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Faith, Religion, and Spirituality: A Phenomenological and Hermeneutic Contribution to Parsing the Distinctions

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Abstract: Religion and spirituality are contested terms in the fields of Religious Studies, Theology, Sociology or Anthropology of Religion, and other areas, and the notion of faith has often been abandoned altogether. The present article attempts to make a distinctly philosophical contribution to this debate by employing phenomenological parameters, as they are articulated in the work of Martin Heidegger, for proposing distinctions between faith, religion, and spirituality. It then goes on to “fill” these structural distinctions in more detail with hermeneutic content by drawing on Paul Ricoeur’s work on faith and religion, as well as Johann Michel’s analysis of Ricoeur’s account of the self as a “spirituality”. The article thus employs Heidegger’s phenomenological categories and Ricoeur’s hermeneutic project in order to think through the possibility of making phenomenological distinctions between personal confession of faith, religious adhesion to a tradition via myth and ritual, and a broader spirituality as a fundamental dimension of the human being.

Keywords: faith; belief; ritual; religion; spirituality; phenomenology; hermeneutics; Martin Heidegger; Paul Ricoeur



Citation: Gschwandtner, Christina M.. 2021. Faith, Religion, and Spirituality: A Phenomenological and Hermeneutic Contribution to Parsing the Distinctions. *Religions* 12: 476. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070476>

Academic Editor: Neal DeRoo

Received: 23 April 2021

Accepted: 21 June 2021

Published: 26 June 2021

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1. Introduction: Questions of Definition

What is the relationship between faith, religion, and spirituality? The term “religion” has been widely disputed in the literature. The early 20th century scholars Rudolf Otto, Joachim Wach, and Friedrich Heiler define it as an experience of the holy (Otto 1923; Wach 1944, 1952; Heiler 1961). Ninian Smart warns of a merely “abstractive” or “objective” definition on the one hand and, on the other, a “reinterpreted” description, derived from a dominant tradition such as Christianity, and imposed on others (Smart 1979, pp. 3–39). He ultimately aims for a “typical” rather than comprehensive definition that includes “such experiences as the numinous and the mystical” in a reality that is stretched beyond the present one, where “activities of worship and contemplative techniques,” become “embodied in social institutions” and “ethical teachings” (1979, p. 34). Harvey Whitehouse contends that “religion consists of any set of shared beliefs and actions appealing to supernatural agency” (Whitehouse 2004, p. 2). James Cox examines 19 different definitions of religion, before offering the following: “Religion refers to identifiable communities which base their acts of believing and resulting communal experiences of postulated non-falsifiable alternative realities on a tradition that they legitimate by appealing to its authoritative transmission from generation to generation” (Cox 2010, p. 21; see also Streib and Hood 2013). The reference to communities or traditions appears frequently also in other recent definitions. Friedli distinguishes between five aspects of religion—as community, as doctrine, as spirituality, as practice, and as discourse—which in different ways draw on 20 subcategories of academic approaches to religion (Friedli 2016, pp. 387–98). In either case, most scholars of religion agree at this point “that there are no ‘purely’ religious phenomena” (Cunningham et al. 1995, p. 4), but that religion, however defined, is expressed not only in personal or even communal, but also in cultural, economic, and political terms.

Yet, some scholars have recently argued that the terminology of religion emerged out of a Western, heavily Christian, conception of religion and is inapplicable in many other

contexts (e.g., Flood 1999; McCutcheon 2003; Masuzawa 2005; Fitzgerald 2007; Schilbrack 2010; Cadge et al. 2011; Brekke 2012; Noghri 2015). This hesitancy is compounded by a further shift that has taken place in the study of religion over the past decades, away from a doctrinal or theological emphasis on faith or belief and toward an increased focus on practices (e.g., Rappaport 1999; McGuire 2008; Riesebrodt 2010). Heavily informed by a Protestant Christian paradigm, religion had often been defined in terms of personal belief or commitment to doctrine. Religious studies scholars, as well as psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists of religion, have increasingly realized that activity, ritual, and practices (often on public communal levels rather than merely private individual ones) are much more broadly representative of religion, especially outside monotheistic contexts, than a strong emphasis on personal belief or adherence to doctrine. Theology and philosophy of religion have been slower to adopt these shifts, although some philosophers in both continental and analytic traditions are increasingly focusing on religious experience rather than on doctrinal questions (Marion, Lacoste, Chrétien, Louchakova-Schwartz, Alston, Wolterstorff, Cuneo, and others).

Like the term “religion,” the notion of “spirituality” is used in a variety of contexts with sometimes wildly differing connotations. Chinedu Nweke claims that “spirituality suffers even greater complication as a concept” than religion (Nweke 2018). Philip Sheldrake criticizes the reductive and ahistorical way in which the term spirituality becomes a “chameleon” that can take on almost any positive meaning (Sheldrake 2016, p. 19). Drawing on Ricœur, he argues for a reframing of spirituality that is both hermeneutically situated and broadened to account for more every-day, public, and popular cultural forms of expression (2016, pp. 29–32). In an introduction to spirituality that collects many of the prior landmark articles in the discipline Kenneth Collins points out that the terminology “is largely amorphous, lacking definitional precisions, and it often refers vaguely to some interior state or heightened awareness or perhaps to participation in a project, however, conceived, greater than oneself” (Collins 2000, p. 10). Walter Principe laments what he calls a “fluidity” or “vagueness” in the term and engages in a historical survey in order to give it more substance (in Collins 2000, pp. 44–47; for a historical approach see also several pieces in Dreyer and Burrows 2005). He describes it in the most general terms as “the way in which a person understands and lives within his or her historical context that aspect of his or her religion, philosophy or ethic that is viewed as the loftiest, the noblest, the most calculated to lead to the fullness of the ideal or perfection being sought” (in Collins 2000, p. 48). In this definition, spirituality becomes a particular way of living out one’s religion.

Yet, for many scholars it goes considerably beyond a given religious tradition. Sandra Schneiders points out that the term has come to encompass “the life of the person as a whole, including its bodily, psychological, social, and political dimensions” (in Collins 2000, p. 251). She ultimately depicts it as “the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives” (in Collins 2000, p. 254), and she points out in a different context that the term has become much broader and more encompassing than that of religion (in Dreyer and Burrows 2005, p. 52). Peter van Ness defines the spiritual as “a specific aspect of human existence” that concerns “the project of one’s most vital and enduring self” (Van Ness 1992, pp. 273–74). John Macquarrie similarly believes “that fundamentally spirituality has to do with *becoming a person in the fullest sense*” (in Collins 2000, p. 63; emphasis his). He claims that “the more man goes out from himself or beyond himself, the more the spiritual dimension of his life is deepened” (in Collins 2000, p. 67). In several of these definitions questions of identity or even of the transformation of the self play a crucial role—and are extended considerably beyond participation in particular religious confessions. Frohlich draws on Certeau to affirm: “Lived spirituality is an ongoing dynamic activity in which individuals and groups create and recreate meaning, joy, and shared life from whatever materials are at hand”; thus, it “consists of constructed expressions of human meaning” (in Dreyer and Burrows 2005, p. 68). Thus, despite the vagueness of the term and the fluidity of definition, there is some consensus among schol-

ars of spirituality that it is a broader term than that of religion and need not be associated with affiliation to a particular tradition, but instead concerns issues of personal meaning, fulfillment, and transformation.

Even when scholars come to a kind of consensus, their understanding of these terms is often at variance with more popular uses. To give just one practical example: Wendy Cadge shows that hospital chaplains predominantly employ the language of spirituality, which their academic training leads them to consider more inclusive. Yet, doctors and nurses almost exclusively speak in terms of religion rather than employing the more amorphous and non-confessional language of “spiritual.” At the end of her study of how religion, spirituality, and talk about God enter the medical setting, she points out: “Chaplains, who also influence the design and use of physical chapel spaces, speak broad languages of wholeness, presence, and hope. In the chapels, explicit religious symbols are increasingly replaced with images of nature, water, and art, and chaplains themselves speak in broad terms that they believe will help them connect with a wide range of people and the ways they make meaning” (Cadge 2012, p. 193). In contrast, physicians and nurses “do not always pay attention to spirituality, religion, or other ways people find and make meaning in their lives. When they do, they often speak in terms of specific religious traditions.” She concludes: “While some medical staff members understand the broad language used by chaplains, neither they nor chaplains recognize the difference in their languages and approaches, nor do they translate easily between them” (2012, p. 194). This is just one instance of a problematic disconnect that occurs when scholars try to redefine language in a way that is out of touch with how much of the populace (or a particular group within it) employs it.

Such “rebranding” of religion or spirituality can occur in various ways and seems especially prevalent in some recent philosophical treatments, which may be due to the fact that the term “spirituality” has hardly been employed in philosophical discussions at all, so this effort of “rebranding” may be part of an attempt to expand the notions of religion at work in philosophy of religion to be focused less on doctrinal and more on experiential dimensions. (The philosophical articles on religion outnumber those on spirituality exponentially: the main philosophical database for articles in the discipline lists roughly 50,000 results for the term “religion” and 1,800 for “spirituality”; most of the latter are bioethics articles on the benefits of spirituality in a medical setting. The popular search site PhilPapers lists almost 100,000 articles on the topic of religion with various subtopics, while spirituality does not even appear as a minor category and no papers on the topic are listed). Phenomenological explorations of religious experience may well find the study of spirituality more amenable to their purposes than the more creed-oriented assumptions about religion in other philosophical approaches.

Yet, in many of these treatments the terms become conflated in troubling ways. For example, Bruce Benson tries to retrieve the notion of spirituality by arguing that there is no real difference between the religious and the spiritual, but that both deal with a fundamental awe or wonder (Benson 2020). No meaningful distinctions can be made between the two terms and so perhaps the word spirituality should be substituted for that of religion (2020, p. 703). Julia Kristeva even tries to expand the term “belief” to a fundamental human predisposition, which can be expressed in religious or spiritual terms, but is much broader (Kristeva 2009; see also Nancy 2008 and Vattimo 1999). Shogo Tanaka instead tries to contend that “certain experiences that occur outside the common context of religious activities,” such as the “so-called zone in sports” could be called religious (Tanaka 2019, p. 27). While he admits that these experiences are instead often called spiritual, he chooses to call them “spontaneous religious experiences” (2019, p. 28). Tanaka defines such experiences as “extraordinary modes of experience” that involve shifts in perception and in action, a “unity” between self and world” and “sudden emotions such as wonder, awe, or joy” (2019, pp. 30–31). Here the spiritual becomes collapsed into the religious in a way that is fundamentally at odds with how non-academics (and academics in other disciplines) employ the terminology.

In a somewhat different fashion, James K. A. Smith talks about the “liturgy” of war, consumerism, and academic education, employing traditionally religious language for many other activities not usually associated with religion (e.g., [Smith 2009](#), pp. 75–129). Neal DeRoo similarly attempts to expand the notion of religious experience beyond categories of belief or tradition and to challenge the distinction between religious and non-religious experiences in order to reveal the religious as a fundamental “dimension of all experience” ([DeRoo 2018](#), p. 292). He defines spirituality as “a dynamic, vital force that is expressed in all elements of human life and culture” (2018, p. 297), but then goes on to identify this broader human dimension of spirituality with religiosity in a way that seems to elide their differences (2018, p. 298). In a different context he admits that religion is “one mode of spirituality’s expression” and should not be conflated with it ([DeRoo 2020](#), p. 61), but again seeks to extend it to include the sort of experiences Smith identifies as instances of worship (like sports or shopping). While the phenomenological distinction he advances between the dimension of spirituality or religiosity and their concrete manifestations is very helpful, it seems problematic to argue that “any living expression of that spirituality (i.e., any spirit) is already a response to religiosity, and therefore is itself religious” (2018, p. 301).

Such a collapse of religion into spirituality (or the reverse) leads to considerable confusion in the description of the experiences, quite a bit of which would be eliminated if separate terms were used, while admitting that they can be overlapping to some extent. It seems at the very least misleading to say that a “phenomenology of the mall or of the iphone is no less a phenomenology of religious experience than a phenomenology of prayer or of contemplation” ([DeRoo 2018](#), p. 304). Reading a sacred scripture is not the same kind of experience as reading a novel; singing a celebratory hymn in a church or temple setting is not the same as chanting a protest song during a revolution or even performing a Bach cantata in a concert hall; undertaking a religious pilgrimage is not the same as climbing a mountain in a national park; the catharsis of religious confession is not that of the release of tears in the movie theater or sports arena; a regular ritual like the Eucharist is not identical to the rituals of shopping—and yet there clearly are some parallels between these experiences that must be acknowledged and can be profitably investigated. Calling them all “religious” confuses matters, just as eliminating the category of religion entirely also does.

While some of these experiences might be “quasi-religious” in the sense of an elevation, transcending of the self, being summoned to a new self, or call to transformation, a broader and more fundamental category seems required here that acknowledges that many such experiences can occur outside of more explicitly religious contexts. In light of the treatments in Religious Studies mentioned above, they seem better described as “spiritual” rather than as “religious”—and are more commonly depicted in this way by the people who experience them. (That said, DeRoo is entirely right that the distinctions between a basic human disposition for “religiosity” and concrete forms of religious expression are often collapsed in treatments and would profit from being more carefully distinguished. His four levels of phenomenological analysis [in 2020, pp. 66–68], introduce important distinctions, some of which the present article will explore in a slightly different way.)

Furthermore, despite the salutary move to the examination of experiences and practices, many people, at least in the West, continue to be motivated by belief and still think of adherence to doctrinal statements or creeds as an important element of their faith. Much fundamentalism is driven by rigorous adherence to doctrinal guidelines or deeply held beliefs—and not only within the Christian tradition. In many people’s lives, faith, religion, and spirituality, are overlapping and mutually influencing categories without clear distinctions. A particular expression of “faith” can provide “spiritual” sustenance, as can a “religious” ritual. A given “religion” may feature several types of “spiritualities.” Socken and Carson argue: “The spiritual dimension of a person is broader than institutionalized religion, although for some persons spirituality is expressed and developed through formal religious activities such as prayer and worship services” (cited in [Collins 2000](#), p. 79).

One might be “spiritual” without being “religious” and one can presumably follow religious guidelines without faith or spiritual connection, but they are also often mutually supporting dimensions of each other.

There is an inchoate sense of such distinctions in descriptions of the experiences. Believing in a supernatural being, trusting that “God loves me” or that divine providence influences events in the world, being committed to certain doctrinal statements or central pillars of a tradition are all recognizable as expressions of faith and are discussed as such in popular culture and the media. Participating in the rituals of a specific tradition, attending services or liturgies, affiliating with a community that gathers for worship or prayer, undertaking a pilgrimage to a shrine, are identified by many as “religious” activities, whether by the participants themselves, by large-scale surveys (such as the Gallup polls or the Pew Research Forum), or by scholars of religion. Standing in awe of a magnificent sunrise, being transported by the sounds of a rousing chorus or symphony, weeping over the sheer beauty of an aesthetic experience, being overwhelmed by a profound and life-changing insight or event, are described by many as “spiritual” experiences, in both personal and more scholarly contexts, and these events are often explicitly distinguished from “religious” experiences by those who report them (cf. the “spiritual not religious” phenomenon; for discussions of relevant polls and surveys of this issue, see [Hyman and Handal 2006](#); [Schlehofer et al. 2008](#); [Lee 2017](#); [Nweke 2018](#)).

Religion, at least in its more popular use, seems to have something to do with affiliation or adhesion to a community, while spirituality can be far more individual. Faith tends to be a personal attitude toward something formulated or stated to be true more broadly (or even by authority figures). Religion participates in a past, a tradition, while a spiritual experience can be sudden and without connection to anyone else’s previous experience or precedent. Hyman and Handal argue that several “studies support the idea that religion refers to the rituals and organizational practices that one practices in a group setting and that guides one’s behavior; while, spirituality is referred to as one’s subjective experience of God” (2006, p. 278). One might therefore say tentatively that “faith” expresses a personal commitment or adhesion to a person, group, or to certain beliefs, “religion” is engaged in often communally organized structures and practices, such as rituals, while “spirituality” is primarily about certain sorts of uplifting or inspiring experiences or a transformation of the self without the need for explicit ties to a tradition in all cases. Thus, there is a phenomenological “feel” for the distinctions, but they are not clearly articulated. The present article proposes to give this somewhat inchoate “feel” more substance—and thus the philosophical discussion of these issues more clarity—by drawing briefly on phenomenological distinctions articulated by Martin Heidegger (in the vein of DeRoo who draws on Husserl and Henry for similar distinctions) and filling these with hermeneutic content via a much longer detour through Paul Ricœur’s work on faith and religion.

2. Phenomenological Distinctions of Levels of Experience and Analysis

How might phenomenology be helpful for examining these potential distinctions? Husserl excluded questions of God from a strictly phenomenological investigation—a transcendent “God” must be bracketed—although he also encouraged Heidegger to pursue a phenomenology of religion and, curiously, many of his students went in that direction on both personal and academic levels (Dietrich von Hildebrand, Hedwig Conrad-Martius, Jean Héring, Roman Ingarden, Edith Stein, Gerda Walther, Emmanuel Lévinas, etc.). Phenomenology has become a prominent method in the study of religious experience, not just in early thinkers like Otto, van der Leeuw, Kristensen, and Eliade, but also more recently (e.g., the hermeneutic phenomenology of [Brenneman and Yarian 1982](#); for a survey and introduction, see [Cox 2006, 2010](#)), although the way in which Religious Studies employs this methodology is often quite different from philosophical approaches to phenomenology.

Heidegger, in a famous early lecture in 1927 ([Heidegger 1996](#), pp. 45–77) as well as in *Being and Time*, posits phenomenology as the more fundamental and primordial investigation of the “existential” condition of the human in an “ontological” sense, while theology

instead is ranked with other “positive” sciences as investigating particular “existentiell” aspects of human experience in an “ontic” sense. While theology explicates “Christianness” or faith as it is experienced in distinctly Christian human existence (1996, pp. 51–55), phenomenology deals with the most fundamental, shared, and constitutive structures of human consciousness, which are then expressed in a variety of ways in concrete lived experience and can be examined there by other scholarly investigations, such as biology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and, indeed, theology (Heidegger [1927] 1993, pp. 41–50).

Heidegger even elucidates this briefly with a specific example. In his 1927 lecture on the relation between “Phenomenology and Theology” he maps the theological notion of “sin” onto the “existential” category of “guilt” via the distinctions between ontic and ontological: guilt is the broader human experience that is part of the structures of the human condition as such, while sin designates the (theological) expression that gives rise to that experience for many people within the Christian tradition (1996, pp. 61–65). Heidegger claims that “all basic theological terms” in their ontic or existentiell sense have an ontological or existential “pre-Christian” content that can be “grasped” phenomenologically; thus “all theological concepts harbor within them necessarily the understanding of Being that human existence [*Dasein*] has as such from itself, inasmuch as it exists at all” (1996, p. 63). The claim that *all* such terms have a direct equivalent on the more fundamental level might be going too far, but *some* correspondence between broader human structures and particular expressions within confessions and affiliations—as well as their specific appropriation in terms of “faith” or personal commitment, broadly conceived—is surely required.

There are, however, actually at least three levels at stake: first, the real lived experience of particular people, what one might call the empirical level; second, the broader examinations that to some extent abstract from concrete experiences of specific individuals and make more general scholarly claims about groups, what one might call with Heidegger the ontic or existentiell level; and finally, the more fundamental examinations of the underlying structures of human consciousness or of the human condition as such, what one might call the ontological or existential level (albeit without Heidegger’s concern about “Being as such”). This latter level is in some sense not the “highest” but actually the “lowest” or deepest level; it is not last but really first in a fundamental sense of giving rise to or enabling the other levels, which depend on it and are in some way concreter and more specific manifestations of it. Thus, for example, Heidegger contends that our experience of clock time or calendar time is dependent on and made possible by the deeper primordial human structure of temporality (1993, pp. 334–72).

Returning to Heidegger’s example, one could thus speak empirically of a particular person having a concrete experience of *Schuld* as a specific debt that must be paid to whom it is owed or as the guilt associated with the harm caused to another person in a specific situation (first layer). One might also describe the broader experience of guilt in a given religious tradition, such as Christianity, employing theology for its analysis, identifying it as “sin” (second layer). Finally (or, more precisely, primordially), one can explicate the fundamental human structure of finitude and indebtedness that is always already “fallen” into a world in which one finds oneself unsettled and not at home (third layer). All three designate experience, albeit on different levels, and all three can be “personal,” but they describe different levels of analysis. In this sense, guilt can identify a specific empirical experience, but can also depict the fundamental structure of human finitude and indebtedness. Indeed, it can be experienced as the former precisely because it is always already the latter. While using the same terminology for both has value in showing that they are connected in some essential way, it can prove rather confusing, as Heidegger’s analyses of world and time demonstrate, where he experiments with a variety of identifications to distinguish differing connotations of words we employ with less precision (cf. the four meanings of *Welt/world* in 1993, pp. 64–65 and his distinctions between *Zeit*, *Zeitlichkeit*, and *Temporalität* or *Geschichte*, *Geschichtlichkeit*, *Historie*, and *Historizität* in Part II of *Being and Time* and other texts). Similar distinctions might be useful also for the phenomena associated with religion and its underlying existential structures.

Thus, using Heidegger's analysis as a guideline, one might tentatively locate "faith" on the first (empirical) level, "religion" on the second (existentiell level, and "spirituality" on the third (existential) level. That is to say, faith might be said to designate the individual empirical experiences of specific people in concrete situations, religion to depict the everyday, existentiell experiences of large groups of people as they are instantiated in meaning-giving symbols, rituals, and stories within certain traditions, and spirituality might be taken to refer to a more fundamental, existential, human affinity or sensibility for transcendence (transcendence here taken in a phenomenological, not a theological sense). That does not mean that spirituality would not be "personal" or is not experienced, but rather would reserve the term for the fundamental primordial existential dimension of human experience that could then be expressed ontically ("existentielly") in a variety of concrete ways via religion and faith as non-exhaustive forms of its manifestation. The three levels would sustain each other and faith and religion would, in some sense, depend on or form an expression of "spirituality" as a feature of the human condition that could also be expressed in non-religious ways.

Heidegger himself does not explore these kinds of distinctions or pursue the topics of faith, religion, or spirituality in any detail. Indeed, there is continual slippage in his own account between ontic and ontological levels. In his 1920–1921 seminars on the phenomenology of religious life he proposes to undertake a phenomenological analysis of primordial Christian existence as explicated in Paul's letters (Heidegger 2011, pp. 67–69, 75–80) that anticipates what he identifies as existential in *Being and Time* without the rigorous distinctions between phenomenology and theology of the 1927 lecture. And although he distinguishes in *Being and Time* between an *analysis* of everyday, average, common, lived experience and an *analytic* of the deeper, primordial structures (1993, pp. 15–19, 41–52), he speaks of both as phenomenological. (There are also "smaller" slippages, such as his describing *eigentlich* and *uneigentlich* as fundamental primordial existential possibilities, but then identifying *Uneigentlichkeit* repeatedly with the everyday, average, and existentiell/ontic). Even aside from these inconsistencies, Heidegger's distinctions between levels remain relatively abstract and programmatic. Thus, although his categories seem promising, his way of working out the terminology is insufficient and its application to religion in either case rather limited, as his own interests soon shifted elsewhere.

Paul Ricoeur calls this kind of "fundamental" phenomenological formulation a "short route" that lacks linguistic and historical context and content (Ricoeur 1974, pp. 6–11). He therefore proposes supplementing it with the "long route" of hermeneutics that would supply at the level of semantics, reflection, and history what the Heideggerian existential approach assumes but does not articulate (1974, pp. 11–24). Ricoeur argues that examining the concrete lived experience of the human requires removing the "brackets" of the phenomenological reduction, thus focusing no longer on the "pure" structures of consciousness (Ricoeur 1966, pp. 3–34; Ricoeur 1986, pp. xli–xlix). The philosopher is never "at the origin of meaning" but comes to it always belatedly via texts and the context of understanding provided by language and history (1974, p. 20). Hermeneutics shows that "existence arrives at expression, at meaning, and at reflection only through the continual exegesis of all the significations that come to light in the world of culture" (1974, p. 22). He makes a similar critique of phenomenology of religion in the vein of Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade, arguing that rite, myth, and belief can only be accessed via language (1974, p. 22). He himself travels such a "long route" for the hermeneutic study of faith and religion repeatedly. The rest of this contribution will follow him on this long route to give more content and hermeneutic substance to the proposed phenomenological hypothesis of the three layers or levels.

3. Hermeneutics of the Particular Experience of Faith

To a large extent Ricœur employs the terms “religion” and “faith” interchangeably, often referring to “religious faith.” Yet, this is mostly the case for his work on biblical hermeneutics; by contrast, his earlier writings on the symbolism of evil (Ricœur 1967) or comparisons between this symbolism and that of psychoanalytic or poetic discourse (cf. 1974, pp. 287–334; Ricœur 1976, pp. 45–69) refer primarily to the “sacred” or “religious” and do not speak of faith unless he is evaluating the Adamic myth or Christian themes. He thus tends to reserve the terminology of faith/belief—maybe unconsciously—for “biblical” faith. When speaking of traditions other than the Christian or Jewish, the language of “faith” is not usually employed, but instead that of “religion” or of the “sacred,” which he tends to use to refer especially to indigenous or nature religions (and which will be examined in Section 4). In either case, his analysis of faith as a “primary expression” is useful for illuminating this phenomenon. Although his hermeneutic work on the biblical texts is somewhat later than the earlier exploration of the religious or sacred, it will be the starting point here, because these writings deal most fully with faith as the most basic and most personal expression of religion.

3.1. Faith as First-Order Discourse

Ricœur frequently makes distinctions between what he calls first-order, second-order, and sometimes even third-order discourse. The first-order discourse refers to “the ordinary expressions of religious faith,” while the second deals with more “sophisticated” or theological formulations (Ricœur 1995, p. 37). The first order refers to the most basic faith experienced by the ordinary believer. The second-order discourse is so called because it “has usurped the first rank in daily life” via science and description (1995, p. 222). Ricœur usually refuses to engage in these higher-level discourses and remains with the more primary or originary expressions of faith, which he examines predominantly via recourse to the biblical texts (Ricœur and LaCocque 1998, pp. xv–xvii). In this respect it is important to clarify that Ricœur tends to call “primordial” (often also translated as “originary”) what he thinks are the simplest, most immediate and ordinary human experiences (such as those expressed by early myths or by the biblical texts) before they are overlaid with theological or philosophical elaboration, while Heidegger—from whom he obviously derives the terminology—uses “primordial” (*ursprünglich*) for the deeper, more fundamental structures, on which these more concrete, lived experiences depend.

Thus Ricœur argues that “it is to the least elaborate, the most inarticulate expressions of the confession of evil that the philosopher must listen” (Ricœur 1967, p. 4). These quickly become identified as the biblical texts. Already in an early essay he says that “the philosopher, when he reflects on religion, should have for his partner the exegete rather than the theologian,” in order to focus on the texts in and by which believers address God directly (Ricœur 1974, p. 482). In a different context he defines the first level as that of the “confession of faith” of the believer, the second as that of “ecclesial dogma, where a historic community interprets for itself and for others the understanding of faith specific to its tradition,” and the third level as referring to what is imposed as “body of doctrines” by authorities as the “rule of orthodoxy” (Ricœur 2013, p. 112). Although these distinctions are not quite the same as those between ontic and ontological, partly because Ricœur contends that those distinctions lack hermeneutic content, the first level does clearly refer to personal faith and the second to organized religion.

Ricœur frequently argues that religion is best examined through its language (1995, p. 35). This language is that of faith, which is expressed most fully and most immediately in the biblical texts. The philosopher can most profitably focus on the primary expressions of faith via these texts that manifest them. Philosophy, he insists, “will try to get as close as possible to the most *originary* expressions of a community of faith, to those expressions through which the members of the community have interpreted their experience for the sake of themselves or for others’ sake” (1995, p. 37; emphasis his). He employs “originary” (or primordial) here in the sense of primary and first, but also ordinary or everyday, and

ultimately most basic and personal. (By contrast, Heidegger opposes “everyday” or “*existentiell*” to “*primordial*” or “*existential*”). Faith is this most fundamental and personal expression of religion, which comes before any articulated doctrine or philosophical justification. In this sense the biblical texts are not regarded as theological, but as encapsulating and expressing this varied and personal faith of particular people or of early Jewish and Christian communities. The biblical discourses articulate modalities “of the confession of faith” (1995, p. 39). Biblical stories like the exodus or the resurrection “are the events of deliverance that open and disclose the utmost possibilities of my own freedom and thus become for me the word of God” (1995, p. 47). Personal faith is expressed in the texts, thus representing its most “primitive” or basic expression, but such faith can then also become appropriated personally from these texts by subsequent readers.

Ricœur consistently pushes any notion of “religious experience” back to the faith articulated in texts, avoiding any direct discussion of (unmediated) experience. Religious experiences must always be articulated in a language (1995, p. 218). He usually judges mere “experiences” as too immediate for direct philosophical examination, which must always take the hermeneutic path through texts or other forms of discourse (1995, p. 49). Indeed, he often expresses great discomfort with notions of religious experience “out of a distrust of immediacy, effusiveness, intuitionism” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 139; see also Ricoeur 2009, p. 16). Yet, although texts are in some sense less “immediate,” because they are written, involve a certain amount of distancing from the original event or experience, and always already require interpretation, we can examine the primary expression of faith as it is manifested in them in “originary” fashion. Faith for Ricoeur is always the concrete, empirical expression of believing individuals or communities.

3.2. Faith in the Biblical Texts

This language of the biblical texts is multiform, polyphonic, and highly diverse; it is expressed in a variety of ways via the different genres of the biblical discourses, such as narrative, wisdom literature, prophecy, psalmody, and so forth (Ricoeur 1991, pp. 89–101; 1995, pp. 39–47, 217–35; 2013, pp. 111–52). Each speaks of God differently, and they can even be in conflict with each other. The narrative texts present God as the actor within history. The prophetic texts by contrast speak in the voice of God, through the prophet, proclaiming in the first person what is often disruptive of history or any neat narrative. The psalms address God confidently in the second person, while the genre of wisdom literature adds doubt and confusion. These different types of “poetic” discourses about God represent the concrete and differing, even contradictory, experiences of the divine and thus constitute a diverse space of discourse open to multiple interpretations.

The different biblical texts open a “world” to the reader who may enter it and thus be transformed. Through fictional, poetic, and biblical texts “new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality” (1995, p. 43). This poetic dimension of the “world” of the texts allows for appropriation of its message for one’s personal existence and thus enables a change of life (1991, pp. 96–97; 1995, p. 44). The texts lead the reader to increased self-understanding and personal transformation: “The world of the text is what incites the reader, or the listener, to understand himself or herself in the face of the text and to develop, in imagination and sympathy, the self capable of inhabiting this world by deploying his or her ownmost possibilities there” (1995, p. 232; emphasis his). One is able to establish a personal relationship with the text through this “biblical faith” (1991, pp. 98–101). The movement of interpretation and imagination called for by the texts enables the personal appropriation of faith that shapes the new way of being that the space of interpretation opened by the texts has made possible.

This demonstrates both the personal nature and the diversity of the experience of faith. Faith is not a monolithic experience and, although deeply personal, not closed to philosophical investigation, if it becomes expressed in discourse in some form. The variety of such discourses testifies to the many different kinds of experiences of faith. The meaning of faith is found within the matrix of the circularity of the discourses taken together and

crossing each other. For Jewish and Christian texts, “God” is the “referent” named by the text in various ways, the “index of incompleteness” at the intersection of the “circulation of meaning” between the discourses (1995, pp. 45, 221, 222). Belief thus finds expression in concrete descriptions of the divine, narratives of deliverance, prophetic speech, prayers or celebratory hymns addressed to God, and any number of other particular manifestations. Faith is constituted by the “being” proposed by this diverse world of the biblical texts and the personal appropriation of their meaning (1991, pp. 99–100). The philosopher can investigate these concrete and empirical expressions of faith via their textuality, whether explicitly written down or not—as long as it is identifiable and interpretable discourse. If philosophy wants to examine “faith” it must look at this primary and empirical experience of individuals as it is expressed in a variety of concrete and different discourses.

3.3. Faith as Personal Adhesion

Ricœur’s own relationship to his faith can also be illuminating in this context. He often spoke of his own faith as a “chance” or “accident” transformed into “destiny” by “continuous choice” (1998, p. 145). He never disputed the particularity of his faith convictions and described them frequently as his concrete experience, tied to his specific circumstances and history that could have been otherwise, without which, however, he would not be who he was. This faith was intrinsic to his identity and yet particular, on some level arbitrary and yet “essential,” made so by his own commitments, which became an integral part of his identity. In fragments found after his death, he elaborates on this: “‘A chance transformed into destiny by continuous choice’: my Christianity,” which means for him that the occasion of his birth and heritage “in the Christian faith of the Reformed tradition” became for him a living reality through continuous personal commitment (2009, p. 62). He continues: “Through this continuous choice, a chance [was] transformed *into a destiny*”; he defines this “destiny” in terms of a conviction to which he adheres: “The term adhesion is moreover appropriate in the case of Christianity to which . . . I adhere and which includes attachment to a personal figure under which the Infinite, the Most-High, is given to be loved” (2009, p. 64). He argues that although this may suggest a certain kind of relativism, in the sense that other religious options would have been possible, for him “living it from within, my adhesion is absolute, as noncomparable, not radically chosen, not arbitrarily posited” (2009, p. 65). This deeply held particular conviction is for him a matter of the heart, despite his reservations over many aspects of doctrine, such as sacrificial notions of atonement or literal belief in physical resurrection. In the interview he reflects on this in a personal manner: “Where would I now situate myself with respect to this, if I am prepared to accept my heritage as a whole? Do I have a right to filter it, to sift through it? What do I believe deeply?” (1998, p. 162). Belief thus emerges as this concrete adhesion to aspects and expressions of a given tradition or heritage.

The comparison to other religious traditions (of which more below) is thus always already one step removed and not of the same existential import as the particular personal adhesion of faith. While the relativity and comparability of religious traditions can and must be affirmed, from within faith, the “faithful believer” experiences existential commitment and personal adhesion to his or her own tradition of faith. This does not mean that one must be closed to other traditions or cannot learn from them, but indicates a prior and more specific commitment of faith. A Christian, he says, is “someone who professes a primordial adhesion to the life, the words, the death of Jesus” (2009, p. 69). Through such adhesion “someone faithful to a tradition personally commits himself to the asymmetrical relation that . . . ‘we others’ and ‘all others,’ strangers in a way, is put in parenthesis” (2009, p. 73). Such faith is thus fundamentally about a deeply personal and empirical commitment that becomes determinate in some fashion that allows it to seem no longer relative vis-à-vis other commitments to other kinds of faith. One can learn from other cultures and other traditions, but there is a special “emotional charge linked to the adhesion to one or the other” (2009, p. 75).

This is the way in which many people (traditionally especially Christians and especially Protestant Christians) speak of their faith. Yet that understanding is increasingly applied more widely. As mentioned above, there has been much critique—and rightly so—of this wider application, arguing that many other religious traditions thrive on ritual practices or activities and are far less concerned with personal faith convictions or adhesion to creed or doctrine than (Protestant) Christianity. While this is true, “faith” is also increasingly taking on broader connotations, especially in light of the rise of fundamentalisms around the world. The personal affiliation of individual people to particular worldviews, very frequently associated with a specific “religious” tradition, has become in many ways just as strong in certain iterations of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, especially when some groups or individuals seek to combat or even eradicate other interpretations (see Brekke 2012; Gluck 2010; Lewis 2011; Riesebrodt 1993; Ruthven 2004; and Schimmel 2008 for concrete analyses). Here “faith” surely is a useful descriptor of what is at stake, especially if taking it in the ancient sense of *credere* as commitment to and affiliation with deeply held convictions, not merely abstract mental consent to doctrinal statements, however formulated.

Such expansion of the notion of faith could be patterned on Ricoeur’s analyses of the parallels between texts and actions. Ricoeur broadens the notion of text or narrative to action and history in multiple works. He argues that we can think of actions like texts because they have actors, aims, referents, conclusions or results, and an arc to them (1991, pp. 105–207). History more broadly similarly has narrational elements, partly because it is temporal and involves plot (Ricoeur 1984, pp. 3–94). Thus, one may speak of activities as having a language or even constituting a kind of discourse or quasi-text.

In a similar way, one might say, faith could be taken as a wider term that could potentially be used analogously across diverse forms of adhesion for concrete, empirical commitments to fundamental convictions that are deeply personal without exhausting the entire spectrum of what religion entails. Individuals around the world in a large variety of contexts can be said to have or display faith if their commitments are of this concrete sort in a way that is existentially wrapped up with their personal identity in important fashion. Although this would have to be shown more fully and in detail for particular traditions, one may say that there is some affinity or likeness between “faith” as it is used for personal convictions in predominantly Protestant Christian contexts and the similarly deep and identity-shaping empirical commitments in many other concrete contexts. Again, to be clear, Ricoeur himself does not draw this parallel or even set out to analyze faith in these terms. But his application of the notions of text and discourse to actions and other aspects of human living allows such an extension. Faith, then, could be employed as the philosophical designator for the particular, empirical, and concrete commitment or adhesion to broader identity-providing (often religious) traditions.

4. Hermeneutics of the Symbolic and Ritual Expressions of Religions

As is true of his writings about faith, Ricoeur similarly does not set out to “define” religion. He usually takes its meaning for granted, suggesting only that it should be examined via symbols, myths, or texts. Yet the way in which he explicates these symbols and myths is illuminating. It is also in this context of the exploration of symbols and myth that he draws the clearest distinction between a “pure” phenomenological analysis of the human condition, and an empirical or hermeneutic examination of such religious symbols or myths.

4.1. Religious Symbols and Myths

Ricoeur’s work on symbolism comes earlier than his hermeneutics of the biblical texts and, in fact, constitutes one of the earliest articulations of his important notion of the wager and the ensuing hermeneutic circle (especially 1967, pp. 347–57). In his groundbreaking work on *The Symbolism of Evil*, he analyzes three major symbols for evil (defilement, sin, guilt) and four related religious myths (ritual, tragic, Adamic, gnostic). The discussion is

the second part of the second volume in what was originally conceived as a three-volume project on the philosophy of the will, featuring what he calls a “pure phenomenological” description of the voluntary and involuntary (Ricoeur 1966), an “empirics” of the will, comprising both a discussion of fallibility (Ricoeur 1986) and of religious symbols of evil (the two were published in one volume in the 1960 French original), and ending in a “poetics” of the will, which was never published in that form. This makes clear that Ricoeur himself thought of his exploration of religious symbols of evil as an “ontic” (or what he calls “empirical”) project in contrast to the more fundamental, structural, “pure,” phenomenological investigation of the will.

Ricoeur thinks of these symbols as primordial expressions of evil that move from seeing it as a force outside oneself to increasingly an aspect of the self (the development of conscience and personal guilt), although in this context “primordial” often seems to amount to “primitive” for him. He moves in fairly linear fashion from defilement through sin to guilt, portraying guilt as the highest stage that includes the earlier stages (for analyses and critiques, see Davidson 2020). In a similar way, he considers the Adamic myth the highest type that brings together the insights of the other three. In this regard, it is very telling that he returns to the notion of faith at the very end of the treatment in the context of considering the Adamic myth, arguing for it as the risky personal appropriation of symbols and myths after the movement of critique. Faith is ultimately unverifiable (1967, pp. 319–21), but one can make a wager for the truth of the myth and thus return to faith via a kind of “second naïveté” (1967, p. 351). For this a “re-enactment” of the religious myth on a personal level in “sympathy and imagination” is required (1967, p. 347). Such belief in the meaning of the symbol as appropriated for me then broadens my understanding (1967, p. 352). In a different context he says: “I understand religion as a primitive structure of life which must always be overcome by faith” (1974, p. 441). While Ricoeur’s slippage between “primitive” and “primordial” throughout his work on symbolism and myth is not helpful, his work does consistently treat religion as the particular (“primitive”) expression of more basic structures, which can also be appropriated in a more empirical or concrete sense via “faith,” thus constituting a sort of middle layer between them.

Although Ricoeur’s own focus in this work is on notions of the will, fallibility, fault, and evil, the ways in which he treats the symbolism of the sacred, especially before it culminates in the analysis of the symbol of guilt and the Adamic myth, is telling. Ricoeur describes a fairly linear trajectory that involves a move from cosmic symbolism, defilement as exterior stain, and communal rite to the personal, interior, and invisible. He depicts the shifts from communal to individual practice, from systemic or structural to personal, and from externally expressed to internally felt as “progress” to a higher stage of development (1967, pp. 151–57; 1974, pp. 425–39). “Religion,” as it is expressed in “primitive” cultures via shared ritual, as well as communal and cosmic symbols, refined in narrative myths that give meaning to large groups of people, must give way to individual faith grappling with a personal existential consciousness of guilt. Informed by the work of scholars like Bultmann, Durkheim, Mauss, and Eliade, Ricoeur is convinced that religious myth and symbolism defined these earlier cultures, but that the Enlightenment moves of critique and demythologization make us unable to “believe” in these earlier myths, although the kernels of truth within the symbols might be recovered via the aforementioned “second naïveté.”

Although this account of linear progression and elevation above the primitive is surely problematic, it contains important insights about the ways in which religion functions on communal and ritual levels: through symbolism and myth it can provide meaning and shape identity for groups and whole cultures. Religious myths display “a concrete universality conferred upon human experience by means of archetypal personages”; they provide “an ideal history” and have “symbolic function” through the “primordial drama that opens up and discloses the hidden meaning of human experience” (1967, p. 170). Religion is recognized indirectly as a communal and ritual phenomenon, expressed in practices not only in beliefs.

Ricœur expands his examination of religious symbols in his work on psychoanalysis, where he often draws parallels or contrasts between them. In an essay that first juxtaposes them to each other in order then to point to parallels, he speaks of the religious symbol as complex and “opaque,” as deficient in “clarity, necessity, and scientific order,” always requiring interpretation (1974, p. 317). He contrasts the “religious phenomenon” as it “is intended and given in cult and faith, in ritual and myth” as descriptive, while Freudian hermeneutics seeks to be explanatory (1974, p. 318). Yet, so he assures us, such religious symbols are not arbitrary but convey truth and put humans in touch with the sacred in its cosmic dimension. He concludes that “religion as we know it today is a reappearance in the form of a fantasy, of forgotten images of the human past” that can be regenerated in new forms of interpretation (1974, p. 322). Both the religious symbolic and the psychoanalytic unconscious ground the self in different ways (1974, p. 333). In these early essays Ricœur often suggests a “demystification” of religion (via the atheist “masters of suspicion”) in order to make room for faith (e.g., 1974, p. 347). Despite Ricœur’s own clear preferences of faith over religion in these explorations of religious symbolism, the communal, corporeal, and ritual nature of religion emerges, even if Ricœur himself downplays or even dismisses it, instead favoring individual, internal, and non-ritual forms of expression.

4.2. Religion as Manifestation

In later examinations Ricœur often contrasts biblical faith (as “proclamation”) even more explicitly to a manifestation of the sacred: “The word ‘sacred’ belongs to the side of manifestation, not to the side of proclamation” (1995, p. 71). He even admits to being “frightened by this word ‘sacred’” (1995, p. 72). To the “sacred” of religious “hierophany,” he contrasts the “kerygma” of biblical faith as proclaimed in the word (1995, pp. 48–49). These religious expressions of the sacred obey a law of correspondence where symbols refer to cosmic realities, while biblical proclamation exercises a logic of superabundance or extravagance, as expressed in the limit-expressions of the biblical texts (1995, pp. 54–55, 57–61). Although Ricœur tries to bring the two together in the final part of the essay, it is fairly clear that he thinks we cannot return to a “sacred” conception or experience of the world, which is ultimately superstitious and uncritical, and that biblical proclamation has far more to offer us (1995, pp. 61–67). The terminology of the sacred is throughout applied to nature religions and their experience of the cosmos.

It is telling that Ricœur consistently associates this “manifestation” of the sacred with the comparative approach to religion advocated by his colleague and friend at the University of Chicago, Mircea Eliade. On some level this is a distinction between what both think of as “Christian” vis-à-vis other “religions” and thus perpetuates the distinctions common at the time. (As briefly mentioned above, it is worth remembering in this context that Ricœur is writing these texts in light of the work done by Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévy-Strauss, Mircea Eliade, Gerardus van der Leeuw, and others, and at a time when it was standard practice to refer to other traditions across the world as “religions”—and often to see them in distinction from Christianity.) Following Eliade, Ricœur describes this religious sense of the sacred as focused on nature and cosmic in scope. It establishes correspondences between religious symbols and natural phenomena. While Ricœur himself denigrates this “logic of equivalence” vis-à-vis the “logic of superabundance” he sees at work in the biblical texts, especially the parables of Jesus, it carries his analysis of symbols an important step beyond the symbolism of evil explored earlier, by expanding it beyond just symbols of fallibility or fault.

Religion, then, is here taken to be a more or less organized expression of primordial experiences of the sacred, such that they provide a universe of meaning (and, indeed, endow the universe *with* meaning). This is accomplished in different ways in different traditions. Eliade’s extensive work in comparative religions followed a program of setting various symbols and elements of myths side-by-side and thus discovering what he took to be broader patterns of meaning across traditions, such as notions of sacred space and time, sacred tools or implements, and so forth. Similarly, although in his early work Ricœur

supplies instantiations of the symbols of defilement, sin, and guilt in the myths of different traditions, in his later writings he refers more broadly to these cosmic symbols highlighted by Eliade. The “originary symbolism” of religion (the reference is again to Eliade) is concerned with “the most immutable human manner of being in the world” (1976, p. 65). Each religious tradition or group constitutes one kind of manifestation of these underlying patterns, its particular “ontic” or “existentiell” expression, one might say with Heidegger. All the ancient myths “speak to us in some fashion” (1967, p. 306), yet we cannot live in all of them at the same time. We always privilege some myths or narratives over others, even if we can learn from those we do not privilege. Much later he will say: “What seems to me to be constitutive of the religious is, therefore, the fact of crediting a word, in accordance with a certain code and within the limits of a certain canon” (1998, p. 145). In his later work Ricœur will sometimes liken this diversity of symbols, myths, and narratives to the multiplicity of languages.

4.3. Religions as Languages

In some of his final texts, Ricœur compares different religions to different languages: “If pushed, I would agree to say that a religion is like a language into which one is either born or has been transferred by exile or hospitality; in any event, one feels at home there, which implies a recognition that there are other languages spoken by other people” (1998, p. 145). He speaks of religion as a “mother tongue,” which clearly implies that while one may be native in one religious “tongue,” one can learn the languages of other religions (cf. also Ricœur 2010, p. 38). In some of the fragments published after his death, he reiterates this: “Just as everyone is born into a language and accedes to other languages only by a second apprenticeship, and most often, only through translation, the religious exists culturally only as articulated in the language and code of a historical religion” (2009, p. 15; emphasis his). If other traditions are engaged sympathetically, their universes or worldviews can be envisioned and possibly even entered: “I have often used the expression ‘in imagination and sympathy’ to designate the capacity to hold as plausible—that is to say worthy of being pleaded for—a confession, a confessional structure of the religious” (1998, p. 169). All this suggests that here “religion” means a particular (ontic or existentiell) instantiation of a tradition that can be examined and described phenomenologically, albeit not in the “pure” sense of referring to the human as such.

Religions are always particular in a plural not purely individual sense. In one place he calls Buddhism “religious because one finds there the reference to an anteriority, an exteriority, and a superiority—these three notions being constitutive of the manner in which I am preceded in the world of meaning” (1998, p. 170), although in another context he refers to it as non-religious, yet still linked to the religious (2009, p. 15). In yet another context he professes: “I will say for myself, being of the Christian Reformed tradition, that this movement of what I call imagination and sympathy sometimes takes me to the edge of Buddhism” (2010, p. 38). Religions provide various, different, but to some extent translatable, ways of seeing the world, universes of discourse with distinct meaning, which can grant identity and purpose to human experience. They are communicable, but maybe not fully or transparently so, which is why they often operate with symbols, metaphors, and mythic narratives.

Ricœur returns to the topic of religion in a quite different sense also in some of his final talks and addresses, reflecting on the connection between religion and violence in light of terrorism. In these contexts, religion similarly refers to particular traditions that are bound together by communal affiliation, shared rituals, and institutions. Certain religious communities and institutions claim to possess ultimate meaning, thus totalizing it (1998, p. 155). Religion is made up of symbols, beliefs, and communal structures, such as rituals and institutions (2010, p. 29). All these enable the release of a deeper and more fundamental core: “The religious has as its function the deliverance of the core of goodness from the bonds that hold it captive” via the symbols, narratives, and communities of a particular tradition (2010, p. 30). Religion can have a positive impact on those who appropriate it

personally, because it is an “extraordinary capacity to make the ordinary person capable of doing the good” (2010, p. 30). Different religions do so differently: “Each religion is summoned to define itself in distinction and opposition to others” (2009, p. 67). This is what gives rise to violence in Ricœur’s view. Religious violence is an attempt to grasp “the source of life itself” (2010, p. 34). This source of life is the meaning “invigorating each time for each religious community” (2010, p. 35). Violence is fueled by “the jealous capture of the source” (2010, p. 35). And he concludes: “The religious never exists except in religions. And the religions, under the influence of the radical evil of which no one knows the origin, are connected, one to the other, in a relationship of mimetic rivalry, having as object the source of life undivided in its outflow, divided in its receptacles” (2010, p. 35). Although the topic here is religious violence, this very clearly identifies religion as an ontic or existentiell manifestation of a more fundamental, primordial source or basis, yet which is manifested only through the particular instantiations. There is a deeper “groundless ground” that comes to the surface in the particularities of religious traditions.

Does this allow us to apply the terminology of “religion” more broadly, in a manner distinct from its strongly Christian associations and the ways in which Protestant discourse in particular has colored how “other religions” are investigated? If faith and religion are separated a little more—in terms of how we employ the terms in scholarly fashion, not necessarily in people’s personal experiences—it might be possible to rid religion of its strong creed- or doctrine-oriented connotations, as is indeed already the current practice in sociology and anthropology of religion, where, as noted in the introduction, the terminology of religion is usually retained (albeit sometimes reluctantly), but the focus is almost entirely on ritual and other activities rather than on doctrine or beliefs. While Ricœur himself does not engage in an analysis of ritual and is fairly dismissive of the sacred, his work on myth and symbolism has rich potential for such broader investigations into religious practices and ritual structures (for an attempt to explore this potential, see [Gschwandtner 2021](#)). Although Ricœur focuses on the biblical texts, the parallels he draws to action and history in other aspects of his work, might allow us to expand his analysis of religious texts to religious actions and practices in a broader sense, which clearly display many of the features he highlights about other “narrative” actions. Can Ricœur’s distinctions between the ground or underlying structure of the “religious” and its articulation in specific religions also provide guidance on how to understand this ground or structure in a hermeneutic-phenomenological sense?

5. Hermeneutics of the Spiritual Structures of Human Personhood

Ricœur uses the terms “spiritual” or “spirituality” only very rarely. A search on the “Digital Ricoeur” resource indicates that the word “spirituality” and related terms appear in his published texts a total of 620 times. By comparison, “faith,” “belief” and related terms appear a total of 2,743 times and “religion” and related terms a total of 3,423 times (plus another 840 instances of “sacred”). Most of his books only have a couple of mentions of the terms spiritual or spirituality, usually employed as an adjective qualifying “world” in a cultural sense, and it is pretty much always used without further discussion, more or less interchangeably with religious, which appears far more frequently. Some of the references to “spiritual” are to the Platonic dialogues, to Emmanuel Mounier’s philosophy, or very broadly to general cultural predispositions, usually in a list also involving terms such as psychological, social, cultural, moral, and/or historical. He refers a couple of times to a “spirituality of discourse” that is manifested in “writing,” but without offering any explanation for what he means by that expression (e.g., 1991, pp. 148–49). There is certainly no explicit discussion of spirituality as a phenomenon, so this topic will have to be approached in a more indirect manner. The section will first employ Johann Michel’s analysis of what he calls a “spirituality” in Ricœur’s account of the self and then extrapolate further about the kind of experience described, which is recognizable even when Ricœur does not explicitly call it a “spiritual” experience. Thus, hermeneutic substance is given to the phenomenological category and layer of experience rather than the term as such.

5.1. Spirituality as Work on the Self

Johann Michel extensively employs the term “spirituality” (italicized throughout his piece) to read Ricœur in light of Foucault’s examination of the self (Foucault 1993 and 2005). Foucault explicitly distinguishes spirituality from religion, identifying spirituality with care for the self and knowledge of the self. He calls spirituality “the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth” (2005, p. 15) and insists that “it would be completely wrong to identify these [structures] with religion” (2005, p. 29). Spirituality, as Foucault describes its historical development in the West, has three characteristics: the subject can only have access to truth or knowledge through personal transformation, this involves a conversion or change in status exercised through work on the self, and the truth thus achieved gives insight to the self or peace to the soul in ways that go beyond information or mere knowledge (2005, pp. 15–16). Hadot similarly speaks of “spiritual practices” in antiquity (Hadot 1981, 1995, 2001), likening Stoic forms of self-development to the Ignatian spiritual exercises.

Michel employs Foucault (and indirectly Hadot) as a guide for highlighting the dimensions of self-knowledge that enable transformation of the self in Ricœur’s *Oneself as Another*. While there are “techniques” for self-knowledge, only a “spirituality” of concrete practices can lead to transformation of the self (Michel 2008, p. 64). This allows him to investigate Ricœur’s anthropology as a “spirituality of Socratic and Christian inspiration” (2008, p. 66). He argues that Ricœur draws on Christian, existentialist, and psychoanalytic sources in order to present a spirituality of care for the self and self-knowledge that requires an existentialist dispossession of the self and a psychoanalytic recovery of the self (2008, p. 69). This is a “phenomenological” spirituality that requires self-transparency for transformation via the task of mediation that allows work on the self (2008, p. 70). A constant hermeneutic labor of self-interpretation allows the self to become increasingly a “subject” albeit not in the strong Cartesian sense (2008, p. 71). This becoming must be continually renewed; one is never finished. Heidegger’s “care for the self,” according to Michel, allows Ricœur to develop a spirituality that brings together ontological and epistemological hermeneutics for an “infinite transformation of the self” (2008, p. 74).

Michel argues that Ricœur’s account of self-knowledge “is based in the end on a form of spirituality,” a technique for self-knowledge that requires work on the self and enables transformation (2008, p. 76). In this way, Ricœur, in Michel’s view, has made a fundamental contribution to a “re-spiritualizing of the human and social sciences” (2008, p. 77; emphasis his). Michel notes that this care for the self is not narcissistic or egotistic, but involves a de-centering or even a certain loss of the self and also care for the other as absolutely essential for self-knowledge (2008, pp. 79–80). He sees Ricœur operating the same “spiritualizing” strategy upon analytic philosophy in *Oneself as Another*. Here also care for the self involves knowledge of the self (2008, p. 82). Michel says: “In this way, care for the other is directly involved in care for the self” in a “spirituality that is called fidelity” (2008, p. 85; emphasis his). Ricœur’s description of “aiming for the good life with and for others in just institutions” constitutes a further development of this spiritual possibility of transformation (2008, p. 86). Ricœur’s philosophical anthropology thus expands Socratic spirituality of self-knowledge with a care for and transformation of the self that includes care for others and transformation of institutions toward greater justice (2008, p. 92).

It is interesting that Michel does not go on to examine the final two Gifford lectures that were excised from the text before revising it into *Oneself as Another*. Especially in the final lecture considering the “summoned subject” Ricœur extends his consideration of the self into a more explicitly “spiritual” direction, although he does not himself employ that term. He examines various instances where “the self is constituted and defined by its position as respondent to propositions of meaning” from various “symbolic networks” (1995, p. 262). Although most of these are Jewish or Christian (the prophetic vocation in the Hebrew Scriptures, the call to imitate Christ, and the Augustinian voice of the inner teacher), Ricœur interprets them as indicative of a broader structure of being summoned that transcends any

particular religious iteration. Just as the “paradigm” could be transferred from a Jewish to a Christian context (1995, p. 267), it can also be detected in other places. It indicates a dialogic structure in the self and a “capacity for renewal” (1995, p. 268). The “most internalized expression of the responding self” is that of the voice of conscience, which “opens new possibilities of interpretation” of this “dialogic structure” (1995, p. 271). Here the “religious” context is removed and a more “neutral” version of the phenomenon of “the dual structure of a voice that calls and a self that responds” emerges (1995, p. 272). The personal and particular confession of faith, he suggests, is only possible because of this more fundamental broader structure of a self “summoned” by the other (1995, p. 274). It is maybe not entirely problematic to call this with Michel a “spiritual” structure in a non-religious sense.

Regardless of whether this is an appropriate use of the term in regard to Ricœur’s work, it usefully indicates a broader human structure or disposition of the self that is not explicitly religious in any sense, although “religious” people could obviously also engage in it, and maybe do so in more deliberate ways. Ricœur’s rare uses of the word, employing it almost always in the context of the “spirit” of discourse or referring to “spiritual” culture or humanity more broadly, would lend at least some indirect support to such a reading. Such a “spiritual” disposition would involve response to the call of the “other” (however conceived) and an effort at self-transformation and self-transcendence that is much broader than any particular religious tradition. Ricœur does even speak in various places of a kind of dispossession or loss of the self that is warranted in certain circumstances (e.g., 1995, pp. 271, 284–88, 313, 329). And, interestingly, he will sometimes distinguish his “positive” account of the broader human capacities of the self from a narrower religious context of self-abnegation: “Everything I have tried to say about the self and otherness in the self, I would continue to defend on the philosophical plane; but, in the religious order, perhaps I would ask to give up the self” (1998, p. 155). Can further indications of such a dimension of “spiritual” self-transcendence be found in his work, not necessarily in order to claim that Ricœur has an account of spirituality, but rather to fill this category or layer with further hermeneutic content?

5.2. *Spirituality as Transformation of the Self*

Michel focuses his examination of Ricœur’s “spirituality” on *Oneself as Another*, articulating its dimensions of “spiritual practices” for the self that might allow for self-knowledge and transformation. But there is another aspect of Ricœur’s work in which he explores these themes maybe even more explicitly, namely his work on narrative. As briefly discussed already in the context of the biblical texts, Ricœur argues that texts open a world in which we might envision ourselves and by which we can be transformed if we are willing to enter them and take on their hermeneutic wager. In his earlier work on *Time and Narrative*, he discusses this in terms of a three-fold mimesis: texts are prefigured in life (mimesis₁), life is configured within the text (mimesis₂), and the text in turn refigures or transfigures the lives of the readers (mimesis₃). He claims these mimetic possibilities of all poetic texts, including the biblical ones, but this makes it extremely difficult for him to trace the ways in which the biblical texts might differ from the sort of transfiguring world offered by fiction or other narratives. Some of these difficulties might, in fact, be alleviated, if Ricœur were willing to recognize a deeper or broader (spiritual?) existential dimension that many poetic or literary narratives might offer to the human being, of which the biblical texts would then constitute one kind of (existentiell) instantiation, specific to their religious context and affiliation.

Ricœur claims that “through fiction and poetry, new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality” via “the imaginative variations that literature carries out on the real” (1991, p. 86). Texts, and especially narrative texts, show us new possibilities. They enable us to come to increased self-understanding via appropriation of their worlds (1991, p. 87). We receive “an enlarged self” by “exposing ourselves to the text” (1991, p. 88). He reiterates this in a different context: readers are able “to receive an

enlarged self from the apprehension of proposed worlds" via appropriation (Ricoeur 1981, p. 182). Stories, novels, biblical texts, even philosophical treatises enable us to enter into their initially alien world, to become divested of "the earlier 'me' in order to receive as in play, the self conferred by the work itself" (1981, p. 190). New modes of being thus become possible (1981, p. 192). All this has the potential for a metamorphosis of the ego (1991, p. 88) that can surely be described as "spiritual" in its impact on the person in a sense much broader than religious transformation.

The activity of interpretation thus is about "the power of the work to disclose a world" (1981, p. 182). Language and metaphor enhance our "capacity for letting new worlds shape our understanding of ourselves" (1981, p. 181). Narrative configuration enables the events of life to become a "meaningful whole" (1984, p. 67). Ricoeur insists that "human lives need and merit being narrated"; indeed "the whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative" (1984, p. 75). We actualize these untold stories in our reading by entering the horizon of other people's stories. This expands our own horizons and challenges us to a broader vision of the world, increased understanding, and transformation of the self. Narratives "augment reality" by "proposing a world that I might inhabit and into which I might project my ownmost powers" (1984, pp. 80–81). By so doing they enable us to grapple with human finitude and "may aid us in thinking about eternity and death at the same time" (1984, p. 87).

Ricoeur makes exactly the same claims about the biblical texts and their respective biblical worlds. The Bible is revealed to the extent that it proposes new ways of being to its readers via the worlds it opens before them (1991, p. 96). The only thing that appears to render these biblical worlds unique or "special" seems to be the "God-reference" at stake in them (1991, p. 97). One might well suggest that these possibilities of meaning and transformation are fundamental (ontological/existential) "spiritual" dimensions of the human condition, basic capacities that allow humans to make meaning, to live in a shared world, and to grapple with the existential realities of suffering and death. Religious myths or the biblical texts do so in one particular (ontic/existentiell) manner. The fact that Ricoeur has such a hard time distinguishing between the biblical world and other narrative worlds is itself telling: they maintain the same structure and thus perhaps are all "spiritual" in some way or at least aim at that aspect of the human condition. This allows us to distinguish three layers: The biblical world, on Ricoeur's terms, is one in which one may believe or which is appropriated via empirical faith. The "ritual world," one might say in parallel fashion, accomplishes such meaning-making for the "religious" in shared or communal manners. Other narrative or poetic worlds, including aesthetic ones, may do the same in a different sense, together pointing to a broader "spiritual" dimension of the human condition.

5.3. *Spirituality as Essential Structure of the Human*

One final aspect of Ricoeur's work can give us a hint of what this third layer might encompass: his final, posthumously published, reflections on the "Essential," which he identifies as religious, yet also beyond the religious, a shared human structure that reaches beyond any particular religious tradition or confession and unites us in moments of grief or death. As already noted, in several late interviews and in the fragments published posthumously, Ricoeur increasingly speaks of his personal adhesion to a religious tradition as the particular participation in something essential that is expressed differently in the various religious traditions and is more fundamental than each. Although he certainly does not posit an "Urform" of the religious or propose a "universal" religion—an effort he condemned already in his early treatment of Marcel and Jaspers (Ricoeur 1947, pp. 282–83)—he does envision a shared dimension of the human condition that is manifested in various ways in particular religious traditions. He describes it in terms that seem reminiscent of how Heidegger speaks of the ontological or existential dimension: "the essential is too close, therefore too covered over, too hidden. It will reveal itself bit by bit, at the end" (2009, p. 7). It is also worth noting that this occurs in the context of a reflection on death

and mourning, on what it means to live one's own death and to experience the death of others. (Interestingly, Raymond Lee argues that mortality is where religion, spirituality, and secularity come together (Lee 2017)).

Being-toward-death is, of course, for Heidegger the most fundamental existential experience, the existential possibility that cannot be overcome, but is most fundamentally our own, completely certain and yet indeterminate (1993, p. 263). Ricœur suggests that something "Essential" emerges in what he calls "the internal grace" of "the dying person" even "in the time of agony" (2009, p. 14). Such grace is a "mobilization of the deepest resources of life in the coming to light of the Essential" (2009, p. 15). He identifies it as follows: "the Essential, in one sense . . . is the religious; it is, if I dare put it this way, that which is common to every religion and what, at the threshold of death, transgresses the consubstantial limitations of confession and confessed religions" (2009, p. 14). Here Ricœur calls "religious" both the particular traditions or confessions and also employs the term to refer to the "essential" that goes beyond them, that underlies them, and that they thus share in common to some extent, but his discomfort at employing the same term for what he clearly recognizes to be operative at a different level is evident.

He reiterates the simile of language: "The religious is like a fundamental language that exists only in natural, historically limited languages." That is, "the religious exists culturally only as articulated in the language and code of a historical religion" (2009, p. 15). Yet these particular instantiations in certain religious traditions limit "that amplitude, that depth, that density of the religious that I am here calling the Essential" (2009, p. 15). Although Ricœur does not explicitly identify this as an ontological or existential underlying condition in Heidegger's sense, it certainly comes close, qualified by his insistence that it actually manifests only in particular religious traditions, just as language always structures human experience; yet we speak not language as such but particular tongues. For Ricœur, "in the face of death" the religious can be identified in some way "with the Essential" and thereby transcend "the barrier between religions" (2009, p. 15). Because death is "transconfessional" and "transreligious," it is able to break "through the filter of reading 'languages' of reading" and Ricœur is willing to identify this as a "religious experience" (2009, p. 16). Given that he explicitly identifies it as transcending and setting aside the religious, and as applying even to the "non-religious," indeed, the universally human, "spiritual experience" seems a more appropriate term here.

In accompanying the dying with compassion (the context here is palliative care, especially as he experienced it in the context of the decline and death of his wife), we can share "the movement of transcendence—immanent transcendence, oh, paradox—of the transcendence innermost to the Essential rending the veils of the codes of confessional religions" (2009, pp. 17–18). He reports "a testimony about the rushing in of the Essential" in a dying friend's eyes that leads the narrator to recite Baudelaire as a prayer. Surely this is a "spiritual" moment where "the need for a prayer" is felt and the transcendent is encountered and yet neither is the prayer religious, nor is the transcendent divine (2009, p. 19). The "life of death" and the human fraternity that meets it speak of a "confessional" and a "history of suffering" of which we are all a part and which we all encounter in our own way. Ricœur nowhere employs the language of the spiritual, but he is certainly describing a fundamental, existential human reality and the ways it can be elevated and given meaning by friendship, compassion, forgiveness, and fidelity.

In a further fragment he reflects on the notion of detachment in Meister Eckhart and the Rhineland mystics. Detachment from self, love of the other, is a "liberation for the essential" (2009, p. 42). Thus, "it is the *openness and being available for the fundamental* that motivates the transfer of the love of life to the other." This "relation between openness to the essential, for the fundamental, and the transfer to others who will survive me is reciprocal: openness for the fundamental, freed up by 'detachment,' *founds* the transfer—the transfer *verifies, attests, tests*, the 'test' of detachment in its dimension of generosity" (2009, p. 42; emphasizes his). Buddhism similarly teaches such detachment (2009, p. 49). Again, although the word "spiritual" is not mentioned (not even as a "spirituality" of the

Rhineland mystics), what Ricœur describes here as our relation to the fundamental and essential certainly identifies a third layer that “founds” and undergirds the religious or other expressions of openness to the transcendent.

His reflection on religious violence similarly entertains the possibility of “something like a fundamental religion” (2010, p. 36). He admits to being comfortable with basic notions of “religious sentiments easily transposable and communicable from one religion to another,” such as a “feeling of absolute dependence” (Schleiermacher), an unconditional trust (Tillich), or a “wishing well, such as admiration for creation, jubilation in the meeting between man and woman, striving for the greater gifts” or “optative happiness” (2010, p. 37). Here also, “spiritual” does not seem an inappropriate term for this description, fitting it better than “religious sentiment.” This avoids the fruitless search for a “core religion” or a “radical relativism” in which one “could indifferently adopt one religious point of view or the other” (2010, p. 37), instead suggesting the spiritual (rather than religious) sentiment as the fundamental human structure that is articulated or manifested in a variety of different ways in manifold traditions, many, but surely not all of which, are religious in their own particular manner.

One final insight might be drawn from Ricœur. His most fundamental affirmation, to which he returns over and over in his work is the contention that the good is deeper and more “originary” than evil and that religion—in both its benign and its more sinister manifestations—is about enabling and tapping into this capacity for the good (1986, p. 145; Ricœur 2004, p. 491; 2010, p. 29; Changeux and Ricœur 2000, pp. 287, 288). Might not this fundamental structure of the “capable self,” which he elaborates so powerfully in his final works (Ricœur 2005, pp. 89–109), including its potential for “learning how to narrate oneself in other ways” (2005, p. 101), point us to the “spiritual capacities” of the human being, capacities that are part and parcel of our condition and can be activated in a variety of ways: through symbols, myths, or narratives, experiences of trauma and beauty, grief and death. These are the fundamental issues with which faith, religion, and spirituality all grapple in a variety of different ways.

6. Conclusion: Faith, Religion, Spirituality

Extending Ricœur’s work on biblical faith, religious symbolism, and transformation of the self beyond his own discussions of them thus allows us to confirm hermeneutically the three overlapping but also distinguishable phenomenological levels or layers at work: a fundamental human structure of being open to transformation or to profound experiences of awe or wonder (the “spiritual”), the ways in which this basic human capacity can be structured in usually communal fashion via symbol, myth, and ritual (the “religious”), and the particular ways in which such experiences can be appropriated empirically as “belief” or “faith.” And these distinctions do correspond at least to some extent to the way in which ordinary people employ the terminology: speaking of *faith* as their particular personal adhesion to doctrine or convictions, thinking of *religion* in terms of corresponding to specific traditions that include large numbers of people either doing things together or at least sharing many rites or practices in common, and employing *spirituality* to designate experiences occurring to anyone regardless of affiliation with any particular tradition, although they can obviously occur *also* within the context of concrete religious traditions or be expressed via empirical experiences of faith.

The wager of these distinctions between faith, religion, and spirituality admittedly requires considerable efforts of extrapolating from Ricœur’s work. The confusing ways in which the term “primordial” is employed in the discussion—sometimes meaning “primitive,” sometimes “simple” or “immediate,” sometimes “fundamental” or even “grounding”—does not help matters. Yet, distinguishing between (1) fundamental human predispositions for self-transcendence and transformation (as spirituality), (2) communal forms of expression in symbolism, ritual, or myth (as religion) and (3) concrete adhesion, affiliation, or commitment (of faith) makes at least some sense of the ways in which such phenomena are experienced by many, while also acknowledging that for some people

they are deeply intertwined, while for others they remain more distinct. This allows for “spiritual” experiences of nature or art, for example, without any sort of religious affiliation or doctrinal convictions. Furthermore, it permits manifold expressions of religion that are not reducible to faith; faith would remain one particular concrete appropriation of the broader structures and practices of religion.

It might even go some way toward explaining phenomena like fundamentalism, which can occur both in the context of religion and, as some scholars have suggested (e.g., Larsson 2004; Lewis 2011), outside it. In these cases faith would exist on its own without attachment to religious affiliation or even clearly connected to a spiritual dimension. Indeed, fundamentalism might then be judged problematic, precisely because it dissociates “faith” from “spirituality” in the sense of veiling or even subverting its fundamental ground in openness and transformation of the self. In a broader and maybe less “negative” sense, faith as identity-shaping commitment can occur both within religious community and in non-religious contexts, can be clearly connected to its spiritual ground or only in a confused manner. Similarly, religious participation can become rote, undertaken only out of habit or obligation, lacking dimensions of faith or, more positively, such participation can be expressed in ways other than belief, such as committed liturgical engagement or charitable work. Faith, religion, and spirituality can come together and mutually reinforce each other when the personal faith of a given individual empirically evolves out of a community’s ontic celebrations of religious ritual, which themselves—in their huge variety across the human experience—are enabled by deeper and more fundamental spiritual capacities and dispositions of the human condition.

This does not accomplish all of the essential work of exploring concretely how faith, religion, or spirituality function in human life or what exactly they accomplish, but it does allow us to distinguish more carefully how the terms differ from each other and to assign layers of expression to them. It also alleviates at least some of the tremendous confusions that result when the terms are conflated with each other or when one is eliminated or substituted for another. Finally, it opens the path for depicting hermeneutically and phenomenologically specific experiences of faith as they are manifested in personal commitment and deeply held convictions, concrete structures of religious experience as they are manifested in symbols, myths, rituals, and traditions, and the fundamental spiritual dimensions of the human condition as they are manifested in (personal and communal, religious or non-religious) experiences of self-transcendence, efforts of self-transformation, and other meaning-generating practices.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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