Recovering the Vertical: Confronting Religious Violence in a Phenomenological Key

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The unpredictability of the vertical and the dangerous, spontaneous, undomesticable quality of the vertical is incompatible with what we predominantly value and are encouraged to value. If we live in a 'horizontal' world that suppresses the vertical, it is nonetheless a world that is susceptible to verticality and beyond our control; it is a world into which the vertical erupts. (Steinbock, Phenomenology and Mysticism 14)

In this paper, I will examine the intricate relationship between religion and violence with a view to its spectacular articulation in contemporary society. In order to do so, I propose to turn to Anthony Steinbock's work and will draw especially on his conception of *verticality*. To bring this concept to bear on the problematic at hand, I will evaluate its capacity to consider the specific verticality of "religious experience" and "religious violence" respectively. As to my understanding, "verticality" is not a monolithic concept that can be tracked down easily by way of a classic eidetic-phenomenological description; perhaps it cannot be tracked down at all. I contend that in order to grasp it and assess its vast descriptive scope and analytic power, we need to analyze "verticality" in a *generative key*. Put differently, we need to pay attention not only to its meaningful articulation on the subjective level but especially to its transformative power on the social and cultural level. It is only in this key that we may get a better understanding of the "dynamic vectors" of "vertical givenness," its existential structure, as well as its eruptive and disruptive potentials.

To think through these potentials, it will be of paramount importance to give an account of the *specifically religious articulation* of verticality and to consider its distinction from other types of vertical experiences. With

these distinctions, I have in mind, notably, the experiences of *ethical* height (*hauteur*) and *ecological* immensity, but one might also think about *aesthetic* sublimity, *political* unconditionality, and perhaps still other categories. Without a doubt, such a programmatic endeavor was taken up by Steinbock early on. We can find it in his attempt to outline various figures of vertical givenness in *Phenomenology and Mysticism*, which explicitly nominated the “verticality of religious experience” (see 14-17) as its major focus of investigation. Notwithstanding the conceptual distinctions provided there, it strikes me that a critical reflection on the subtle and oftentimes very fragile demarcations (as well as transitions) between these spheres is still missing in Steinbock’s works. Such a lacuna, however, gives rise to suspicion. Hence I argue that we need to be careful in this regard since it is exactly the possible (and often intended) conflation of “the religious” with “the ethical,” “the political,” or “the ecological” in their joint but differing appeal to the eruptive character of verticality that paves the path for “religious” justifications of violence.

In the first part of this essay, (I) I demonstrate that this is a problem that becomes pressing in the context of our *contemporary social imaginaries and their discontents*. Today, various claims at “recovering the sacred” indeed revolve around imaginations of the “undomesticable quality of the vertical” and the ways it is taken to embody an unconditional in an age of overburdening conditions. As I argue in a second part, (II) this constellation calls on us to consider the *specifically religious articulation* of verticality and to reflect upon the relationship between (the eruptive character of) *religious verticality* and (disruptive) *violence*. To explore this relationship, I propose to unfold the structure of this intersection from a generative point of view. Accordingly, I discuss whether or not violence is an intrinsic or rather a contingent feature of the religious in respect to vertical experience and related action. In order to conceptualize this relationship on phenomenological grounds, I deem it necessary to explore it with a view to the role of *human affectivity* and its emotive articulation as well as generative transformation. Bearing in mind what Steinbock calls the “dismissal” and “denigration” of the “moral emotions” in modernity and its aftermath (273-274), I am led to argue that the “return of the religious,” and especially its violent forms, can be viewed as a specific response to the dismissal, one that is not alien to modernity but rather embodies its innermost consequence (III). The concluding question that shall be merely raised in this context concerns the afore-mentioned ambiguity that derives from the “affective fragility of man” (Ricœur, *Fallible Man* 81). In other words, it concerns the fact that the “moral emotions” do not only bear a unanimously good and liberating potential. As I argue, they imply a dark side, too, one that has all too often been neglected but should be taken into consideration carefully in order to provide us with a fuller picture of what is “expressive of the human condition” (*Fallible Man* 253) and how we permanently *make it*.

I. The Crisis of contemporary social imaginaries, the “return of the religious,” and the disruptive power of the vertical

Crisis is a concept that is proliferating today on many fronts. Given the rapid diversification of political, economic, ecological and other crises, it looks as if we are running from one crisis to another. Thus viewed, crisis apparently figures into the true condition of our world and deeply affects our contemporary social imaginaries. Put otherwise, we seem to be caught in a kind of systemic crisis or endemic state of disarray. Such a concept of *crisis* has a long history in phenomenology. Husserl’s well known exploration of the topic indeed concerns the disconcerting “disarray” (Husserl, *Crisis* 299) and he understands it to be triggered by the scientific naturalism of his days. As Husserl clearly felt, however, this crisis cuts much deeper and accordingly he attempted to explain it in spiritual terms as a crisis of *European humanity* as such (*Crisis* 299). In his understanding, such a profound crisis could only terminate in annihilation or result in a phoenix-like renewal. Such a *restitutio ad integrum* points toward a “spiritual rebirth” of the telic function of the universal *logos*—which returns from the burning fires undamaged, and untainted. Whereas Husserl still seemed to believe in this possibility, this dream might, finally, indeed be over today. As stated initially, late modernity clearly testifies to a different array of ever proliferating *crises* that no longer point toward any possible restitution of some preceding unity or the achievement of an all-embracing telos (most lately and notably *progress* and its avatars). Today it rather seems as if the crises of political modernity and the various discontents it has engendered on a *global* scale have created a host of truly critical developments. In their disconcerting novelty, “which cannot be addressed with the comforts of history” (Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers* 36) any longer, they challenge and truly exceed our conceptual as well as discursive powers of representation and integration. Rooted in the cultural logic of the capitalizing progress running havoc, they testify to a “general crisis of representation” (Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* 298) that threatens to run down our belief in the universality of *ordering* reason.

Until recently indeed, attempts have prevailed to articulate and contain the potentials of such a crisis in order to defend a yet unfathomed unity and universality of reason, one that in fact *lives* from the discursive and deliberative “inclusion of the other” (see Habermas, *The Dialectics of Secularization*). This strategy was implemented most notably in the context of post-foundational accounts celebrating the systemic abandonment of traditional figures of transcendence and related ideologies of power. With the destruction of onto-theology and related figures of sovereignty, it is argued, dawned the era of “immanence” or, in Charles Taylor’s words, the “immanent frame.” In bridging the gap of transcendence that separated the political and the social in the classic age, the project of modernity promised to undo all theocratic and hierarchic power figurations in order to implement

a true “homogeneity of power” (see *Moral Emotions* 269-274). The era of immanence, thus viewed, appeared well suited to end the seductions of “political theology” and hence to become an age of “radical secularity.” (269)

As Steinbock among others holds, however, the “dissatisfaction with ‘Enlightenment rationality’” and a modernity “spinning out of control” (Habermas 18) has grown steadily and intensifies today in unprecedented ways. While confronted with its discontents and threatening collapse, postmodernism offers no escape or refuge. As Steinbock rightly claims, it rather only “ratifies” modernity’s innermost tendencies, namely the transformation of the “homogeneity of power” into an all-absorbing “power of homogeneity” that structurally “sanctions the status quo” (*Moral Emotions* 272-273) and its politics of “rational assimilation” (Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* 102-104). Finally, this verdict also seems to be true with regard to the latest narrative of political modernity, that is, globalization. Reiterating the logic that Freud exposed in *Civilization and its Discontents*, globalization creates at least as many discontents as it promised to provide universal progress, individual liberation, and collective emancipation. In fact, the enforced implementation of this Western “life-form”—be it in terms of an aspirational ideal or as the hated enemy image *par excellence*—is about to generate manifold new constraints, addictions, and truly unprecedented discontents. Its maelstrom-like character, the inequities, insecurities and threats that it engenders in a variety of dimensions, today openly refute the aspired visions of social cohesion and “homogeneity of power,” liberation, and emancipation that had been tied to its promise earlier on. In their unprecedented global conjunction, the dialectics of technology and the systemically embellished violence of neoliberalism clearly attest to the fundamental ambiguity of this very process, exposing a horse that is not tamed anymore, has “no apparent structural rider,” and apparently is bolting (Appadurai 36-7).

On the global level, we can witness the ambiguous implications of this process becoming endemic, critical, and multiplying in unprecedented ways. A variety of deep cutting fault lines have arisen that not only provide proof for this development but also mark the “human condition” as something unevenly distributed—pointing at a development that renders our traditional belief in the assumedly liberating “struggles of recognition” dysfunctional (see again Appadurai; but also Stiglitz; Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*; Chomsky, *Global Discontents*). Phenomena like the revival of “tribalisms” and the return of “identity politics”; the implementation of “new wars” as a “social condition” and a related systemic attack on the poor in neocolonial settings; the closely related flight and migration movements as well as the ever growing surge of precarious classes in post-industrial states; the hazardous exploitation of natural resources; the affective collapse of whole societies unified solely by the idols of instrumental reason or neoliberal efficacy; or the spiritual

pauperization of serialized ego-machines in purely functional societies that both reflects the structural boredom as well as general indifference of a perfectly wired but socially more and more dysfunctional society—all these phenomena point to the flip-side, to a modernity truly going awry and wreaking havoc.

With the breakdown of traditional philosophies of history and related belief in historical teleology (from Hegel to Husserl, and beyond), these fault lines and discontents cannot any more be viewed in terms of merely contingent hindrances of progress. As a matter of fact, they have given birth meanwhile to various attempts at dealing with these disconcerting “permutations of Enlightenment rationality” and the practical impasses they brought about. Related critique concerns, first and foremost, our beloved individualist social ontologies and the ideals of political legitimacy (such as deliberation, universal discourse, reciprocal recognition) derived therefrom. As we might argue following Steinbock, both revolve around our assumedly *modern conceptions of self-grounding freedom, autonomous rationality, and the quest for a fully secularized, homogeneous constellation of power*. Together, as we start to realize today, they have colonized the thickness of our interpersonal relations in inherently procedural terms of deliberation, discursive reason, and self-founding sovereignty; together they contribute to prolong the “conflation of freedom and sovereignty,” which was lamented by Arendt (see *The Human Condition* 254-255) as the original sin of traditional political theory early on. Finally, together they served to create a constellation that results in a “culture of fear” (Crépon) and a related “politics of enmity,” (Mbembe) which both feed into the old “myth of the masterful, autonomous and invulnerable body” (Bergoffen). This, however, is a myth which is but the flip-side of the all too traditional separation of mind and body and their presumed proclivity to rationality and the irrational, which still haunts political theory not only in theory, but especially in practice.

Given their concrete *global* impact, the discontents engendered by our modern social imaginaries and related social technologies can indeed hardly be disavowed any longer. Yet traditional political discourse, obsessed by the afore-mentioned ideals of autonomy and rational mastery, apparently lacks the resources to openly respond to these challenges, as they but mirror its own limitations and flaws. One should not wonder, therefore, that it is indeed at this point that the so-called “return of the religious” proves so successful today. Due to its striking, indeed “revelatory” capacity to disrupt and shake the hegemonic power of our visions of autonomy and the homogenizing social technologies derived therefrom, *religion* is more and more acclaimed as potentially the only salvaging answer to these systemic and disconcerting developments. Yet this “return of religion” must not, I argue, be misunderstood in terms of the simple “attempt to resurrect a Transcendence,” and could therefore “only amount to abandoning ourselves to a naïve theocracy or to what we witness today as

fundamentalism and fundamentalist violence” (*Moral Emotions* 272-273). It is not, therefore, to be mistaken in terms of the enforced restitution of a pre-critical, pre-modern social imaginary. This conclusion would be inconclusive and indeed misleading. Above all, it would not do justice to the fact that the “return” of religion is about something *unprecedented* and that it is absolutely not clear what it is that is said to “return” here and now. The intertwining of “old religion” with “modern technology,” for instance, something strongly emphasized by Derrida (“Faith and Knowledge”), rather testifies to the *simultaneity of apparent incommensurables* that we need to take into close consideration if we are to discuss the “return” of “religion” *today*.

Religion, put otherwise, *returns* not simply as a result of some “ideological secularism” (see Glendinning) or naturalism that has proffered the “disenchantment of the world” in the name of *progress* at any cost and thus was by definition prone to result in a “dialectics of secularization” (Habermas & Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization*). Rather indeed, one should also mention that alongside its traditionally accounted capacity to trade contingency, exposure, as well as finitude (all the stuff that still makes the “prosthetic God” (Freud) feel unhappy, technological progress and liberal virtues notwithstanding) and provide “salvation” (see Riesebrodt), the “religious” returns in a vast variety of respects today, some looking older, some being unprecedented. Whether it is in its individually enhancing spiritual capacities in the post-secular context (see, e.g., Giera), its “popularity” in the “society of the spectacle,” (see Knoblauch), its resurging institutional significance in the “Global south,” (Jenkins) or its resurgent community instituting functions (Kippenberg; Braeckmann) “the religious” seems to be the strongest candidate to fill the gaps that global modernity and its still widening array of discontents has produced. Furthermore, this fact is also evidenced by the correlation that can be drawn between contemporary global “struggles for recognition” or culturally inflected conflicts over “human rights” and the way they incorporate the narrative semantics of religious traditions in order to justify the (counter)violence they use for their assumedly “liberating” ends. Finally, one might also think about the refurbishment of the same narrative semantics in ecological discourses on “post-growth” or apocalyptic depictions of technology that also seem to revolve around the same eruptive power of the vertical and the way it can potentially be used to disrupt socially dysfunctional communities.

Generally viewed, all discourses mentioned refer to religion in terms of its eruptive capacity, its capacity to articulate something deemed *unconditional*, that is, something that can *then* be used to *unconditionally disrupt* a “fallen,” “impure,” impoverished, “inauthentic,” or otherwise critical state of communal being. In its very core, the move to religion revolves around the idea of avoiding any form of compromise over an “unconditional claim” as such (Margalit, *On Compromise and Rotten*

Compromise 24)—whether it be called personal dignity, a “livable life,” the survival of mankind, or redemption from the evil (see Liebsch & Staudigl, *Bedingungslos?* 9-18).

II. On the phenomenality of religion and its relation to violence, generatively regarded

The problem with this interpretation of course is that all too many ships are said to set sail under the winds of religion and the seal of the unconditional—traditionally, the “holy.” As far as I see it, this excessive usage points to a *conflation of the eruptive power of the vertical with the specifically disruptive power of the religious*. It is in this context that Steinbock’s notion of the *vertical* can productively be brought into the discussion, and where it has to stand the test of providing us with a more adequate phenomenological description of the situation with which we are confronted. Put differently, whereas it should not lead us to wonder that *religion* has re-entered the game more recently with remarkable verve, especially on a global scene, it is a question of philosophical rigor to clearly define the specific character of *religious* verticality; to demarcate the bonds that keep religion and other modes of vertical experience separate; to unveil their possible intersections; but also to critique their often instrumental but frequently unnoticed conflation with other forms of givenness.

In Steinbock’s terms, we might discuss such conflation in terms of *idolatry*. This concept details a “way of living that ‘deforms’ or ‘reverses’ verticality”; it entails “compromising verticality in the very face of the epiphany of the holy, the revelation of the person, or the disclosure of the Earth,” and is said to have “the effect of systematically closing off epiphanic, revelatory, manifest, disclosive, and displaying givenness.” Accordingly, idolatry is to be understood as a general assault on vertical givenness as such. Thus viewed, it is quite similar to the discussion of the maelstrom of globalization, social technologies, and an ideological secularism resulting jointly in one homogenous form of power directed by the afore-mentioned project of “rationalist assimilation.”

As Steinbock claims, “living under its sway becomes actualized in many ways: injustice, hatred, racism, institutionalized poverty, militarism, misogyny, ecological terrorism, and general earth-alienation.” (17) It hence takes place on various micro- and macro-levels but in general leads to a “reversal” of vertical relations. The call to *fundamentalist violence*, for instance, at the hands of those who use the narrative semantics of religious traditions to justify violence is mentioned here as an example that reflects this kind of idolatry more specifically. Yet, as Steinbock is also very clear, to call this specific phenomenon “idolatry” and to distinguish it as the “root of the problems we face” today may itself give way to “fundamentalist” patterns of thought and action. Why, indeed, should we not rather attempt to avoid using religious semantics at all in order to avoid falling back into

an unenlightened and opaque stronghold of the mythical, irrational, etc., and do our best to stick to a soberly refined secularist language instead? Steinbock's answer: that would "eschew the religious dimension of experience as a whole ... only at our own peril and the hazard of missing a crucial dimension of our lives." (17) This eschewal, in the last analysis, is said to be part and parcel of a general "de-spiritualizing downspin," a process which results in the contemporary tendency that "we live in idolatry in such a profound manner that we do not even experience it *as* idolatry." (18) Thus viewed, *idolatry* would be nothing specific or exceptional. Following Steinbock, it rather has become our habitual make-up and an element of our experiential life—the very element displayed in the de-realizing tendencies of a late modernity "spinning out of control" outlined earlier.

The liberating claim to "reverse the reversal," a project that has been formulated early on by Steinbock, yet appears to be dependent upon formulating a concise understanding of vertical experience in general, and *religious* experience in particular. And while verticality is designated and differentiated with regard to its power to break with the restrictive or monolithic order of horizontal givenness understood in terms of *presentation*, this description remains all too silent as regards the "specific difference" of vertical qua *religious* experience. In order to proceed further, we therefore need to achieve some clarity about the specifically religious qualification of verticality. As to Steinbock, however, the shape of religious experience appears to be rather indeterminate, that is, "religious experience can be understood as an indistinct extra-ordinary experience of 'sacredness' that can range from the experience of nature as divine, to the demonic, to, in monotheism, the living, Personal God" (*Phenomenology and Mysticism* 21). Whereas Steinbock's explorations locate themselves in the confines of the Abrahamic religions, he still holds that the religious qua the "numinous"—a term he takes from Rudolf Otto—"is not necessarily qualified in any personal way"; also, it may "still remain undetermined, latent, unexplored in an individual life, or unexpressed in cult" (21). What he deems constitutive for this kind experience is an "experience of dependency" that he claims has an impact on the very position of the experiencing subject, rendering it a passive recipient, a gifted or rather "beloved" one. Accordingly, Steinbock takes such dependency to be "occasioned first and foremost by the 'positive' presence of a superior being" (21-22). Positive here, following Otto, does *not* carry with it any inherent ethical quality. Dependency rather points at a most foundational, ethically neutral (and potentially ambiguous) experience that occasions or elicits a *response* to a "self-givenness of an absolute kind" (22) however it may be designated concretely.

The profound and general character of such "givenness," qualified contextually as "inter-Personal," is exemplified, following Steinbock, in *mystical* experiences. As he expounds, this designates a specific

experiential sphere that is difficult to access. Without delving any deeper into the discussion concerning the specific status of *mystical* experience that serves Steinbock as a leading clue to explore religious experience as such, his key argument in general holds that “the evidence peculiar to the religious sphere cannot be produced from outside of the religious dimension itself” (22). *Epiphanic* givenness—the term used to describe the peculiar verticality of religious experience—only refers to the *evocative dignity* of something (personal) designated as “wholly other,” that is to experiences that neither “*arise from* nor are *reducible to* cultural, ethical, biological, or aesthetic experiences and norms or any combination of them.” (22) As we learn further on, these experiences prove neither congruent with the ethically appealing quality of the other person, nor with the immense quality of ecological experiences, whereas these might well (be used to) embody the specific claim of the religious.

Even if Steinbock does not deal with this explicitly, the distinction between different kinds of vertical givenness to be made in this context could revolve around the designation of the different *moral emotions* that permit the subject access to the dimension of verticality. First, the feeling of *respect* (*Achtung*) shakes our reciprocal inauthenticity and installs the *ethical height* of the other person to which we actively need to respond. As Steinbock (*Limit-Phenomena and Phenomenology* 130) puts this later in Husserlian terms, the “absolute ought” is the modality that is peculiar to the revelation of the person as absolute value, and it is qualified in terms of “*non-violent insistence*.” Second, the feeling of the *sublime* shatters our indifference toward the assumed neutrality of some outer nature and abandons us to our passive dependency vis-à-vis the all grounding power of the *natura naturans*, or the “primal arché earth,” which is both foundational of our “I can” as it is indifferent toward man’s very existence. Third, the feeling of *awe*, which is mentioned explicitly by Steinbock, also exposes us passively to an overpowering instance of givenness. Yet here things are not about a closed principle that would either be indifferent toward us or dependent upon our active response. At stake here, rather, is the confrontation with an overpowering might that at once—ambiguously as this might be—empowers the subject who finds itself exposed to the call. Thus viewed, “the religious” revolves not only around a specific experiential *surplus* that is appresented in experiencing a kind of “absolute might,” however this *might* or *vertical power* is qualified concretely, but more so in the *empowering impact* that the experience of such “might” bears on the “summoned subject.”

To get things clearer here, we may return once more to Otto’s account of the holy in this respect. Following Otto closely, we may analyze such *might* further in terms of the *creaturely* experience of being passively affected by “an overpowering, absolute might of *some kind*” (Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* 10). For Otto, however, such *might* not only exposes our *dependency* but also feeds back on us and infuses our selfhood with *energy*.

Dependency, thus viewed, not only implies passive affectedness by the givenness of the majestic *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of “the holy,” or awful stupor in front of the incomprehensibility of the “wholly other,” the irrational, and the like, but at *once* it also refers us to the “urgency or energy of the numinous object,” (23) that is, to its emotively *empowering backlash* on the part of the experiencing subject. To see how we can bring this fundamental insight into the religious qualification of verticality to bear on the topic at hand, we may take a short detour through contemporary phenomenological debates on religion. It is in this context that we shall understand how Steinbock’s account may finally help us to get a better grip on what is at issue here.

In classic accounts in the phenomenology of religion, the lived ambiguity that unfolds in the correlation of dependency and energy is reflected with regard to the correlation of an affective *call* that addresses the subject in utmost passivity and its re-active, socially embodied ways of *response*. Paul Ricœur for instance, holds in this regard that “feelings and dispositions ... called ‘religious’ ... transgress the sway of representation and, in this sense, mark the subject’s being overthrown from its ascendancy in the realm of meaning,” (“Experience and Language in Religious Discourse” 127) thus attesting to the subject’s *dependency* upon “another source of meaning.” Accordingly, he claims that “to these feelings and these absolute affections correspond fundamental dispositions” of response “that range from complaints to praise, passing through supplication and demands.” (127) It is important to note that these dispositions “take form only as they are conveyed by determinate discursive acts,” a fact which leads Ricœur to claim that the phenomenology of religion has “to run the gauntlet of a hermeneutic, and more precisely ... a *textual* or *scriptural* hermeneutic” (130).

Whereas the stated dependency upon a preceding call—characterised as “absolute dependence,” “ultimate concern,” “utter confidence,” “immemorial gift,” etc.—by necessity extends to postulating a *responsive attitude* on the part of the “summoned subject” (Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* 262-75), I do not deem it necessary to qualify this attitude in inherently hermeneutic terms alone. Of course, Ricœur is absolutely right in denouncing the quest for establishing a phenomenology of the “religious phenomenon taken in its indivisible universality” (“Experience and Language in Religious Discourse” 131). However, the strategy to relegate the focus to the level of language, the text and, more generally, narratives, seems to throw out the baby with the bathwater, for this gesture indeed tends to freeze the meaning of “lived religion” in the conceptual and methodological confines of the “textual gaze” (Stordalen, “Locating the textual gaze” 521; see also Meyer “Picturing the Invisible” 335), implementing a mentalistic bias interested only in immaterial ideas, which eclipses the practical dimension to an all too large degree.

A possible solution to this could, however, be found in Ricœur's older (but abandoned) phenomenological anthropology. In this context, he emphasized the elements of action and will, and conceptualized religion as the overwhelming exposure to the absolute in terms of a "poetics of the will." "Capable man," according to the earlier Ricœur, is indeed able to respond creatively to what exceeds him, but given his irreducible "affective fragility" he also is inherently *fallible*, and therefore prone to "the tantalizing religious possibility that a *poetics* of the will (in the sense of describing the will's Createdness) may imply also a poetics of the *will* (the will's own capability for Creator-like Creativity)" (Wall, 2005 53¹). In this context, the question of religious violence as something that derives from the very structure of "religious subjectivity" shows up; but Ricœur never took this up again, transposing the problem completely to the level of the textual and the issue of narrative identity.

Ricœur's constricted phenomenological account of religion, which seems to result from the abandonment of his early "poetics of the will," is not unique. A similar shortcoming can be found in Jean-Luc Marion on the other shore of options in contemporary phenomenology of religion. As is well known, Marion has elaborated a more radical phenomenological account that revolves around the attempt to conceive the phenomenon of *revelation* in terms of the "saturated phenomenon," more precisely, in terms of a second-level "saturation of saturation" (see Marion, *Being Given*). Yet on this account, the status of the subject, or rather "the gifted," in the last analysis recedes into a position of pure passivity. Here "the gifted" is said to "receive itself entirely from what it receives" (*Being Given* 268), that is, "God as gift," the immemorial gift which also shines forth in the gift-character of *all* reality qua created. While I cannot go into more detail here in the comparison and criticism of these two positions (see Staudigl, "Transcendence, Self-Transcendence" 752-762), it remains important to point out their flawed strategies in order to analyze the specific phenomenality of *lived religion*. Confronting this phenomenality indeed is the true challenge as it requires a different phenomenological approach, one that neither is on the hunt for nothing but "traces of the holy" (Ricœur), nor is for reclaiming the univocal impact of some "immemorial gift" (Marion). On the one hand, this incarcerates "lived religion" in the framework of "high culture"; on the other hand, it abandons us to a "paternalism of the gift" that is purported to function as the only "higher reason" (Marion, *Being Given* 148-154).

As to my hypothesis, it is exactly the problem concerning the *phenomenality of lived religion* that can be confronted productively if we

¹ As Wall notes, Ricœur refers to this "tantalizing religious possibility" only once: "What should happen if [like these fathers] we should invert the metaphor, if we should see the image of God not as an imposed mark but as the striking power of human creativity?" (Ricœur, *History and Truth* 110)

re-read Steinbock's account of *verticality* in a *generative key*. As a matter of fact, Steinbock himself has not offered a reflection on the basic correlation of call and response—that is, the key correlation at work in contemporary French phenomenology of religion—in the context of his analysis of religious experience. Yet I argue that the generative framework he has elaborated earlier on (Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*) offers exactly the leading clues we need in order to move in this direction.

While it is impossible to systematically outline the project of a “generative phenomenology” here, let it suffice to say that it revolves around the insight into a *relational genesis of sense*. Sense, in other words, must not be understood as being reducible to the meaning bestowing acts of some pure consciousness (*subjektive Sinngebung*); rather, its genesis also extends to anonymous, inter-corporal processes of meaning-formation (*Sinnbildung*) as well as trans-subjective events of “symbolic institution” (*Sinnstiftung*). If we take this insight seriously, it leads us to understand and reconceive phenomenology in inherently non-foundational terms, that is, “as a non-foundational phenomenology of the social world” (*Home and Beyond* 3). As Steinbock notes later, it thus becomes a project capable to articulate “the radical presence of ‘absolutes’ *within* the field of human experience” (*Phenomenology and Mysticism* 15), which may then be analyzed with respect to impacts on the concrete formation of experience. This insight, of course, is of paramount importance for any phenomenological enterprise that ventures to explore the phenomenality of religion. Religion in fact, as it has been focused on by the afore-mentioned accounts, has either been reduced to *personal* religious experience or to its *textual* articulation. Approaches that emphasize either “counter-experiences” of “radical transcendence”, or the “narrative structures” of “religious texts” that are taken to symbolically supplement an always already “lost origin” (“epiphany,” “Revelation,” etc.), remain within a framework of immaterial ideas, and do not treat “lived religion” in terms of an inherently “social” and “practical phenomenon.” In contrast to these shortcomings, a generative account needs to consider religion in terms of the social and the practical, that is, in terms of the ways the correlation between call and response is concretely articulated. Such articulation, as I argue, is realized in the ways (affective) “experiences of transcendence” and (emotive-responsive) “practices of self-transcendence” are conjoined in (inter-corporal) “liturgies of making transcendence together” (see Staudigl, “Transcendence, Self-Transcendence”). The latter syntagmatic expression is used to emphasize the constitutive links between the dimensions of the extra-ordinary that affects us, the personal that responds to this call, and the related collective practice—dimensions which together make up for the specific phenomenality of religion.

Whereas I cannot flesh out this model here in more detail, the correlation can be demonstrated concretely with a view to the link that is said to exist between religion and violence. As we have learned from Otto

and Steinbock's reassessment of his major idea, the experience of "the holy" revolves around a moment of tremendous awe that translates its "irrational" quality into the fabrics of social life. In its capacity to shake pre-given meaning structures and horizons of sense-making it allows us to "see through" (Augustine, *Confessions* 184) the restricted relevance of the everyday "life-world." Without a doubt, this shaking and possibly transformative experience of being absolutely affected or afflicted entails a *violent* moment. This moment is also clearly palpable in traditional accounts of revelation, or hierophanies, which emphasize the disruptive character of such encounters with "the holy," the "wholly other," "transcendence," etc. As a consequence of this insight, a generative approach to religion has to take into consideration a *beyond the text* that may affect the subject on the personal level, as when Ricœur purports that "the absolute has to declare itself here and now." Indeed, this "beyond the text" has to be understood as a "*before the text*," most literally understood (see Graves), that is, as the field of religious action. The central phenomenon to be understood is the active, responsive articulation of what affects unconditionally. Therefore, we need to focus on those "interventionist practices" or "liturgies" (Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation* 75-87) that concretely articulate the call by way of performatively transposing it as in the medium of collective performance, or "making transcendence together," into the fabrics of everyday life. Precisely such practices provide the religious, to recycle Geertz's famous formula in a phenomenological spirit, with an "aura of factuality" (Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* 109).

The same argument can indeed also be drawn from Ricœur. In his reflections on "narrative identity" in *Oneself as Another* (164, 170) he considers the confrontation with "textual worlds" to mimetically offer creative resources for imagination that can have a transvaluing impact on life, e.g., by providing visions of shaping the life-world and bringing order to the self's (or the larger community's) "struggle for concordance in discordance." The way, however, religious narratives may exert such a profound impact requires that they are being *embodied*, or appropriated bodily and affectively—which amounts to an inherently collective procedure traditionally termed *ritual* (see Gschwandtner).

Given this insight, the focus of our reflections has to rest on a community's embodied capabilities to not only experience the transcendent but also to let it exert some lasting impact on everyday life. In its capacity to help us "see through" and accordingly transfigure everydayness and its ruling pragmatic imperatives, these practices or liturgies do more than symbolically appresent the transcendent. Such appresentative practices not only cognitively transform, but they also carry on the "primordial violence" or "might" that the affective encounter with the holy, transcendence, etc. involves. For instance, emphasizing the constitutively affective and hence *embodied* way of responding to the extra-ordinary, Srubar talks about a kind of "asemiotic communication" with the sacred, transcendent, etc. (Srubar,

“Religion and Violence” 506, 510-511). As this author demonstrates convincingly, this “primordial violence” is generatively translated in two predominant ways: on the one hand, it is *worked into* the “narrative semantics” or “discursive practices” (Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation* 85-86) of religious traditions; on the other hand, it becomes *socially relevant* in a variety of selective “behavior-regulating practices” that our life-worldly “topologies of the profane and the sacred” entail (Srubar 507-10). On these levels, too, violence definitely is a major part of the game. It pertains to these narratives and the oftentimes rigid moral landscapes they engender, as it is part and parcel of the “dynamics of inclusion and exclusion” that such topologies of the sacred and the profane bring about (Srubar).

As for the role of “religious texts,” the relation between violence and religion has frequently been addressed and it has been demonstrated (see Assmann; Kippenberg) that the relationship is not an intrinsic one, but is activated only under inherently contingent conditions. As Assmann (*The Price of Monotheism* 22) holds, the “cultural semantics” of a vast variety of religious systems of knowledge are in fact pervaded by a “language of violence.” The “violent scripts,” however, that are traded down in this medium need not at all be reactivated by necessity. They may rather also offer material for critical reflection on violent social developments and hence the potential for demystifying religion.

With regard to the “topologies of the sacred and the profane” and their concrete socio-political impact, things become still more difficult. It is indeed in a situational context that the afore-mentioned “scripts” become potentially relevant as exemplary venues for action. Yet the reactivation of such narrative scripts in some concrete “struggle for concordance in discordance” is never to be misunderstood as a *causal* process. In other words, it does not necessarily result from a new way of defining one’s situation, be it in terms of a liberating response to some “refused recognition” of religious rights and sentiments, a “dialectics of secularization” that is said to headline a “revenge of the sacred” and thus justify a “holy war”, or the quest for new “political theologies” in face of the systemic decline of the political today, etc. At issue here is the conflation of the *justification of violence in “religious terms”* and the *motivation* of what is all too quickly and unanimously labelled *religious violence*.

III. Transfiguring the ordinary—recovering the sacred?

To confront the question of such *motivation*, I propose to consider these reactivations to be dependent upon the specific role that the “moral emotions” play in our beloved modern social imaginaries, as well as their contemporary collapse. As I have argued, the liberating, socially binding and motivating power of religions and/or their narrative semantics revolves around their emotive potential to imaginatively re-define and poetically

reconfigure one's situation in transformative terms. That such imagined transfigurations of everydayness imply the possibility of violence should by now be clear from the generative viewpoint I have sketched here. The true philosophical quandary, however, relates to the kind of transformative acts of "performative violence" (Kippenberg) that openly refute all rationality and calculus. As such, they seem to withdraw completely from any discourse of justification, thus rendering themselves disorderly, irrational, illegitimate *per se*. The question to be raised is whether or not such "performative violence"—which "does not serve a calculable goal, a prudent tactic, or a readily comprehensible message"—can rightly be said to carry an "immediate meaning" *in* it. Is the reference to, e.g., some God's unconditional will and absolute force—that a figure like the suicide bomber's *zeal* is said to embody in an exemplary fashion—not itself adopting an already mediated meaning, one that is derived from a selective interpretation of the tradition, that is, from its "cultural semantics"? (see Tietjen) To put this differently, is the claim to embody the "Force of God" not equivalent to *force* God, to "seize the source," as Ricœur once put it? Is this kind of "religious violence" therefore not to be deciphered as yet another kind of *instrumental* violence shrouding itself with the nimbus of the sacred, parading as "purported sanctity" (Pope Francis)? And does this not demonstrate that such violence is simply parasitic upon the disruptive power of the religious in order to suspend the basic social necessity to justify one's mundane deeds, which are shaped by the contingency of the given situation?

Nothing, to my understanding, will serve to rationally oppose this assessment. Yet whereas one might therefore be inclined to critique the contemporary theatre of religious violence and cruelty as a mere instrumentalizing of some true kernel of religion for some external ends—e.g., Ricœur refers to its basic "capacity to make the ordinary person capable of doing the good" ("Religious Belief" 30)—we must not forget that performative or expressive violence can also be used differently, in a less surreptitious way, as a way of "reversing the reversal." We may think in this regard about such violence being enacted as a liberating means to respond from within situations of systemic speechlessness, invisibility, or multiple exclusions—situations which are oftentimes disavowed and sanctioned by the self-righteousness of Occidental reason and its strategies of "rationalist assimilation" (Kearney). Whether it be the "violence of neoliberalism" (Springer) or a so-called "econocide" (Appadurai), the disavowed "everyday violences" of our highly indifferent social technologies (see Kleinman, "The violences of everyday life"), or the violence of effective processes of "negative sociality," like systemic racism, (see Staudigl, "Racism"), violence in all these cases appears to be built so deeply into the "megamachine" (Mumford) that we cannot conceive any response to it that would not be contaminated by its "economy" (Derrida).

Of course, here one might switch to the anti-colonial struggle and its oftentimes violent fight against the “infernal machine” (Sartre) of colonialism. While undoubtedly frequently using excessive violence, too, this yet uncompleted chapter in the global South’s “struggle for recognition” has also exposed all too clearly the self-righteousness of Occidental reason and the violence that the politics of “rationalist assimilation” entails. Becoming either “domesticated” or structurally outlawed as “violence incarnate,” for the “native” this situation results in an “apocalypse of hope,” which can only trigger worse violence. Most interestingly, such a double-binded dead end resurfaces today, in global modernity, in a “double anxiety” explored by Appadurai (35), which involves “fear of inclusion, on Draconian [sc. alienating] terms, and fear of exclusion, for this seems like exclusion from history itself.” No wonder, then, that for some groups, and I am thinking here particularly about ISIS, the coming of the apocalypse is something to be brought performatively into reach, namely by generating an excessive reign of religiously overdetermined violence that is used to engender the “apocalypse soon.” (see Clarke; Rogozinski)

At this point, finally, my reflections link back to the introductory discussion of secular modernity and its global discontents. I have argued that, as the *crisis of secular liberalism* nowadays is about to converge with the affective collapse of a fully disembodied and procedural society, resources of *meaning* are becoming scarce, thus transforming the “disenchanted world” into a “wasteland of sense” (Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure* 4). In this situation, to quote Nietzsche, a “great hunt” for the “still unexhausted possibilities” of life is unleashed again and again, at least in the Western mindset. This “great hunt,” however, results in nothing but the constitution of a “society of the spectacle” (Debord) that is doomed to chase its ever fading sense in a never-ending proliferation of images and performances. Following Michel Henry’s assessment, this dynamic represents not only the archetype of globalization but in fact installs the systemic reign of a life-negating inner “barbarism” that relegates the meaning of life to its ecstatic expressions (Henry, *Barbarism*). With the related categories of progress, popularity, and commodification being converted into sacrosanct values of social technology, the relentless pursuit of the project called modernity reaches its peak, and perhaps its point of no return. Thus viewed, the so-called dialectics of secular reason testifies to the indeed abyssal condition of late modernity and pinpoints a condition that compels us to navigate between the Scylla of a *disillusioned individualism* with its moral sources drying out, and the Charybdis of a *purely functional* or *procedural community*, which we fear for its desocializing effects. It should not make us wonder that, in this context, religious communities that revolve around the fantasmatic yet emotionally appealing images of unity, purity, and integrity, are surging “like a phoenix from the ashes” (see Kippenberg).

And indeed, as Claude Lefort has argued, the disembodiment of “political bodies” by the “democratic revolution” in political modernity has always triggered attempts at their re-incorporation. As Lefort has emphasized, too, it is not only the totalitarian movements that need to be taken into consideration in this context. We rather also need to acknowledge a much more general *Permanence of the Theological-political* and see, as Lefort concludes at the very end of his essay, that “the religious is reactivated at the weak points of the social.” Therefore, we need to confront the “difficulty political or philosophical thought has in assuming, without making [it] a travesty, the tragedy of the modern condition” (Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* 255). Put differently, the claims that the self-empowerment of the social raises in the medium of the political finally resort to a language that has been abandoned—or even sacrificed (see Ten Kate, “Secularity as Sacrifice”)—by the very constitution of this medium. The tragedy is, as far as I see it, that we lack the words to address this constitutive shortcoming without labeling it as something that simply *refutes* modernity. The same argument has also been proffered by René Girard in his anthropological masterpiece *Violence and the Sacred*:

The modern mind still cannot bring itself to acknowledge the basic principle behind that [sc. sacrificial] mechanism which, in a single decisive movement, curtails reciprocal violence and imposes structure on the community. Because of this willful blindness, modern thinkers continue to see religion as an isolated, wholly fictitious phenomenon cherished only by a few backward peoples or milieus. And these same thinkers can now project upon religion alone the responsibility for a violent projection of violence that truly pertains to all societies including our own ... [T]oday, more than ever before, we will encounter resistance when we try to rid ourselves of ignorance—even though the time has come for this ignorance to yield to knowledge. This resistance is similar to what Freud calls resistance, but far more formidable. We are not dealing with the sort of repressed desires that everyone is really eager to put on public display, but with the most tenacious myths of modernism; with everything, in short, that claims to be free of all mythical influence (Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* 318-9).

In the same fashion as Girard denounces the structural eclipse of the sacrificial process, and considers the crisis of this process to epitomize the “myths of modernity” going awry, the “return of religion” and especially religious violence calls upon us to denounce the eclipse of the “moral emotions” in our late modern social imaginaries and its purported social technologies. Today, the rise of the apparently irrational, disorderly and monstrous, also in the Gestalt of sacrifice (see Rogozinski, *Jihadisme. Le retour du sacrifice*), clearly testifies to the motivating force of the highly ambiguous emotions around which religion revolves. To exemplify this, we might consider the “moral emotion” of “*social shame*”. “Social shame” is

frequently used to explain violence as a *response* to a denial of recognition. We can see this idea developed in an exemplary fashion in Honneth's reflections on the "moral grammar" that the "struggle for recognition" is said to bring about: "Social shame is a moral emotion that expresses the diminished self-respect typically accompanying the passive endurance of humiliation and degradation. If such inhibitions on action are overcome through involvement in collective resistance, individuals uncover a form of expression with which they can indirectly convince themselves of their moral or social worth" (Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition* 164).

Honneth's argumentation does not only testify to the relevance of human affectivity *per se*; it also relates to the role of "affective economies" and a "cultural politics of emotions" (see Ahmed) in the affective genealogy of performative "counter-violence" ("a form of expression," as he writes). Basic in this context, firstly, is the fact that denials of recognition—in form of bodily violation, legal degradation, or cultural humiliation—are not perceived on a merely cognitive or discursive basis but rather on the level of our embodiments—a pre-predicative and proto-normative level. But secondly, as the quote holds, they are not only *experienced passively* in terms of shame or the loss of self-esteem, but also *expressed actively* in a variety of inherently negative affects like anger (see 121, 135-139).

Honneth's intentionally neutral wording "collective resistance" resonates with the *force of the irrational* in its function to transcend the indifference and violence of certain everyday life-worlds, also often termed "cultures of violence." The subsequent *interpretation* of violence, especially "religious violence" as "irrationality incarnate"—by definition incapable of participation in "universal discourse"—testifies to the aforementioned self-righteousness of reason. Such reason has always pre-ordered the field or arena where, and the terms in which, any struggle for recognition *might take place*. "Irrationality," and especially the irrationality that is part and parcel of the disruptive power of religious verticality (see again Otto), is used instrumentally, thus quite rationally, to actively pierce the reign of such reason, and access the field of possible struggle.

Given this, we cannot but note an affinity between the irrational characteristics of the religious and the kind of social violence that dignifies itself with the *charismatic* qualities of a "liberating act." Furthermore, we should note that *the irrational* as such also plays an important—not to say dominant—role in the constitution of modern forms of power and in our underlying belief in rationality (see Soeffner 82-3). This is a fact that has been exposed time and again. As for this role, we may think about Freud, Max Weber, as well as a whole tradition in French social theory from Comte via Durkheim to Bataille and Girard, as well as Otto, whom we have favored as the thinker who was rehabilitated the concept of "the irrational" in religious theory most clearly. Yet the question remains how we may confront the *irrational* and the power as well as delight that we can derive from its liberating capacities in a non-biased fashion, so as to avoid its

immediate ostracizing? To put this differently, how may we conceptualize this black spot of “discursivized reason” that is able to activate the strongest emotions and an indeed orgiastic potential—a potential that, in the end, may result in the conflation of the holy with a “higher” or “ultimate reason”?

Given this difficulty, we indeed need to develop categories that, on the one hand, do not simply *refute* the irrational motif that is part and parcel of man’s “unsocial sociability” (Kant) and his capacity to engage in deliberation and discursive reason; rather, our categories should help us to bear in mind that this motif *rests* itself on an “irrational background” and impetus (82). To use Otto’s words once again, the numinous or *vertical* quality of violence is *both* an irritating, and a necessary element of social order. It is only in confronting it and acting *against it* that social order can be created and might indeed prove persistent.² And it can do so only, we should add, by recourse to and support of *other domains of the irrational*, that is, the disruptive *irrationality* of the moral emotions, which harbor the same potential to recover the long lost “kernel of the truly living” (Weber 469). The question that remains concerns the role of rationality and its *interplay* with the irrational in the very process of articulating this potential.

Put otherwise, in embodying the basic *ambiguity* that the “human condition” necessarily entails, the “moral emotions” are not to be considered immune to their negative appropriation but rather epitomize the “affective fragility of man” (Ricœur) most eminently. As I claim, the wager today is to confront this *ambiguity* head on, neither to simply celebrate the “moral emotions” as a necessary factor to deal with in the confines of reason alone, nor to ostracize them as the “accursed share.” Only by assessing the “affective fragility of man” in its *irreducible ambiguity* will we become able to develop a more sensible understanding of what returns today (not only) *in the name* of religion, that is, as the emotively liberating capacity of the vertical to expose our disavowed discontents and overcome their alienating spell. Steinbock’s work on the “moral emotions” and the “vertical vectors” they set free, will prove to be invaluable in this respect. As our reflections have shown, however, we need to extend its scope to include the interplay with their negative potentials in order not to slip back into all too traditional dichotomies.

As a matter of fact, this irreducible ambiguity figures prominently in the opening quote of this article from Steinbock’s *Phenomenology and mysticism*: as he states, verticality signifies both susceptibility and uncontrollability; it pinpoints this fragile condition that by definition

² We should add here that, given this strong dependency, reason, understood as an ordering project, may even turn out to be parasitic upon its others, that is, irrationality, and participate in its performative (re)construction because it needs it as its very material. This hypothesis endorsed by Zygmunt Bauman’s assessment of the “dialectics of order” (see Bauman) would definitely require further treatment in this context but this cannot be done here.

implies an eruptive potential and hence embodies the liberating promise to “take us *beyond* ourselves.” Its givenness is said, as he furthermore claims, to “incite awe,” and potentially, “wonder”. Befalling us, it affects us passively, thus dislocating ourselves, delimiting our active capacities. But it also incites crisis and gives rise to new visions of imagining selfhood, agency, and collective emancipation—for better or worse. It is, anyway, upon us to expose the ambiguity of the vertical and bring it to bear on our visions of freedom, selfhood, and collective being, instead of ostracizing it from the bonds of reason alone.

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