence* in Schutz’s work is primarily not at all about the “sacred” or some kind of godly or otherworldly givenness. The term rather refers to whatever escapes the capacity of man to pragmatically disclose what she experiences. Accordingly, he distinguishes between small, medium and large transcendencies. Whether it be the fleeting experience of time passing, of the past that escapes me; the exceeding givenness of the other person that always repudiates my intentions; or, finally, the “big transcendencies” like, e.g., death, which we master by referring to realities beyond everyday life—all these moments of otherness “call for action that is able to bridge this gap.” To cope with transcendence yet is not something that the solitary ego might successfully do all alone. This endeavor rather requires and is dependent upon interaction and communication. As such it is not only practical but also revolves around the generation of symbolic, that is, appresentative semiotic systems and symbolic practices—or simply speaking: *culture*.

2) Culture, on this account, is not a self-enclosed system of pragmatic mastery and related recipes. For Schutz, the realm of the symbolical not simply subsists as another means to achieve such mastery. He rather conceives of the symbol as a sort of “meaning clip” (Srubar 2007: 201-3) that enables us to transcend the “pragmatic motive” as such and hence to relate to everydayness in a different light. It thus enables us to reconsider everydayness in light of what resists its reign and especially its sometimes apparent tendency for “hyper-mastery,” as in the case of technology (cf. Barber 2017). In this context Schutz demonstrates that the symbolic dimension offers us access to what he calls, in following William James, “multiple realities.” (cf.



Schutz 1962)

Schutz's theoretical take on these "realities" or rather "finite provinces of meaning" (to use his preferred title) focuses their meaningful constitution. He does not understand them as *ontological features* but rather conceives of them in terms of some internally coherent experiential attitudes or "cognitive styles." Such "style" involves a specific degree of attentiveness to the given (*attention à la vie*), typical forms of interaction (like "gearing into" (*Wirken*) the world), typical patterns of related self-experience, forms of sociality, etc., around which they revolve. As to his basic assumption, all "provinces of meaning" are dependent upon "everydayness" as their irreducible "hub." It is the "paramount reality" (Schutz 1962: 226) of our very being and is formative of the ways we relate to a variety of different "realities." Schutz here mentions, e.g., the province of scientific theory, dream, play, art, or, finally, religion.

What is important about Schutz's account of "finite provinces of meaning" is the fact that by *taking them* we become able to "see through" (Schutz 1962: 257) the functioning intelligibilities of our already socially derived (that is, pre-interpreted and normatively sanctioned) life-world. In some instance, as in the case of the "religious finite province of meaning," this break-through activates the subject's potential to transform its pre-given relevance-structures, and overcome her traditional "stock of knowledge." Thus, it brings it closer to a "promise of salvation"—around which all religions somehow appear to revolve, as Martin Riesebrodt (2007) has demonstrated.

However we may distinguish more properly this reality, let it suffice to emphasize that Schutz's approach is helpful for understanding religion as an "attitude," to use Husserl's term. Accordingly, *entering* this attitude (or being catapulted into it, e.g., in experiences of shock and awe) designates a specific "kind of epoché." (cf. Barber 2017: 94-103) It is a kind of epoché that has a very different focus compared to the phenomenological epoché, since it is about suspending the question whether or not the transcendent principle, etc., around which one's religious system of knowledge revolves, really exists. This so-called "religious premise," as Riesebrodt (2007: 75) called it, yet is not at the center of a Schutzian account of *religion*. Schutz, thus viewed, is neither a theologian nor a believer, neither a philosopher of religion nor a methodological atheist. What matters for him is rather the question *how the ways we deal with experiences of transcendence feed into the fabrics of social life and, reciprocally, how forms of social interaction constitute the conditions for such way of experiencing*. Important hence is how such transcendent principles performatively gain and may in future claim, to use Clifford Geertz's expression, an "aura of facticity." (Geertz 1973: 109)

It is at this point that we may complement Schutz's pragmatic theory of the life-world with some more general action-theoretical reflection. If the world is indeed "seen through" from within the religious finite province of meaning; if it appears in a different light (the uneconomic logic of the gift, grace, God's mercy, as epitomized in the Islamic concept of Ar-Rahman, or the Buddhist dharma, etc.) that appears liberating, the one who *returns* from this finite province of meaning may want to preserve this knowledge also *within* the everyday life-world (cf. Bloch 1992). In

other words, the specific *resistance* this experience offers to the pragmatic motive, will then need to be *dialectically integrated into the life-world*. Religion, thus viewed, is not anymore a matter of belief or dogma, but rather as John Caputo respectively argues, “a matter of transformation”:

“Religious truth is not found in having certain information or beliefs that will gain one insight into a supersensible world or a ticket of admission to an afterlife. Religious truth is not a matter of information—as if it reveals certain facts of the matter otherwise unavailable to empirical inquiry or speculative “reason”—but *a matter of transformation, with the result that religious truth takes place in and as the truth of a form of life*. [...] 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, one that cannot be held captive either by confessional religion or reductionistic critiques of religion.” (Caputo 2015: 33-4)

If we translate this philosophical assessment back into social theory, we might say that the core element of religion cannot be found in “discursive practices” or “behavior-regulating practices,” which are so dear to both to philosophical as well as sociological accounts of religion. If religion is *a matter of transformation*, we rather need to look for this element in the third kind of practice Riesebrodt discusses, so-called “interventionist practices.” As to this author, only “interventionist practices” (which he also calls liturgies) can assure the kind of *communication with the sacred* that is indeed cardinal for entering, entertaining, or applying the “religious province of meaning,” as it makes it tick. His account of these is as follows:

“There are at least four types of contact with or access to superhuman powers. Establishing contact can mean—in Spiro’s sense—interaction through symbolic actions such as prayers, chants, gestures, formulas, sacrifices, vows, or divination. Second, establishing contact in the sense of manipulation may take place, for example, by wearing amulets or performing ‘magical’ acts. Establishing contact can also mean temporary interaction or even fusion with superhuman powers, as experienced in mystical trance and ascetic ecstasy. Finally, establishing contact can mean activating super-human potential that slumbers within a person; it includes practices of self-empowerment through contemplation and the “enlightenment” experienced thereby. The last two ways of establishing contact are usually reserved for religious virtuosos. All such practices, which aim at establishing contact with superhuman powers [in order to ensure the “promise of salvation,” thereby affording the transcendent principles their “aura of facticity”, M.S.], I call interventionist practices. Many concern what has long been called ‘cult.’” (2007:75)

In a nutshell: What we may call the “religious finite province of meaning” requires a specific kind of *epoché* to enter it or to be catapulted into passively, and this practical epoché calls for training and habitualization to secure such access; furthermore, it requires appresentative symbolic devices to communicate the core experience of “seeing through” and the liberating power that it practically affords one; finally, both these “interventionist practices” and the “discursive practices” that communicate it call for their concrete embodiment in the everyday *interactional order*, first and foremost in the formation of behavior regulating practices and the related narrative semantics of religious systems of knowledge.

### 3. Confronting the Relationship of Religion and Violence on Phenomenological Grounds

In a last step I will attempt now to apply these insights and confront the vexed question concerning the relationship between religion and violence on this phenomenological basis. This is by far not a contingent question, since such systems, i.e., specific ways of a society’s self-description, have across the vast variety of religious traditions always been understood as the most *basic* form of the cultural molding of the life-world. Thus viewed, they are in the service of generating a *fabrics of meaning that transforms the world into a human life-world*, that makes, e.g, “the unbearable bearable,” (Moyaert 2009), the contingent acceptable, the (apparently) senseless meaningful, and so is even capable of providing (or at least promising) “hope for the hopeless.” Religion, put differently, has been taken as a means to transform and thereby *order* reality in a meaningful way. If we accept that violence is always already *part and parcel* of every such attempt at constructing, securing, or re-establishing social order, as Hobbes among others has clearly shown (cf. Liebsch 2015), we need to consider how violence is irreducibly worked into religious systems of knowledge and the meaning-generative or enculturating practice that these entail.

Ambiguously enough, the religious impetus to contain violence derives from a basically violent encounter with the sacred, or transcendent, which I use as a placeholder here for the various expressions of this (unprincipled) principle across different cultures and religions. As we learned from Schutz, the moment of otherness that is part and parcel of encountering transcendence, “calls for action to bridge this gap.” It calls for interaction and communication. Yet communication in this special case bears specific features:

“[C]ommunication with non-everyday realities within the lifeworld doesn’t appear simply as a semiotic process of using symbols. It also involves an emotional and bodily experience that is caused by the overwhelming impact of the transcendent reality, which is manifested in the practices of the actors. [...] Compared with other systems of knowledge dealing with non-everyday areas of reality such as philosophy or science, religious knowledge is closely intertwined with corporeality and emotions and therefore gives rise to high motivational



potency for related action.” (Srubar 2017: 504)

This embodied character of religious experience is manifest in various forms of religious practice or “liturgies,” including prayer, ritual washings, orgiastic sexuality, but also practices of self-chastisement, asceticism, self-flagellation, or the various forms of “martyrdom,” to mention just a very few. This evidence indicates that religious systems are indeed *linked tightly to the embodiment of actors* who, somehow paradoxically, thereby intend to reach the transcendent. We should note at that point that the emotive-motivational power that lies in these bodily or rather inter-corporal relations is used to “transform religious propositions into lived values, claiming counter-factual maintenance” (Srubar, *ibid.*)—as in various eschatological promises to bring some godly kingdom down to Earth.

This *violent potential of the sacred* that we tried to single out, is also expressed in philosophical as well as theological assessments of revelation that emphasize its excessive, blinding, and overwhelming character. To this attests the description of the violence of *hierophanies* in various holy texts. Another example would be Rudolf Otto, who in his treatise “The holy” famously talked about a “mysterium tremendum et fascinans.” What is most interesting in Otto’s account, however, is the fact that he also noticed the motivating and *energetizing* experience that this encounter effectuates (see Otto 1958: 23-4). This insight points at what we may call with Schutz the *necessity to dialectically integrate the transcendent viewpoint into everydayness* (cf. Barber 2017: chapter 4). Srubar provides us with a clear description of this transformation:

“The relation of ‘sacrality’ to everyday life is expressed not only in its ties to human corporeality but also in the way the disturbing experience of the ‘sacred’ is integrated into the lifeworld and how it gains its order there.” (Srubar 2017: 505)

This impact is exemplified, e.g., in the structure of lived space that is now taken to represent the sacral order in a way that everyday social relations are endowed with a symbolic significance (Schutz 1962a) and hence appear to be “‘charged’ with the power of ‘sacrality,’” (*ibid.*) which in turn can be used to legitimize the transformation (or preservation) of the everyday social order. This process of projection and retrojection, as Srubar calls it, becomes most palpable in the *dynamics of inclusion and exclusion* that related *topologies of the sacred and the profane* entail. Such *breaking lines of inclusion and exclusion* are without a doubt relevant in a variety of social realities. They gain, however, a deeply troubling weight in the context of religious systems of knowledge. In their case, the foundational distinction between purity and danger (Douglas 2003; cf. Bauman 1993), order and chaos/disorder is not only the general background that makes social action possible by way of simply demarcating social space in terms of center and periphery, the accessible and the inaccessible. It is rather important to see that this distinction at once reintroduces violence (now in a ritualized form) as *an a-semiotic medium of communication*

*with the sacred*. On this level, violence reaches out in two interrelated directions, as we know very well. Imaginations of disorder in fact are not only projected onto outward strangeness (heterodoxy) but are oftentimes even more catastrophic in regard to inward (mis)perceptions of decline or heresy. In this context, a variety of *purifying* or purging forms of violence seeks to find its sources of legitimization. This extends not only to discourses of justification that revolve around *unconditionals* like “holy ground” or “holy war.” (cf. Clark 2014) Without delving deeper into the related structures of legitimization that altogether revolve around a perceived threat or “violence incarnate” of the other, a misperception that thrives on the fact that violence always justifies itself as “counter-violence”<sup>5)</sup>, let me note just one issue here: in all such instances that revolve around the enforcement of some “unconditional claim” or “eternal truth,” we have to witness a ritual, performative generation of violence; a re-generation in fact that, willy-nilly, participates in the production of its other/s whom it needs in order to uphold its claims. What is most disconcerting about this mutually reinforcing process is the simple fact that it structurally reduces what Schutz calls “the reciprocity of perspectives,” leading on the long run to an asymmetric relationship that may even eclipse the humanity of the other. In this case, *racialized difference* (cf. Fanon 1988), or in the context of religion, *heterodoxy*, e.g., is postulated as a danger to personal and collective, social as well as spiritual well-being, and therefore calls for assimilation, exclusion, or extinction of those who are represented as a threat to one’s own religious system. (cf. Srubar 2017, *ibid.*)

Closely related to this second dimension of violence, I would finally like to draw attention to a third one. Both the experience of the transcendent and its incorporation into the social topologies of everydayness are related to what we may call the *narrative semantics of religious systems of knowledge*. Such “discursive practices,” in Riesebrodt’s terms, indeed are again highly ambivalent as regards violence (Assmann 2010). On the one hand, they openly name it, thus offering violent scripts of action and schemes of interpretation that may become relevant for novel *definitions of one’s situation in religious terms*. This is a dimension that has been described with utmost profundity by Hans Kippenberg. He accordingly argues that the reactivation of such scripts attests by no way to any causal necessity. It rather is inherently contingent since it is dependent upon the historical and cultural elements that impact a person or group’s definition of the situation, as it arises in her incessant “struggle for concordance in discordance.” (cf. Ricoeur 1992, 32) In this context one might also reference recent theories of recognition, which also emphasize the responsive character of such violence. On the other hand, however, this reading of religious violence in terms of action theory remains a strangely *disembodied* reading. It somehow tends to forget (or suppress) the corporeal components that are part and parcel of the very effectivity of religious systems of knowledge and practice. As we have seen earlier on, to eliminate violence from the bodily experience of the ‘transcendent’ would mean to throw out the notorious baby with the bath water, that is, it would cancel out the immediate effect that the presence of ‘sacrality’ requires. Now we see that the narratives, which revolve around this transcendence or sacrality, would themselves become obsolete if this

original violence would be canceled out. This would be, as Srubar notes, a misunderstanding of religion and its basic but ambivalent powers:

“The attempts to eliminate the corporeal components from that communication [with the sacred] by way of rational reflection (as it has been attempted in the context of European Enlightenment) would transform religions into axiomatic philosophic systems: hence, their religious ethical commandments would lose their vitality and, as ‘flatus vocis’ [...], would mutate into empty propositions. Accordingly, the relation to violence remains one of the central points in religious narratives.” (Srubar 2017: 512)

Interestingly, these discourses are either veiled in a semantics of *love* or couched in the vocabulary of legitimate *counter-violence*. Yet love, which has frequently been understood as but another form of a-semiotic communication with the sacred, is as such not at all free from violence, not the least due to its “unconditional character.” (see Marion 2002) As for counter-violence it should by now be even more clear that religious practices that seek to prevent us from “evil” and to expel violence from the everyday world adopt themselves various forms of counter-violence, be it self-restraint, ritual sacrifices, or the violent extinction of heresy respectively heterodoxy, which but re-create the cause upon which they parasitize.

To conclude: In light of these findings our initial question, whether or not violence is a *structural attribute* of religion or simply a *temporarily misdirected behavior accidentally fostered by the narrative semantics* of some religious system of knowledge, turns out to be more than misleading. It is misleading, perhaps even distorting and adulterating, indeed inasmuch as it disregards the variety of violences that are woven into our pre-conceived perceptions of the “religious phenomenon,” be it the modern doctrine of secularism or the liberal imaginary (cf. King 2007; Goldstone 2011). As I sought to demonstrate, inhabiting a religious life-world, or “finite province of meaning,” requires a dialectical retrojection of the transcendent principle, a kind of “rebounding violence” or “conquering return” in Maurice Bloch’s terms.<sup>6</sup> This happens, or rather is performed by way of practices of a-semiotic communication that are required to *transform religious propositions into lived values*. Given this, the irreducibly ambivalent role of violence in religious systems of knowledge clearly comes to the fore. In Srubar’s words:

“As the striving for non-violence as the topic of religious systems of knowledge is finally always legitimized by the violence that appears in the communication with the ‘sacred,’ the non-violence claimed by the semantics of religious narratives remains precarious and always runs the risk of generating violence itself. This ambivalence inherent to systems of religious knowledge is inseparably integrated into their structure and cannot be removed by any means of self-reflection.” (Srubar 2017: 512)

While this assessment of such irreducible ambivalence may appear all too negative or even

fatalistic to some, I conclude by emphasizing that it also offers a positive outlook. It does so since it demonstrates that *violence is not one*, that it always leaves leeways of lesser violence, and that it depends upon us how we deal with the “rebounding violence” that the uncanny “return” to the everyday life-world affords us. There might be a dialectics at work here, but it is open. Hence it is about us to decide whether we surreptitiously claim to embody God’s zeal or rather take a liberating dance with her weakness; whether we, equipped with our dear ideas of discursively sanctified counter-violence or a literally understood *jihad* remain parasitic upon our imaginations of disorder, chaos, *fitnah*, and all other such imaginations, with which religious semantics are replete. But to chart this way in-between the intrinsically intermingled opposites of autonomy and heterology would be yet another story to tell; it would be a story about “enabling God,” and an “enabling God” (cf. Kearney 2010), who is as insistent as she is weak in us—we, who all too obediently accept to step in for her absence, thus giving birth to a whole teratology of monsters presumably lurking “without” that we in fact only nurture “within.”

### Notes

- 1) A first version of this paper was presented at the conference “Philosophie, Religion und Wissenschaft in der islamischen Lebenswelt”, University of Vienna, Austria, March 2018. Work on this paper has been made possible by two grants of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF I 2785; FWF P 29599).
- 2) I may mention the special issue of *Human Studies* dedicated to “Alfred Schutz and religion” that I edited in 2017, as well as Barber (2017).
- 3) To be more precise, knowledge of “Islam,” the so-called “political Islam” and its occidentalist interpretations would be essential for the whole argument since the trope of religious violence has move into the focus so poignantly only with the key event, *Schlüsselereignis* in Kant’s terms, of “9/11.” The argument elaborated here thus is propelled on sandy soils and would definitely require intercultural and inter-religious verification. The point I would like to make here, however, rather is to first start a discussion concerning philosophy’s general, that is, phenomenological capacities to confront and describe a phenomenon like “religious violence” in its very structures, hence to position phenomenology as a viable candidate to start such a venture. My early conviction that phenomenology indeed harbors such unfathomed potentials to provide such analyses, has been supported heavily by Toru Tani’s related work in this direction, which has also touched on the critical issue of violence, sometimes even with intercultural intonations, cf. Tani (2008).
- 4) As Agamben has shown in exemplary fashion, the qualifications of violence are parasitic on the ways in which we imagine, represent and in fact performatively create its “otherness.” In his words: “The unnaturalness of human violence—without common measure with respect to natural violence—is a historical product of man, and as such it is implicit in the very conception of the relation between nature and culture, between living being and logos, where man grounds his own humanity. The foundation of violence is the violence of the foundation.” (Agamben 2006, 106) A concrete exemplification of this parasitism can be found in Staudigl (2019b).
- 5) Sartre is clear about this relationship: “Violence always presents itself as *counter-violence*, that is to say, as a retaliation against the *violence of the Other*. But this violence of the Other is not an objective reality except in the sense that it exists in all men as the universal motivation of counter-violence.” (Sartre 2004: 133)

- 6) “Rebounding violence,” this concept coined by Bloch (2006), appears absolutely useful for describing the “conquering return” of the subject to this world (Otto would say “energizing”) from its “journey to the beyond,” (2006, 5) that is, to use a Schutzian expression, from the “religious finite province of meaning” that has helped one to “see through” the all too pragmatic limitations of everydayness.

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