Prolegomena to a phenomenology of “religious violence”: an introductory exposition

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Abstract

This introductory essay discusses how the trope of “religious violence” is operative in contemporary discussions concerning the so-called “return of religion” and the “post-secular constellation.” The author argues that the development of a genuine phenomenology of “religious violence” calls on us to critically reconsider the modern discourses that all too unambiguously tie religion and violence together. In a first part, the paper fleshes out the fault lines of a secularist modernity spinning out of control. In a second part, it demonstrates how the “liberal imaginary” revolves around individualist conceptions of freedom and sovereignty that, on their part, become parasitic upon imaginations of disorder, otherness and (especially religious) violence. In a third part, the author demonstrates how these insights call for developing a transformed phenomenological framework in order to give a more sensible account of “religious violence.” Finally, in presenting the articles gathered in this “special issue” of *Continental Philosophy Review*, some pathways into such a sensibitized phenomenology of “religious violence” are outlined.

Keywords Religious violence · Post-secularism · Return of religion · Phenomenology

1 A slippery slope

The “return of religion” is a topic that has led to immense public attention and scholarly interest, especially in the last two decades. A vast variety of related phenomena quickly comes to mind. Consider, for instance, the resurgence of religious communities in many areas around the globe,¹ the development of novel forms of lived religiosity and “spiritual imaginaries,”² the comeback of “political

¹ Kippenberg (2013).

² Heelas and Woodhead (2007) and Knoblauch (2009).

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theologies,”³ and of course the problem of “religious violence.” All of these issues have motivated disputes across disciplines and sometimes even caused shrill polemics. Of paramount importance in this regard are especially the various forms in which “religious violence” appears and their spectacular display in the media. Whatever the primordial exemplary instances of “religious violence” may be, the *category* as such is already highly problematic and widely contested. Just consider a few concrete issues such as, e.g., the various brands of so-called religious fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism “in the name of God”; literalist justifications of “sacred wars,” including forms of “caring Jihad,” “sexual jihad,” or so-called “suicidal bombing”; the return of ostracized practices such as exorcism, flagellation, and even crucifixion; the oppressive implications of “new puritanism” in the “bible belt” and elsewhere; or, finally, the refurbishment of religious narratives concerning purification and punishment in the recent “Corona-crisis.” As this selective survey indicates, and as work on “epistemic violence” has managed to demonstrate in a systematic fashion more recently, the concept of “religious violence” *as such* is highly problematic: all too often it works as a readymade label of social pathology, political defection, or, most generally put, “marker of irrationality” and is easily misused for ideological (and often racist) ends, most notably after the key event of 9/11.⁴

The floating images of “religious violence” that we so easily encounter on the web and the related footage that is used to provide us with evidence of such things *really happening* undoubtedly raise a lot of concern. Given the all too apparent “irrationality,” the backward “barbarism,” and incomprehensible “senselessness” as well as “horrorism”⁵ that seem to be the root cause(s) of such disconcerting incidents, we find ourselves perplexed. Still, as anthropologist Neil Whitehead formulated, such perplexity is not *innocent*. It is habitually used to commit us to a “scientific hunt for causation”⁶ that is designed to bring things to a rationally justified “solution.” Confronted with the “other of reason,” it appears most necessary to use an “ethical epoché,” as Husserl once called it.⁷ This is a *practical* epoché that is designed to guide us along if we find ourselves in pressing need to understand but feel that we should avoid short-circuited judgement. In a nutshell, “violence” and most notably “religious violence” epitomize the kind of otherness that befalls us and easily shakes our faculties of unbiased understanding and interpretation. Thus viewed, they indeed present a challenge to reason as such. As I argue here, this proves especially true for

³ De Vries and Sullivan (2006).

⁴ An exemplary demonstration for this can be found in Brunner’s critical discussion of discourses on “suicidal bombing” (Brunner 2011); on the recent surge of the race-religion intersection see Topolski (2018).

⁵ Cavarero (2008).

⁶ Whitehead (2007, p. 40).

⁷ On this concept see Staudigl (2015, pp. 163–168).

its disengaged brands, which became predominant and even hegemonic with the rise of political modernity, secularism, and the "liberal imaginary."

"Discursive reason," as Habermas has shown in this regard more recently,⁸ is in fact *not at all completely innocent*. It definitely needs to *preserve itself*⁹ in light of such threatening challenges and has to remain vigilant in order not to fall prey to mere "imaginings of disorder" that are proliferating in our contemporary "cultures of fear."¹⁰ In order to promote a truly universal quest for "the inclusion of the other,"¹¹ our practice of "discursive reason" has to be careful in every step it takes: on the one hand, it must be cautious to not rationalize such otherness away, turning it into a problem to merely be solved, some "social pathology" to be remedied, a kind of deviance to be sanctioned, or a systemic dysfunction to be effectively adjusted. In other words, it must avoid falling into a self-righteous posture that all too easily renders itself sacrosanct but accounts for the other only on paternalist grounds.¹² Still, "discursive reason" also must avoid to let itself be swept away by the inspiration of some "wholly other," whose claims irremediably call for answers but easily may become overwhelming, too.¹³ Responding to the "religious other" and its sometimes indeed excessive claims, thus viewed, becomes a truly tricky affair.¹⁴ Caught between our beloved illusions of autonomy and threatening imaginings of heteronomy, we end up between a rock and a hard place: tied at this threshold the inclination becomes strong to resort to dear patterns of thought that either *silence* this call of the other or turn us indifferent to the *irrational babble* it so ostensibly proves to be.¹⁵

Given the previously mentioned, however, things perhaps are more complicated than they seem to be in the first place. By presenting "religious violence" as a *marker* for the presumed irrationality of religion, the "secularist doctrine"¹⁶ did not only establish a profound schism between religious and secular world-views. It also

⁸ The ambiguity of Habermas' later interest in religion (Habermas 2008, 2010; Habermas and Ratzinger 2006) has triggered a rich and controversial discussion in the last decade. While I cannot embark on a comprehensive evaluation of this discussion, I use it as a kind of guiding thread to approach the topic at hand.

⁹ Habermas (2013, p. 293).

¹⁰ Crépon (2010).

¹¹ Habermas (2005).

¹² As feminist theory has shown convincingly, the "paternalist imaginary" fixes us to the bad alternative of either protecting or fighting the "other," that is, to a logics of confrontation that links the modern conception of autonomy to a culture of domination and violence; a convincing analysis of this very gesture is provided by Abu-Lughod (2002); how this culture gives rise to a certain understanding and habitual display of the body on both the individual and the political level, is explored most clearly by Bergoffen (1990).

¹³ This dilemma is presented in a most articulate way by Kearney (2003), whose attempt at paving a path between our dear illusions of autonomy and "postmodern" seductions of heterology is of exemplary relevance for the position outlined here.

¹⁴ Moyaert (2008).

¹⁵ Rancière (2010).

¹⁶ For a discussion on how this doctrine often develops into an "ideological secularism," see Glendinning (2009).

managed to disavow every critical questioning of secularism's normative claims to be prone to relativism and, in the last analysis, fanaticism.¹⁷ As I argue, however, the secular quest for order is not only equilibrated by identifying some aberrant, unruly or disorderly quality *in* its “relevant others,” most notably its *religious* others. As we rather start to realize today, this quest indeed proves to be deeply *dependent* upon related *projections*. It does so to such an extent, that, finally, it becomes *parasitic* upon their presumed otherness.¹⁸ This gesture, however, is more than suspicious. By way of pitting a whole imaginary of violence incarnate against the presumed pacifying effects of secular modernity, the “liberal imaginary”—and its ideals of “discursive reason” and deliberation that it is said to actively purport—feed(s) into what Cavanaugh has aptly termed the modern “myth of religious violence.”¹⁹ This myth, however, is not only most effective by way of *exculpating* state violence; it is most egregious indeed as it renders people structurally *indifferent* to the far-reaching effects of manifold invisible *violences*, thus impregnating the existential frameworks they are always already living in with inherently violent social imaginaries. Given this, our stance toward violence turns out to be truly fraught with ambiguities, the most disconcerting one being the inherently ambiguous embodiment—or “including exclusion” in Agamben's words²⁰—of (especially religious) violence in our purportedly non-violent modern social imaginaries. To sum up in Mahmood's words: “secular necessity” and “religious threat” are correlated in a vexed way today—a way that one-sidedly stigmatizes “religious affect” and sanctifies “secular reason.” It does so at the cost of eclipsing the potentials of “religious reason” and of exculpating the consequences of the “secular affect” going awry, however.²¹

In light of this suspicion and of the conceptual inaccuracy—and finally ethical indifference—of the canon when confronted with this multi-faceted phenomenon, the discourse on “religious violence” indeed appears vexed with various quandaries. As has been discussed in religious studies more recently, the very conceptualization of “religious violence” is already a most critical one, albeit frequently eclipsed issue in contemporary philosophy and most notably in phenomenology, too.²² This is not only due to the fact that this discussion has for a long time more or less been relegated to a host of neighboring disciplines which have been declared to be in charge of the issue: As to my hypothesis, this simple empirical fact concerning the social distribution of research agendas testifies to an even more basic problem that philosophy seems to have. Namely, the problem with its *relevant others*. Alongside the “specters of faith” and the narrative semantics of religious traditions returning to

¹⁷ Mahmood (2009).

¹⁸ This interpretation builds upon Zygmunt Bauman's (1993) insight into the disavowed dependency of rational order on the orderly production of chaos (“raw material”); it finds further evidence in anthropological analyses concerning the traditional tropes of the “Barbarian” and the “Cannibal” (see Whitehead 2013); a first attempt at a phenomenological exploration of this *parasitism* is offered by the author (Staudigl 2019a).

¹⁹ Cavanaugh (2009). As Springer has shown, this myth is supplemented by a whole *geography of violence*, that is, the assumption that “violence sits in places.” (Springer 2011).

²⁰ See Agamben (1998, p. 107): “Sovereign violence is in truth founded not on a pact but on the exclusive inclusion of bare life in the state.”

²¹ The terms used here have been adapted from Mahmood (2009).

²² Tuckett (2019).

haunt the eternal “quest of reason” in a truly unprecedented—and also most ambiguous—way, one requires reason to confront its own discontents as well as productive participation in the imagination of its relevant others. Here, philosophy’s mission indeed becomes all the more difficult, perhaps even tainted.

We might employ some metaphoric resources of our philosophical imaginary in order to offer an account of the situation depicted. In the twilight of reason the Owl of Minerva, already threatened by an extinction of sorts, has to fly this low and is arriving this late, that perhaps it must face the light of some untimely sunrise, one which indeed might burn her feathering. Unlike Husserl believed, however, we do not seem to have any assurance left that the quest of reason still bears the Phoenix-like capacities to be reborn again in this kind of confrontation. Will, in other words, the very problem of “religious violence,” with its much more painful reedition of the more traditional question concerning faith and reason, become the Waterloo of philosophy? Or do we still own the tools to counteract this abysmal challenge, this widening gyre, which threatens to swallow up everything and let loose—to quote Yates—“mere anarchy” “upon the world”? Although these borrowings from the traditional philosophical imaginary might strike some readers to exaggerate the depicted state of affairs, I still deem it apt to catch at least one cardinal point: everything in this very imaginary seems to revolve around the *threats* of “mere anarchy,” “disorder,” or the lurking “fall into hostility toward the spirit and into barbarity.”²³ Perhaps the quest *of* reason, in a nutshell, has to turn into a quest *for* reason, some yet un-thought kind of reason to come, one which opposes both its relativist self-liquidation as well as its self-righteous (and hegemonic) ways of universalizing implementation. This situation—the ambiguity of religion in regard to violence, and the ambiguity that philosophy finds itself entrenched in once it confronts this issue head on—offers a true challenge for philosophy today.

As far as I can see, this challenge is mirrored in many contemporary questions that concern the interlacement of secular modernity with its assumed (or perhaps projected) other. In this regard the questions whether we have ever been really *secular*,²⁴ whether the concept of *secularism* applies only to the special case of “Europe,”²⁵ and whether the concept of *religion* is perhaps nothing but a secret weapon of Western hegemonic universalism,²⁶ are all of paramount importance. Adopting Asad’s most general answer, we may hold that the secular “is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it [...] nor a simple break from it” and that “the concept of the secular cannot do without the idea of religion.”²⁷ This insight demonstrates clearly that any *reasonable* reflection concerning a “pure essence” of “religion” and, consequently, some permanent (assumedly opaque and irrational) core of all “religious violence” is, at best, simply misleading or, at

²³ Husserl (1970, 299). In the German original Husserl uses the phrase “Verfall in Geistfeindschaft und Barbarei.”

²⁴ Taylor (2007).

²⁵ Martin (2005).

²⁶ Asad (2003).

²⁷ Asad (2003, pp. 25, 200).

worst, attests to a disavowed orientalist prerogative.²⁸ While such kind of critical assessment has come to be more accepted recently, it still has to face high stakes, as Mahmood expressly noted:

While these analytical reflections have complicated the state of academic debate about the religious and the secular, they are often challenged by scholars who fear that this manner of thinking forestalls effective action against the threat of “religious extremism” that haunts our world today. By historicizing the truth of secular reason and questioning its normative claims, one paves the way for religious fanaticism to take hold of our institutions and society. One finds oneself on a slippery slope of the ever-present dangers of ‘relativism.’ Our temporal frame of action requires certainty and judgment rather than critical rethinking of secular goods.²⁹

The introduction laid before you—and in fact all the contributions gathered in this special issue of *Continental Philosophy Review*—revolve around the conviction that questions, such as those mentioned, are not merely of interest for the sociology of religion, religious studies, the social psychology of religion, inter-religious pedagogics, or cultural anthropology. In pointing to the deep *ambiguity* toward “religion” that marks the prevalent self-understanding of secular modernity, those questions rather harbor an immense, albeit disconcerting philosophical potential, too. Without any doubt, this ambiguity has recently moved into the focus of quite many investigations across disciplines: *religion* is often reclaimed as a vessel for peace yet in very many instances it is also exposed as a major reason for, and medium of, violent conflict. It is controversially and oftentimes polemically discussed whether we are duped by the afore-mentioned “myth of religious violence” or whether inherently religious justifications of violence exist³⁰; whether basically mundane forms of violence intentionally parade as “purported sanctity” (Pope Francis), mimic the splendor of some “divine violence” and hence misuse “religion” in instrumental terms, or whether there is something about it that attests to some irreducible “violent core” to be found in (all) “religion”; whether violence is *intrinsic* to religion or rather is to be conceived as some “*temporarily misdirected*” behavior fostered by the narrative semantics of religion³¹—a misuse that but overshadows its positive potentials by definition. Still, one may respond to the quandary that all those formulations refer to. One might argue that it seems to be safe to assume that religion and violence are hardly strangers to each other but rather intersect—perhaps even intertwine—in various respects. However, the question then arises: does such a most general assessment help us in going further with and delving deeper into the question that we are facing?

²⁸ Said (1985).

²⁹ Mahmood (2009, p. 65).

³⁰ Clarke (2014).

³¹ Srubar (2017, p. 502; my emphasis); Srubar’s discussion relates to Assmann’s (2010) critical evaluation of the violences of the Monotheistic religions, especially their irreducible “language of violence” and the ways it translates into concrete “topologies of the sacred and the profane.”

2 Contextualizing the problem: on secularism and its discontents

To emphasize the deep ties between religion and violence attests to an insight, both old and most general. This insight does not tell us anything about the relationship between religion and violence *as such*; the specific forms it assumes, and the possible dynamisms it sets free. Without a doubt, “religious violence” is not at all picked as a novel topic. Perceptions, or rather *interpretations* of it, definitely played a foundational role in the constitution of modern political philosophy, especially in Hobbes’ work. It has since then persisted to influence the “philosophical imaginary”³² of our political modernity. Today, however, the coordinates for thinking about it definitely have changed, although it frequently seems to take over the same role as the war-like “state of nature” as for Hobbes. The cultural anthropologist Appadurai has claimed more recently for a “new logics of violence”³³ with regard to globalization. Today, it calls upon us to revisit the claimed relationship once again and delve deeper into it. Given its spectacular appearances and unprecedented forms we need to give a *contemporary* account of it.³⁴

Building upon Appadurai’s anthropological insights, I argue that the changing “economies of violence” in the context of a globalizing modernity “spinning out of control,”³⁵ bear a massive impact on the ways we perceive and represent contemporary forms of what we have gotten used to unanimously call *religious violence*. Without a doubt, in the maelstrom of globalization such violence often (re) appears as something that is presented as the “accursed share” (Bataille) of a (pre-modern) condition we believe to have overcome and thus feel entitled to project onto our “others.” Today, however, “religious violence” cannot so easily be pinned down any more by conjuring up such a teratology of backward otherness and abject “medievalism.”³⁶ In fact, such a gesture not only disregards an existing variety of self-critical knowledge (e.g., in the so-called “wisdom traditions”) that has always been operative in all religious traditions, albeit in often suppressed and shrouded forms. The true problem about this gesture, however, is the fact that it proceeds as if our “neon Gods” of progress, “rationalist assimilation,”³⁷ or “relational co-existence” wouldn’t harbor a truly monstrous and inherently violent potential, too.³⁸ As we might rather suspect, these potentials are simply lurking so nearby and are so

³² On the intricate implication of violence in the traditional “philosophical imaginary,” see Murphy (2012).

³³ Appadurai (2006).

³⁴ De Vries (2013).

³⁵ Habermas (2008, p. 211).

³⁶ An early anthropological exploration into the fabrication of otherness in terms of backwardness is provided by Fabian (1983); an interesting, complimentary account that focuses the recycling of this trope in its importance for the recycling of one’s own “culture” in times of crisis can be found in Schneider (1997).

³⁷ Kearney (2011, pp. 102–104).

³⁸ Even though it promises the opposite, the recent discourse on “relationality” and “relational co-existence” is but exemplary in this regard. As Colebrook (2019) demonstrates, the very narrative of “relational existence” is dependent, too, upon imaginations of “forms of existence” that are negatively marked by an “impoverished conception of relationality.” (Ibid., p. 179).

perfectly disguised in our liberal social technologies that we tend to overlook them by definition.³⁹ In this regard, our accustomed habits of indifference and projection go dearly hand in gloves. In addition to this already tantalizing insight yet another problem must be mentioned. As many scholars have recently shown, “religious violence” often appears as a *critical*, perhaps unavoidable reaction to the disconcerting *discontents* that late modernity has in fact brought about from within.⁴⁰ Accordingly, it also appears, as Derrida famously put it, as a kind of violence that—astonishingly only at first sight—belongs to “two ages” at once. In other words, it is triggered by the very tendencies that have once been implemented by attempting to effectively ban it:

In our ‘wars of religion’, violence has two ages. The one, already discussed above, appears ‘contemporary’, in sync or in step with the hypersophistication of military tele-technology—of ‘digital’ and cyberspaced culture. The other is a ‘new archaic violence’, if one can put it that way. It counters the first and everything it represents. Revenge. Resorting, in fact, to the same resources of mediatic power, it reverts (according to the return, the resource, the repristination and the law of internal and autoimmune reactivity we are trying to formalize here) as closely as possible to the body proper and to the premachinal living being. In any case, to its desire and to its phantasm. Revenge is taken against the decorporalizing and expropriating machine by resorting—reverting—to bare hands, to the sexual organs or to primitive tools, often to weapons other than firearms <l’arme blanche> [...] This archaic and ostensibly more savage radicalization of ‘religious’ violence claims, in the name of ‘religion’, to allow the living community to rediscover its roots, its place, its body and its idiom intact (unscathed, safe, pure, proper). It spreads death and unleashes self-destruction in a desperate (auto-immune) gesture that attacks the blood of its own body: as though thereby to eradicate uprootedness and reappropriate the sacredness of life safe and sound. Double root, double uprootedness, double eradication.⁴¹

According to Derrida, this “auto-immune logic,” however, distinguishes not only the pragmatic *incapacity* of religious life forms to come to terms with the challenges that late modernity and globalization bring about. It is also, in a truly constitutive way, *part and parcel* of the secular (that is, presumed legitimate)—violence, albeit perfectly disavowed in our master narratives of rationalization and legitimization.⁴² What Nietzsche in *Daybreak* once called the Apollonian “veil of reason,” perfectly seems to apply in this context:

³⁹ An analysis of some among these disguising strategies and how they are part and parcel of our modern, that is, secular “social imaginaries” can be found in Staudigl (2019b).

⁴⁰ This argument has originally been put forward by Eisenstadt (1998); for a more recent application see Riedenauer (2016).

⁴¹ Derrida (2002, pp. 88–89).

⁴² On the limits of legitimizing violence and their disavowal, see Waldenfels (1991).

Wars or military 'interventions', led by the Judaeo-Christian West in the name of the best causes [...], are they not also, from a certain side, wars of religion? The hypothesis would not necessarily be defamatory, nor even very original, except in the eyes of those who hasten to believe that all these just causes are not only secular but pure of all religiosity.⁴³

If we read these two quotes together, we come to see the deep ties that silently bind the very phenomenon of "religious violence" to the profound crisis of our contemporary "social imaginaries." Indeed, as a closer look reveals, the unprecedented phenomenal presence of "religious" motives and justifications in our "new logics of violence"—especially in the theater of today's "new wars" and the excessive media staging of such apparently irrational cruelties—betrays an intricate yet disavowed relationship between our late "modern social imaginaries"⁴⁴ and its presumed other. In this context the trope of "religious violence"⁴⁵ is frequently used to epitomize this "wholly other" in a most exemplary fashion. Represented in terms of some unas-similable "opacity," "irrationality per se," or "violence incarnate," this trope is ready at hand to animate *imaginings of disorder*. Thus viewed, it furnishes the self-righteousness of "secularized reason" on its hunt for "rationalist assimilation" (Kearney), "inclusion on Draconian terms" (Appadurai), or generally speaking a provisory integration (Habermas) with a good conscience. In a nutshell, however, all these phenomena are complicit in further *creating an image of violence*—and in particular "religious violence"—as the other per se, while disavowing the normatively embellished violences they contain and proliferate on a global scale. A vast variety of phenomena attests to the discontents that this situation brings about: the overstrained promises of globalization turning wild; a neoliberal world order running havoc in the name of progress; the fault lines of a political modernity giving rise to a deep political vacuum today, inviting populism and perhaps something worse; and the indifferent nihilism of a widespread "ideological secularism" that seems to have no answers left to the existential claims of finitude and suffering, and for all that "cries to heaven" (Habermas)—all these disconcerting developments indeed point at the *irreducible ambiguity of our late modern predicament*.

As for my hypothesis, this ambiguity of our contemporary situation is due to the fact that the widening fault lines of "secularized reason" and a modernity "spinning out of control" do not simply mirror the deficiencies—or rather antinomies—of a *yet unfinished* project. In other words, the predicament of late modernity is not a merely contingent crisis that will be overcome by further reliance on some teleological spirit, civilizational process or functional algorithm, which will in the long run help to dissolve all contingent forms of "deviance," "disorder," and "irrationality." On contrary, the predicament of our post-secular constellation rather points at a much more *deeply rooted intertwining of (late) modernity and its own, disavowed violences*. As it has been argued recently on various occasions, this twisted

⁴³ Derrida (2002, p. 63).

⁴⁴ The concept has been introduced systematically by Taylor (2004).

⁴⁵ On the role of this trope in the philosophical discourse of modernity, see King (2007).

intertwining becomes more and more visible today in the context of global developments in technology, communication, and finance capital. Developments in exactly those fields have especially led to a profound transformation of our political economy of conflict, traditionally conceived in terms of a “strained harmony” (*harmonia palintrope*) (from Heraclitus to Hegel and beyond). The proliferation of so-called “new wars,” to mention just one striking example, is most telling in this regard. This most recent phenomenon reflects a profound change in contemporary warfare with war turning into “a mutual enterprise rather than a contest of wills.”⁴⁶ This development attests to an exemplary transformation of the occidental matrix of political thought since it undercuts all traditional attempts at thinking *war* in relation to an overarching principle of *peace*, or some other way of securing some basic “bonds of separation.” Furthermore, it indicates clearly that the afore-mentioned predicament needs to be addressed critically with a view to the afore-mentioned new global “logics of violence,” that is, by looking at those potentials which obviously thrive on the unprecedented implications of a derailing modernity and, especially, the neoliberal calculus running havoc on the global scale, e.g. by way of creating “war economies” that feed back into said “cultures of violence.”

Given the incapacity of our beloved modern master narratives of “progress,” “cosmopolitan justice,” “discursive reason,” “reciprocal recognition,” etc., to confront these challenges in a productive and sustainable way,⁴⁷ this situation calls for different means of articulation and response. It is exactly in this context that the global “return of religion” has become of paramount importance for our beleaguered late modern “social imaginaries,” especially with regard to their by now all too apparent fault lines and proliferating discontents. “Religion,” in this context, has to be explored as a transformative or liberating *way of life* rather than in traditional terms of belief or doctrine; in terms of *meaning-generative schemas* that guide the basic human “struggle for concordance in discordance” (Ricoeur) instead of some presupposed subjective “core experience” or isolated subjective act and attitude; and in terms of the *existential truth* of religion and its practical as well as expressive relevance. Caputo, on his part, clearly points at all of this, attempting to clarify what kind of “truth” it might be:

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 after-life. 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

⁴⁶ Kaldor (2013, p. 13).

⁴⁷ Let it suffice to mention the critical exposition of progress as a guiding principle of Western hegemonies that is still operative in major philosophical positions like, e.g., phenomenology and also critical theory (Allen 2017).

a more elemental experience that precedes this distinction, one that cannot be held captive either by confessional religion or reductionistic critiques of religion.⁴⁸

3 Detours into a phenomenology of “religious violence”

In order to explore this “truth” and the transformative potential that “religion” harbors, both for good and bad, a phenomenological account appears to be suited. It seems to be most promising indeed inasmuch as it enables us to explore the *meaning-generative force* that this *elemental experience* so ambiguously introduces into our contemporary social imaginaries—imaginaries, which, as I have argued thus far, engender their own fault lines and unprecedented discontents. What appears most intriguing in the context of the contemporary “return of religion” and related attempts at thinking a “post-secular constellation” (that would be able to meet this challenge head on) is the very ambiguity of what is *returning* now under the former name of “religion.” On the one hand, the “post-secular constellation,” understood in light of critical reflections as those, appears to replete with imaginations of “religious violence” and social technologies created in order to confront a variety of disorderly threats, taking shape both without and within. Such hetero-normative *social technologies of “religion making”* reverberate heavily, as Goldstone argues, especially in the liberal imaginary and how it is designed to *take care* of the “religious other”:

To be sure, secularism takes on myriad configurations, and they do not all insinuate a common telos; likewise, the subjects it produces and the relationship to ‘religion’ it enjoins will vary across time and space. [...] But amid the geopolitical-ideological terrain in which we currently find ourselves [...] secularism is ineluctably bound up with sovereign power, and together they constitute a politics of religion-making. Violence figures prominently in this arrangement: both as that which might at any time erupt among certain forms of religious life and as that which the secular state inflicts in order to forestall such threats and to better facilitate its various modes of subjectivation and accumulation. One is transgressive, inhumane, gratuitous; the other, necessary and salvific, administered on behalf of universal humanity and in accordance with ‘a secular calculus of social utility and a secular dream of happiness’ (T. Asad).⁴⁹

On the other hand, the various forms in which the “revival of religion” today stand up in opposition against an aggressive “ideological” and sometimes explicitly “sacrificial” secularism,⁵⁰ masquerading the purported liberation and autonomy, the salvific qualities of progress and technology, or the near deification of the (post)

⁴⁸ Caputo (2015, p. 33) (emphasis added, M.S.).

⁴⁹ Goldstone (2011, p. 116).

⁵⁰ See Glendinning (2009) and ten Kate (2015) respectively.

human—all of these forms attest to the yet unequalled, creative potentials of “religion,” that is, the wager of *religious imagination*. Epitomizing the insight that indeed “something is missing” (Habermas) in our secularistically hardened attempts to creatively outbalance our modernity “spinning out of control,” these forms testify—for better or worse—to the truly *poietic force of the religious imagination*.

Such *force*, however, not only shapes and sustains *traditional* patterns of individual conduct and collective existence. It also embodies the critical power to transform them and create new ones. Meandering, on the one hand, between unprecedented acts of violence done “in the name” of rehearsing religious narratives of “purity” or “unscathed belonging” and, on the other hand, promises of non-violent self-transcendence as well as “making transcendence together,” religion epitomizes for many—especially for those whose *dissent* cannot be expressed in the paternalist medium of “achieved consensus” (and “salvaging translations”)—perhaps the only remaining “force of exception.”⁵¹ The question whether or not it indeed is the only force that might still be able to transform our contemporary “wastelands of sense”⁵² and recreate the human appeal in a disordering world, cannot be taken up here in more detail. The much smaller but definitely haunting question to be answered is a different one: we need to ask *how* the appeal of this transformative potential, which promises even “hope for the hopeless” and “the truly destitute ones,”⁵³ can be channelled constructively so as to avoid its tendency of turning obsessive, fundamentalist, or fanatic, that is, become violent.⁵⁴ As we have come to see, this question still gains importance in a situation where the crisis of secular liberalism converges with the collapse of a truly disembodied and fully procedural society, with traditional resources of meaning clearly becoming scarce. In that context we also begin to realize that the post-secular premise is not only overly rationalistic, but also heavily underestimates the affective, community instituting power of religion.⁵⁵

⁵¹ On the exclusion of dissent as a cardinal problem largely eclipsed in our traditional accounts of the political, see Rancière (2010); on the trope of force and how it gains traction today in discourses of exception, see Raschke (2015).

⁵² Nancy (2008, p. 4).

⁵³ Raschke (2015) and Appadurai (2006).

⁵⁴ Another related question would be whether or not this very way of framing the problem is not part of the problem as such: indeed, if we talk about things *becoming*, *turning* violent, doesn't that insinuate that we start from the very assumption that some original, pure, unscathed, and non-violent origin, order or core (traditionally termed “the Good,” “the True”) has existed, somewhen, somewhere, etc.—and that the history to come but displays the necessary drama of its replenishment or redemption? Doesn't exactly this narrative, however, feed into our vicious circles of “violence” and “counter-violence,” whilst presupposing that one may legitimately lay a claim on what is deemed to be original, orderly, and “good”? Doesn't, in the last analysis, the very presumption that this origin is pure and unscathed contribute to the institution of “imaginings of disorder,” “symbolisms of evil,” and finally even of some full-fledged “theologies of waste” (aberrancy, abjection, *privatio*), against which we got used to pit a whole machinery of cultural recycling, thus indifferently exculpating its “necessary” violence? (Crépon 2018) This suspicion might not so easily be outweighed. To my understanding, it attests to some deep-rooted Platonic remainder of occidental thought that is operative even in contemporary social and political philosophy, and philosophy of religion, too, which has trained us to shy away from avowing the manifold violences that are woven into our functioning “social imaginaries.” The trope of “religious violence” is but a sharp, perhaps exemplary reminder in this regard.

⁵⁵ Braeckman (2009) and Kippenberg (2013).

In this regard, following Charles Taylor’s analysis developed in *A Secular Age*,⁵⁶ we may argue that the “buffered self” that secular modernity has birthed, is about to pay for its newly won autonomy with symptoms of exhaustion as well as depression, and for social emancipation with ever deepening experiences of loneliness and isolation. Deteriorating visions of the “good life” and the “common good” also feed into this development, as we confront a truly uncanny alienation from our sustaining life-worlds today. Such proliferating alienation and affective collapse of societies, however, seems to be but a side-effect of our all too successful attempts to liberate ourselves from the constraints of nature, finitude, and contingency. By projecting a trans-, or posthuman nature that appears to be designed to assure something as a “global immanence” or “relational existence” in an age of spectacular “super-diversity,”⁵⁷ the “tragedy of the modern condition”⁵⁸ confronts us with a real loss of grounds, which only travesties as purported autonomy. As a closer look reveals, this malaise but exposes our deep, disavowed dependency on the perceived threats that our cultures of fear and paranoid securitization are selling out systemically, to the extent of finally becoming obsequious to and finally even parasitic upon such threats and projections. A recent critical discussion of the “Anthropocene” and its “relational universalism” testifies to this very tragic ambiguity:

Despite the mournful tenor of discourses on the Anthropocene, where we regret having thought of ourselves as separate from nature for so long, the era of the Anthropocene has more often than not figured the end of the world as *what must be avoided*; we must not fall back into a nomadism that would bear no profound relationship to the globe. There is very little sense, however, that – despite the common recognition that the Anthropocene has a violent, destructive and barbarous history as its cause – other (less robustly global and relational) forms of existence might be viable, desirable, or recognizable. Those other forms of human existence, which were erased in order to achieve the state-centered history of humanity that recognizes itself as ‘Anthropos,’ are deemed to be the ‘end of the world’ – primarily because of their impoverished conception of relationality.⁵⁹

As this disconcerting passage tells us, the “explicit moralism” of “post-human relationality” (following up on the implicit moralism of communicative reason) produces the “accursed share” that the social fabrics of our late modern imaginaries

⁵⁶ Taylor (2007).

⁵⁷ This concept has been coined by Vertovec (2007).

⁵⁸ As Lefort argues, the disembodiment of “political bodies” in political modernity has always led to attempts of forcing their re-incorporation. Yet, Lefort not only refers to the totalitarian movements in this context. He also reflects on the so-called *Permanence of the Theologico-Political* in the same regard. This affinity, however, must not be misused to project the logics of totalitarianism into contemporary forms of religious fundamentalism. Unfortunately, this misleading short-cut is more and more prevalent in recent debates. Rather, the essential point here is that “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 the modern condition.” (Lefort 1991, p. 255).

⁵⁹ Colebrook (2019, p. 179) [emphasis added, M.S.].

require in order to work. Whatever contradicts the presumed immanence of “relational becoming” and its procedural avatars (with neoliberalism being the lone figurehead today), it epitomizes the worst violence imaginable. *Neoliberalism*, thus viewed, is a true “theology of waste”: it recycles or rather produces its “ir/relevant other,” and in fact manages to do so by relegating its otherness to those contested spaces around the globe (both within and beyond the traditional borders of the nation state) that are represented to be prone to violence, that is, to embody a disorderly threat to the neoliberal rollout.⁶⁰ Neoliberalism, thus viewed, appears paradigmatic for modernity’s being *parasitic* upon the imagination of some non-integrable, violent otherness. This need permanently be (re)produced as its very other in order to keep its literally “critical” business alive and kicking.

Thus viewed, the inherently *modern business of critique* closely relates to the *systemic crisis* brought about by the very project of modernity. In this regard, the *critical* developments I have dealt with in the preceding sections epitomize but the *discontents* of a late modernity that, apparently, have not arrived “past the last post.” In other, namely Kantian, words, our belief in the “civilizing process” has not managed to transcend the “inevitable antagonism” ruling humankind and to navigate through a natural history of destruction in order to arrive at a general “condition of calm and security.” That is, to leave “the lawless state of savagery” behind.⁶¹ As I have argued, the unprecedented developments of “a derailed modernity” rather point into a significantly different direction today. They not only give us to understand that violence is woven into “the political forms of modernity” (Lefort) in an irreducible fashion. Even worse, they call upon us to finally approach the truly uncomfortable insight that humankind indeed is deeply *parasitic* upon, namely the ready-made otherness of such “violence,” however infamous and abject its cultural representations may appear to us, however disconcerting the dismay of images may be. More generally put, I hypothesize that the very ostracizing of a kind of extraordinary and excessive violence but complements the (more or less) smooth functioning of our societies in order to eclipse and disavow their own, order-preserving violences.⁶² The structural rule of various systemic forms of violence, the resulting indifference towards the suffering of others and the “deadly consent”⁶³ that it entails: all of this is suppressed by way of presenting violence as our “accursed share” (Bataille). That is, something that we ought to get rid of—something that the trope of “religious violence” so dearly epitomizes. This parasitism, however, is not to be misperceived in

⁶⁰ Springer (2016, pp. 155–159).

⁶¹ Kant (1989, p. 47).

⁶² On this argument see again Bauman (1993, esp. pp. 6 et seq.) and Agamben (1998). Whereas the former lucidly has exposed a general “dialectics of order” that results in the production of “disorder” as its raw and utilizable material, the latter’s reflections on sovereignty generalize this argument and explore its potential for political theory: Agamben indeed argues that “far from being a pre-judicial condition that is indifferent to the law of the city, the Hobbesian state of nature is the exception and the threshold that constitutes and dwells within it.” Given this, “sovereignty presents itself [...] as a state of indistinction between nature and culture, between violence and law, and this very indistinction constitutes specifically sovereign violence.” (Agamben 1998, pp. 106 and 135).

⁶³ On the constitution of such “deadly consent” (Camus) and its far-reaching implication for our social imaginaries see Crépon (2018).

terms of a contingent outcome of some deliberately misconstrued politics, political ideology, alienating exclusion, or “social pathology.” Rather, I argue that we need to understand it as a necessary byproduct of modernity as such, or, in Derrida’s words, its “originary supplement.” In this regard it is of paramount importance to note the related eclipse of violence as a both basic and irreducible problem in social philosophy and political theory. As a matter of fact, this “problem” was played out in the genealogy of the modern state and the legitimation of a “monopoly on violence” that has been afforded. As Das and Poole clearly explain: “In this vision of political life, the state is conceived of as an always incomplete project that must constantly be spoken of—and imagined—through an invocation of the wilderness, lawlessness, and savagery that not only lies outside its borders but also threatens it from within.”⁶⁴

If we take this observation seriously, we need to accept a hard truth: that the constitution of *the political* with regard to such a warlike “state of nature” (Hobbes), which has been presented as the matrix of political theory for centuries, does firstly require the construction of a counterfactual bugaboo of such a “state of war”—whether by presenting it as the “censored chapter” of the modern self or by projecting it onto others, allegedly threatening others. Secondly it requires, as the procedure results in *marginalizing* and *disavowing* the violences of its own rule by fabricating the said *imaginings of disorder* and by representing others as this kind of *violence incarnate*, the ordering of (religious) violence, as Goldstone has shown convincingly. It thus apparently requires eclipsing the (religious) violence of ordering:

Remaining mindful of and, indeed, vigilant against this specter of the worst has played a constitutive role in the structuring of modern subjectivities, authorizing new political arrangements and the array of preventative and punitive measures – from profiling and surveillance to intimidation and torture – intended to keep the danger of religious passions at bay.[...] Equally significant, though, are the ways in which visions of what might be thought of as religion’s best possibilities – from helping to maintain civic virtues and morally buttressing ideas such as democracy and human rights to, at the very least, mandating that one’s beliefs be held in a sufficiently modest and noncompulsory manner – have served to underwrite the brand of religiosity that a liberal culture normativizes and seeks to bring about or failing that, to marginalize and render obsolete. Which is only to say that it can no longer be assumed that secularism naturally resists all theologico-political formations, for it is precisely a distinctive – and often no less terrifying – political theology that it wishes to inaugurate.⁶⁵

While this is not the place to discuss this truly disconcerting hypothesis in detail and to assess how it potentially corrupts some amongst our most dear patterns of political thought, it offers an important clue to understand what *kind* of phenomenological enterprise we deem fit to confront these realities. As I have argued, the “crisis

⁶⁴ Das and Poole (2004, p. 7).

⁶⁵ Goldstone (2011, p. 109).

of secularism” and its contemporary discontents are related in a most tricky way to the ways of perception of the “return of religion” in general. In particular, the “black box” of “religious violence.” As our observations have shown, we thence cannot but underwrite Heidegger’s most basic *hermeneutic* insight. That is, any phenomenological inquiry into the varieties of religious experience and (mal)practice has to start “from out of our own historical situation and facticity.”⁶⁶ This insight requires that the phenomenological method applied has to proceed in a *diacritical* way. In other words, it has to focus in a most meticulous fashion on the “as-structure” that designates, mostly in a pre-reflective and unthematic fashion how those realities are perceived by us in an already interpreted way. It has to ask how some kind of social action is perceived as “violence,” how it is interpreted in “religious” terms, and what the marker “religious” is taken to designate in the respective contexts. As suggested, the social imagination and symbolic institution of “religious violence” in terms of “opacity,” “irrationality” and “violence incarnate”—frequently epitomized as senselessness—plays an indeed crucial role in the integration of our contemporary social imaginaries. In ambiguously lingering between threat and fascination, it epitomizes the “mysterium tremendum et fascinans”⁶⁷ of our late modern “political theologies” in an age of waning statehood and sovereignty. It figures as a paradigmatic imagination of disorder against which our social worlds are pitted and our concepts of freedom, autonomy, and sovereignty are taken in order to be shaped. In other words, our social, cultural, and political ideals of freedom and sovereignty are posited over and against the threats of vulnerability and disintegration that these imaginations of “senseless violence” are taken to embody in an exemplary way.

In the last decade, *phenomenology* has contributed a lot to describing and deconstructing this so-called “myth of senseless violence.”⁶⁸ Various contributions have explored how violence is not only destructive sense but is also built into the very fabrics of social life, cultural practice, and the genealogy of “the political.”⁶⁹ Interestingly enough, however, this variety of phenomenological investigations into the many faces of violence—be they physical, psychological, linguistic, structural, epistemic, or collective—has thus far not led to any attempt at confronting the disconcerting realities of “religious violence.” Bearing this in mind, it was the declared task of the papers collected for this special issue to mark a first, hopefully pioneering step into this direction, however selective and contestable it may be to force the vast variety of phenomena into an eidetic outlook. As the introduction has argued, the very attempt at isolating the *Sache selbst* indeed is haunted by serious objections. These objections pertain not only to the discursive construction of its very object but also to its transgressive dynamics. As I have attempted to demonstrate, it is a constitutive trait of this dynamics that it transpierces the borders of our beloved modern conceptual distinctions: whether we nominate them in terms of the secular

⁶⁶ Heidegger (2010, p. 89).

⁶⁷ The reference goes, of course, to Otto (1958); I discuss some possibilities of interpreting contemporary “religious violence” with regard to this figure of thought in Staudigl (2020).

⁶⁸ Blok (2000).

⁶⁹ See especially Dodd (2009), Mensch (2009) and Staudigl (2015).

and the sacred, moral religion and fallible *parerga*, communicative reason and social pathology, or order and disorder—the parasitic character of any order deemed pure or neutral but betrays the violence of its effects. As this order necessarily revolves around the blind spots of its normative institution, we end up ostracized from any safe haven, whether we may search for it in the arcanum of subjectivity, an apriori of discourse, or the all too smooth functioning of our social technologies. In other words, there is no *direct* way to phenomenologically confront the trope of “religious violence.” It requires, as I have put it, a *diacritical* phenomenology, one that proves capable to confront what Husserl called *Unwesen*⁷⁰—an idiomatic German expression that can neither be translated in terms of non-essence nor of disarray.

4 An outlook on the contributions

In light of these remarks and observations, let me finally offer some words on the contributions that are assembled in the special issue at hand. All of them deal with a variety of divergent facets. Without a doubt, a special issue is definitely not the right place to proceed in a monograph-like fashion and to systematically unravel any eidetic structures of the phenomenon at stake. Interestingly enough, however, some topics are recurrent and some conclusions, in the last analysis, seem to converge in certain ways. Albeit that I am strongly aware of the fact that this brief summary is hardly able to even compile more than just a brief selection of some cardinal motives and relevant figures of thought, I hope it will suffice to flesh out at least *in nuce* how the contributions not only revolve around similar problems but also contribute—given their diacritical stance toward the trope of “secular modernity”—to a more in-depth reflection concerning the general discontents that I have carved out in this introduction.

Most clearly related to this general outlook that I have sketched, stands **Mensch’s** inaugural contribution, which sets the stage for all of the following ones. It head on confronts the question that appears to be essential for understanding the predicament of the “post-secular constellation” and its vexed relationship to the ambiguous trope of “religious violence.” While not relating his reflections to Habermas’ basic question concerning “what is missing” from secular life, Mensch directly focuses—by applying René Girard’s theory of sacrifice and the “sacrificial crisis” of modern societies—the disastrous “forgetting of the ‘founding violence’”⁷¹ the implications of which we are about to confront in our contemporary “tales of transcendence.”⁷² Accordingly, Mensch demonstrates in a most convincing fashion how

⁷² Giesen (2005).

⁷⁰ In the late ‘Vienna lecture’, Husser speaks about the “Unwesen der gegenwärtigen ‘Krise’” (Husserl 1954, 347), an expression quite inadequately translated as “the disarray of the current crisis” (Husserl 1970, 299). But indeed, one would have to ask: a phenomenology of the *Unwesen*, of whatever *sein Unwesen treibt*, is it possible—and what would it look like? Isn’t it exactly the never abandoned capacity for eidetic abstraction that figured so importantly in Husserl’s methodological treasure chest that is at stake once phenomenology encounters phenomena like violence, religion, and finally “religious violence”?

⁷¹ Girard (1979, p. 446).

such a forgetting leads to an eclipse, or, as he formulates with a little help from Kierkegaard, “suspense of the ethical.” As he argues, this is displayed most sharply in our contemporary “societies of the spectacle” and how their ambiguous relationship with violence in general feeds into both *our* unavowed political theologies of domination as well as *their* theocratic regimes.

Starting from the same insight into the constitutive overlapping of “the secular” and “the religious” as Mensch, Ó Murchadha sets out to discuss the inherently liminal character of violence in general, and religious violence in particular. As the author explains, the experience of violence borders on the senseless. This general unspeakability and horror is intensified, as he further hypothesizes, in the case of “religious violence.” In order to convey any social sense, violence needs to rely on its justification, notwithstanding the senselessness it also entails. “Religious violence” appears different in this regard inasmuch as it claims for a higher, that is, *theodical* justification that transcends the meaningful webs of our social worlds. In tearing apart the correlation of means and ends, “religious violence” accordingly forecloses the temporal structures of meaning and “revels in its own spectacle.” This “eschatological longing for the closing of the gap between God and World” consequently results in the annihilation of every worldly order as well as a relativizing of all evil. Thus, epitomizing the *tremendum mysterium* (Otto), “religious violence” mimics the splendor of the holy which it affectively attempts to set in scene. As Ó Murchadha argues further on, this—often indeed fascinating—strategy still results in a perversion of *hope* through an “eschatological” forcing of time.⁷³ In attempting to negate the contingency of its worldly situation, the “desire to become God” (Sartre) transforms into a “desire to haste the coming eschatological perfection,”⁷⁴ a horizontal move that appears condemned to sink into *despair*. In sacrificing the intelligibility of its con-temporal destiny and human direction, this gesture necessarily goes awry: it does not open itself for the kind of mystical *awe* that unfolds nowhere but in the vertical givenness of ordinary everydayness as such. Finally, however, the question remains whether this mystical “antidote” that the author locates in our capacity to live our temporality otherwise, will prove efficient. As he argues, the impregnation of our temporality with a mystical *form* may help us avoid our destructive impulses to force the end—or “seize the source”⁷⁵—but instead listen to the “mystery in the everyday.”⁷⁶ How the habit of an “anticipatory resoluteness” of the “fanatic mindset” (literally *das Vorlaufen in den Tod*) can be bent back upon such unifying awe while being exposed to an all-consuming spectacle of violence, is a question that exceeds the framework of this contribution.

In some sense, Rogozinski’s phenomenological analysis of ISIS takes up the question above.⁷⁷ This analysis takes off in the same general context, i.e., with

⁷³ On the moment of fascination in “religious violence” see Soeffner (2004).

⁷⁴ Manoussakis (2017, p. 108).

⁷⁵ I discuss this motif, which is taken from Ricœur, in Staudigl (2016).

⁷⁶ On this see also Kearney (2006).

⁷⁷ This contribution offers a condensed presentation of arguments developed in a book-length study, see Rogozinski (2018).

regard to the excessively violent forms that the expressly modern Jihadist "return" to some "true religion" revolves around. In its concrete focus, the paper offers a yet rare attempt at concretely applying the phenomenological framework to a contemporary case of a collectively organized form of "religious violence." By demonstrating how a transformed brand of phenomenology⁷⁸ can be used to describe the very *schemas* that interlink human affectivity and the socio-political functioning of ISIS' "theology of violence," the author paves a rich pathway for an eidetic-phenomenological analysis of "religious violence" in general. In particular, Rogozinski analyzes two meaning generative schemas or matrices of social action that make this world of violence tick, i.e., in projectively transforming the subject's primordial alterity into some exterior threat. The two guiding threads are the symbolically charged figures of the *Anti-Messiah* and the aforementioned trope of *Messianic hope*. In a first step, he accordingly demonstrates how a non-foundational phenomenology of embodied co-existence can be applied productively to explore the pre-predicative, inter-affective functioning of these schemas. In a second move, the author offers a convincing account of how this "logic of hatred" turns parasitic upon always escalating projections of enmity and proliferating ideologies of conspiracy: in order to sustain an inherently negative vision of communal being, this parasitism appears as constitutive as the crisis of a derailed modernity and liberal imaginary, which has foreclosed the communal horizons of hope and true liberation.

Greisch's review essay demonstrates how Rogozinski's earlier book on the Witch-hunt⁷⁹ can be understood as another attempt at analyzing the *historic* expressions of this "logic of hatred." It shows, in a both clear and disconcerting manner, how Rogozinski indeed gives us to understand that the foundering ideals of community that can be found in various historic eras, lead to a distortion of human trust on its most basic scale: what appears to be left of our most basic, functioning trust in the other in all these contexts is but an always proliferating hate in which the people alone still seem to be able to trust.⁸⁰ This entails, as Greisch argues, a most serious challenge to our contemporary social imaginaries in general, and to our procedural ideal of democracy in particular. Thus, it aptly summarizes the truly disconcerting consequence of Rogozinski's reflections.

In his reflections on "transcendental pride" and "Luciferism," **Hart** develops and in fact transcendently verifies some basic insights of Rogozinski's article in a more eidetic fashion. In a nutshell, the author employs classical transcendental phenomenology yet wields resources from scholastic thought as well as theology in order to analyze the fundamental, basic extremes of being-human. Following Sartre's ideas from his *Notebook for an Ethics*, Hart finds these "incongruent counterparts" of human nature epitomized in the God-like qualities of mankind taking over the

⁷⁸ The major patterns of this transformation of phenomenology have been outlined already earlier by Rogozinski (2010).

⁷⁹ Rogozinski (2015).

⁸⁰ The truly disconcerting observation that an answer to the question of "Who are we?" might be dependent upon a collective's capacity to hate and thence upon the trust that this inherently negative and "antagonistic political emotion" is able to generate, is discussed by Szanto (2018); see also Mensch (2011), Rogozinski (2015), and of course Žižek (1993).

presumably liberating role of the “anti-creator” (Sartre). The “I am become death, destroyer of worlds” (Oppenheimer) mindset, which he finds at play here, testifies to the yawning, sometimes widening abyss that mirrors the basic “affective fragility of man.”⁸¹ Here the “myth of Lucifer” (taken as an integral part of the Abrahamic traditions) serves as a guiding thread for an eidetic analysis and existential interpretation of these twofold impulses. Exploring the implications of this myth, Hart discusses the malleability of the human condition and its explosive existential grounding. Accordingly, he distinguishes at the very heart of our desiring condition not only a spiritual striving toward divinization, which bears the potential for creative self-renunciation, but also a “transcendental pride” that leads to idolatrous self-inflation. The paper, thus viewed, is most important because it demonstrates that the potential of a Luciferian conversion of agency as is but the flip side of the moral substance attributed to religious systems of knowledge and practice. This insight, however, calls upon us to thoroughly revisit the relationship between “religion” and “violence,” and especially to rethink the modern myth that has attempted to univocally affirm their relation—a myth that has resulted in the predicament of our post-secular constellation and its infusion with excessive images of violence incarnated.

As **Welten** convincingly shows, Levinas’ thought is animated exactly by taking issue with the proclaimed neutrality of modernity and its widely-celebrated capacity to contain violence in a totalizing rational order, be it conceived in discursive, procedural, or transcendental terms. The idolatrous *pride* that Hart has exposed to be rooted in the self-contained relationship of modern selfhood, is targeted directly in Levinas’ attack on the primacy of intentionality and the normativist ethics deduced therefrom. As Welten argues in contradistinction to a whole tradition of interpretation, we must not dissociate Levinas’ philosophical ethics from his Talmudic thinking. Quite the contrary, it is in the Talmudic readings that Welten finds a clue to confront the presumed contradiction between an “ethical violence” that traumatically summons and singularizes the subject and the empiric “violence that needs to be overcome.” As Welten goes on to argue, it is the “difficult freedom” of the *religious* subject. That is, a subject which is initially constituted by the (self)revelatory violence of the Other within, which can only accept its conditioned freedom “against its own will,” and “after the fact.” Thus viewed, Levinas’ concept of such an *Exodic* freedom that commits the dispossessed subject to an always overburdening Messianic responsibility for the other, introduces a different kind of phenomenology: instead of further propagating the imperialism of intentionality and its lingering seizure of power (I-can), Levinas proposes to overcome the modern tyranny of individualism by way of restoring the violence as to how it was “in the beginning.” This original violence, as Welten contends, is not to be confused with the Hobbesian-like “war of all against all,”⁸² which (like in Clausewitz’ reference to the Chameleon-like character of war) easily comes to parade as a purported peace-making. The original violence that Welten’s Levinas has in (his Lacanian) mind, rather, is a truly

⁸¹ On this concept see Ricœur (1986); its relevance for a phenomenological exploration of religion and its ambiguous potentials is discussed, e.g., in Ricœur (2010).

⁸² Levinas (1998, p. 159).

primordial one: it is one that confronts the subject not only with his diachronic *religious* exposition to the Other but at once emphasizes that this exposition is dependent upon an irreducible *alterity experienced within*. Such alterity, however, irreducibly ties religion to its other, revelation to contamination, God to the history of “He war,”⁸³ to quote Derrida’s most cryptic but revelatory syntagma. Thus viewed, Welten’s reading of Levinas attests to the same basic ambiguity that has been exposed by Rogozinski and Hart alike—thus pointing at the necessity to recover an original alteration of the absolute within us that calls on us to avoid any unanimous attempt at “seizing the source” of some divine essence.

In contradistinction to Welten’s reading of the Levinasian account, which deals with the relationship between religion and violence in a seemingly most general way only, Gschwandtner brings the analysis back to more life-worldly issues. The author engages in a convincing reading of Paul Ricœur’s theory of “narrative identity” and demonstrates how it may fruitfully be brought to bear on understanding the role of religion as a shaper of the (all too) human “struggle for concordance in discordance.” Gschwandtner, in a fashion similar to the transcendental investigation proffered by Hart, is most sensitive in exploring the ambiguous potential of religious narratives that is effectuated when being turned “from text to action.” How, she asks, can religious communities be driven either to apply exclusionary forms of violence or foster ways of life that promote liberation, compassion, and peace? In bridging Ricœur’s widely unrelated discussions concerning “embodied existence,” “narrative identity” and the operative impact of “social imaginaries,” Gschwandtner provides a comprehensive outlook on the intersecting dynamics that she finds at work in the shaping of religious selfhood and collective identity. As she argues, such an account is needed in order to trace the concrete interplay somehow entertained by faith communities between both their theoretical potentials for hermeneutically overcoming their own violent potentials (epitomized in the phronetic potentials of the wisdom traditions) and their practical need for materially embodying religious narratives in topologies of the sacred and the profane—topologies that are, by definition, exclusionary and hence potentially violent. As Gschwandtner rightly concludes, this ambiguity has to be endured and hermeneutically cultivated; at any rate, it must not seduce us to (necessarily violently) “seize the source” (or “force the end”) of what *transcends* a given community of faith. She is thus underwriting the same insights as yielded by Hart and others.

Marion’s paper, finally, addresses a very different, yet no less essential question. It confronts the conflictual topology of our post-secular “social imaginaries” with the resurgent question of *transcendence* and its malleable role in social relations. Harkening back to the discussion concerning Girard’s challenge that had been taken up by Mensch’s inaugural reflections on the modern trope of the “return of religion,” Marion investigates the potentiality of asymmetric *forgiveness*. Following Levinas, but firmly located within the contours of his “phenomenology of givenness,” he proposes to understand this most basic “political virtue” (Arendt) as a “gift” to overcome our reciprocal *sacrificial* modern imaginaries. Its most relevant capacity

⁸³ On “God as war” and Derrida’s reading see Sneller (2005).

consists in its power to institute a dispossessive relationship with the other instead. That is, one that is not dependent upon imaginations of procedural coherence, the effectivity of social technologies, or a reciprocal struggle for recognition—but thrives upon a surplus which it indeed poietically institutes.⁸⁴ Here the wager of the gift, to put it in other words, is presented as a self-effacing means to trump the stakes of totality by a “weak force,” (Derrida) which ascends but in its aimless *redundancy*.

Marion, without a doubt, succeeds in presenting Levinas’ primordial ethics as a necessary, albeit “incongruent counterpart” that is required to come to terms with Girard’s challenge. The question nonetheless remains whether or not the violence that presides *in the beginning*—as it has been exposed by Welten’s reading—is not also prone to anticipatorily “consecrate war and its virile virtues in good conscience.”⁸⁵ As the other articles have demonstrated, this disconcerting insight but calls on us to further expose this cardinal ambiguity (and describe its symbolic institutions and practical implementation). We indeed need to do so in order to avoid falling into a habit of indifference that self-righteously condones one’s own necessary “counter-violence” by way of projecting—and sometimes even creating—the “original supplement” of some other violence onto our others, and thus underwrites the myth of some original violence. In this general gesture seems to reside the specific capacity of a genuinely phenomenological account of “religious violence” and the surplus it may offer over and against the findings of historians, sociologists of religion, and political theorists—since all of them find themselves all too often locked in a “hunt for causation.”⁸⁶ This posture, however, easily overlooks not just the expressive and indeed poietic potentials of violence. All the more problematic is the fact that it is also prone to (re)create its very object—be it by intention or not. It is in the same vein that the articles here assembled hope to start a discussion that is much needed nowadays, indeed.

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⁸⁴ On this poietic potential see Giesen et al. (2017).

⁸⁵ Levinas (1998, p. 177).

⁸⁶ Whitehead (2004).

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