

Final report: Research grant “On secularism and its discontents” (FWF P-29599)

1. Report on research work

1.1. Information on the development of the project

Overall scientific concepts & goals

The project investigated the so-called “return of religion” in the context of late modernity in general, and its growing discontents, in particular. One most pressing among these discontents concerns the vexed realities of what is called “religious violence.” Given the often moralistic and normatively overdetermined staging of this so-called “irrational,” “horrorist,” etc. violence, we have attempted to describe and analyze the proliferating phenomenon of “religious violence” in exactly this perspective.

The threefold structure of our agenda (clearing the context – assessing the crisis of secularism / setting up a conceptual framework / exploring cases of religious violence) has helped us to retain a sharp focus throughout the grant. In a first step, the project broke new grounds in articulating the most malleable trope of “religious violence” in terms of an *original supplement* that appears systemically necessary for upholding our traditional Western economies of violence and related modern social imaginaries. Secondly, we took up the challenge to reshape classical as well as recent accounts in phenomenology of religion in light of the challenges posed by violence and developed a methodological framework for analyzing religious violence on such grounds. In this context, it finally became possible to analyze various instances of “religious violence” (religious zeal, fanaticism, unconditional action) in terms of this “relevant other”—an “other” that is all too often normatively pinned against the untouchable bedrock of discursive reason and the related procedural quest for universal norms.

Changes in research orientation – impact on disciplinary standing & potentials

The originally proposed orientation of our research remained coherent over the whole period of time. Given the thematically differing but methodically intersecting interests of the researchers involved, a variety of different thematic foci had been chosen in regard to the exemplary studies undertaken. The related outcomes, however, perfectly fit into the overall research plans and agenda as outlined in the original proposal. Moreover, the exemplifications we elaborated have added a most relevant *practical* philosophical dimension to the more theoretically orientated arguments that have been developed.

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 project has allowed the team to move their work into the direction of “applied phenomenological research,” a domain that has thus far been preoccupied by fields like medicine, esp. psychopathology, anthropology, and the social sciences. As far as the multiple realities of religion in general and “religious violence” in particular are concerned, this practical orientation has proven most fruitful, as our studies on zeal, fanaticism, and the violent potential of “unconditional acts” have revealed. This has proven most important for our disciplinary standing. A heightened interdisciplinary awareness that developed over the course of the grant has effectuated a truly positive influence on both the team’s international recognition and the development in this field, more generally regarded. Especially our

research on the so-called “post-secular turn” in phenomenology has raised strong interest across the involved disciplines. As we have shown, the recalibration of phenomenology in this context is of utmost importance for reassessing the capacities of phenomenological research in changing cultural contexts. In this context, our project has bridged a noteworthy gap since it has helped to close the divide between phenomenology and other research directions that target the religious today, esp. post-secular theory (Taylor, Habermas).

Scholarly advances -- Relevance of hypotheses – Development of new research agendas

The threefold structure of this project enabled us to proceed in a most structured way and offered a balanced basis for testing our initial hypotheses. This structured way of advancing not only helped us to find evidence for our basic thesis concerning the role of “religious violence” as an imaginary trope that is co-constituted and sometimes even performatively (re)created by certain practices of “secular violence.” Finally, this finding also fed into the development of new fields of research, most notably concerning the perennial question of “political theologies” and their contemporary resurgence in an age of waning foundations and contested sovereignties (→ follow-up grant application).

Relevance of the project for related areas of research – Transdisciplinary issues & methods

As the interdisciplinary exchange of our team has shown, the relevance of (our) phenomenological work for neighboring areas is gaining traction today. Theology, religious studies, critical theory, post-colonial theory and cultural anthropology all share a heightened interest in the disconcerting realities of “religious violence.” Encountering difficulties in describing these realities and their interrelations with one’s own privileged epistemic position, has recently led to a surging interest in phenomenological descriptions and hermeneutic-phenomenological interpretations that are capable to overcome traditional perceptions of “religious violence.” With our elaboration of an integrative phenomenological account for describing and analyzing “religious violence” against the backdrop of secularism and its discontents, we have provided a contribution that appears most relevant to all interested in self-critically confronting the trope of “religious violence” beyond the (all too narrow) binaries of myth and Enlightenment, faith and reason, “the sacred” and “the secular,” violence and order.

1.3. Information on the execution of the project, the use of available funds and (where appropriate) any changes to the original project plan

Duration

The total duration of the project was 51 months, including two prolongations (11 + 4 extra / covid-19-related) Within the extra time granted, a series of pending publication projects have been brought on track, and publication projects that had earlier been taken over from the FWF grant I-2785 have meanwhile been concluded, too, or have been taken over by grant I 31919 (PI J. Alvis).

Use of personnel

The project was run by a team of researchers:

- PD Dr. Michael STAUDIGL, 01.10.2016-31.07.2020 (50% FTE for 46 months)
- PD Jason Alvis, PhD, 01.10.2016 - 31.01.2017 & 01.04.2017-30.06.2018 & 01.09.2018 – 14.01.2019 (50% FTE for 23,4 months; interrupted for 2 paternal leave periods); 15.01.2019 – 28.11.2019 (45% FTE for 10,4 months) & 29.11.2019 – 31.12.2019 (37,5% FTE for 1,1 months) [altogether 34,9 months]
- Dr. Ruth R. Tietjen, 01.10.2018 – 30.09.2019 [75% FTE for 12 months]

Minor working contracts for editorial work and translations (David Gamsjäger; Nicolas Tansley)

Items of Equipment purchased

No Equipment had been purchased within this grant.

Significant deviations from the original plan

No substantial deviations from the original plan were necessary. Since the original work plan was too optimistic, the series of “case studies” to be dealt with, had been focused a bit more narrowly than originally conceived. This adjustment, however, does not reflect a *substantial* change.

2. Career development – Importance of the project for the research careers of those involved (including the principal investigator)

■ Michael Staudigl (PI), PD Dr.habil

Further leadership experience in the execution of this grant and the parallel work on the bilateral grant I-2785 has helped to strengthen the PI’s research output and networking; in 2020 the PI has then started to work as a Senior Lecturer at the department (75% FTE) and has also contributed (25% FTE) to the follow-up FWF grant stand-alone “The revenge of the Holy” (P 31919), which he had originally handed in and which had later been accepted after revisions and is now under the leadership of J Alvis. The PI has also been appointed scientific member of the Research center “Religion and transformation” at the University of Vienna.

■ Jason Alvis, PD Dr. habil.

In 2019, the co-worker has successfully defended his habilitation thesis at the faculty of philosophy and education; he has also been appointed as a scientific member of the above-mentioned research center; he has been invited to several professorial hearings in 19 and 20; in 2019 he has secured the resubmission of a stand-alone grant “The revenge of the holy” for which he now is responsible as PI; and thus continues research along lines opened by this grant.

■ Ruth R. Tietjen. Dr.

The participation of Dr. Tietjen in this grant has provided her with several opportunities to publish her work, conceive new publication and grant application plans for the initial phase of her post-doctoral phase; to integrate her research in a larger network; all this has finally resulted in her being appointed a post-doctoral researcher at the Center for subjectivity research (Copenhagen, Denmark), in a grant led by Thomas Szanto.

3. Effects of the project beyond the scientific field

Effects beyond the scientific field were not explicitly intended. The PI participated in some events outside the sphere of academia, dealing with questions concerning the “return of religion” and the question of “religious violence.” All these are minor side effects.

4. Other important aspects

(a) Participation in conferences & most important lectures held (selection¹)

J. W. Alvis (selection)

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| 2020, July 9 | "God Disagrees: From Religious Disagreement to Religious Violence," invited lecture, Web-based conference "Philosophy of Religion in Times of Crisis," Charles University Prague, CZ |
| 2019, June 15 | "A Sense of the Unconditioned: Rethinking Arendt for Philosophy of Religion", Invited lecture, conference for the International Network for Philosophy of Religion, Paris, France |
| 2018, Nov. 3 | "The Counter-Spectacularity of Religion " Plenary Lecture, Society for the Phenomenology of Religious Experience, Prague, CZ |
| 2017, Aug. 29 | "From the Unconditioned to Unconditional Claims: Jaspers, Marion, and Religious Violence”, invited lecture, Faculty of Theology, KU Leuven, Belgium |

M. Staudigl (selection)

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| 2020, Sept. 16 | "Introductory Reflections on the return of religion in a times of crises," lecture at the conference "Irrationality and Religiosity in Times of a Pandemic," University of Vienna, Austria |
| 2019, April 2-4 | 5 lectures on "Phenomenology of violence" ("One week with...") Dep. of Philosophy, University of Tranava, Slovak Republic) |
| 2018, Dec 4 | "Gewalt als Relation denken: Tropologien des Anderen" (invited lecture, Dep. for Philosophy, University Flensburg, Germany) |
| 2018, March 15 | "The Ambiguity of lived Religion, or: How to Rethink the Relationship of Religion and Violence " (Plenary lecture at the conference "Philosophie, Religion und Wissenschaft in der islamischen Lebenswelt", Dep. for philosophy, University of Vienna, Austria) |

¹ A full list of all relevant publications and talks by the project staff can be found at the project’s webpage.

2018, Feb. 1 "Making Transcendence Together: Toward a Phenomenology of Religious Violence" (Keynote lecture at the conference "Phenomenology, Religion and Violence", Dep. of Philosophy, University of Groningen, Netherlands)

R. R. Tietjen (selection)

09/2019 "Religious Zealotry and the Constitution of Collective Identity", Workshop "The Shaping of Collective Identities. Emotion, Religion and the Political" (University of Vienna)

06/2019 "Religious Zeal as a Theologico-Political Affect", Annual Conference of the European Philosophical Society for the Study of Emotions (University of Pisa)

01/2019 "Religious Zeal as a Theologico-Political Affect", Conference "The Politics of Emotions. Historical Insights and Contemporary Challenges" (University of Braga)

(b) Organization of symposia and conferences [only events with international participation listed]

- (1) Workshop: "Phenomenologies of Religious Violence" (org. J. Alvis & M. Staudigl, Vienna University, 19-20/03/2018)
- (2) Conf.: "The Ends of Religious Community: Challenging Challenging Continental Philosophy of Religion" (org. J. Alvis, L. Hagedorn, & M. Staudigl, Vienna University, 16-18/05/2018)
- (3) Conf.: "Philosophy's Religions" (org. J. Alvis, B. Klun, & M. Staudigl, University of Ljubljana, 5-7/09/2018)
- (4) Workshop: "An Insurrectionist Manifesto: Gospels & Political Theology" (org. J Alvis; Vienna University, 08/09/2018)
- (5) Workshop: "Conflict & Interpretation: Ricoeur & Return of Religion" (org. J. Alvis & M. Staudigl, University of Vienna, 12/12/2018)
- (6) Workshop: "Identity without Faith? Agamben, Sovereignty, and What is Missing" (org. J. Alvis, University of Vienna, 22/03/2019)
- (7) Workshop: "The Shaping of Collective Identities. Emotion, Religion, and the Political" (org. Ruth R. Tietjen & Michael Staudigl, Univ. of Vienna, 30/09-01/10/2019)
- (8) Workshop: "Derrida—Religion—Violence. Derrida on secular and religious reason", org. J. W. Alvis, K. Appel & M. Staudigl (University of Vienna, 20-22/11/2019)
- (9) Conf.: "Confronting Fanaticism. Theoretical and Applied Perspectives" (co-org. J. Alvis, H.-B. Schmid, M. Staudigl, R. R. Tietjen, & L. Townsend, Uni. Of Vienna, 20-22/11/2019)
- (10) Conf.: "Religious Experience and Description" (co-org. by J. Alvis; Indiana Univ., USA, October 2019)
- (11) Conf.: "Sovereignty: Sacred and Secular" (org. J. Alvis, Univ. of Vienna, 06-07/02/2020)

- (12) Conf.: “Irrationality and Religiosity in Times of a Pandemic” (org. M. Staudigl & J. Alvis, web-based conference in conjunction with Sosphere, hosted by the Univ. of Vienna, 16-18 September 2020)

(c) Most important publications pending (in preparation / submitted / accepted / in press)

i. Books (Monographs, Edited Collections, Special Journal Issues)

M. Staudigl

- , *The Bonds of Separation: On Community, Religion and Violence in Continental Philosophy of Religion*, ed. with J. W. Alvis, New York: Chicago UP 2021/22 (contracted, in preparation).
- , *The philosophy of Fanaticism*, ed. with L. Townsend, R.R. Tietjen, & H. B. Schmid, London et al.: Routledge (contracted, in preparation)
- , *Religionsphilosophie im Umbruch*, ed. with E. Ramharter, Freiburg/München: Alber 2022 (contracted, in print)
- , *Phänomenologie des Politischen*, ed., Freiburg/München: Alber 2022 (contracted, in print) [incl. a section on religion and the trope of religious violence] (in print)
- , *Phenomenological explorations of religious violence*, ed., Special issue, *Human Studies* 45/1 (2022) (in preparation)
- , *(Ir)Rationality and Religiosity During Pandemics (Phenomenology of Religious Experience V)*, ed. with O. Louchakova-Schwartz & J. Alvis, Special issue, *Open Theology* 7/2/(2021) (in preparation)
- , *Phenomenology of violence* [including a chapter on phenomenological explorations of religious violence], Evanston: NUP 2022 (in preparation)

J. Alvis

- , *The Unconditioned God: Phenomenology and Faith in an Age of Conditions*. London: Rowman & Littlefield 2022 (in preparation)

ii. Articles

M. Staudigl

- , “On Making Transcendence Together: A Phenomenological Account of Religious Violence.” *Human Studies* 45/1(2022) (in preparation)

iii. Chapters

J. W. Alvis

- , “The pacification fanaticism,” in: Leo Townsend et al. (eds.), *The Philosophy of Fanaticism*, op. cit. (contracted & in preparation)
- , “Suffering sovereignty. Open Theism, Weak Theology, and Political Theodicy,” in: *Religionsphilosophie im Umbruch*, ed. M., Staudigl & E. Ramharter, Freiburg/Munich: Alber 2022 (in preparation)

M. Staudigl

–, “On the Relationship of Religion and Violence from a Phenomenological Point of View,” in: J. Rivera & J. O’Leary (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook on phenomenology and theology*, London et al.: Routledge 2022 (in preparation)

–, “The fanatical potential of unconditional claims in conflict. Reflections on the destruction of the Buddha’s of Bamiyan,” in: L. Townsend et al. (eds.), *The Philosophy of Fanaticism*, op. cit. (in preparation)

–, “‘Religiöse Gewalt’ als Herausforderung des Denkens: Zum Desiderat einer kritischen Phänomenologie”, in: J. Dreher, A. Gros, H. Rosa (Hg.), *Phänomenologie und kritische Theorie*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 2022 (in preparation).

–, “The parasitic joys of violence,” in: *Interpreting violence, Ethics, narrative, memory*, ed. C. Falke, V. Fareld, H. Meretoja, London: Routledge 2022 (in preparation)

R.R. Tietjen

–, “Introduction,” with Leo Townsend, in: L. Townsend et al. (eds.), *The Philosophy of Fanaticism*, op. cit. (in print)

–, “On the Social Constitution of Fanatical Feelings,” in: L. Townsend et al. (eds.), *The Philosophy of Fanaticism*, op. cit. (in print)

iv. Other aspects (organizational achievements & grant application [in preparation / under review / accepted])

iv.i. Organizational achievements

–, Institutional setup (with E. Ramharter) of the research cluster "Philosophy of Religion", Dep. for Philosophy, University Vienna (<https://religionsphilosophie.univie.ac.at/>)

–, Integration of the research cluster into the Research Centre for Religion and Transformation, Faculty of theology., Univ. of Vienna ([Research Centre: "Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society"](#))

–, Collaboration with the Research Consortium *Simagine* (<https://simagineconsortium.com>)

–, Collaboration with *Sophere* (Society for Phenomenology of Religion) ([About Us - Society for the Phenomenology of Religious Experience \(sophere.org\)](#))

iv.ii. Grant applications

Accepted:

–, The application “Revenge of the Sacred” that had been elaborated in the framework of this grant and of I-2785, had been accepted after revision. As I have been barred from submitting the revised application due to the FWF regulations (restriction of numbers), the grant has meanwhile started with J. Alvis functioning as PI.

In preparation:

–, “Subjectivity, sovereignty, and violence: Reassessing Political Theology in an Age of Global Crises” (” (Bilateral grant project / FWF/DFG, co-applicant U. Link-Wieczorek, University of Oldenburg, Germany)

–, “New wars and the Human Condition: A Philosophical Investigation” (Stand-alone Project, national collaboration partner L. Hagedorn, IWM Vienna, Austria)

–, “On Violences: Probing a relational account in the study of violence” (Bilateral grant project / FWF/DFG, co-applicant P. Delhom, University of Flensburg, Germany)