

Final project report (FWF I 2785): "The return of religion as a Challenge to thought"

Bilateral research project, in collaboration with Branko Klun, Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana, jointly funded by FWF & ARRS/Slovenia

1. Report on research work of the Austrian (sub)project

1.1. Information on the development of the research project

** Overall scientific concept and goals*

This project investigated the so-called "return of religion" and its impact on philosophy (esp. phenomenology) of religion and (philosophical) theology in general, with a view on their traditionally contested relationship, in particular. Departing from the fact that the project partners were steeped in their respective fields, it was our overall intention to productively expand our research horizons and cross-fertilize intellectual capacities by taking on the challenge of our "relevant other." As to the initial setup, the Slovenian team focused on the *hermeneutic* and *deconstructive* reassessments of theological motifs, whereas the Austrian team put the emphasis on novel *phenomenological* explorations of religion.

One general question we dealt with concerned the *relationship of philosophy and theology*, and the way our barren conceptions of this relationship could benefit from a more sensible approach to its existent, yet frequently disavowed intersections. As to our hypothesis, a tradition like *continental philosophy of religion*—and as part of it *phenomenology*—offers vast potentials to approach a more fruitful understanding of the said relationship. The *systematic reconsideration of the French "theological turn,"* and the assessment of its unfathomed potentials for promoting philosophy of religion, was our first major task. A good deal of research consisted in reconstructing the various theological concepts that are applied and exploited in this context. We set out to show that the pejorative label "theological turn" must not be accepted as a fair branding of this turn. The related polemics rather contributed to disregard the potential impact of phenomenological methods on philosophy of religion as such. As our results demonstrate, the phenomenological philosophy of *religion* that can be derived from this confrontation rather helps to pose challenges to theology, delimiting its *theo*-logical core by exposing their inherent instability, openness, and "rational" potential.

** Changes in research orientation, impact on disciplinary standing and potentials*

The overall research orientation was upheld in coherent fashion over the whole period of time; no major changes had to be implemented. It should be mentioned, however, that the cross-fertilization among our teams resulted in a serious opening of individual research interests, that is, caused the partners to significantly enlarge their agendas: this fact is evidenced clearly by a novel joint proposal that the partners have submitted meanwhile: whereas the focus moved much more into the direction of *political* philosophy on the Slovenian part, the Austrian team turned at exploring the *religious implications* that are pertinent to our predominant preconceptions of the political.

1.2. Most important results and a brief description of their significance

** Advancement of the research field & general importance for the development of the field*

The synergies created in the framework of the project have helped to produce serious results, not only in terms of numbers and networking activities. Thematically regarded, the novel ways by which we reconsidered the relationship between philosophy and religion, faith and knowledge, etc. in terms that avoid traditional binaries, have helped to open novel outlooks on the intersections between the religious and the political: Our attempts at applying phenomenology have paved ways to explore the *religious implications* that are pertinent to our predominant preconceptions of the political but frequently remain shrouded in a secularist terminology, one still prevalent even in "post-secular" theory. Thus viewed, the grant has not only succeeded in deepening both teams' thematic outreach and methodological capacities; in unfolding the potential impact of pheomenology for studying the "post-secular constellation," it has also contributed significantly to the development of the field.

** Scholarly advances — Relevance of hypotheses — Development of new research agenda*

The tripartite structure of our agenda (reconceptualizing transcendence / repositioning the relationship of philosophy and theology / exploring the role of religion in contemporary society) has helped to keep our focus sharp. It was productive for including a variety of contributors, and allowed for providing exemplifications of both philosophical and theological work, which often remains caught in theoretical debates about the nature of their "object." Our most important advances concern the

(a) elaboration of an inherently post-metaphysical concept of *transcendence*, (b) the exploration of how it practically can be applied in the analysis of our *contemporary socio-political imaginaries*; and (c) assessment of how this can be used *to reconceive our notions of the political and even our idea of "political philosophy."*

Our initial hypothesis regarding the *responsive and poietic nature of transcendence* (and the related hypothesis that we need to reassess it in terms of practical and collective forms of self-transcendence) has been exemplified with regard to various thematic contexts (most notably the "return of religion" in terms of "political theologies" and the "spectacle" of "religious violence"), and in relation to a series of relevant theoretical positions (from Levinas and Ricoeur to Patocka and Kearney).

** Relevance for related areas of research — Transdisciplinary issues & methods — Added value of the collaboration*

The relevance of our research for other areas is epitomized by the fact that the novel ways of experiencing and "making transcendence," which we have started to explore, bear a strong potential for confronting the problem of "religious violence" beyond the normativist framework that our "modern social imaginaries" afford us. To promote a different, integrative account of confronting "lived religion" beyond the old dichotomies of faith/knowledge, etc., as we have attempted to argue for, refers to a much needed competence. As we have shown, this competence can be cultivated by entertaining phenomenological, hermeneutic and deconstructive accounts of "religion."

The problem of "religious violence" is an inherently trans-disciplinary topic that requires a sensible account. As we have argued, such an account is much needed today not only in philosophy and theology, which willy-nilly find themselves confronted with it; it is also a desideratum for many other disciplines that are attracted by it yet lack the appropriate means to address this "black box" in a non-reductive way.

1.3. Execution of the project -- Use of available funds

Duration

The total duration of the project was 38 months, a prolongation of 2 months included (01.05.2016 - 30.06.2019).

The project could have benefitted from more extra time, given that a series of publications is still in preparation. It was decided otherwise, however, namely due to the facts that a) the Slovenian project was already concluded earlier; b) no further financial resources had been available; and c) pending tasks could be shifted to a related grant with thematic affinities (P-29599), led by the PI, too.

Use of personnel

The project was run by a team of researchers:

— PD. Dr. Michael STAUDIGL: 01. 05. 2016 - 30. 04. 2019 (31 months FTE 25%, & 5 months 50% FTE)

— PD Jason ALVIS, PhD: 01.05.2016 - 28.06.2019 (16 months 25% FTE; & 13 months 50% FTE); with the exception of the periods from 1.2.2017 - 1.4.2017. & 01.07.2018 - 01.09.2018 (paternal leave)

— Dr. Ludger HAGEDORN: 01.06.2016 - 31.03.2018 (4 months 25% FTE; & 18 months 50% FTE);

— Dr. Sebastian LEDERLE 01.04.2018 - 30.04.2019 (25% FTE);

— Minor working contracts for editorial assistance

Major items of equipment purchased

No equipment purchased.

Cooperation and division of labour with partners within the collaborative research and networking activities

The planned activities were carried out by our teams as outlined in the time and work plan. The milestones nominated have been met throughout the implementation of the project, with the exception of a sixth planned workshop, which was more than outweighed by two additional conferences.

In the framework of our cooperation, we jointly organized a series of workshops (5) and conferences (4) (see below). Our teams collaborated effectively both in terms of sharing concrete research agendas (selected literature to be explored and presented; thematic foci to be covered; reciprocal assessment and pre-review activities of publications), networking, selecting external participants; and in terms of coordinating and promoting jointly envisaged publication projects. Our teams met on regular basis in the overall framework, while the two PIs communicated personally on a weekly basis. In the last year of the joint project, the Slovenian PI spent a semester in Vienna. This time was also used to start preparations for another grant application to follow up on this project.

Deviations from the original plan

No substantial changes were necessary.

2. Career development — Importance of the project for the research careers of those involved

— Michael STAUDIGL (PI): The execution of this and another active grant (P 29599) has strengthened his position at the faculty, with his future position being under negotiation; he has been nominated a *scientific research member* of the Research centre "Religion and transformation in contemporary society."

(<https://www.religionandtransformation.at/ueber-uns/mitglieder/wissenschaftlerinnen/michael-staudigl/>)

— Jason ALVIS, PhD (Co-worker): Successful Defensio of a "habilitation thesis" at the Faculty of Philosophy and Education (May 2019); Alvis has also been nominated as a scientific member of the Research centre "Religion and transformation."

— Dr. Ludger HAGEDORN (Co-worker): in spring 2019 H. received promotion to the rank of "Permanent fellow" at the IWM (<https://www.iwm.at/the-institute/permanent-fellows/ludger-hagedorn/>)

— Dr. Sebastian LEDERLE: The part time employment of Dr. Lederle has helped him to bridge a difficult phase after he had obtained his PhD. He has secured a temporal Research fellow position at the IKKM (Internationales Kolleg für Kulturtechnikforschung und Medienphilosophie) Weimar, Germany.

3. Effects of the project beyond the scientific/scholarly field

Effects beyond the scientific/scholarly field were not explicitly intended. The PI participated in some non-academic events dealing with questions concerning the "return of religion" as a publicly debated issue, predominantly in terms of the imagined threats associated with the trope of "religious violence." Some interviews (e.g., ORF, OctoTV), participation in public debates (e.g., *Grüne Bildungswerkstatt*) and non-academic publications are the minor side effects of this engagement.

4. Other important aspects

(a) Publications in preparation/submitted/accepted/in press (Selection)

(for a full list of all project achievements see the project webpage:

<https://religionsphilosophie.univie.ac.at/forschung/forschungsprojekte/die-rueckkehr-der-religion-als-herausforderung-des-denkens/>)

Michael STAUDIGL

- *Der Primat der Gegebenheit. Zur Transformation der Phänomenologie nach Jean-Luc Marion.* Freiburg & Munich: Alber 2020 (in press)
- *Religionsphilosophie heute*, ed. E. Ramharter, M. Staudigl, Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck (in preparation)
- "Making transcendence together: Toward a post-foundational phenomenology of religion." *Human studies* (in preparation)

Jason ALVIS

- *The Bonds of Separation: Community, Religion and Violence*, ed. M. Staudigl, J. W. Alvis, New York: Columbia University Press (in preparation)

—. *The Unconditioned God: Phenomenology and Faith in an Age of Conditions*. London et al.: Rowman and Littlefield ("Philosophical Perspectives") (in preparation)

Ludger HAGEDORN

—. "Phenomenologies of the Victim. Perspectives from Religion and Violence." Special Issue of *Philosophy Today*, ed. L. Hagedorn J. W. Alvis (in preparation).

(b) Participation in Conferences & most important lectures held (selection, max. 5)

Michael STAUDIGL

- 21/04/2016 "Toward a phenomenology of religious violence" (invited lecture, Faculty of philosophy, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia)
- 24/02/2017 "The Body as a Medium of Transcendence" (lecture at the conference "Rethinking Incarnation, Université de Montpellier, Montpellier, France)
- 08/12/2017 "Making Trancendence Together: Toward a Phenomenology of Religion and Religious Violence." (invited lecture, Dep. for Philosophy, Södertörn Univ., Stockholm, Sweden)
- 15/03/2018 "The Ambiguity of lived Religion. A Phenomenological" (Plenary lecture at the conference "Philosophie, Religion und Wissenschaft in der islamischen Lebenswelt", Dep. of philosophy, University of Vienna, Austria)
- 02/05/2019 "Demythologizing Christianity: Lessons from Patočka to Derrida." (Invited lecture at the conference "Imagining Christianity." University of Steubenville, Austrian Campus, Gaming, Austria)

Jason ALVIS

- 21/08/2016 "In Praise of Waste: Jan Patočka and Technology" (invited lecture at the Society for Reformational Philosophy, Leuven Belgium)
- 25/02/2017 "The Spectacle of God: Guy Debord, Feuerbach, and Incarnation" (lecture at the conference "Rethinking Incarnation," Montpellier France)
- 28/08/2018 "Faith in an Age of Overwhelming Difference: Max Scheler's Phenomenology of Religion" (invited lecture at the European Society for Philosophy of Religion Conference, Charles University Prague, Czech Republic)

- 03/11/2018 "The Counter-Spectacularity of Religion: Or, a Case for Inconspicuousness" (Plenary Lecture at the Society for the Phenomenology of Religious Experience, Charles University Prague, Czech Republic)
- 15/06/2019 "A Sense of the Unconditioned: Rethinking Hannah Arendt for Philosophy of Religion" (Invited lecture at the conference for the International Network for Philosophy of Religion, Institut catholique de Paris).

Ludger HAGEDORN

- 15/06/2017: "Gespenster des Säkularismus. Bemerkungen zur Religion heute." (invited lecture at the conference "Konfession – Bildung – Politik," University of Erfurt, Germany)
- 15/12/2017: "The 'Lightness and Fragility of the Human Fact.' Jan Patočka on the end(-s) of Humanism" (Keynote-Lecture for the 17th Annual Conference of the Polish Phenomenological Association, Dep. of Philosophy, Warsaw University, Poland)
- 22/03/2018: "Die Idee einer 'säkularisierten Erlösung'. Patočka zum Kult des Menschen in der Philosophie des 19. u. 20. Jahrhunderts" (lecture at the Workshop "Patočka und das XX. Jahrhundert", IWM/Vienna)
- 06/04/2019: "'Living in Truth' in postmodern times, or, what is the (non-)ideology of post-truth?", Debate at Yale University: Horchow Hall, Workshop "Understanding Totalitarianism in a Postmodern World"

Sebastian LEDERLE

- 12/06/2018: "Zur genealogischen Dimension einer Geistesgeschichte der Technik bei Blumenberg" (invited lecture at the a.r.t.e.s.-graduate school, University of Cologne, Germany)

(c) Organization of Symposia and Conferences

- Workshop 1:* "The Return of the Religious in Postmodern Thought: Explorations between Philosophy and theology " (Ljubljana, 20 April 2016) (org. Klun & Staudigl)
- Workshop 2:* "Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: Pathways in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion" (Vienna, 20-21 October 2016) (org. Klun & Staudigl)
- Conference 1:* "Rethinking Incarnation: Theology, Phenomenology, and Deconstruction" (Montpellier 24-25 February 2017) (co-org. Klun & Staudigl)
- Workshop 3:* "(Re)Conceptualizing Religion in the Postmodern Context", 8 - 9 June 2017 (org. Klun & Staudigl)

- Conference 2*: "The End/s of Religious Community. Challenging Continental Philosophy of Religion II" (Vienna, 16 - 18 May 2018) (org. Staudigl, Alvis, & Hagedorn)
- Conference 3*: "Philosophy's Religions. Challenging Continental Philosophy of Religion III" (Ljubljana, 5 - 7 September 2018) (org. Klun & Staudigl)
- Conference 4*: "The Cryptotheological Legacy of Hannah Arendt" (Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna; 17-19 October 2018) (org. Hagedorn)
- Workshop 4*: "Conflict and Interpretation. Ricoeur and the Return of Religion" (Vienna, 12 December 2018) (org. Alvis)
- Workshop 5*: "Applying Phenomenology of Religion" (Vienna, 25 - 26 June 2019) (org. Staudigl)

Other organizational achievements:

a) Organization of a *Lecture Series (Ringvorlesung)* "Religionsphilosophie heute" / "Philosophy of Religion today" (co-organized with E. Ramharter) (March-June 2019) (<https://ufind.univie.ac.at/de/course.html?lv=180044&semester=2019S>)

b) Institutionalization of a *research cluster "Religionsphilosophie"* at the Dept. of Philosophy (co-organized with E. Ramharter) (<https://religionsphilosophie.univie.ac.at/>). The cluster has been founded in 2019, has meanwhile been accepted as an integral part of the developmental plan of the Faculty for philosophy and education.

(d) Pending Applications for Grants

An application that had been elaborated, titled "Revenge of the Sacred," had been accepted after revision and has started with a new PI (J. Alvis), as I was barred from application procedure due to the regulations stipulated by the FWF. Meanwhile, the following grant applications have been submitted (PI M. Staudigl):

— "The return to finitude: Philosophy of Religion after the theological turn"; = bilateral application (FWF/ANR-France), jointly submitted with E. Falque (Institut catholique de Paris) (submitted; FWF I-44966 G)

— "Beyond Exclusion and Inclusion: Confronting the Other with Postmodern Philosophy"; = bilateral application (FWF/ARRS, Slovenia), jointly submitted with B. Klun (Faculty of Theology, Univ. of Ljubljana) (submitted; ARRS-RPROJ-JR-Prijava2019/803; FWF)