

Phenomenology of Religious Experience II: Perspectives in Theology

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What Counts as a ‘Religious Experience?’: Phenomenology, Spirituality, and the Question of Religion

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Abstract: This paper: a) offers a phenomenology of the religious that challenges the assumption that “religious experience” is primarily to be understood as a type of experience, called ‘religious’ experience, which is distinct from other (i.e., ‘non-religious’) experiences; and b) traces out some implications of this for phenomenological and other scholarly approaches to religion. To achieve these aims, the paper begins by explaining the phenomenological claim—found most explicitly in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty—that all experiences are expressive of a certain kind of spirit. This account of spirit, when applied to the phenomenological understanding of the ‘religious,’ allows us to distinguish between religiosity (as a transcendental structure), religions (as dynamic forces that express that structure), and religious phenomena (as concrete phenomena that express religions). In turn, this tri-partite distinction allows us to explain how religiosity leads to the development of religion in a way that suggests that ‘the religious’ is best conceived as a particular dimension of all experience. In that light, two major implications for the study of religion emerge from the phenomenology of the religious provided in this paper: 1) the realm of possible subjects of study is greatly expanded; while 2) the proper object of study is narrowed and clarified.

Keywords: Phenomenology of religion, Husserl, Caputo, Schilbrack, expression, spirit, religiosity, what is religion

A journal issue with the theme “Phenomenology of Religious Experience” seems to take for granted that ‘religious experience’ is a type of experience distinct from other (i.e., ‘non-religious’) experiences. In this paper, I would like to challenge this assumption via a distinctly phenomenological account of spirit. I pose this challenge, not so as to undermine the possibility of ‘religious experience’ (or its phenomenological elucidation), but to better understand it and its relation to theology and religion.

To do this, I will begin by explaining the phenomenological claim—found most explicitly in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty—that all experiences are expressive of a certain spirit (Section 1). Then, I will examine why this spirit ought to be considered ‘religious,’ such that experiences expressive of this spirit should be considered ‘religious’ experiences (Section 2). Next, I will briefly explain how this ‘religious’ spirit leads to the development of religion in a way that can expand our understanding of the ‘religious’ (Section 3). As a result, I will end by suggesting that “religious experience” is best conceived, not in the sense of particular experiences described as ‘religious,’ but rather as a particular (‘religious’) dimension of all experience. Doing so does not eliminate the need to talk about ‘religion’ as a distinct subject of scholarly inquiry, but it does alter how we pursue that inquiry (Section 4).

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1 Spiritual expression and experience

To begin, then, I must show that all experiences are expressive of a spirit. Drawing heavily on the phenomenological investigations of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, I will first elucidate the act of 'expression' so that we can properly understand what I mean when I say that our experiences are *expressive* of a spirit. Then I will move to define the nature of the spirit that is so expressed.

1.1 Expression

There is a certain ambiguity in the phenomenological use of the term 'expression': 'expression' can refer either to the act of forming a 'phenomenal unity' (e.g., between sense and perceptual object) or to the meaningful thing that is produced as the result of that unity. This ambiguity is captured in the distinction between the noun and verb forms of 'express' in the phrase: "the phrase 'that is a cat' is an *expression* that *expresses* a particular sense or meaning." Phenomenologically speaking, the tie that binds these together lies in the phenomenal unity¹ of the expressed (normally an epistemological element such as a sense or meaning) and that in which it is expressed (normally an ontological element such as a perceptual object or social institution). This unity necessarily results in the existence of something that has sense or meaning as part of its very being² and so can be considered inherently meaning-full.

But this meaningful 'expression' is expressive if and only if it constitutes a phenomenal unity with what is expressed. This "phenomenal unity" has two essential characteristics. First, the elements of the unity are asymmetrical: the physical appearance of the expression is "lived through," while the enacting of the sense contained therein is "lived in."³ Second, this asymmetry is not *experienced* as asymmetrical—as A motivating one to live in or enact B—but rather as a unity: I do not experience the two parts of the expression as two parts, but rather precisely as one.⁴

Taken together, these essential characteristics reveal that an expression is characterized first and foremost by its no longer being taken primarily in a perceptual intuitive sense but rather as meaning something. As such, the verb form of expression (i.e., 'expressing') is a function that alters neither the thing nor the perceiver directly, but rather how the thing is presented to the intuition of the perceiver: in Husserl's words, "what constitutes the object's appearing remains unchanged, [but] the intentional character of the experience alters"; this alteration of experience "finds support" in how the thing gives itself, but the essential nature of the experience of expression is found in "the intention directed upon the word itself."⁵ As such, expressing is a function whose role is primarily intentional, affecting the relation between things and the perceivers of those things.

When an expression is functioning expressively, the subject's intention is directed, as we have said, not primarily at the perception of the object but at the sense that is intuitively presented with or 'in' the object appearing. This intention occurs immediately in the intuitive presentation of the object and decidedly not as a distinct intuition requiring a distinct act of "fulfilling or illustrative intuition."⁶ That is, there is not a perceptual-intention that leads us to a distinct meaning-intention (as is the case in indicating); in (an) expression, the two are given as one, in a phenomenal unity. As Merleau-Ponty says: "meaning is not on the phrase like the butter is on the bread, like a second layer of 'psychic reality' spread over the sound: it is the totality of what is said [...] given with the words for those who have ears to hear."⁷

¹ Rather than the "unity of judgement" found in indications; cf. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, I, 184.

² Cf. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, 268.

³ Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, I, 193. See also Husserl, *Ideen II*, 236.

⁴ Though that I can later, through reflection, distinguish the parts is essential to the nature of this unity: the unity I experience is precisely an experienced unity, not an ontological unity or a unity of substance (cf. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, I, 193).

⁵ Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 193-194.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 155.

We can summarize this account of expression, then, as: the presentation of a ‘meaningful thing’ in which a physical appearance is phenomenally united with a sense such that the sense is intuited in and through a perception itself, though later reflection is able to distinguish the perception from the sense intuited thereby.

1.2 Spirit

This notion of ‘expression’—if not always the explicit terminology—remains central to Husserl’s entire phenomenological project.⁸ It reaches its zenith in his invocation of ‘spirit,’ where it is used to refer to the life, accomplishments and products of human living.⁹ Such spirit is therefore personal (insofar as it pertains to persons) and communal. For Husserl, “Personal life means living communalized as ‘I’ and ‘we’ within a community-horizon”¹⁰ that is part of a “surrounding world” in which we, as humans, always live. Such a surrounding world “is the locus of all our cares and endeavors,” and as such “is a spiritual structure in us and in our historical life.”¹¹

Husserl summarizes this account of spirit by referring to it as a “vital presentiment.”¹² This highlights two key elements of the account of spirit: first, spirit is essentially living, that is, tied to life;¹³ spirit is a *dynamic force* and not merely a concept, position, or goal.¹⁴ Spirit is affective, not merely effected: people “themselves also change as persons” as a result of the effect of spirit on the life-world, “taking on new habitual properties” and new ways of intuiting (and therefore interacting with) the world.¹⁵ This is to say

⁸ I make this claim at some length, while also more carefully laying out the development of Husserl’s concept of ‘expression’ and its relation to his later use of ‘spirit,’ in DeRoo, “Expression and the Promise of Phenomenology.” Those wanting a more in-depth justification for my reading of Husserl on these topics are invited to consult that work.

⁹ This is, of course, different from a traditional Christian understanding of spirit. The case for why we should think of the phenomenological account of spirit in a ‘religious’ way will be made in section 2. The ways in which that may differ from other traditional understandings of spirit will be explored in sections 2 and 3.

¹⁰ Husserl, *Crisis*, 270.

¹¹ Husserl, *Crisis*, 272. This bears a very strong resemblance to Husserl’s discussion of spirit in *Cartesian Meditations* § 58, where he speaks of the ego as always located in a “specifically human surrounding world [...] of culture” that applies “for each man and each human community” (160/132). When the sense of this surrounding world “is explicated precisely” it “becomes apparent” that people access this world via certain conditions that are rooted in historical and cultural circumstances (160/132–133) that endow the world “with specifically ‘spiritual’ predicates” (162/135). ‘Spirit’ is then used also in *Cartesian Meditations* to refer to “the intentional motivational complexes” that come about through a “temporal genesis [...] rooted in human undergoing and doing” that are “already constituted” for any particular person or community in the surrounding world in which such persons “are vitally immersed,” rather than to refer to something like Hegel’s “Objective spirit” (*ibid.*). But these ‘intentional complexes’ are clearly not merely rational *cogitationes* either, as they are the result of human “undergoing” and human “doing” (162/135) and constitute a “horizon of the past (which is co-determinant for an understanding of the present itself)” (160/133). Husserl admits that his treatment of these issues in *Cartesian Meditations* is sufficient merely to “indicat[e] these problems of a higher level as problems” which the “systematic progress of transcendental-phenomenological explication” will one day help us to clarify, so as to enable the “transcendental sense of the world” to be “disclosed to us” (163/136), and that, in *Cartesian Meditations*, “we must forego a more precise exploration of the sense-stratum” of the surrounding world (162/135). As such, I think we can read the later examinations of spirit (e.g., in the *Crisis*) to be the further elucidation of the account laid out, *in nuce*, in the *Cartesian Meditations*. All references in this note are to § 58 of the *Cartesian Meditations*; I have provided both German (first) and English (second) pagination to references from this work, as the English translation moves some of the material from the German translation around, for reasons justified by the translator.

¹² Husserl, *Crisis*, 275.

¹³ Though the “word *life* here does not have a physiological sense; it signifies purposeful life accomplishing spiritual products: in the broadest sense, creating culture in the unity of a historical development” (Husserl, *Crisis*, 270). For more on Husserl’s use of ‘life’ as a philosophical trope, see Derrida, *Voice and Phenomena*. Michel Henry pursues the centrality of ‘life’ in much greater phenomenological detail; an excellent (if quite dense) summary of his thought in this regard can be found in his “Material Phenomenology and language.”

¹⁴ And certainly not an entity or ‘object’ in the strong sense; cf. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 162/135 (though it is unclear in this passage whether Husserl is only ‘bracketing’ the question of the objectivity of spirit for transcendental methodological reasons, or whether he is making a stronger ontological claim than that).

¹⁵ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 162/135.

that spirit moves people, shaping the very way they engage with the world around them in profound and innumerable ways—including in the formation of their “‘innate’ character”—while at the same time being constituted in or by the (surrounding) world(s) in which it finds itself.¹⁶ This is the ‘vital’ part of spirit as a ‘vital presentiment’.

Secondly, in calling spirit a “presentiment,” Husserl means to say that it provides the horizon of expectations that we necessarily draw on to ‘clarify’ or pre-figure the intended object.¹⁷ By doing so, it provides the object-like formations [*Gegenstandlichkeit*]¹⁸ that are the necessary precursor to ‘objective’ engagements with the world, insofar as it enables the intended object to coincide with a confirming-fulfilling intuition in a synthesis. Via this clarifying mode of bringing to intuition, spirit shapes the way an object presents itself to the intuition of the perceiver (which, as you may recall, is central to the act of expression): by shaping what is clarified, spirit shapes what is expected, and so shapes how and by what that expectation could be fulfilled.¹⁹

So, to speak of ‘spirit’ in this phenomenological sense is to claim that there is a dynamic, vital force (that is not necessarily a distinct living entity) that shapes our pre-theoretical horizons in a way that is necessary for experience itself but of which we may not be consciously aware, even as we are being guided by it.

1.3 Experience and/as spiritual expression

Because this notion of spirit is at work in the pre-theoretical horizons of expectation²⁰ we use to ‘make sense’ of our world every day, ultimately all of our experiences are shaped by, and expressive of, (some type of) spirit: insofar as drawing on these horizons is necessary for acts as basic as perception itself,²¹ everything we do is not only drawing on, but also enacting or expressing, this spirit. And as expressive, this relation to spirit—this spirituality—is not merely an act of the people who are thinking or drawing on those horizons, but is embedded within things themselves: we encounter things always already as meaningful things.²² So Husserl will claim that a “spiritual meaning” is “embodied” in the very environment of the lifeworld,²³ especially in cultural objects such as “houses, bridges, tools, works of art, and so on”²⁴ that he sometimes calls simply “spiritual products.”²⁵ The world we encounter is not made spiritual by the intervention of a human perceiver; rather “the material-spiritual is already preconstituted, prethematic, pregiven.”²⁶

¹⁶ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 162-163/135-136; Husserl acknowledges that this whole question of spiritual or ‘oriented’ constitution opens up many questions regarding the relationship between the genetic constitution(s) performed by individual subjects and “the problem of all-embracing genesis” (163/135). Anthony Steinbock pursues these questions of genetic and generative constitution in more detail in *Home and Beyond*.

¹⁷ This makes use of the Husserlian distinction between ‘clarifying’ and ‘confirming’ modes of intuition; cf. Husserl, *Analyses concerning Active and Passive Synthesis*, especially 79-80.

¹⁸ Cf. Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, 69.

¹⁹ Think, for example, of how, in America, black bodies are encountered as dangerous in someone’s very perception of them (police officers being a particularly newsworthy example of this in recent years), because of how ‘blackness’ has been constituted in American culture. ‘Blackness’ here is part of a ‘spirit’ of white supremacy that shapes people’s perceptual expectations (“He’s dangerous; I’ll bet he has a gun”) in ways that, in turn, shape what can fulfill that expectation (a cell phone becomes a ‘gun’). For more on the phenomenology of racism (though without the explicit use of the terminology of spirit), cf. Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*.

²⁰ For a more precise phenomenological elucidation of these “horizons of expectation,” please refer to DeRoo, *Futurity in Phenomenology*, chapter 2.

²¹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, “Eye and Mind,” and *The Visible and the Invisible*.

²² Cf. Husserl’s analysis of “oriented constitution” in *Cartesian Meditations* § 58.

²³ Husserl, *Die Lebenswelt*, 427. This theme is examined at much greater length than I can do here in Pulkinnen, “Lifeworld as an Embodiment.” I think the notion of expression would be a helpful addition to Pulkinnen’s analysis. I draw heavily on Pulkinnen’s translations of material from *Die Lebenswelt*; unless otherwise cited, all translations from that volume are Pulkinnen’s.

²⁴ Husserl, *Erste Philosophie*, 151.

²⁵ Husserl, *Crisis*, 270.

²⁶ Husserl, *Ideen II*, 238n.1; see also Pulkinnen, “Lifeworld as an Embodiment,” 127.

Describing this as “material-spiritual” is essential to understanding the type of spirituality at work here. As an active and dynamic expressive force, spirituality is experienced, not as distinct from material things, but rather in phenomenal unity with them. In general, we ‘live in’ the spirit that is expressed in material things, without (normally) being aware that we have passed from a material/perceptual to a spiritual mode of engagement. In this regard, spirit is deeply formative of the material conditions we find ourselves in, and is, in fact, experientially one with those conditions. To live is to be engaged in this type of spiritual expression.²⁷ Merleau-Ponty will go so far as to say that this kind of expression is perhaps the fundamental element “of all culture,”²⁸ since human living is simply taking up the sense that is already present in the world around us and reworking it in and as our very bodies.²⁹ In this sense, the lived body of the human person is both expressive and an expression. This is based on “*a movement which itself creates its own course and returns to itself*,” and thus a movement which has no other guide but its own initiative.³⁰ This movement is the living, dynamic force that Husserl calls ‘spirit,’ and we could refer to it as a transcendental condition of our material, everyday living that is not transcendent to that material living.³¹

2 The “religious” nature of spirit

So far, I have taken up the phenomenological claim (found most explicitly in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty) that all human experience is inherently expressive of a certain spirit that is constitutive of the material conditions of our lives (including of the lived body itself), even as it is itself shaped by those material conditions. Now I will move to show that such spirituality is, in fact, ‘religious’ in a meaningful sense. This is essential if my argument for the ubiquity of religious experience is not to rest on a mere semantic equivocation (of the term ‘spiritual’) but is rather to tell us something interesting about “religious experience” itself.³²

To show that this spirituality is religious, we must first make sense of what it means for something to be religious. In doing so, we are not seeking to offer a sociological or critical definition of ‘religion,’ but rather to offer a phenomenological account of the religious.³³ To do that we must make a distinction, within the ‘religious,’ between ‘religiosity’ and ‘religion.’³⁴ As explicated by John D. Caputo, the most prominent and

²⁷ Cf. Maclaren, “Life is Inherently Expressive.”

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 123.

²⁹ For more on the role of expression in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, cf. Landes’ *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression*.

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language,” 110.

³¹ Though Merleau-Ponty is adamant that “there is no reason to look for” the explanation of expression in a “World Spirit which allegedly operates within us without our knowledge” (“Indirect Language,” 103), his object of critique here seems to be the idea of a transcendent spirit that exists objectively, outside of humanity (“Indirect Language,” 108), and which would relieve us of our responsibility for our own actions (“Indirect Language,” 109). But the account of material-spirituality developed by Husserl and explicated (briefly) here is neither transcendent (in this sense), nor objectively existent, nor does it remove our responsibility. In this regard, it is more like Merleau-Ponty’s account of the dialectical movement cited in text than like the Hegelian account of spirit that Merleau-Ponty critiques. That some account of spirit can be operative in Merleau-Ponty is confirmed by Landes when he describes the human world, in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s critique of empiricism, as “objective spirit” (Landes, *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression*, 82; cf. also the introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*).

³² This is not so say that I will simply be equating the phenomenological use of ‘spirit’ with, for example, the Christian notion of spirituality. Rather, here I will be merely establishing that ‘spirit’ as I am using the term (following its phenomenological understanding described above) is religious in an important way. While I think there may be important resonances with Christian spirituality, elucidating those resonances (and the differences) lies outside the scope of the current project.

³³ We will explore in section IV below the difference between phenomenological and other approaches to the question of religion and its definition. For now, in keeping with the theme of the volume, I will take it for granted that we are interested precisely in a *phenomenological* account of religion.

³⁴ In doing so, I mean to parallel the much-discussed distinction between *foi* and *croyances* in Derrida (cf. Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge”). This distinction has become important in philosophy of religion, especially through the work of John D. Caputo; cf. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears*. The distinction (and its use in contemporary philosophy of religion) is not without its critics, however. For some notable examples, see Simmons and Minister (eds.), *Reexamining Deconstruction*; and Smith, “Re-Kanting Postmodernism.” I think that the *foi-croyances* distinction is not incidental to Derrida’s overall project, but can be shown to be connected closely to his more wide-ranging distinction between the “Undeconstructibles” (e.g. Justice, Democracy, etc.) and their ‘deconstructible’ manifestations in particular socio-historical acts and institutions (e.g., the law; American democratic processes; etc.). This distinction itself is essentially phenomenological in nature, and has significant implications for phenomenological method; cf. DeRoo, *Futurity in Phenomenology*. I think the account of spiritual expression being developed here could prove quite helpful in better understanding and articulating this distinction.

vigorous user of this distinction, 'religiosity' refers to something like a 'driving force' or an 'event,' while 'religion' refers to actual socio-historical phenomena, like the Roman Catholic Church, worship liturgies, the doctrine of the Trinity, the Quran, meditative practices, and so on. This distinction is used to highlight the difference, phenomenologically and philosophically, between concrete phenomena and that which is expressed in those phenomena. As such, I would argue that spirituality, in the way I am discussing it here as the relation to a dynamic, vital force that is expressed in all elements of human life and culture, is akin to religiosity, and the concrete social and 'spiritual' products are the concrete phenomena captured under the term 'religion' in the above-mentioned distinction.

But our focus on spiritual expression enables us to see a third level that needs to be inserted here. Between spirituality, as a broad structure, and spiritual products, as concrete phenomena, we must posit the level of individual spirits: a spirit is an example of spirituality that is expressed in particular phenomena. Given the close tie between spirituality and expression, we can perhaps use the example of language to help us see the need for this three-fold distinction. Between the structure of 'linguisticity' and concrete products of language (i.e., particular words or phrases) there are particular languages (e.g., English, French, German). Each language is an example of 'linguisticity' (i.e., of the broad structure of language) and is expressed in particular words and phrases. And just as a language is not merely a collection of words and phrases, but a particular approach to engaging the world³⁵ (like the infamous, if perhaps apocryphal, notion of the Inuit having 50 different words for snow), so, too, do particular spirits or religions offer us distinct approaches to engaging the world: they shape the products that express them, even as they themselves are shaped, in some way, by what expresses them (in the same way that new words coined in a language shape what that language is able to do in a broader way).

If we are to relate this three-fold distinction of spirit back to the question of religion, we will have to make a slight emendation to Caputo's religiosity-religion nomenclature. Rather than having 'religion' refer to the concrete products, we will have 'religion' refer to the different forces that respond to the question of religiosity, and use the term 'religious phenomena' to refer to the concrete products like acts, institutions, etc.³⁶ In light of our earlier analysis of spiritual expression, we can see that the distinction between religion/spirit and religious/spiritual phenomena is a theoretical distinction not an experiential one: we *experience* the spirit/religion in and through its expressions, though we can, upon reflection, acknowledge a dynamic, affective quality to the spirit that is not present merely in the objects (qua perceptual objects) that express it.³⁷

Similarly, the distinction between a spirit/religion and the 'structure' of spirituality/religiosity is a theoretical not an experiential distinction: we only experience religiosity via some particular religion or other. But we can, upon reflection, recognize a certain (transcendental) structure that different religions respond to or express: just as the Hammurabi code and the law of the United States can be seen as differing examples of a 'structure' of jurisprudence, so, too, can we talk of different spirits or religions as differing examples of a 'structure' of religiosity.

But why should we think such a broad 'structure' of religiosity exists? To answer that would require some account of what the structure of religiosity might be. Returning to the question of the religious nature of spirituality can again prove helpful here. We can say that we should consider spirituality religious

³⁵ Think of Wittgenstein's "language games" or pragmatist accounts of language as making explicit different approaches to the world.

³⁶ Caputo is not incorrect to use the term 'religion' to refer to concrete phenomena, though I think there is value in splitting that category into the two sub-categories mentioned: religion and religious phenomena. Insofar as these spirits/religions are themselves produced in and by particular lifeworlds, they, too, can be said to constitute 'phenomena' of a certain type. This raises the question of the ontological status of the spirits/religions (as dynamic forces), and the precise nature of their relationship to the 'phenomena' that express them. Unfortunately, we will not be able to pursue these questions further here.

³⁷ One obvious example that I hope will help illustrate this point: the Bible is a collection of writings that constitutes a book. As an object, the book can be approached as expressing any number of different 'spirits': the 'spirit' of the particular times and places in which the individual writings were composed; a 'spirit' of universal ethical and moral norms; the 'spirit' of a living God; the 'spirit' of folk superstition; etc. Which spirit we find expressed in the book will affect our response to the book and the book's affect in our lives—but the book itself remains the same object, qua perceptual object, regardless: it is composed of the same graphemes, inscribed on the same pages, arranged in the same order, etc.

because it refers to that (phenomenologically) basic or primal force that shapes how we bring things to intuition. It is the primary motivating force of all our actions, and insofar as devoutly religious people regularly claim their religious commitments are the most important commitments in their lives, and acknowledge the distinction between this motivating impulse (e.g., the Holy Spirit in Christianity) and the actions that result from this impulse (e.g., the church as a human, and therefore flawed, institution that nonetheless is specially inspired by the holy Spirit), this type of religiosity or spirituality seems to capture well what religion means to religious people.³⁸ As such, spirituality can be conceived as ‘religiosity’ along these lines: as a fundamental drive that is deeply determinative of human life and action,³⁹ and which gives rise to concrete phenomenon that can therefore be considered ‘religious.’⁴⁰

3 Spirituality, religion and theology

But if the overall structure of spirituality can be considered broadly religious, it does not necessarily follow that every phenomenon that expresses a spirit can itself be considered ‘religious.’ In his chapter on religious expression in *Phenomenology of Expression*, Remy C. Kwant implicitly makes this point. In that chapter he distinguishes “two fundamental spheres of religious expression”: first, the opening on to the “fundamental question”⁴¹ of a “darkness in the depth of this field” of clarity in which contemporary humanity otherwise lives.⁴² This questioning constitutes an aiming at “something which becomes visible in everything, but which can never be isolated as an object.”⁴³ This level of religious expression can be distinguished from a second level, which Kwant describes as the attempt to answer this “fundamental question” in a particular and concrete way.⁴⁴

While many different things are religiously expressive in that first sense, Kwant seems to want to reserve the term ‘religious,’ properly speaking, only to certain types of expressions of the second type. So, while he recognizes that the ‘depth dimension’ of human experience is recognized as a certain “mystery” as much by Marxism and “areligious humanism” as by traditionally religious people, he still claims that this dimension can be “laid bare without being ‘filled’ with a religious affirmation,” which is to say that “The religious dimension fascinates [us], even when [we have] become religionless.”⁴⁵

But why call some of these responses ‘religionless,’ if they exist as a response to the religious dimension? Why privilege the second type of religious expression as the ‘true’ site of ‘religion,’ properly speaking—and even then, why restrict it only to certain examples of that second type? In accord with

38 I acknowledge that the definition of ‘religion’ is itself quite a contentious issue in contemporary religious studies. I am here attempting to ‘define’ it phenomenologically, that is, based on the lived experience of those who self-identify as devoutly religious people. I admit that many people who consider themselves broadly ‘religious’ or, in our contemporary idiom, who consider themselves ‘spiritual but not religious,’ may not recognize themselves in this definition of ‘religion.’ While I don’t have time to argue this point here, I hope there is at least some intuitive plausibility in defining a term phenomenologically according to those who identify most strongly with the term. I will return to the question of how my definition of religion relates to those offered in contemporary religious studies in Section IV below.

39 My claim here can be construed as minimally as: “there is something that shapes how I live and what I do, and that something is religious.” One must be careful not to equate that something with religion itself, as many practitioners would distinguish their religion (e.g., Christianity, Islam) from the “something” that their religion is about (e.g., Jesus/God, Allah). Hence the need for the distinction between the motivating impulse and the actions that result from that impulse.

40 This is in keeping with some other ‘phenomenological’ accounts of religion. Michael Barber’s elucidation of a broadly Schutzian account of the “finite religious province of meaning,” for example, claims that the religiously transcendent (which is different from the ontologically transcendent; cf. 25) “becomes an ultimate relevance within which the religious believer’s subjective relevances and projects are contextualized” (16). It is this type of notion of the religious as the ‘ultimately relevant’ that I am claiming is a propos for the phenomenological concept of spirituality; all citations in this footnote are to Barber, “The Finite Province of Religious Meaning.”

41 Kwant, *Phenomenology of Expression*, 166.

42 Ibid., 164.

43 Ibid., 165.

44 Ibid., 166.

45 Ibid., 169.

our (phenomenological) discussion so far, we can see that the way in which we attempt to answer the fundamental religious questioning is a contingent response to the impulse of "religiosity." As such, when Kwant acknowledges that Marxism recognizes the 'depth dimension,' we could claim that our aiming at it is indicative of a certain 'religiosity,' and we could thereby claim for Marxism a certain religious character (i.e., as being 'religiously expressive' in the first sense). Kwant thereby shows that spirituality can be 'religious' even if it is expressed in 'non-religious' ways: the religiosity of spirituality is not reliant on some specific form of expression that it takes.⁴⁶

But insofar as any specific form of expression it could take is already a response to the impulse to religiosity, every expression—including Marxism—is an attempt to answer the 'fundamental question' of religiosity (i.e., that of 'ultimate relevance'⁴⁷), and therefore seems, phenomenologically speaking, to be already a 'religion.'⁴⁸ Why, then, does Kwant want to restrict 'religion' more narrowly, and refer to 'areligious' humanism or to humanity as becoming 'religionless'? He seems to be suggesting here that not all contingent responses to religiosity (i.e., his 'second type' of religious expression) should be considered 'religions.' One could easily object that the claim that Marxism, for example, is a "religious expression" in the sense Kwant describes above does not necessarily entail that it is a 'religion,' properly speaking. Responding to 'religiosity' would then be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for something's being a 'religion.'⁴⁹

So what might this other criteria of 'religion' be? Given what he does and does not label as 'religious' in his book, Kwant seems implicitly to hold that something can be a religion if and only if it believes in the existence of transcendent or supernatural realities. This notion of religion seems somewhat widespread in our modern Western world,⁵⁰ and fits our 'common sense' understandings of religion. But such a claim, I would argue, conflates a particular theological expression with religion, more broadly. It seems to be premised on a three-fold belief: first, that the aiming at "something which becomes visible in everything, but which can never be isolated as an object" calls primarily for a linguistic/conceptual response; second, that that response must necessarily have to do with the existence of transcendent or super-natural realities; and third, that it is only in answering that question of the existence of transcendent or super-natural realities affirmatively that one offers a 'religious' answer to the question.

But all three facets of the objection are eminently contestable. First, if the fundamental religious question is about the existence of transcendent or super-natural realities, I see no reason why only an affirmative response to the question should be considered a 'religious' response. For even if I answer a question with a negative, I have still answered the question; a "no" is still an answer to a yes/no question. As such, a denial of transcendent realities remains religious, so long as that denial occurs as a response to the 'fundamental question' of religiosity.

But I see no reason to limit the fundamental religious question to being about the existence of transcendent or supernatural realities.⁵¹ If we think of religiosity as the aiming at "something which becomes visible in everything, but which can never be isolated as an object," we can see that, whatever this 'something' is at which we are aiming, it need not, and can perhaps never, be an object or entity (in

⁴⁶ As we will see below, one common misconception is to equate religiosity with a particular form of theological expression.

⁴⁷ Barber, "The finite Province of Religious Meaning," 16.

⁴⁸ Though there may be reasons to distinguish this 'phenomenological' understanding of a structure of religiosity from, e.g., a sociological understanding of religion. Schilbrack suggests that the sociological and critical examinations of religion, for example, might be "best served by a definition of religion that is more precise" (Schilbrack, *What isn't Religion*, 292). This would also distinguish the broader structure of experience (religiosity) from religion as a 'finite province of meaning;' cf. Schutz, "On Multiple Realities" and Barber, *Religion and Humor*. We will return to these questions in Section IV.

⁴⁹ For the potential difficulties of offering necessary and sufficient conditions for a definition of 'religion,' see de Vries, "Introduction"; and Simmons, "Vagueness."

⁵⁰ Cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*. This can also be cast in terms of belief in 'spiritual' beings (cf., e.g., Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture*) or 'superempirical' realities (Schilbrack, "What isn't Religion?")—though Schilbrack's account of the "superempirical" may prove more amenable to what we are proposing here than the others.

⁵¹ As "purely substantive" approaches to defining religion seem to do; cf. Schilbrack, "What isn't Religion," 295-6.

the strong sense⁵²), and hence may not be ‘real’ (depending, of course, on what, precisely, one means by ‘reality’).⁵³ For what the language of spirituality as a ‘force’ or ‘event’ claims is precisely that religiosity or spirituality affects things in the world, without itself being a ‘thing.’⁵⁴ Further, spirituality/religiosity may be, as we have said, a transcendental condition of our material, everyday living, but it is not thereby transcendent to that material living.⁵⁵ As such, spirituality/religiosity can achieve the aim of religiosity highlighted above without necessarily being about a ‘transcendent reality’ or ‘supernatural entity,’ because it is possible to conceive it as neither an entity nor transcendent (and as ‘real’ only in a peculiar, non-ontological sense). And therefore it is not necessary to take the fundamental religious question to be concerned with transcendent or supernatural realities.

Finally, given the transcendental (but not transcendent) operation of spiritual religiosity, it is clear that its expressions cannot be confined strictly to the linguistic or conceptual. The way that religiosity/spirituality, qua transcendental, shapes our intuition and our experience necessarily entails that the type of ‘question’ being posed here is not merely a linguistic or conceptual question. One could, perhaps, say that religiosity does not merely pose to us a particular question (e.g., that of the existence of transcendent realities), but rather exists in the very “being of the question” itself.⁵⁶ And insofar as a genuine question demands simultaneously to be left open (“a genuine question must be a quest”) and to be closed off (“a genuine question must be able to be finished,” to be “answered once and for all”),⁵⁷ we can see that, qua question, religiosity “opens up [a space] in which it is possible to find more answers, to live.”⁵⁸ Living, then, is the true response to the fundamental ‘question’ of religiosity.⁵⁹ And while I may ‘live’ in some parts of my life via conceptual and linguistic articulations, this is certainly not the case for the entirety (and likely not even for the majority) of my life. Alongside the linguistic and conceptual elements of my life are also reflexive responses (i.e. things done in automatic response to stimuli from the world, e.g., moving away from fire to avoid being burned), aesthetic responses (engaging the world creatively in auditory, tactile, visual, gustatory, olfactory, etc. ways), physical and kinematic responses (moving bodies in the world in certain ways), biological responses (the maintenance of ‘life’ in the physiological sense), and so on. These

52 It is not clear to me that traditional theistic conceptions of God, for example, would consider God to be an ‘object’ nor an ‘entity,’ if the latter is taken in an objective sense. Obviously, proving this claim would depend on what, precisely, one means by an ‘object.’ I think phenomenology can be helpful in exploring this question, but I will not do so here.

53 This does not rule out the possibility that this something *could* be real or perhaps even an entity (in some unique form); that is, I do not mean to rule out any possible affirmation of a traditional theistic position, for example. I am merely suggesting that it is not *necessary* that what religions responds to be (objectively) real or entitative in order to show that there is not (yet) a reason to *limit* the fundamental religious question to being about transcendent realities or supernatural entities (e.g., “spiritual beings” in Tylor’s sense). This *may* be what religion ends up being all about, but it is not yet obvious or necessary that it is so. I am also, then, giving an account where religion might be interested in something that is not that kind of thing (Dahl’s account of the holy in *Phenomenology and the Holy* may be another such account) in order to make the preceding claim (of the non-necessity of thinking religion in terms of supernatural entities or transcendent realities) hopefully more plausible.

54 Cf., for example, Caputo, *The Weakness of God* and *The Insistence of God*. Though, without making the further distinction within “religion” (on his nomenclature) between ‘spirit/religion’ and ‘religious phenomena,’ Caputo threatens to treat the ‘force’ of religion as *only* structural, and hence may suggest that it can *never* have a phenomenal existence. This seems to be Simmons’ critique (cf. his contributions to Simmons and Minister (eds.), *Reexamining Deconstruction*), though one would need to more clearly work out the relationship between ‘religiosity’ and ‘religion’ in Caputo to assess whether he does, in fact, fall into this problem.

55 Espen Dahl’s account of the holy strives to show how the holy must be encountered in our everyday lives; cf. Dahl, *Phenomenology and the Holy*. The relationship between Dahl’s account of the holy and the account of spirit I offer here bears further study—though the complexity of each’s relation to ‘religion’ is such that the comparison cannot be made quickly, as would need to happen here.

56 I do not have time to justify the following claims as constituting the ‘being of the question.’ The interested reader is asked to consult Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy* (whose subtitle is “The Being of the Question”), where that case is made in more detail.

57 Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy*, 1.

58 Ibid., 2.

59 This aligns nicely with the ‘vital’ portion of Husserl’s definition of spirit as a ‘vital presentiment,’ and with Barber’s notion of religion as pertaining to “ultimate relevance.”

other responses need not be construed as rooted in a linguistic or conceptual response:⁶⁰ while one could certainly try to distill a linguistic or conceptual answer from the actions I do—e.g., “Well, if he did X, he must think X is the right thing to do”—it is no more obviously accurate to say that we do X *because* we think X is the right thing to do than it is to say that we think X is the right thing to do because we do X. This is just to say that these other types of responses can be construed as spiritually expressive without their being rooted in a linguistic or conceptual response. The linguistic and conceptual are one (perhaps two) modes of expressing spirit, alongside others—but there is no necessary reason to think they are more primary or phenomenologically basic than the others.

In fact, the ability to linguistically and conceptually determine one's response to religiosity actually constitutes but a small part of one's life, and therefore a small part of one's religious response. If we call the linguistic and conceptual determination of one's religious response “theology,”⁶¹ we can see, then, that theology has a role to play in religious living, but it is not an exhaustive, and likely not even an (overly) determinative, role.⁶² That is, while theology may be part of one's religious response, it is not necessary that it be so: one can be religious, even without a(n articulated) theology.⁶³

Rather, a religion is simply a way of living that expresses some spirit (i.e., that expresses an answer to the question of religiosity) in everything, even if that spirit is never, and perhaps can never be, wholly objectified or conceptually articulated. To suggest (through theological articulation, habitual practice, or some other mode of living) that the best way to deal with the fundamental uncertainties of life is to “seek happiness by acquiring a certain kind of life via engaging in certain types of practices with certain kinds of objects” opens up a particular way of living, and so is a response to the fundamental religious impulse. As such any such suggestion—especially when codified⁶⁴ into sets of institutions, social structures, public or private practices, and belief systems—is well considered a religion, whether the objects and practices in question are to be carried out in a church, a temple, a mosque, or a mall. I see no phenomenological reason not to call all such spiritual expressions—including things like consumerism and Marxism—‘religions’, other than a belief (almost certainly rooted in one particular theological response found in only some religions) that ‘religion’ pertains only to affirmations of a transcendent reality. Such a belief, as I hope is now clear, is untenable as an overarching phenomenological definition of religion. This is important to acknowledge because it helps us see how things like Marxism, humanism, or consumerism can be ‘religions,’ even if they do not offer an explicit theology of a particular (i.e., transcendent or supernatural) type.

We can say, then, in summary, that any response to the fundamental impulse of religiosity is a ‘religious’ response that we can thereby consider ‘religion.’ Insofar as ‘spirituality’ names the impulse of religiosity—that is, names the dimension “which becomes visible in everything, but which can never be isolated as an object”—then any living expression of that spirituality (i.e., any spirit) is already a response to religiosity, and therefore is itself religious (and this is the case, even if that expression does not achieve conceptual, linguistic articulation in a theology). And, therefore, to put it succinctly: anything that expresses a spirit is already a ‘religious’ expression.

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty has done more than any other phenomenologist, I think, to make this point plain.

⁶¹ This raises interesting questions about the relationship between ‘theology’ and other scholarly approaches to religion: is every scholarly attempt to articulate what is going on in some religious practice or object offering a ‘theology’ of that thing? Should ‘theology’ be restricted to what religious practitioners *believe*, while other avenues of scholarly inquiry into religion examine other facets of religious practice (e.g., what people *do*, the institutions they are part of, etc.)? Does my work cross into theology from another approach to religious scholarship only if I believe the religion I am studying/discussing is true? Much remains to be explored about the relationship between theology and other scholarly approaches to religion, and those explorations may require further refinement to the view of theology offered here.

⁶² Though theology may be partially determinative, insofar as the concepts and words we use to articulate and understand our religious response will shape and affect the nature of our response. But it is also true that, e.g., the things we do regularly will shape and affect the nature of our religious response, as James K.A. Smith has shown; cf. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, *Imagining the Kingdom*, and *You are what you Love*.

⁶³ Whether one necessarily operates according to an implicit theology, or whether (and if so, how) one can distill a theology from a set of actions and institutions are interesting questions that we do not have time to tackle here.

⁶⁴ And we must take ‘codified’ here in a broad sense that is not restricted strictly to linguistic or conceptual articulations, but could include also, e.g., regular habitual practices that are not reflected upon enough to be linguistically or conceptually articulated.

4 Phenomenology and the definition of religious experience

But given that we've already argued that *everything* in the human lifeworld is spiritually expressive, it therefore follows that every human experience is religiously expressive, and therefore ought to be considered a 'religious experience.' But if every experience is a 'religious experience,' does there remain a need to speak about 'religious' experience?

Kevin Schilbrack raises this question in claiming that definitions of religion within the scholarly field of religious studies "are so capacious that the term 'religion' loses its analytic usefulness."⁶⁵ For if 'religious' does not function to distinguish some particular experiences rather than others as the proper object of study, then religious experience *seems* to become redundant, at best, and downright misleading, at worst, as a term for theoretical reflection and study. For if everything is religious, then there seems no point in studying "the religious" as a distinct field of study for the term 'religious' does not set apart any particular object to be the subject of study in that field.

But this need not be the case. On this phenomenological definition, "religious experience" can now refer, not to the study of some experiences and not others, but rather to the study of one facet of experience (its spiritually expressive character) rather than other facets (e.g., the way a spirit is expressed conceptually, aesthetically, biologically, etc.). As such, 'religious' still functions to delineate between dimensions of experience that are religious and those that are not religious—or at least to distinguish between the religious (i.e., spiritually expressive) and non-religious elements within a particular facet of experience. And if there are non-religious elements within an experience that also includes religious elements, then there remains a reason to talk about the 'religious,' and even to study it as a distinct field of scholarly inquiry.

But we must be careful here. We have already said that anything that expresses a spirit is already a religious expression. How, then, can we claim the way a spirit is expressed conceptually, aesthetically, biologically, etc., is a 'non-religious' element of an experience? Here we must keep in mind the (theoretical) distinction between the spirit that is expressed and the various modes in which it is expressed.⁶⁶ While the spirit can be expressed linguistically, conceptually, biologically, and aesthetically, it is also possible that one way the spirit can be expressed is in ways that seek to make explicit the connection between everyday actions and the spirit they are expressing.⁶⁷ This 'making explicit' need not be linguistic or conceptual—often it is ritualistic, requiring some type of material practice. But the point of such practices is to help one better see the connection to what Barber calls the religiously transcendent⁶⁸ at work in everyday experiences. In the language of spirituality we are using here, we could say that this mode of expressing spirit is focused on the nature of that expression itself: it draws attention to the expressive character itself, rather than merely 'living in' that expressive character. In doing so, it brings to the fore a 'deeper' meaning to the experience in question: the experience is no longer merely a phenomenon to be encountered primarily perceptually, imaginatively, aesthetically, etc., but we are led to see that the experience is meaning-full, having as part of its very being an expression of spirit itself. To be clear, all experiences are meaning-full and expressive in this way; the claim here is merely that some experiences draw our attention to that expressive character, while others let that dimension of the experience remain in the background.⁶⁹

This suggests, then, that in order to study the religious dimension of our experience, I may choose to study either: a) the way in which *any* experience responds to religiosity; or b) those experiences which seem to have, as a *primary* focus of the experience, a response to religiosity.

⁶⁵ Schilbrack, "What *isn't* Religion," 291.

⁶⁶ This distinction is laid out most systematically in Dooyeweerd, *New Critique of Theoretical Thought*.

⁶⁷ Dooyeweerd refers to this as the 'pistic' mode, from the Greek word for faith [*pistis*].

⁶⁸ Which is not necessarily ontologically transcendent; cf. Barber, "The Religious Province of Meaning," 25.

⁶⁹ Highlighting this expressive character is an essential element of the 'religious province of meaning' as discussed by Schutz and Barber. The latter discusses this in terms of how the religious province of meaning opens us to "a new way of seeing" "by detecting appresentational functions in events, persons, and objects actions that seem to have nothing at all to do with religion" (Barber, "The Religious Province of Meaning," 16; Barber references Schutz, "On Multiple Realities," 212-213, 235, 241 and Bergson, *Mind-Energy*, 126, 128, 155/101, 102, 123 in support of his claims.

It should by now be clear, I hope, why I think (a) is a proper subject of religious study: insofar as spirituality/religiosity opens the question of life, and particular religions/spirits act as dynamic forces that constitute particular ways of living out an 'answer' to that question, an answer that is expressed in every human experience because it shapes the very horizons of expectations we necessarily draw on in constituting our experience, every experience that pertains to life [*Leben*] (i.e., every *erlebnis*, but also every experience, institution or object occurring within a *lebenswelt*) exists as a response to spirituality/religiosity.

But it also seems intuitively plausible that not every experience will express its spiritual/religious character in the same way, and so not every experience may prove as useful as others for studying the religious facet of human experience. This can be true because the primary way of responding to religiosity in a particular experience may be more or less expressive to the particular person studying or reflecting on that experience: as someone not very artistically literate, I, for example, find experiences whose primary expressive focus is aesthetic to be not as easy a subject for reflection as experiences that are more conceptual. In this regard, the relative ease of identifying the religious/spiritual nature of an experience may be driven by the person reflecting on that experience rather than anything about the nature of the experience itself.

But (b) suggests also that some experiences have responding to religiosity as a more primary focus of that experience than do others. While an art piece, for example, has a primarily aesthetic focus insofar as its *raison d'être* is aesthetic, it is at least plausible that some experiences could have, as their primary focus, the articulation of the expression of the spirit at work in them. In this case, the spiritual/religious expression at work in the experience is not merely 'lived in,' but the attention of the subject is drawn more directly to that expressive character: just as all words are expressive, but onomatopoetic words draw a special attention to their expressive character, so, too, might some experiences draw special attention to their (religiously) expressive character.

This drawing of our attention is itself a spiritual question. Phenomenologically, attention is understood as a "tending of the ego toward an intentional object, toward a unity which 'appears' continually in the change of the modes of its givenness."⁷⁰ This tending-toward occurs because of affecting [*Affektion*], that is, "the peculiar pull [*Reiz*] that an object given to consciousness exercises on the ego."⁷¹ This pull or allure of the object is intuitive and 'automatic,' drawing on the horizon of expectations in which spirit is operative. The result of this tending-toward is an association, which itself is premised on tendencies that are also drawn from the horizon of expectations in which spirit is operative. As such, the very fact that some experiences draw our attention more obviously to their religiously expressive character may itself be as much a product of *our* spiritual/religious situation as scholars as it is telling about the experience itself or the spirit/religion being expressed in that initial experience.⁷²

At the same time, it cannot be denied that, experientially, some experiences strike us as more obviously 'religious' than others. To be clear: phenomenologically speaking, it is not only (b) type experiences that are religious. All experiences, because of the inevitable (a) facet that they contain, are, properly speaking, religious experiences, and a genuinely phenomenological understanding of religion must be able to account for both the (a) and the (b) facets of "religious experience." But in order to better study the (a) religious/spiritual facet of experience, we can either attempt to distill it in any possible experience, or we can look to some experiences that may more obviously or more readily evidence this 'religious' component. Insofar as we can acknowledge that some experiences draw our attention more directly to this facet of experience than do other experiences, we could see, then, that there could be a certain advantage, for the study of religion, to focusing special attention on those experiences which seem to be more obviously 'religious' in nature—provided our study of them remains aware of the role spiritual expression plays in the experience and our (experience of) reflection on it.

⁷⁰ Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, 85.

⁷¹ Husserl, *Analyses*, 148.

⁷² This seems to be in line with (though not wholly in agreement with) certain movements in 'critical' approaches to religion as suggested by Jonathan Z. Smith (*Imagining Religion*), and taken up by Russell McCutcheon (*Manufacturing Religion*) and others. It is also consistent with the 'appresentative' focus of Barber's account of the religious province of meaning; cf., e.g., "Passive attention plays a preeminent role in religious consciousness"; Barber, "The Religious Province of Meaning," 15.

While this seems to bring us right back to where we started, with an account of ‘religious’ experiences as distinct from other experiences, I don’t think that’s quite accurate. I think we have learned something—two things, in fact—that are helpful for the study of ‘religious experience.’ Namely, we have:

1. greatly expanded the realm of possible subjects of study;
2. narrowed considerably the object of study.

In the first sense, we have expanded the realm of possible subjects of study in the sense that any human experience whatsoever can be seen as spiritually expressive, and therefore can become the proper subject of a phenomenological investigation of religious experience: a phenomenology of the mall⁷³ or of the iPhone⁷⁴ is no less a phenomenology of religious experience than a phenomenology of prayer or of contemplation. But this is the case, not just because all experiences are religious experiences. Our renewed appreciation for the spiritual religiosity that is characteristic of human experience has helped us see that certain experiences are more readily focused on the religious (understood now as a facet of experience rather than as a particular type of experience) than we had originally thought:⁷⁵ the ‘mall’ may be an experience that expresses a spirituality (i.e., of consumerism) in a particularly focused way, much like we could say attending a worship service or spending time in meditation expresses other forms of spirituality in a particularly focused way. In this regard, we can now see things like the mall or the Apple store as uniquely ‘religious’ sites in ways we may not have seen before.

But this can become apparent only in light of the second thing we have learned, namely, the narrowing of the object of study. In this sense, we have seen that, properly speaking, the *object* of a phenomenology of religious experience is not the totality of some experience, but one particular dimension of any and all experience. And this dimension—spirituality—can be considered religious insofar as it expresses “something which becomes visible in everything, but which can never be isolated as an object.” Those experiences that uniquely focus on this dimension of experience are a privileged subject of inquiry only insofar as they help us better understand this facet of experience.

But this is a different object of study than might be of interest to other scholars of religion. In light of the three-fold distinction offered above (i.e., the structure of spirituality/religiosity v. distinct spirits/religions v. the phenomena that express a particular spirit/religion), we can see that the phenomenologist of the religious⁷⁶ is interested in the (phenomenological) structure of spirituality/religiosity, while other scholars of religion (e.g., sociologists of religion, religious studies scholars, etc.) are interested in a particular religion/spirit or multiple particular religions/spirits, and still others might be interested in a particular type of sociological institution, but not in the religion/spirit expressed in and through that institution, nor in the experiential structure that makes possible that expression. It is not, it seems to me, the phenomena themselves that are of primary interest to either phenomenologists of the religious or to scholars of religion of the first type: they may be, as we have said, of secondary interest, insofar as they help us better understand or access our particular object of inquiry, but our primary interest lies either in the structure (for the phenomenologists) or in the particular manifestations of that structure (for the scholar of religion of the first type). Given the nature of expression, our only experiential point of access to either the structure or the spirits/religions is via the phenomena which express them, and in this regard we can say that phenomenologists of the religious and other scholars of religion study the same ‘things.’ But through reflection we are able distinguish the phenomena and what is expressed in them, which opens

⁷³ Cf. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*.

⁷⁴ Cf. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*.

⁷⁵ Ceasing to equate religion with a particular theological affirmation of transcendent realities is also important in this recognition. However, our abandonment of that theological affirmation was itself rooted in a deepening awareness of the role that spirituality plays in our (religious) experience.

⁷⁶ I use the somewhat cumbersome ‘phenomenologist of the religious’ rather than ‘phenomenologist of religion’ for two reasons: 1) insofar as we have defined ‘religion’ as one element of the religious, the ‘religious’ actually names the broader category that is of interest here; and 2) insofar as the term ‘phenomenology of religion’ is used regularly in religious studies (in ways that have no obvious connection to the use of the term ‘phenomenology’ in philosophy), the phrase ‘phenomenologist of the religious’ may be helpful in distinguishing the philosophical approach at question in this paper from the religious studies approach.

the possibility of the study of religion (as the force which is expressed in concrete phenomena), even as further reflection opens different ways of studying religion (as either an experiential structure or a concrete, dynamic force or as a sociological institution).

As such, the phenomenologist may find (a) more useful to the study and definition of the religious than might other scholars of religion. Expanding the meaning of the term 'religion' to include every act or social institution might be problematic for, say, the sociological study of religion—but it might prove crucial for a proper understanding of the phenomenological study of the religious. Insofar as the two are concerned with different objects, they may find different phenomena to be helpful subjects of inquiry in pursuit of their respective objects.

But it remains the case that I have here defined, not only 'religiosity' but also 'religion' in a phenomenological vein. Insofar as I have suggested that things like Marxism and consumerism are religions, and (some) people in sociology of religion or religious studies offer definitions of religion that purposely exclude those things as not religious,⁷⁷ we seem to have a disagreement in our fundamental understanding of what 'religion' is. On the one hand, this may not be problematic; Schilbrack acknowledges that "what one decides is the 'best' or the 'right' definition of religion will depend on and be indexed to one's purposes,"⁷⁸ and therefore we could expect that phenomenology and other ways of studying religion—insofar as they concern different objects—would find different definitions of religion helpful to their pursuits. But on the other hand, it would seem that this equivocation in the meaning of the term 'religion' seems problematic, either to our understanding of religion itself, or—if you affirm Schilbrack's 'strategic' mode of defining religion—at least to the role that our definitions of religion might play in other understandings of religion and vice versa. For if the different foci of the phenomenological, sociological, and other modes of studying religion yield, not merely different results, but different *definitions* of religion, can insights from one field having anything to offer to scholars in the others? Are our definitions of religion wholly polysemous, or is there enough similarity that something can be meaningful in both accounts?

Insofar as phenomenology claims that religions emerge as concrete expressions of the structure of religiosity, it seems that at least the phenomenological understanding of the religious should expect insight into religiosity to provide some insight into religions, and vice versa. One major question opened up by this paper's discussions of the definition(s) of religion in sociology and religious studies is the nature of the type of question that a definition of religion is meant to answer. While Schilbrack discusses "the two required aspects" of the early definitions of religion, namely "*why* a belief is held and a practice done, [i.e.,] the functional or pragmatic aspect of religion" and "*what* the beliefs and practices are about, the substantive or ontological aspect of religion,"⁷⁹ the phenomenological approach to the religious opens a third avenue of inquiry: "*how* something is experienced as religious." This latter question deals with what makes religion *possible* and *actual* in human experience, and suggests that part of the answer to that has to deal with transcendental conditions that may not be entirely either "superempirical" or merely empirical.⁸⁰ This, in turn, not only calls into question the necessity of religion's affirming transcendent, supernatural, or superempirical realities, but also opens the question of spirits (in the phenomenological sense of dynamic, affective forces) as something that even non-phenomenological approaches to religion must consider. This, in part, may require more attention be paid to the affective nature of religion and religious phenomena. While this is already beginning to happen,⁸¹ perhaps phenomenology can help deepen and clarify the study of 'affect theory' and its role in religion, while also having its own understanding of spirituality clarified by insights gleaned from 'affect theory' and its role in religion.

⁷⁷ For one example, see Schilbrack, "What *isn't* religion," 318.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 292.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 297-298.

⁸⁰ Insofar as "transcendentality" is a question of genesis, and hence has a material-spiritual provenance; cf. Husserl, *Crisis*; Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis*; and Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*.

⁸¹ Cf. Schaefer, *Religious Affects*; Supp-Montgomerie, "Affect."

There are many questions that need to be asked also regarding how these other approaches to religion can help the phenomenology of the religious. At the least, it seems taking more account of empirical and material accounts of religion can help the phenomenology of the religious combat its narrowness (i.e., its tendency to equate ‘religious’ with ‘theistic’), its insularity (i.e., its tendency to talk only to other phenomenologists of the religious, and not to either other scholars of religion nor to practitioners of religion), and perhaps its tendency to overestimate the cognitive/reflective/intellectual in regards to religion.⁸² But all this is only a beginning, some very tentative suggestions. Much more thought needs to be given to the relationship between phenomenological and other approaches to the study of religion.

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⁸² This critique is raised in regards to philosophy of religion more broadly in Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, chapter 2 and 3; and in Simmons, “Vagueness.”

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