

Article

# Locating Religious Violence in the Spiritual Constitution of Experience

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**Abstract:** This work sought to address the question of where religious violence is located in our constitution of experience, so as to show how transcendental phenomenology can help us begin to better understand religious violence. The paper begins with an outline of four distinct levels of phenomenological analysis provided by transcendental phenomenology. It then relates those four levels to religious experience, showing that religious violence can refer to violence occurring on all four of those levels. In doing so, it also shows that “religious experience” can refer both to particular experiences we call ‘religious’ and to a dimension of all experiencing. Finally, the paper ends with the suggestion that religious communities wishing to address the question of religious violence must pay attention both to the spiritual force that animates them and to the cultural context in which they express that force.

**Keywords:** phenomenology; transcendental phenomenology; religious violence; Derrida; religiosity; religious traditions; spirituality



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## 1. Locating Religious Violence in the Spiritual Constitution of Experience

In the philosophy of religion, religious violence is often construed as either a theological problem (what is it about our understanding of religion that, perhaps necessarily, leads to violent outcomes?) or a sociological problem (what is it about our social make-up or our political institutions that causes differing religions to be construed as violent?). But what is under-explored in the philosophical literature on religious violence is the way that differing ways of constituting experience affect or impact the question of religious violence. My hypothesis is that the way we understand religion to operate in terms of our constitution of experience has a large impact on our understanding of religious violence itself, including both what is problematic about it and ways to combat it. If this is true, then a serious engagement with transcendental phenomenology<sup>1</sup> would be an important and perhaps even a necessary element of any robust attempt to account for religious violence.

To evaluate this hypothesis, this work will explore the overarching question, “Where, in our constitution of experience, is religious violence located?” Answering this question more precisely not only disambiguates different understandings of religious violence, it also leads us to at least two implications about religious violence: one pragmatic and one more philosophical. Pragmatically, I suggest that religious traditions should claim responsibility for their religious expressions, rather than ceding that responsibility either to God/the divine, or to “culture”; philosophically, I try to show that phenomenology of religion should not simply talk about the constitution of religious experience but also about the religious and spiritual constitution of experience. Both, in different ways, seek to show that being ‘violent’ is not something that simply adheres to particular religious phenomena or particular religious traditions but is instead a question of the relationship between expressions of religiosity and the conditions or contexts of their expression. In this regard, in addition to whatever theological or political problematics ‘religious violence’

names, it also names a problematic that can only be considered transcendently and phenomenologically.

The paper begins with an explanation of the four levels of the constitution of experience outlined in transcendental phenomenology (Section 2), followed by a discussion about how these four levels map onto an analysis of religion (Section 3). With these newly refined levels in place, I then suggest that ‘religious violence’ can refer to violence occurring on all four of those levels, thereby suggesting several different understandings of ‘religious violence’ (Section 4). I then show that this reflection on religious violence helps us realize that religious traditions need to consider both the spiritual driving force and the cultural context of their expression when they are deciding how to express themselves in religious phenomena (Section 5).

## 2. The Levels of Constituting Experience

We must begin, then, with some introductory methodological claims. While I try to do so quickly so that the majority of the paper is focused on the theme of religious violence (in keeping with the theme of this special issue), a brief reiteration is necessary here, as the phenomenological method is not always clearly and unambiguously used (to put it politely).

The notion that there are different levels or ‘layers’ (Costello 2012) or ‘topologies’ (Nitsche 2018) to the constitution of experience is as old as Husserl, at least. For the early Husserl, these are posited as levels of constituting consciousness but this, we will see, already begs a significant question. So, let us simply call them levels or layers of the constitution of *experience*. They are four-fold: First, Husserl insisted on the need to distinguish between empirical phenomena (what we experience in our normal everyday lives) and the transcendental conditions by which we experience those phenomena (i.e., the processes that constitute our experiencing of those experiences (Husserl 1950, 1999, § 14). These “transcendental conditions” are themselves constituted within experience (Husserl 1948, 1970, 1973), which enables us to distinguish, within the transcendental conditions, between the way in which those conditions are operative within the constitution of some particular experience or others (what we can call “transcendental empirical,” Deleuze 1994; DeRoo 2021a, 2022 “quasi-transcendental,” Guenther 2020; Benington and Derrida 1993 or “sensible transcendental” Elton 2015; Irigaray 1993; Tilghman 2009 conditions) and the way in which something like those conditions must happen if experience is to happen at all or in general (what we can call “transcendental” conditions). Later, Derrida and Merleau-Ponty showed how the transcendental conditions must themselves be generated by (Derrida 2003; Merleau-Ponty 1968) or take place within some “ultra-transcendental” (Derrida 2010) process that constitutes the transcendental processes.

This gives us four levels of the constitution of experience: empirical, transcendental-empirical, transcendental, and ultra-transcendental. Perhaps a quick example will be beneficial to help us see these four levels in action. You are reading this paper: let that be the phenomenon under consideration. The empirical dimension of your experience of that phenomenon is the particular concrete details of you reading it: you read it on this particular computer screen, in some particular place (perhaps your office), with certain prior knowledge that informs your listening (perhaps of phenomenology or of philosophy of religion), etc. These empirical factors take place within particular institutions or traditions (referred to as *Stiftungen* in phenomenology Husserl 1952, 1989; Derrida 1989; Merleau-Ponty 2010; Barbaras 2004; Vallier 2005) that are historical realities in the world and that help give sense to your experience. These “traditions” would include the tradition or institution of contemporary business architecture that gives particular form to the physical space of your office (as the place where you read this paper), the tradition or institution of academic research practices in philosophy that encourage this type of single-author, peer-reviewed research article, and the tradition or institution of academic English that gives particular linguistic form to this paper (which is different from the form it would take if this paper were written for a colloquial North American audience or if it were written in German, where the

connotative differences between “spirit” and “geist” would greatly shape the reception of this paper). These particular traditions are concrete cases of the “transcendental” conditions necessary for one to have any experience of a broadly similar kind at all: space or spatiality (rather than the particular form given to space by contemporary business architecture), sociality (rather than the particular form given to our social relations by the practices of the contemporary academy), and language or “linguisticity” (rather than the particular form given to language in academic English). Finally, there is the ultra-transcendental dimension, which seeks to explain how the transcendental processes (spatiality, sociality, linguisticity, etc.) themselves are brought about. For example, through the will of the transcendental ego or consciousness (Husserl 1950, 1999, 2000), conceived as the “individual genius” or “Master” (e.g., in Hegel); or through the various destinies, epochs, and unfoldings of Being (e.g., as Heidegger might contend); or through the differentiating processes of historically-enmeshed flesh (Merleau-Ponty 1968), conceived as the production of “post-structuralist” or “post-phenomenological” discourse at play in a particular time (21st century), place (“the West”), and language (English phenomenology, compared to “French” phenomenology, “German” phenomenology, Nordic phenomenology, etc.).

These levels of experience, then, are not ontologically or epistemologically distinct. Rather, they are phenomenologically distinct, but ontologically and epistemologically intertwined (*Verflechtung*) or enmeshed. The nature of the relationship between them is characterized phenomenologically as “expression”: the phenomenal unity of asymmetrical elements, such that I ‘live through’ one so as to ‘live in’ the other. Just as you ‘live through’ the marks on the page so as to ‘live in’ the meaning expressed therein, so, too, do we ‘live through’, for example, the empirical conditions so as to ‘live in’ the traditions or institutions we inhabit and live out of every day. This expressive relationship, while asymmetrical, is *mutually* asymmetrical: I can live through A so as to live in B, but I can also, through a change in focus, live through B so as to live in A. Finally, this expressive relationship is also generative (Steinbock 1995): the content of the various levels are mutually generated in and through the experiences undergone. It is because you read articles like this that academic society in philosophy continues to be organized this way, even as you have to read articles like this because philosophy is *already* organized this way.

### 3. The Four Religious Levels of the Constitution of Experience

We are left, then, with four mutually expressive levels operating in our constitution of experience: the empirical, the quasi-transcendental, the transcendental, and the ultra-transcendental.

Early on, Husserl attributed the transcendental processes (like spatiality, linguisticity, etc.) to the activity of the transcendental ego. However, in his later work, he came to see that even subjectivity (i.e., the transcendental ego) arises, in some significant way, because of processes that both constitute it from within but also exceed it. These “supra-subjective” processes (Husserl 1970, p. 270) come to be discussed under the rubric of “spirit” (*geist*).<sup>2</sup> Spirit names the affective force that shapes our most fundamental engagements with and intuitions of the world.<sup>3</sup> It is intimately (and expressively Heinämaa 2010) bound with materiality, insofar as objects are “spiritual products” that bear their own ‘meaning’ or ‘sense’ within them as the intrinsic meaning of the material itself. Hence, the material-spiritual (Husserl 1952, p. 250n.1) (or “spiritual-sensuous” Heinämaa 2010, p. 8) names the very meaningfulness of the world(s) we engage, a meaningfulness that is expressed in (and constituted by) phenomena (including material objects), which are always encountered within particular regimes of sense (*Stiftungen*) that are expressive of and expressed in those objects. This spirituality, according to Husserl and Henry, is operative on the most basic of phenomenological levels (i.e., life), and shapes everything constituted within experience, including both subjects and objects.

Spirit is expressed culturally (Henry 2013). Culture is the living of life, or life’s (which is to say: experience’s, phenomenality’s) self-unfolding. And one of the ways it unfolds is via religion. The “religious” mode of cultural expression, which I refer to as “religiosity”, is

a particular way of expressing spirituality: it brings spirit to the forefront of our experience, highlighting for us (conceptually, ritualistically, etc.) the way we are bound to (*religare*) or engaged with reality. In this regard, religiosity, as a transcendental expression of spirituality, tells us about the spirit(s) that is/are operative in all of our experiencing, and not necessarily about some supernatural reality to which we owe a bond of reverence (*religio*).<sup>4</sup>

Historically, some of these accounts of the nature of our bond with reality have proven especially powerful in shaping how particular communities make sense of the world. These religious traditions or institutions (*Stiftungen*) are not primarily sets of beliefs (as traditional philosophy of religion might have us believe) but differing accounts of the religious bond we have with the world, that is, differing accounts of how we intuit the world itself in sensible ways.<sup>5</sup> The phenomenological significance of these religious traditions, then, is in how they constitute people experiencing the world differently. Think, for example, of the differing attitudes towards the material world in Baptist, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions of Christianity, or in Mahayana, Theravada, and Tantric or Tibetan traditions of Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> These differing experiences of the world express themselves most obviously in concrete phenomena (i.e., people's experiences of empirical particulars), including rituals (e.g., worship rites), material objects (temples, rosaries, statues, icons, etc.), inherited practices (yoga, prayer, etc.), particular beliefs (Jesus is the son of God), belief systems, texts (the *Kama Sutra*, the Koran), concepts (all-PKG God), and more. Religious phenomena are the concrete means by which we encounter "religious traditions" in our everyday experiences, even as those "religious traditions" are the "mode of being" (Barbaras 2004, p. 58) of religiosity, itself a particular cultural expression of spirituality.

What we want to sociologically call "religion", therefore, should be phenomenologically distinguished: Are we talking about religious phenomena (on the empirical level)? About religious traditions or *Stiftung*? About religiosity (as opposed to artistic or linguistic modes of expressing spirituality)? Or about spirituality itself? All four of these layers are operative in our (religious) experience and in the "religious constitution of experience" that is the *raison d'être* of religious traditions.

#### 4. Locating Religious Violence

We can see that this makes "religious" violence itself unclear in the same ways: what does 'religious' refer to here in relation to violence? The question I'd like to pursue at this point, if I can put it bluntly, is, "where is the 'source' of "religious violence"?" What is "to blame" for religious violence? That is, if we can all concede that some religious phenomena are experienced violently within some religious traditions (e.g., *jihad* in certain Wahhabi Sunni Islamic interpretations or the exclusion of women or sexual minorities from full participation in some Catholic and Protestant Christian communities), then where or why does this violence occur in those particular phenomena?

The most common response in contemporary society, I think, is to locate the violence in the particular phenomena themselves: it is the Wahhabi interpretation of *jihad* or the refusal to let women be priests or pastors that is violent. These particular religious phenomena are violent (or lead to violence), but this is not a problem for all religious phenomena, and so, not a problem for 'religion' itself.

Socially, a second common response is that violence is a problem unique to some religious traditions (Wahhabi Islam, white evangelical Christianity), but not others (Sufi Islam, "progressive" Christianity). This, therefore, casts some religious traditions as uniquely "problematic" for the continuance of peaceful, secular society, without necessarily casting religion itself as problematic.

Both of these responses, I would submit, contain truth in them, but fail to adequately deal with the problem of religious violence and its relation to contemporary society insofar as they fail to be adequately transcendental. That is, they look simply at phenomena (or the tradition, but the tradition is normally sociologically viewed as something like a phenomenon) so as to categorize each phenomenon as 'good' or 'bad', but they fail to investigate how those phenomena came to be constituted in that way and how the

evaluation of 'good' and 'bad' itself came to be constituted. The focus is, then, on whether this phenomenon is acceptable to us rather than on how it comes to be (taken as) acceptable or unacceptable to us. This latter issue, I posit, is more (transcendentally) phenomenological, and it is opened when we consider the constitution of religious experience and the religious constitution of experience.

With regard to the constitution of religious experience, there are plenty of people willing to concede that the problematic nature of some religious phenomena has everything to do with how those things came to have their current meaning and not with the tradition itself, let alone with religion itself. The *Jesus and John Wayne* (du Mez 2021) book is a popular contemporary example of this: while the patriarchal and violent tendencies of white evangelicalism are problematic, these can be traced to their historical development and need not require us to write off everything in that tradition. Such an account, while deeply historically enlightening, is more phenomenologically suggestive than it is demonstrative. Specifically, it fails to explain (or even account for) the transcendental dimension of how experience itself is constituted. This is not to denigrate *Jesus and John Wayne* or books like it; they remain wonderful moments in the diagnosis of the constitution of religious experience and something that phenomenologists of religion have a lot to learn from (not least in their popular outreach and appeal). They do not address transcendental concerns, but they do not claim to either. The danger of this is that such accounts, I argue, can be seen as blaming particular people or particular institutional decisions for the "bad" outcome because they fail to account for broader issues at play: those individuals were themselves constituted in particular circumstances that influenced their decision making. That element of the question of religious violence is the one that, I suggest, transcendental phenomenology is uniquely positioned to address, especially when transcendental phenomenology pays attention to spirituality and the social, political, and critical implications it opens up for phenomenology.<sup>7</sup>

So, some people locate religious violence in the empirical and/or in the quasi-transcendental levels of experience. Both approaches have some truth—there is violence operative in both of those levels, it seems to me—but both miss a bigger picture, because (I argue) they fail to transcendently contextualize those as levels of the religious expression of spiritual experience. That is, they miss how things were constituted as violent on those levels because they do not see those levels as expressive of religiosity and spirituality. In that sense, they are not wrong, but maybe they are missing out on a 'bigger' conception of or a more fundamental location for religious violence.

Third, there are those who would locate religious violence in "religion" itself. Richard Dawkins and those like him would be located here, as might Jacques Derrida and those like him. For Dawkins and his colleagues, it is religion itself that is violent and problematic, not simply some particular religious traditions or particular religious phenomena (like particular doctrines, practices, etc.). The problem is religion itself insofar as it stirs up dangerous passions and discredits the role of reason and "rational exploration" in favor of blind faith and irrational acceptance. Such an approach seems to require an account of 'religion' that equates it to 'believing things without sufficient rational evidence'. But such an account of religion seems to me to be itself a religious phenomenon (a particular belief), arising in a particular religious tradition (Abrahamic monotheism). In this regard, Dawkins and his colleagues' critique of religion does not target the level of religiosity as a transcendental element of experiencing as such. It targets only "religion" as a particular (Western, Abrahamic) understanding of religiosity, and therefore "religion" as a particular religious phenomenon.

The work of Derrida is more complex in this regard. He clearly has a transcendental element to his account of religion: he is concerned primarily with recovering a notion of messianicity, and not simply remaining content with messianisms (religious traditions), and so he seems to provide a critique of religious traditions for losing the sense of religiosity itself. In this sense, one could argue that Derrida's position is something like, "a religious tradition is problematic if it fails to be sufficiently religious, that is, if it fails to bring to the

forefront of experience the way in which a person is bound to the world". Yet, at times, it seems like Derrida's position is actually more along the lines of: "a religious tradition is problematic if it fails to describe a person's connection to the world as one of radical openness to alterity". In the latter case, it is not religiosity that is the problem, but (as in Dawkins' case), a particular conception of that religiosity, and in that sense, the problem with 'religion' is simply that some religious traditions fail to explain spirituality the way that Derrida thinks we should.<sup>8</sup>

In that sense, the problem of religious violence is not due to religiosity itself, for Derrida or Dawkins, but to a particular understanding of religiosity found within particular religious traditions (especially the non-mystical traditions of the Abrahamic faiths). Indeed, for the problem to be with religiosity itself, one would have to contend that it is inherently violent to bring to the forefront of our experience the spirituality (in the phenomenological sense) that is already operative in our constitution of experience. Since that spirituality is already operative and is not instituted by its religious expression, I do not see how bringing it to the forefront of experience would itself be violent. The only potential violence I could see on the level of religiosity itself is that spirituality is informed and constituted in part by its religious expression, and therefore *if* one's mode of religiously expressing it was violent, it could shape that spirituality itself to be more violent in the future. But, again, this does not seem to be a problem with religiosity itself but with the religious tradition in and by which religiosity is expressed.

This, then, also suggests how we should respond to the question of religious violence and the ultra-transcendental level of experience. Are the fundamental driving forces of our experience themselves inherently violent (as Freud and psychoanalysis might suggest, though likely with very different understandings of 'driving forces' and the constitution of experience)? Insofar as spirituality is an ultra-transcendental condition of our experiencing, if violence happened at the spiritual level, i.e., at the most basic level of the constitution of our experience, it would be expressed in all the levels of our experience. But, because spirituality in this phenomenological sense is not only expressed religiously but is expressed in various other cultural modes as well, violent spirituality would be expressed in all its cultural expressions, not just the religious ones. As such, it would cease to be "religious" violence, specifically, though we could, perhaps, talk about how that spiritual violence is expressed in religious ways that may differ from how it is expressed in other cultural ways. In this regard, religion wouldn't be uniquely violent; it might simply be unique in how it expresses its violence. Recent work in "religious trauma" might be helpfully located here, as an exploration of the unique ways that violence or trauma manifest in religious traditions and religious phenomena (see, for example, [Panchuk 2018](#)).

To summarize, then, we can understand "religious violence" as referring primarily to: (a) particular religious phenomena that are uniquely violent, (b) particular religious traditions that are uniquely violent, (c) religiosity itself as being uniquely violent or in some unique way motivating violence, or (d) spiritual violence as it is uniquely manifest in religious ways (though it is also expressed in other cultural ways). I have tried to show that, in almost all cases, what is phenomenologically of significance in our understanding of religious violence seems to have a lot to do with how the spiritual impulse is expressed in and by particular religious traditions. That is, whether we are interested in the constitution of religious experience or in the religious constitution of experience, the question of violence seems to be significantly (though by no means exclusively) located in the empirical-transcendental level of religious *Stiftungen*. This suggests that religious violence is *phenomenologically* significant<sup>9</sup> in how it expresses the spirituality that constitutes us and our experience and how it, in turn, shapes and constitutes that spirituality through its expressions of it.

## 5. Responsibility

My hope is that the preceding analysis proves helpful to disambiguating some of the discourse around "religious violence". On the one hand, it should be obvious that what

Derrida speaks of as the “violence” of messianisms vis-à-vis messianicity is distinct in kind from, say, the killing of *infidels* or the cultural repression of women or sexual minorities. On the other hand, the analysis also suggests that, while those accounts of religious violence are talking about different things in their immediate analyses, there may be a connection between them nonetheless: how one understands one’s (spiritual) connection to the world will impact how one constitutes various phenomena. In this regard, otherwise academic conversations about religious or philosophical doctrines (like atonement theology or theistic understandings of sovereignty) could have real-world implications that lead directly to physical, emotional, verbal, and/or psychological violence being committed upon concrete individuals.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of that practical outcome, my main contention is that tracing the question of religious violence all the way back to the spiritual driving force of our experience (rather than locating religious violence only on one level) can help us see that religious people are responsible, not simply for what spirit they express, but also (and perhaps especially) for the way they express that spirit in the cultural context in which they find themselves. That is, by focusing on religion as being expressive of our most phenomenologically basic relation to the world (i.e., of spirituality), we see that *how* we express spirituality (do we express it religiously? Ethically? Aesthetically?), *what* spirituality we express (is the nature of our primary connection to the world consumerist, where each individual makes of the world what they will so as to maximize their own happiness? Is it Christian, where the world is a creation that bears the imprint of its Creator, and is therefore endowed throughout with religious meaning and purpose? It is physicalist, where the world is a collection of individual atoms with only chance or arbitrary connections that are short-lived and, broadly speaking, meaningless? Is it something else?), and *who* we express that spirituality to (are we expressing our particular form of spirituality to those who share that spirituality or to those with a differing spirituality? Are those to whom we are expressing peers in religious, political, social, etc. ways, or is there a power imbalance in play of some type?) are equally important factors in the constitution of experience. To understand our experience, we must understand *all* of those elements, and not simply one or two of them; so, from a transcendental phenomenological perspective, it is not simply some particular religious phenomenon that is at stake in the question of religious violence, it is how religious people constitute experience in general, whether the phenomenon in question is viewed as “religious” or not.

This broader philosophical point about the (religious) constitution of experience has practical implications for how religious communities (in the narrower, sociological sense of ‘religion’) operate. In its narrower, sociological sense, religious living is about how one lives as someone who believes in the existence of some super-empirical reality, such as God, Allah, brahman, etc. To apply this to our analyses of the (religious) constitution of experience, we would say that a religious community is, at least theoretically<sup>11</sup>, one that understands their most basic relation to the world (their ‘spirituality’ in the phenomenological sense) as happening via some super-empirical reality: the ‘spirit of God’ is what drives their engagement with creation, or their recognition of *brahman* is what enables them to perceive the world as *maya* (illusion, ‘mere’ perception). In this sense, ‘religion’ is not simply a belief about super-empirical realities,<sup>12</sup> but a fundamental orientation that shapes everything about how a person or community intuits the world, and therefore shapes everything about their experience, just as the ‘spiritual’ is not some other-worldly, non-physical realm, but the fundamental driving force of a person or community’s phenomenal experiencing of the world as they experience it. The ‘religious’ is an attempt to bring the ‘spiritual’ to the forefront of their experience in a way that they can directly engage and interact with, rationally, ritualistically, or in some other way. Therefore, to live ‘religiously’ one must pay attention to both spirituality and the context of its expression: the ‘religious’ person (in the narrower sense) is never simply doing “what God/the spirit wants” (which puts all the responsibility for the person’s expression of spirituality on the spirit), nor are they simply doing “what makes sense in this culture” (which puts all the responsibility on the culture,

that is, on the context of their expression). Rather, religious communities are responsible for how they express *this* spirit in and to *this* cultural context(s) in which they live. For the person who is interested in how the spirit is expressed *religiously* (rather than in some other way), both *what* spirit is being expressed and *who* that spirit is being expressed to remain equally important. Hence, my religious expression of spirituality is never just about what I say or do but about how my expressions impact the world. To put it perhaps too succinctly: to live one's religious life well, a person should focus primarily not on what they say or do but on what their audience hears or sees.

Acknowledging this point radically shifts religion from a 'private', 'interior', and therefore largely cognitive enterprise, to one that is necessarily social, cultural, and experiential, just as 'experience' is never strictly 'personal' or 'interior' but is also socially and culturally constituted. For if religious experience is a matter of expressing spirituality in and to the world in a particular way, then religion must account for both spirituality and the world in a significant way. "Religious violence", then, is not simply a problem of some particular tradition or doctrine, but a problem of how we relate to both the spiritual force(s) that drive our experience and the cultural world in which we both encounter that spirit and express it. This is not to remove the uniquely religious responsibility of religion, but rather, it is to articulate that responsibility clearly: theology without sociology is as spiritually problematic as is sociology without theology. Transcendental phenomenology, I am arguing, offers us some unique tools by which to articulate the relationship between theology and sociology such that we can see why both are necessary to properly account for religious violence and for religious experience in general.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> By transcendental phenomenology, I mean that strand of phenomenology that seeks to articulate the conditions of experiencing itself. The tradition of transcendental phenomenology I will take up here begins most prominently in Husserl, and is taken up in various ways by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Henry, Derrida, Steinbock, Zahavi, and others. It can be distinguished from "applied phenomenology" that seeks to incorporate qualitative reflections on particular experiences into the study of fields related to those experiences (e.g., reflections on patients' experiences in the medical system being used in nursing studies). This is akin to Zahavi's distinction between 'philosophical' and 'non-philosophical' uses of phenomenology, though I am not comfortable simply equating 'philosophical' with 'transcendental' without further clarifications, which there is no room (or need) to provide in this paper (see [Zahavi 2021](#)).
- <sup>2</sup> I discuss this phenomenological understanding of spirit in much greater detail elsewhere and ask those interested in understanding this concept better to consult DeRoo ([DeRoo 2019, 2020, 2021b](#)).
- <sup>3</sup> In this sense, Husserl's conception of 'spirit' seeks to explain how the 'world' is able to influence subjective experiencing, not simply passively but also, to a certain extent, actively: the world is not just a stage we are 'thrown' on to but, via the notion of spirit, operates as a force shaping our intuitions of the world itself. This circularity—the world shapes how we intuit the world—is, in some sense, a mark of Heidegger's "hermeneutical phenomenology" (see, for example, §§ 3 and 34 of [Heidegger 1996](#)).
- <sup>4</sup> So, while religion, in its Judeo-Christian sense, is likely etymologically derived from *religio*, the account of religion I am adopting here is traced back to *religare*, with the hopes that this version of religion is less Abrahamic and therefore may better describe broader, non-theistic accounts of religion.
- <sup>5</sup> This phenomenological notion of "religious traditions", then, cannot be wholly conflated with religious traditions in the sociological sense, but it cannot be wholly divorced from that, either. This relationship between "religious tradition" in its phenomenological and its sociological senses must be pursued and articulated elsewhere.
- <sup>6</sup> Human sexuality might be one cipher for this question of the significance of the material world. Think, for example, of the differing attitudes toward sexuality in American, white Baptist cultures and in the tantric traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism.
- <sup>7</sup> As I argue it must (in [DeRoo 2022](#)).

- <sup>8</sup> One potential explanation for this lack of clarity is that, while Derrida casts religiosity as a transcendental process, he fails to elaborate on the phenomenological significance of that in relation to religion (and perhaps in general; his account of difference as an “ultra-transcendental concept of life” is not easily and rigorously related back to the other ‘levels’ of the constitution of experience). As a result, I think his critique of religiosity (or messianicity) ends up mischaracterizing religiosity as a religious tradition or a religious phenomenon: the problem, for Derrida, is not that we try to bring spirituality to the forefront of our experience in some direct (though not necessarily rational) way, nor that bringing spirituality to the forefront of our experience in one way necessarily means we do not do it in another way (as some have suggested; see Simmons and Minister 2012), but that the ways in which we (actually) bring it to our experience tends to make spirituality too much a unique substance (e.g., God) and not enough an ultra-transcendental process of differentiation or generation. I think the real seeds of his critique are empirical and phenomenological, though they are not always explained as such.
- <sup>9</sup> Which is different from how it might be significant politically, psychologically, socially, epistemologically, etc.
- <sup>10</sup> There are several scholars making this type of claim about the two phenomena mentioned and several others (see, for example, the contributions to Ellens 2003).
- <sup>11</sup> It is not necessarily the case that everyone who self-identifies as Christian, for example, is necessarily animated by the ‘spirituality’ of the Christian God. Many of these religious traditions have taken on other meanings that may drive one’s willingness to identify (or not) with that group (see Simmons 2021). This does not mean that my transcendental analyses of religiosity and spirituality are wrong, it simply means that such a transcendental understanding of religion is no longer what drives our common, everyday understanding of ‘religion’ (in the sociological sense), a point that I concede and which, in some ways, drives my desire to recover the transcendental elements of religiosity and spirituality.
- <sup>12</sup> For this definition of religion, (see Schilbrack 2013).

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