Part II
***Bordering Imaginaries II: The Need for Conceptual
and Historiographical Innovation***

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**From the Crisis of Secularism to the Predicament
of Post-Secularism**

Late Modern Social Imaginaries and the Trope of Religious Violence

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Abstract

This article offers an interpretation of late modern social imaginaries and their relationship to religion and violence. I hypothesize that the transition from the ‘secular age’ to a so-called ‘post-secular constellation’ calls on us to critically reconsider the modern trope that all too unambiguously ties religion and violence together. Discussing the fault lines of a secularist modernity spinning out of control today on various fronts, I argue that the narrative semantics of the so-called ‘return of religion’ is frequently adopted as an imaginative catalyst for confronting these contemporary discontents – for better and worse. In linking recent work on ‘social imaginaries’ with Paul Ricœur’s discussion of the productive role of imagination in social life, I then explore the transformative potential of religious imagination in its inherent ambiguity. In conclusion I demonstrate that this quality involves a poetic license to start all over, one which can be used to expose both the violence of our beloved political ideals of freedom and sovereignty, as well as their repercussions on religious practice.

Keywords

secularism – post-secularism – imagination – religious violence – Paul Ricœur

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There remains to be discerned, in the freedom of the imagination, what could be termed the imagination of freedom.

PAUL RICŒUR

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1 Introduction¹

The discussion concerning *modern social imaginaries* and their apparent transformations in the course of late modernity has gained a lot of traction in recent years. But what exactly are *social imaginaries*? Most generally regarded, the very concept relates to habitualized collective patterns of cultural meaning and the ways they always already sustain a society as a political institution. Put differently, social imaginaries are embedded and embodied articulations of social “meaning-making” that are formed and form themselves in historical as well as civilizational contexts. The concept points at a variety of interrelated insights concerning the very functioning of the fabrics of *modern* socio-political life as such. This concerns, firstly, the *inherently creative* (and not basically reproductive) nature of imagination, which is more and more regarded as an antidote (or at least corrective) to our beloved yet all too overbearing modern conceptions of deliberative practice, mutual recognition, or discursive reason. It concerns, secondly, the by definition *collective* and thus necessarily *symbolic* character of all meaning-institution (*institution symbolique*). Finally, it furthermore involves the *irreducibility of inter-cultural encounter* and its dynamic variation.²

1 This article was elaborated in the framework of the research grants “The return of religion as a challenge for thought” (FWF I 2785) and “Secularism and its Discontents” (FWF P 29599), funded by the Austrian Science Fund.

2 As Adams et al. put it: “The term ‘social imaginaries’ points to several interrelated trends of a major shift in the humanities and social sciences [...] towards a new approach to the question of modernity. First, it reveals the modern concern with – and emphasis on – the imagination as creative and no longer only reproductive, or fictive; as such, forms of social creativity are

Social imaginaries thus viewed refer to trans-subjective patterns of socio-cultural meaning, power relations, and their intersecting impact on human action. They are the pre-reflectively lived and shared precondition for our various inter-subjective modes of being-in-the-world. They are anchored and transmitted in symbolic articulations and representations but basically revolve around the collective and creative role of imagination in human discourse and practice.³ Interweaving the symbolic contexts of human life-worlds with the imaginary element, they silently but effectively shape our narrative identities and practical aspirations, both on the individual and the collective level.

Given its capacity to reveal the interconnecting power of imagination understood as a catalyst for ordering social life, the concept has quite naturally been applied productively to the analysis of various social phenomena. The focus has been, e.g., on issues of culture and civilization, technology and development, religion and spirituality, and most recently extends to the dimensions of history, geography and ecology. While it has been used to explore the shaping of (both individual and collective) identity in the interplay of active participation and passive exposition, the constitutive role of manifold *violence* in these processes has thus far not been considered adequately. It has been stated, without a doubt, that they entail a both productive and destructive potential.⁴ However, the sometimes to be found expression “violent social imaginaries”⁵, which seems to point at this potential, figures predominantly in misleading ways. Indeed, it is nearly exclusively applied to provide us with presumably neutral descriptions of “social pathology”⁶, “cultures of violence” in “failed states,” or the “horrorism”⁷ of “new wars”⁸ and “global terrorism.”⁹ Such use, however, paints the picture of some *cartography of violence*, where

seen as the workings of the creative imagination. Second, social imaginaries highlight the phenomenon of collectively instituted meaning and its inter-cultural variations. Third, foregrounding ‘imaginaries’ provides a corrective to a one sided focus on ‘reason’ as the central tenet (or promise) of modernity. Finally, the elaboration of ‘social imaginaries’ underscores the ongoing, albeit incomplete, hermeneutical turn in the human sciences. Thus instead of focusing on the singular ‘imagination’ or ‘reason’ as a faculty of the individual, it seeks rather to emphasize the constitutive elements of socio-cultural ‘reality’, such as ‘social imaginaries’ and ‘forms of rationality.’” (Adams et al. 2015, p. 9).

3 Ricœur 1991a.

4 Ricœur 1991a, pp. 185–187.

5 Schröder/Schmidt 2001.

6 Honneth 2009; Habermas/Ratzinger 2005, pp. 43 et seq.

7 Cavarero 2008.

8 Kaldor 1999, Münkler 2004.

9 Juergensmeyer 2001; Lincoln 2003.

violence “sits in places”¹⁰ or is tied to imaginations of social anomy and disorder, thus always threatening to undermine the *borders* that we have erected to keep these things neatly apart. The concept is hardly applied, however, in *critical* fashion. This indeed would require a confrontation with the productive and sometimes indeed *creative role of violence* in the performative constitution of “social imaginaries” in general and “imagined communities” in particular. Put otherwise, it calls on us to analyze violence as a “resource of world-making”¹¹, which is always already embedded in meaningful webs of cultural expression. As I will argue, our more recent visions of presumably liberating *global* imaginaries are no exception to this.

In what follows, I will attempt to confront this desideratum head on. I will oppose the “traditional cartography of violence in modern Western thinking,” which holds, “at its core, [that] violence represents the breakdown of meaning, the advent of the irrational, and the commission of physical harm.”¹² As a corollary to this position, all other forms of social violence and what has been called “structural violence”¹³, “symbolic violence”¹⁴ or “the violences of everyday life”¹⁵ are disqualified as merely “ethereal examples.”¹⁶ The tiring quarrels concerning definitional conundrums need not concern us here any further.¹⁷ What is more important relates to the fact that *violence*, thus viewed, is all too quickly misrepresented as a natural inclination to be corrected or a social problem to be solved, but is not understood as a “meaningful cultural expression, whatever its apparent senselessness and destructive potential.”¹⁸ Moreover, the related aspiration of bringing a solution to this problem creates, as has been shown on many occasions, a deeply entrenched *circle* of original violence and responsive, therefore “legitimate counter-‘violence.’” This circle is tied to traditional, inherently heteronormative imaginations of, on the one hand, nonviolent, ordering reason and, on the other hand, irrational violence, which

10 Springer 2011.

11 Schröder/Schmidt 2001, p. 9.

12 Whitehead 2007, p. 40.

13 Galtung 1969, Farmer 2001.

14 Bourdieu 2002.

15 Kleinman 2000.

16 Whitehead 2007, p. 40.

17 At least it need not if we accept the insight that what “counts as violence” (and what not) (Liebsch 2015) results from always already functioning, pre-reflectively lived, habitualized, and embodied “orders” (Foucault) or “economies of violence.” (Derrida) Recent discussion on “epistemic violence” offer another proof for this disavowed intersection of “violence with its projected other.

18 Whitehead 2007, p. 41.

is said to act disorderly, i.e., embody a “threat to order.”¹⁹ The quest for order esp. in its modern forms, thus creates *imaginations of disorder* upon which this very project becomes *parasitic*.

To avoid any such naturalizing hunt for causation and causal explanation but to *understand* why violence “occurs in the ways it does,” we need to recognize “that violence is as much a part of meaningful and constructive human living as it is imagination of the absence and destruction of all cultural and social order.”²⁰ This uncomfortable anthropological report leads me to the hypothesis that I will pursue in the rest of this article. Concretely put, I will argue that our beloved, assumedly liberating and violence-free modern social imaginaries are in fact not only *equilibrated* by the proclaimed contingency of some aberrant, unruly or disorderly violence that we tend to project, quite parasitically indeed, onto our “relevant others.” Moreover, I will argue that these imaginaries are in fact *permeated* by violence to a truly constitutive degree – a kind of violence, however, which is most successful in symbolically eclipsing and making itself invisible.

A major case in point in this context is the image of presumed otherness and blatant irrationality of “religious violence” that we got used to pit against the pacifying effects of secular modernity, the liberal imaginary and the ideals of discursive reason and deliberation. However, this most effective *myth of religious violence*, as Cavanaugh²¹ has called it, does not only *exculpate* legitimized (state) violence.²² At once, it renders us *structurally indifferent* to the far-reaching effects of manifold related violences, thus impregnating the existential frameworks people find themselves living in with inherently violent social imaginaries. In other words, our stance toward violence is fraught with deep ambiguities, the most disconcerting one being the inherently ambiguous embodiment – or “including exclusion” – of violence in our assumedly non-violent modern social imaginaries.

To unveil or at least get a better grip on this disconcerting ambiguity that functions at the heart of our late modern social imaginaries, I will proceed as follows. In a first step I will discuss the critical state that our modern social imaginaries have arrived at with the *crisis of secular reason* and the various discontents to which it has given rise, most notably in the context of globalization. (section 2) Secondly, I will attempt to demonstrate how this crisis has exacerbated in the so-called *post-secular* constellation. With the “return” or

19 Cf. Foucault 1965.

20 Whitehead 2007, p. 41.

21 Cavanaugh 2009.

22 Cf. Goldstone 2011.

“revival of religion” taking on many different forms in its opposition against an aggressive “ideological”²³ and “sacrificial”²⁴ secularism that masquerades in the guise of purported liberation or global solidarity, “religion” has indeed become one of the most ambiguous signs of our times. Meandering between unprecedented acts of violence and promises of non-violent transcendence, it epitomizes for many the perhaps only remaining “force of exception”²⁵ – the only force that might still help us to transform our contemporary “wasteland of sense”²⁶ and recreate the human appeal in a disordering world. (section 3) The question remains, however, how this ambiguous yet liberating potential, which provides even “hope for the hopeless” and “the truly destitute ones,”²⁷ may be taken up and channeled constructively so as to avoid its tendency to turn obsessive, fundamentalist, fanatic, finally giving way to “political theologies of domination.” To confront this question productively, I will discuss this potential in terms of the *poietic potential of religious imagination* in a third part. (section 4)

2 On Secularism and its Discontents²⁸

Every civilization has its discontents, avowed or not, and as we know since Freud’s groundbreaking analysis this proves all the more true for our Western civilization and its universalist aspirations to incorporate the civilizing process itself. Whereas the lasting unhappiness of modern humankind²⁹ first seems to date back to the enforced renouncement of instinctual desires, even in the obsessive pursuit to become God-like we remain bored and unfulfilled, finally and most paradoxically by way of even “amusing ourselves to death.” Definitely, this famous slogan coined by Neil Postman has set the stage for a discussion that is heavily recurrent today: While Western civilization, technology and

23 Glendinning 2009.

24 Ten Kate 2015.

25 Raschke 2015.

26 Nancy 2008, p. 4.

27 Appadurai 2006, p. 35.

28 This chapter takes up and develops arguments that I have developed earlier on together with Ludger Hagedorn, see Staudigl/Hagedorn 2018.

29 As Freud notes: “Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times ... Future ages will bring with them new and probably unimaginably great achievements in this field of civilization and will increase man’s likeness to God still more. But in the interests of our investigations, we will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy in his Godlike character.” (Freud 1961, p. 39).

especially the media definitely facilitate our lives, they not necessarily manage to enrich them to the point of making us really happier. Given this, however, one need not wonder that the proliferation of this inherently ambiguous Western life-form – whether it be an inspired ideal or the hated enemy-image par excellence – engenders a variety of novel constraints, unmitigated addictions, and far reaching discontents. The related idea of *globalization*, with its promises of importing freedom by implementing liberal ideas and secular values, indeed best epitomizes this ambiguous tendency. In the maelstrom-like character it has taken on with the *neoliberal* march, it not only provides new possibilities (for some) but creates new anxieties, inequities, and insecurities (for many) – and furthermore gives rise to unprecedented developments. And indeed, it is in the wake of the “maelstrom of globalization” that a variety of truly troubling phenomena, pointing at a “new logics of violence,”³⁰ has arisen recently. As many commentators meanwhile hold, they indeed threaten to derail the very project of modernity, posing countercurrents to the assumed triumphal procession of its proclaimed liberal imaginary.

These developments, however, not only haunt our beloved modern social imaginaries as a kind of relic from the past, an institutional hang-over, or some socio-ontological deficit that will finally be overcome by our visions of integration, proceduralism, or, in terms of some last resort, a “cunning of reason.” I thus contend that we must not misinterpret them in terms of contingent deficits of “disengaged reason,” a sort of “childhood sickness” (Rawls) that will be overcome by the normative grammar of societal integration and the now widely celebrated revival of the antagonistic principle, or as some merely contingent “disarray” in the teleological order of (European) reason – as if we might still rely on the “comforts of history,” a crypto-theology of progress, or the salvaging power of providence that will, on the long run, always secure the benevolent play of order, collateral damage notwithstanding. Following the “prophets of suspicion,” especially Freud, we rather need to understand that all these developments are not contingent incidents but rather attest to the truly profound *discontents* that are but the flip of secular modernity and civilization. Thus viewed, they point at the weakness of the predominant conception of a secular, disengaged brand of reason, which apparently has remained all too self-assured about its liberating and “salvific” qualities, the near “deification” of the human, and the sanctification of universal “human rights,” while all too frequently disavowing the concomitant tendency to “sacralize collective political entities.”³¹ And even though many societies have profited enormously from our

30 Cf. Appadurai 2006, pp. 36–48.

31 Cf. Abrams 1988; Das 2004; Gentile 2006.

modern regulative orientation toward the related ideals of collective emancipation and personal autonomy, including their dismissal of myth and theocratic foundations, it is becoming obvious that secularism is not the clear cut solution to the problems of modern humankind, as many have indeed hoped for, including also the afore-mentioned Freud.

Today, as a matter of fact, we cannot but observe deep cutting *fault lines* to emerge as constituting the flip side of late, secular modernity and the liberal imaginary. Especially the hegemonic display of “disengaged reason” and an “ideological secularism,” which are presented as the organizing rationale for a normative liberal ethos and a secure polity, are often blamed for these developments. The developments one might mention in this regard are as numerous as they are disconcerting. They include, e.g., the often noted, emotion-driven revival of “tribalisms” and populist “identity politics,” including the unpredicted return of extreme collective violence and the political usage of cruelty,³² thus fostering a “new logics of violence”³³ like with the advent of “new wars,” which are about to threateningly turn war into a “social condition.”³⁴ They relate to a “new war on the poor”³⁵ in abounding neocolonial settings³⁶ on what is becoming a “planet of slums.”³⁷ They furthermore concern the closely related flight and migration movements that only more recently began to deeply affect the “old World,” too. They also refer to the disconcerting surge of ever-growing precarious classes in the post-industrial zones of the North and the implementation of a pervasive “culture of fear.”³⁸ They critically relate to the hazardous exploitation of natural resources still being sacrificed on the altar of some obscene vision of inevitable progress that is disavowed by the very precariousness it creates. In the latter context especially, questions concerning regimes of “post-truth” and the “crisis of representation” also become relevant, presaging a post-political and perhaps even post-human condition that further accelerates the afore-mentioned tendencies. With an eye specifically to the West and its tapering visions of the “good life” and the “common good,” they thus bear witness to the spiritual pauperization and “transcendental homelessness” of exhausted ego-start-ups: as mere “subject-positions” they are tied in a scramble for continuous self-realization and autonomous performance, which is prone to disintegrate any “social bond” from within. This development, finally, refers

32 Nahoum-Grappe 2002.

33 Appadurai 2006, pp. 34–48.

34 Kaldor 1999.

35 Farmer 2004.

36 Mbembe 2001 and 2016.

37 Davis 2007.

38 Crépon 2010.

to the affective collapse of whole communities unified solely by the neon gods of instrumental reason and neoliberal efficacy, creating but dysfunctional societies, too.

In confronting us with human finitude, contingency and fallibility in a most startling way, these developments have recently started to affect our late modern social imaginaries in accelerating fashion. They all attest to a widespread feeling of profound unease that threateningly haunts our contemporary self-understanding and increasingly fragile social imaginaries. As some critics of secular modernity and a so-called civilizing process hold, these developments demonstrate that the long assumed “disenchantment of the world” has but resulted in the creation of a “wasteland of sense”³⁹. In this “wasteland,” to follow Nietzsche’s predictions, a “great hunt” for the “still unexplored possibilities”⁴⁰ of genuinely human life is unleashed again and again. Such a hunt contributes, however, to the make-up of some “society of the spectacle,”⁴¹ which dooms us to chase some ever-fading sense in a never-ending proliferation of projects, images, and performances. As French phenomenologist Michel Henry has argued, this very dynamic epitomizes nothing but *the archetype of globalization*. Finally, as he explains, it results in the reign of a systemic “barbarism”⁴², which mistakenly relegates the meaning of life to the media of its representation and expression. With the related categories of expression – progress, popularity, and commodification – converting into sacrosanct social values, the relentless pursuit of the project of modernity thus seems to reach its apex, or perhaps its truly critical point of no return. What has been called the “dialectics of secularization”⁴³ is a clear expression of this truly abyssal condition of late modernity: it points at a condition at a loss of grounds, one that forces us to navigate between the Scylla of *disillusioned individualism* with its moral sources drying out, and the Charybdis of an *impossible community*, which is longed for but also feared in its assumedly illiberal, fundamentalist and totalizing implications.

At this point, where the crisis of secular liberalism converges with the collapse of a truly disembodied and fully procedural society, resources of meaning clearly become scarce.⁴⁴ Caught in the “bad infinity” of exceedingly

39 Nancy 2008, p. 4.

40 Nietzsche 2002, p. 43.

41 Debord 2000.

42 Henry 2012.

43 Habermas/Ratzinger 2004.

44 According to Claude Lefort, the disembodiment of “political bodies” by the “democratic revolution” in political modernity has always led to attempts at enforcing their re-incorporation. However, it is not only the totalitarian movements that should be considered

dis-realizing mediations, questions of contingency and finitude do not, however, lose their sting. Today, they rather seem to affect and push us more than ever, as our daydreams of human enhancement, AI, and social engineering unambiguously demonstrate. This is not only true for the disengaged and buffered “modern self,”⁴⁵ who apparently pays for its newly won autonomy with manifold symptoms of exhaustion as well as depression, and for social emancipation with ever deepening experiences of loneliness and isolation.⁴⁶ Furthermore, it also proves all too true for our tapering visions of the “good life” and the “common good,” as we nowadays appear to experience a far-reaching and deeply uncanny alienation from our life-worlds that results from our all too successful attempts to liberate ourselves from the constraints of nature, human finitude, and social contingencies. At that point, however, the “tragedy of the modern condition”⁴⁷ becomes as palpable as possible, confronting us with a loss of grounds that travesties as purported autonomy while exposing our irreducible dependency on the earthly, intersubjective, and transcendent relations, from which we believe to have been able to rid ourselves. In this context and in the wake of the developments outlined, secular modernity and its discontents has given way to what Mishra⁴⁸ has aptly termed an “age of anger.”

As has been observed on a manifold occasions, it is exactly within the context of the basic ideas of secular modernity and the related liberal imaginary undergoing a profound crisis of legitimacy that *religion* reemerges as a long-traded tool to manage contingency and exposure, experiences of transcendence, and human finitude. Religion, however, seems to be on its way back not only as a functional tool to reduce complexity, to symbolically come to terms with contingency, or to practically assure “salvation,” whatever this may mean.⁴⁹ In the global context of the disillusioning of the liberal ideals (or perhaps idols) of “discursified reason,” “reciprocal recognition” or a “cosmopolitan ethos,” religion today returns with strong force in its *community-instituting*

in this context, but also the so-called *Permanence of the Theologico-Political*. This affinity, however need not be exploited in order to project the logics of totalitarianism onto contemporary religious fundamentalism, a short-cut that can be found more and more often in recent debates. That, as Lefort concludes in the very end of the essay, “the religious is reactivated at the weak points of the social” and, finally, as a consequence of the “difficulty political or philosophical thought has in assuming, without making a travesty, the tragedy of the modern condition” (Lefort 1991, p. 255), mirrors the hypothesis proposed here.

45 Taylor 2004.

46 Höhn 1996.

47 Lefort 1991, p. 255.

48 Mishra 2018.

49 Riesebrodt 2007.

power.⁵⁰ Even if one may contest the view that religious communities are nowadays indeed rising like a “phoenix from the ashes”⁵¹, the recently proliferating role of religion and religious semantics in the symbolic institution, emotive invocation, and performative construction of communities cannot but attract one’s attention. And indeed, even if the sociological facts may vary across the globe, there is no reason not to take the socially cohesive function and symbolic power of religious “life forms” seriously again, masking it instead in terms of some philosophical artifact or theological desideratum. In fact we find strong evidence for this development not only in regard to the persistent (sometimes even growing) power of traditional denominations in the global South, but also in the explosive impact of “global political theologies”⁵² or, of course, in the surge of “fundamentalist movements”⁵³ and communalizing forms of so-called “religious violence.”⁵⁴ It is also a fact evidenced in the more specific Western context, not only with religious topics reclaiming prominence in the public space, but especially with the birth of “new spiritual imaginaries”⁵⁵ and the way they challenge the secularist agenda of our beloved (neo)liberal political economies.

This kind of “return of religion,” as it gains heightened attention by the afore-mentioned incidents, attests to the imaginative potential of religious narratives and imaginaries. It stands as a resource for *liberating* collective action and imagination to reason with. In offering a heightened “awareness of what is missing” (Habermas) in the secularist outlook; a utopian sensibility for alternative life-forms in face of disasters triggered by the excessive use of instrumental rationality and the hubris of technology; and an unexhausted moral force of resistance to oppose the leveling effects of the “neoliberal roll-out” that is truly running havoc on a global scale – in opening all these various potentials, an alternative religious or “post-secular awareness”⁵⁶ becomes increasingly important today.

50 Braeckman 2009.

51 Kippenberg 2013.

52 Vries de/Sullivan 2006.

53 Riesebrodt 1998.

54 Kippenberg 2011.

55 Heelas 2005; Knoblauch 2009.

56 Mavelli/Petito 2012, p. 931.

3 The Predicament of the Post-secular Constellation

This resurgent importance of religion for society, which has frequently been labeled *post-secular*, definitely denotes a decisive development in contemporary culture and politics. Among its many sources we can find, as I have argued thus far, a basic disillusionment with political modernity and its unfulfilled promises of implementing formal equality and procedural justice⁵⁷, as well as a remarkable growth of religious movements and communities that at times openly oppose the Western ideal of the secular nation state. One might also mention an altered public consciousness that is committed to a religiously informed politics of hope, but also a kind of “bad consciousness” on the part of Western secular scientists seems to be part of the game.⁵⁸ Given its manifold genealogy and the both descriptive as well as prescriptive ways it is used, the concept, however, appears notoriously contested. Hence it remains to be clarified what the exact relationship to secularism is, in which I am interested here. In light of the argument I have proffered, I think it is correct to put the emphasis on the insight that post-secularism in fact has to do a lot with the decline of the secular nation-state and its so-called “monopoly of violence” and the related “plea” – or rather quest – “for new models of politics able to include religious views.”⁵⁹ In other words, it concerns the – internally as well as externally motivated – weakening of the instance that has traditionally, following the Westphalian paradigm or rather “presumption”⁶⁰, safeguarded religious tolerance and peaceful political coexistence. As Sigurdson puts this:

[T]he notion of the post-secular aptly registers a new visibility of religion even in Europe, a visibility that is in part an effect of the transformation of the Westphalian paradigm into something else. The overcoming of a secularistic self-understanding does not mean a return to a religious self-understanding, any more than the de-territorialization of religion means

57 Besides its merely descriptive uses, the post-secular, in its more innovative meaning “has emerged as a form of radical theorizing and critique prompted by the idea that values such as democracy, freedom, equality, inclusion, and justice may not necessarily be best pursued within an exclusively immanent secular framework. Quite the opposite, the secular may well be a potential site of isolation, domination, violence and exclusion.” (Mavelli/Petito 2012, p. 931).

58 As Hans Joas puts this: “(The postsecular) does not express a sudden increase in religiosity, after its epochal decrease, but rather a change in mindset of those who, previously, felt justified in considering religions to be moribund.” (Joas 2004, p. 124, cited in Mavelli/Petito 2014, p. 2).

59 Mavelli/Petito 2015, p. 1.

60 Thomas 2000, p. 815.

a return to pre-modern conditions. What is happening, rather, is the development of a more complex interrelationship between religion and secularity as a consequence of a particular history, and I propose to call this new state of affairs a post-secular condition.⁶¹

As is well known, the doctrine of secularism “emerged as the political solution to Europe’s bloody religious conflicts and in doing so established the principles of toleration and freedom of conscience in their place.” However, this heavily exported brand of liberal secularism, which revolved to a great extent around the relegation of religious experience to the private realm, was premised indeed not only on an ideal of toleration but also on a *strong* state that was provided the means to ensure “that religion will henceforth assume a modulated form”⁶². The post-secular constellation, as one might call it, accordingly not only has to do with a resurgent *attention* to religion in the public square⁶³, but especially with the waning of nation states, their weakening in the maelstrom of globalization, and the erosion of *sovereignty* this entails – since all this paves the path for new embodiments of religion, local and global. Sovereignty, however, is of truly paramount importance for the doctrine of liberal secularity, given that the “*disciplinary or civilizing* impetus internal to secularism”⁶⁴ resides not simply in its power to separate the religious and the political; it rather has to be located, as Mahmood critically holds, in its capacity to mold the “kind of subjectivity a secular culture authorizes, the practices it redeems as truly (versus superficially) spiritual, and the particular relationship to history it prescribes.”⁶⁵ The Foucauldian emphasis that subjectivities are silently molded and shaped according to the doctrine of secularism thus not only demonstrates that integration happens “only on the condition that ‘this individuality be shaped in a new form and submitted to a set of very specific patterns’ (Foucault).”⁶⁶ Moreover, it also provides us with insight into the cardinal link between secularism and politics, namely that “secularism’s claim to moral and political legitimacy, after all, was and continues to be linked to its claim not only to being able to provide space for the peaceable coexistence of a plurality of identities and beliefs but to being able to *secure* this space against anything or anyone that might stand to threaten it.”⁶⁷

61 Sigurdson 2010, p. 190.

62 Goldstone 2011, pp. 115 et seq.

63 Reder 2013.

64 Goldstone 2011, pp. 115 et seq.

65 Mahmood 2006, p. 328.

66 Goldstone 2011, p. 106.

67 Goldstone 2011, p. 106.

At that point it should finally become clear why I have linked, from the very beginning onwards, the discussion concerning secularism and its discontents to the issue of violence: both the (ostensible) violence of others as well as one's own. Religion and especially "religious violence," one might rightly state in this context, has on a manifold occasions across modern history⁶⁸ been invoked to make certain political economies appear rational, and in fact unavoidable, finally to the extent of equipping them with the unquestioned legitimate power (and violence) to expel, assimilate, etc., its proclaimed otherness, say irrationality and "violence incarnate." From this development immediately follows a highly normativized outlook on religious articulations in general, practically separating what is accepted by liberal democratic culture from all digressing forms, which are to be excluded and ostracized. Religion, thus viewed, is apparently degenerated into a ready-made category, offering either a normatively predisposed template for an appropriate form of some spiritually embellished kind of *social* action, or representing the kind of "accursed share" that we actively need engage with, be it to transform or extrude it. At any rate, the "economy of violence" that hence seems to be intrinsic to the "doctrine of secularism" clearly comes to the fore in such a perspective, as Goldstone, among others, sharply expounds:

To be sure, secularism takes on myriad configurations, and they do not all insinuate a common telos; likewise, the subjects it produces and the relationship to 'religion' it enjoins will vary across time and space. [...] But amid the geopolitical-ideological terrain in which we currently find ourselves [...] secularism is ineluctably bound up with sovereign power, and together they constitute a politics of religion-making. Violence figures prominently in this arrangement: both as that which might at any time erupt among certain forms of religious life and as that which the secular state inflicts in order to forestall such threats and to better facilitate its various modes of subjectivation and accumulation. One is transgressive, inhumane, gratuitous; the other, necessary and salvific, administered on behalf of universal humanity and in accordance with 'a secular calculus of social utility and a secular dream of happiness'. (Asad)⁶⁹

The "post-secular constellation," as I understand it in light of reflections like these, is replete with both related imaginations of violence and concerned

68 See King 2007.

69 Goldstone 2011, p. 116.

social technologies designed to administer a series of disorderly threats, both within and without. At the same time, however, it bespeaks the uncomfortable, Janus-headed situation of a widespread feeling that something indeed is missing to productively counter a late modernity spinning out of control, with its neoliberal calculus running havoc on the global scale, while remaining tied to an all too secular doctrine of confronting *otherness* and imagining *change*. In this context, traditional social imaginaries revolving around our most dear conceptions of *procedural justice*, *mutual recognition*, and *deliberative integration* are definitely worth being mentioned, as they altogether revolve around a gesture of “rationalist assimilation”⁷⁰ that seems to be incapable of incorporating the post-secular stakes. They all mirror, as I would argue, Habermas’ hermeneutic screening of religion, which in its proclivity to cognitively retain some moral core intuitions to be derived from religion remains clearly opposed to any attempt at introducing these (in core *opaque*) potentials into our attempts at transforming political order. Quite the contrary, by way of translating its “intuitions” into the secular idiom of communicative reason, religious practice became colonized, or superseded, in a kind of “linguistification of the sacred.” (*Versprachlichung des Sakralen*)⁷¹ And in fact, Habermas was from the very onset of his work mainly interested in the procedural sociologic whereby the “socially integrative and expressive functions that were at first fulfilled by ritual practice (presumably; M.S.) pass over to communicative action”; as a consequence, as he claimed, “the authority of the holy is gradually replaced by the authority of an achieved consensus.”⁷²

This argumentation reverberates in the later developed “institutional proviso” of translation.⁷³ With the related imperative to communicate “religious intuitions” only by way of using a universal, rational and consequently secular discourse, Habermas, however, contains the process of “communicative” or “discursive reason” within itself. Being tied irreducibly to the functioning parameters of rational validity and procedural justice, *reason* – to risk this formulation – is cut off from its capacity of becoming a truly *world-disclosing* power, as he in fact understands it to be at work in art and religion’s *reason*. The following assessment, therefore, undoubtedly can also be read as the expression of a kind of disillusionment on Habermas’ own terms:

70 Kearney 2011a, pp. 102–104.

71 Habermas 1987, p. 77.

72 Habermas 1987, p. 77.

73 Habermas 2008, pp. 114–147.

Pure practical reason can no longer be so confident in its ability to counteract a modernization spinning out of control armed solely with the insights of a theory of justice. The latter lacks the creativity of linguistic world-disclosure that a normative consciousness afflicted with accelerating decline requires in order to regenerate itself.⁷⁴

And this is not all, since Habermas' methodical way of reducing the role of religion to the level of some cognitive impact with an inherently secular, self-enclosed rationalist framework, in fact disarmingly testifies to its own, innermost deficit.⁷⁵ When Habermas, e.g., states that "enlightened reason loses its grip on the images, preserved by religion, on the moral whole [...] as collectively binding ideal," this results in the truly disturbing fact that "practical reason [itself; M.S.] fails to fulfill its own vocation when it no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and to keep awake, in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven."⁷⁶ As to Dallmayr's assessment:

Going back to Habermas' 2008 essay, one can now see fairly clearly 'what is missing': it is an awareness of the primacy of lived experience over cognition, of ordinary language over epistemic paradigms, or (more simply) of doing or practice over knowing.⁷⁷

Habermas, whom I have mentioned here rather as an epitome of a prominent general tendency of occidental rationalism, is by far not the only one to turn, albeit absolutely unintentionally, the wager of universalizing translation into the high costs of "rationalist assimilation" and structural exclusion.⁷⁸ We can find a similar logic at work even in the presumably most open-minded discourses that struggle for a universal space of immanent, ecstatic affiliation (cf.

74 Habermas 2008, p. 211.

75 See also Dallmayr 2012, p. 971.

76 Habermas 2010, p. 19.

77 Dallmayr 2012, p. 971.

78 Of course one should also emphasize that Habermas at times is much more sensible to the non-assimilable character of religion, not only in his later attempt at emphasizing the responsibility on the part of secular mindsets to secure an openness for religious semantics. Already earlier, in the context of the afore-mentioned "linguistification of the sacred"-chapter, the argument in favor of discourse ethics is already supplemented by a recuperation of the moral implications of religion: "Something of the penetrating power of primordial sacred powers still attaches to morality; it permeates the since differentiated levels of culture, society, and personality in a way that is unique in modern societies." (Habermas 1987, p. 92).

introduction) with no borders at all, at least no visible, mundane borders. To mention just one, most recent example, let me briefly turn to the most current discourse on the paradigm of *global relationality*.

Whereas late modern critiques of progress (from Virilio to Derrida) have always considered the *accident* as the “originary supplement” of development in general, the recent attempt at implementing a global frame of immanent, inherently relational becoming has in fact sharpened the lines of exclusion that it preaches to be able to overcome in an all-inclusivist mentality. One can get this easily from Appadurai’s insight that the marginalized are faced with a “double anxiety: fear of inclusion on Draconian terms, and fear of exclusion, for that seems like exclusion from history itself.”⁷⁹ The borders, in other words, appear permeable, yet the conditions of either staying out or coming in are inherently violent, determining both the spaces as well as the bodies involved.⁸⁰ A recent reflection on the ‘Anthropocene’ and its “relational universalism” provides even more credence to this assessment:

Despite the mournful tenor of discourses on the Anthropocene, where we regret having thought of ourselves as separate from nature for so long, the era of the Anthropocene has more often than not figured the end of the world as *what must be avoided*; we must not fall back into a nomadism that would bear no profound relationship to the globe. There is very little sense, however, that – despite the common recognition that the Anthropocene has a violent, destructive and barbarous history as its cause – other (less robustly global and relational) forms of existence might be viable, desirable, or recognizable. Those other forms of human existence, which were erased in order to achieve the state-centered history of humanity that recognizes itself as ‘Anthropos,’ are deemed to be the ‘end of the world’ – primarily because of their impoverished conception of relationality.⁸¹

As I have argued before, and as this insightful but definitely disconcerting passage proposes, the “implicit moralism” of “post-human relationality” (as a follow-up to the explicit moralism of discursive reason) also creates the “accursed share” that the social fabrics of late modernity requires in order to function. Whatever opposes the immanence of relational becoming and its procedural, most notably neoliberal avatars, bespeaks the worst violence we

79 Appadurai 2006, p. 35.

80 Cf. Ahmed 2007.

81 Colebrook 2019, p. 179 [my emphasis].

might imagine. Especially *neoliberalism*, in this sense, is what one might call a “theology of waste”: it produces and construes its (ir)relevant “other,” and it does so by relegating such otherness to those critical spaces around the globe (within as well as beyond our traditional borders) that are said to be prone to violence, and thus represent a true danger to the neoliberal rollout.⁸² Neoliberalism, in this sense, is paradigmatic for modernity’s being *parasitic* upon the imagination of some non-integrable, violent otherness, which it permanently has to (re)produce as its very other in order to keep its indeed “critical” business going.⁸³

The explicitly *modern business of critique*, to put things otherwise, closely relates to the *systemic crisis* brought about by the very project of modernity. In this regard, the afore-mentioned critical developments epitomize the *discontents* of a late modern condition that, apparently, has not arrived “past the last post,” where, according to Kant, “a natural history of destruction” (with a little help from providence) was believed to create a general “condition of quiet and security” out of the “inevitable antagonism” that rules humankind. Enlightenment thought in general, and Kant in particular, apparently believed that nature – only in the end of course and after many devastating experiences – *forces* humankind to step out of what he called “the lawless condition of savages.”⁸⁴ The unprecedented developments of “a derailed modernity,” however, point into a significantly different direction. They once again indicate that violence is not only critically woven into “the political forms of modernity,”⁸⁵ but more so that humankind is deeply *parasitic* upon its ready-made otherness. In other words, the ostracizing of a kind of phenomenal, extraordinary and excessive violence complements the average functioning of societies in order to eclipse and disavow their own, order-preserving violences.⁸⁶

82 See Springer 2016, pp. 155–159.

83 As we have seen before, the critical business of separating the faculties of one reason, is but a cardinal part of this game. On this criticism, see also Caputo 2015.

84 Kant 1963, seventh thesis.

85 Lefort 1986; cf. Liebsch 2015.

86 This argument has already been propelled by Bauman (Bauman 1993, esp. pp. 6 et seq.) and worked out, of course, by Agamben, too. Whereas the former lucidly has exposed a general “dialectics of order” that results in the production of “disorder” as it raw and utilizable material, the latter’s reflections on sovereignty generalize this argument and explore its potential for political theory: Agamben indeed argues that “far from being a pre-judicial condition that is indifferent to the law of the city, the Hobbesian state of nature is the exception and the threshold that constitutes and dwells within it.” Given this, “sovereignty presents itself [...] as a state of indistinction between nature and culture, between violence and law, and this very indistinction constitutes specifically sovereign violence.” (Agamben 1998, pp. 106 and 135).

The structural rule of various systemic violences and the resulting widespread indifference towards the sacrificial suffering of others, all this is suppressed by way of presenting violence as our “accursed share,” that is, something that we ought to get rid of. Such parasitism, however, is not a contingent result of deliberately misconstrued politics, ideology, alienation, or social pathology. I hypothesize that we rather need to understand it as a necessary byproduct of modernity as such, or its “originary supplement,” in Derrida’s words. It is important to note the related eclipse of violence as a basic problem in social philosophy and theory, since it was played out in the genealogy of the modern state and the legitimate “monopoly on violence” it has been afforded, as Das and Poole clearly state in “State and its margins”:

In this vision of political life, the state is conceived of as an always incomplete project that must constantly be spoken of – and imagined – through an invocation of the wilderness, lawlessness, and savagery that not only lies outside its borders but also threatens it from within.⁸⁷

What once again deserves to be noted, concerns the fact that the constitution of the political out of such a warlike “state of nature” (Hobbes), which has served as the basic matrix of political theory for centuries⁸⁸, not only had to construct the counterfactual bugaboo of such a “state of war” – whether by presenting it as the “censored chapter” of the modern self or by projecting it onto others. At once, it also had to *marginalize* and *disavow* the violence of its own rule and necessary terror by fabricating such *imaginings of disorder* and some others’ *violence incarnate*. The ordering of (religious) violence thus apparently requires eclipsing the (religious) violence of ordering. Or, as Goldstone puts this most clearly:

Remaining mindful of and, indeed, vigilant against this specter of the worst has played a constitutive role in the structuring of modern subjectivities, authorizing new political arrangements and the array of preventative and punitive measures – from profiling and surveillance to intimidation and torture – intended to keep the danger of religious passions at bay.[...] Equally significant, though, are the ways in which visions of what might be thought of as religion’s best possibilities – from helping to maintain civic virtues and morally buttressing ideas such as

⁸⁷ Das/Poole 2004, p. 7.

⁸⁸ Put otherwise, this image or trope was functionalized as both “the necessary opposite *and* origin point for the state and the law.” (Das/Poole 2004, p. 8)

democracy and human rights to, at the very least, mandating that one's beliefs be held in a sufficiently modest and noncompulsory manner – have served to underwrite the brand of religiosity that a liberal culture normativizes and seeks to bring about or failing that, to marginalize and render obsolete. Which is only to say that it can no longer be assumed that secularism naturally resists all theologico-political formations, for it is precisely a distinctive – and often no less terrifying – political theology that it wishes to inaugurate.⁸⁹

4 Imagining Otherwise?

To recapitulate and put things in a nutshell: our “secular age” and the modern visions of freedom and sovereignty purported by the “liberal imaginary” and the implicated doctrine of secularism, has created a variety of discontents that expose late modernity's ambiguous relationship with religion. In the “post-secular constellation” and the so-called “return of the religious” this ambiguity translates into a “social technology” that conceives of “religion” in strictly hetero-normative terms. On the one hand, ideas of “defective religion” are taken to be a major cause for some of the violence I have mentioned; on the other hand, it is believed that its “pure” and “untainted” forms and expressions may embody a liberating potential that can be used to overcome all violence. In the *post-secular* imaginary *religion*, or at least some of its potentials, thus is understood in a twofold way: on the one hand, it is seen as a *potential remedy* for a “derailed modernity” “spinning out of control,” which lacks the moral (and perhaps also intellectual) capacities to reflexively confront its own abyssal condition and obviously “accelerating decline” (Habermas); on the other hand, it is represented as the inherently *opaque element* that remains antagonistic to the requirements of the “salvaging translations” and deliberations that only a rational qua *secular* discourse is often taken to bring about. This, to my understanding, is the deep predicament that marks the role of religion in the context of what has been termed *post-secularism*.

Against the background of disconcerting recent developments, religion, as I have argued, is frequently appealed to as a *resource* of liberating social imagination and enabling re-creative action. How, however, may we rethink *imagination* in this context in order to secure its liberating potential on the level of the social and the political, too, without falling back into an enthusiasm for the abstract and thus, potentially, into fanaticism? What, in other words, ought to

89 Goldstone 2011, p. 109.

be done with the fact that this power definitely bears a capacity for good, while also including the threat of the worst? Finally, how may we understand the power of “religious imagination” as a truly *poietic* human capacity that persists beyond our secularist projections of religion and that may be used productively to disrupt secular modernity’s “self-incurred tutelage” (Kant)?

While I will definitely not be able to answer all these questions and draft a full-fledged account of (religious) imagination here, I at least would like to pave a path for such an endeavor to be undertaken. In light of the interrelations between violence, religion *and* reason that I have attempted to trace in the previous chapters, I will take my point of departure here in acknowledging this intersection as something that cannot simply be put aside on the level of *imagination*, too. It is in this context that I propose to turn again to the thought of Paul Ricœur, whom I have initially mentioned in regard of his contribution to the concept of “social imaginaries.” Ricœur, in fact, has insisted most clearly on the role of negativity and violence in his re-conceptualization of imagination’s social functions, most notably in his exposition of the ambivalent imaginative potentials of both *ideology* and *utopia*.⁹⁰ Secondly, imagination has also played some underrated role in his later discussion of *religion*, blending the earlier focus on a linguistic exploration of “religious discourse” with a profound reflection on its practically imaginative and, finally, *poietic* powers. In what follows, it is my intention to bring Ricœur’s general concept of productive imagination to bear on his later discussion concerning the specific quality of religious imagination and its role in the transformation of socially effective, esp. oppressive forms of late modern social imaginaries. Thus viewed, I wish to productively contribute to a refined understanding of the potentially liberating role that the transformative potential of religious imagination can have on our, i.e., purportedly neutral, secular imaginaries, yet without forgetting about its inherently ambiguous character.⁹¹

90 Ricœur 1986; 1991a, pp. 180–186.

91 Ricœur’s conceptualization of imagination has developed throughout his work. Even if his later interest in religious narrative and practice does not include a systematic reassessment of the productive role of imagination, I argue that the very concept is cardinal to Ricœur’s general account of religion, especially as it is conceived in terms of some practical, transformative form of *social* practice. How this account may then be brought to bear on the more contemporary discussion of the “social imaginary,” is a question that extends beyond the scope of this article. A helpful idea of charting such a pathway, however, might consist in taking the practical function of imagination in terms of the *mimetic* potential of the “imaginative refiguration” of life by narrative as one’s point of departure. Ricœur’s strong emphasis on the *mimetic inscription* of narrative practice (*faire narratif*) in the embodied practices of religious communities (exemplified for instance by practices of ritual embodiment; see Gschwandtner 2020) is of utmost importance in this context.

As is well known, Ricœur's work can be understood to productively move *between* phenomenology and hermeneutics. His "hermeneutic phenomenology of religion," therefore, is far from being preoccupied with describing some "core experience" or essential kernel of religious experience. Confronting the always already existing hermeneutic *mediations* of religious experience and practice,⁹² this approach (at least implicitly) deconstructs any distinction between some assumed core experience and the rather contingent textual, institutional, etc., husk or periphery of religion.⁹³ The context of Ricœur's phenomenological confrontation with religion, and this is also important for our question, is the critique of onto-theology and the "metaphysics of presence." With his early reflections on "Religion, Atheism, and Faith" he indeed was among the very first to explicitly consider a "post-religious faith"⁹⁴. In their tenor, these reflections paved the path for what Derrida on his part later on famously termed a "religion without religion," and what has since then been systematically extolled by Kearney in terms of the ana-theistic wager of "returning to God after God."⁹⁵

Ricœur, in taking seriously the so-called "death of God" offers an attempt at *re-imagining the sacred*⁹⁶ that moves beyond the traditional yokes of omnipotence, omniscience, and absolute sovereignty. While the middle Ricœur was convinced that religion "may be identified through its language, or to speak more accurately, as a kind of discourse,"⁹⁷ later on he came to underscore much more the inherently embodied, affective, and practical dimensions of lived religion. Starting from a phenomenological understanding of religious experience in terms of an inherently embodied "relation of call and response"⁹⁸, he is cautious to avoid the traps of "autonomous rationality" and "unrecognizable heterology," which have traditionally worked as markers of the very discourse

It forcefully reminds us of the embodied dimensions of a narrative's personal appropriation and the high motivational force of its inter-corporal performance. This points at a dimension that indeed is largely absent from Taylor's account of social imaginaries since he restricts the operative role of imagination to the cognitive levels (see also Ward 2005, pp. 128–130). Focusing on the embodied and inter-corporal dimensions and genealogies of social imaginaries, hence may open a relevant field for future research concerning their pre-reflective constitution and practical effectiveness.

92 Cf. Ricœur 2001.

93 This distinction, as I would like to remind the reader, is operative in Habermas' aforementioned position, most explicitly in his talk about an "opaque core" of religion.

94 Ricœur 1991b, pp. 436–463, here: 443 [trans. by Charles Freilich].

95 Kearney 2011b.

96 Cf. Kearney/Zimmermann 2015.

97 Ricœur 1995, p. 35.

98 Ricœur 2000.

on religion in the philosophical discourse of late modernity. These abstract poles indeed have shaped our recent, and especially our secularist understandings of religion in terms of “the other of reason” in a truly hegemonic way. What is most important, hence, is the deconstruction of categories like autonomy and sovereignty. This step appears as the consequence of Ricœur’s attempt to rethink religion in terms of acknowledging the relational character of “oneself-as-another”⁹⁹, exemplified, e.g., in the trope of “welcoming finitude”¹⁰⁰, a formula which epitomizes the liberating implications of such a displacement of autonomy for our understanding of religion in a most adequate way. As Ricœur demonstrates, such acknowledgment is not a merely theoretical gesture. It rather takes place on an everyday basis in the human, all too human “struggle for concordance in discordance,” a struggle whose always endangered success he understands to be deeply dependent on the function of *productive, creative*, and finally *poietic imagination*. On his account, he frequently exemplifies the power of imagination in terms of “narrative imagination,” thus testifying to the role of narration in the constitution of both the person and the community. While he did not offer a systematic account that explores the interrelations of “religious language,” “narrative theory,” and “ritual embodiment” in practice, already these general insights sketch a horizon for analyzing *religious* social imaginaries, their mimetic impact on our ideas of selfhood and the common life,¹⁰¹ as well as the liberating potential of religious imagination.

And indeed, in thinking together his early *philosophy of the will* and “poetics of finitude,” with his linguistically grounded account of *narrativity*, and his late (and unfortunately incomplete) emphasis on the concrete “dialectics between selfhood and otherness,” Ricœur’s work offers a unique approach to confront religion in terms of “creative imagination,” which thence appears as a category that silently underpins the whole range of his oeuvre. While I cannot flesh out the operative function of imagination at the various stages of his work here properly¹⁰², let it suffice to exemplify this role with a view to some instances. To start with, imagination appears first in his early work on “human fallibility”¹⁰³ and “the symbolism of evil,”¹⁰⁴ indicating a practical

99 Ricœur 1992.

100 Gschwandtner 2020.

101 See Gschwandtner 2019.

102 As George Taylor argues, Ricœur’s interest in *productive* imagination is a cardinal thread running through all his work. This idea is supported by recourse to Ricœur’s unpublished Chicago “Lectures on Imagination,” (1975) which provide a systematic account of productive imagination across his various fields of research (George Taylor 2006).

103 Ricœur 1986.

104 Ricœur 1969.

anthropological constant that holds together man's intricate "affective fragility" and the fact of being torn between "the voluntary and the involuntary."¹⁰⁵ In pursuing a related question in the context of his "hermeneutics of the self," Ricœur understands the role of "creative imagination" to be central in the social and cultural "struggle for concordance in discordance," as it shapes our capacities of imaging the other, finally to the extent of imagining *otherwise*. As a prerequisite to this stands Ricœur's attempt to "generalize the concept of imagination," as outlined in his theory of the metaphor, "beyond the sphere of discourse," thus making it bear on "the social imaginary, the touchstone of the practical function of the imagination."¹⁰⁶ Accordingly, in the earlier discussion in "Philosophy and religious language," Ricœur notes not only that in the "imaginative variations" by which "literature works on the real," "new possibilities of being in the world are opened within everyday reality." He furthermore adds that religious texts are "kinds of poetic texts," which "offer modes of redescribing life," too.¹⁰⁷ The related practical, and as he often says *poietic* "unfolding of the world of the text" here attests to a "new being," which results from the "risk" of our practical response to "the appeals to our own most possibilities."¹⁰⁸

In some later work, Ricœur then took an even more explicit turn "from text to action," offering a plethora of reflections concerning the role of imagination in action,¹⁰⁹ a turn that climaxed in his thesis that "social imagination is *constitutive* for social reality."¹¹⁰ Finally, his late discussion of biblical texts and the hermeneutic circles always already existent between "Word," "text," and "believing community" implicitly focuses the role of imagination with regard to the *practical* transformation of these circles "into existential questions"¹¹¹ and "ontological commitment"¹¹². When stating, e.g., that "freedom in the light of hope [...] is nothing else than this *creative imagination* of the possible," this assessment clearly attests to his overall understanding of imagination: not as a "norm-governed productivity" but rather in terms of the "power of giving form to human experience, [...] of redescribing reality" and even of some "original *creation* of meaning."¹¹³

105 Ricœur 1966.

106 Ricœur 1991a, pp. 168 et seq.

107 Ricœur 1985, p. 43.

108 Ricœur 1985, p. 45.

109 Ricœur 1991a.

110 Ricœur 1986, p. 3.

111 Ricœur 2001, p. 135.

112 Ricœur 1985, p. 144.

113 Ricœur 1985, p. 144 [my emphasis].

As one may conclude, Ricœur develops a dynamic, creative, and transformative understanding of imagination, and explicitly associates imagination with the Aristotelian concept of *poiesis*. As Ward explains, for Ricœur the “social imaginary” is, on the one hand, “the practical functioning of the imagination in and between people.”¹¹⁴ The “generative power of imagination,” on the other hand, “enables us to glimpse the surplus that is excessive to the *status quo* [...]” It is such a surplus which “empowers us to act”¹¹⁵ and at once enables us to transform or restructure the social imaginaries in which we always already live. Imagination on this account bears a both reproductive as well as productive character and this is mirrored not only in the fact that we live in various imaginaries *at the same time*, some reflected, some completely inarticulate and habitualized. Following this distinction, we also need to “distinguish [...] between social imaginaries that are dominant and those that are marginal, even marginalized.”¹¹⁶ And while there indeed are *hierarchies* among various imaginaries, the *generative power of imagination*, of other imagined social possibilities, allows for their destabilization. As Ward concludes:

[T]he borders between the effective (the dominant social imaginary) and less-effective or ineffective (other marginal forms of conceiving and living the social life) can never be sealed. This rendering porous of the borders separating the dominant [or ‘ideological,’ M.S.] from the utopian is the work of the imagination, the labor one might say, the *poiesis*. I would, following Ricœur, see that it is the imagination that makes possible such destabilizations, fostering ongoing transitions, readjustments, painful juxtapositions and transformations. [...] The work of the imagination with respect to a social imaginary is transformative, utopian and critical of ruling interests and values.¹¹⁷

In closing this little *tour de force* through Ricœur’s sometimes scattered discussions of imagination and what he calls “the big laboratory of the imaginary,”¹¹⁸ let me note what I deem most interesting in his by no way systematic reflections on the topic. This is the fact that he understands the trope of the “social imaginary” to be invested with the *irreducible ambiguities of imagination*: on the one part, it is either “norm-governed” or “transformative”¹¹⁹, on the other

¹¹⁴ Ward 2005, p. 130.

¹¹⁵ Ward 2005, p. 136.

¹¹⁶ Ward 2005, p. 136.

¹¹⁷ Ward 2005, pp. 135 et seq.

¹¹⁸ Ricœur 2002, p. 164.

¹¹⁹ Ricœur 1995, p. 144.

part, it functions either in a “primordial” or in a “distorted” way.¹²⁰ Following Mannheim’s exposition of a basic “*noncongruence*” between human experience and historical reality, he accordingly writes:

Individuals as well as collective entities [...] are always already related to social reality in a mode other than that of immediate participation, following the figures of non-coincidence, which are, precisely, those of the social imaginary.¹²¹

The two poles of *ideology* and *utopia*, as to his assessment, thus always already *permeate* our functioning social imaginaries on a most basic or elementary level;¹²² they are two forms of a radical, “constituting imagination” by which society symbolizes itself.¹²³ This is an idea that clearly undermines Mannheim’s way of opposing these apparently contradictory phenomena.¹²⁴ As Ricœur holds, however, the everyday “integrative function of ideology and the subversive function of utopia” *together* embody the most original levels of symbolic social ordering and practical recreation. Their “crisscrossing,” as Ricœur puts it, mirrors “two fundamental directions of the social imaginary,” with the consequence that their “tension [...] is insurmountable,” but also what makes the social world tick. Understood as most basic and radical forces, however, they also bear a potential for *dysfunction*, which Ricœur in both cases proposes to understand as a “pathology of imagination.”¹²⁵

If we take these insights seriously, they can help us to formulate an important conclusion for understanding our initial problem, that is, the vexed relationship between “the religious” and “the secular,” and their violent potentials. Without a doubt, to approach such an understanding at all, we first need to accommodate Asad’s insight that “the secular” is “neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it [...] nor a simple break from it”¹²⁶. Its intersections rather are varying and intricate and consequently “the concept of the secular cannot do without the idea of religion”¹²⁷. This assessment, however, remains abstract in terms of *how* their intricate relationship may after all be thought. It is exactly in this context that Ricœur’s focus on the

120 Ricœur 1991a, pp. 183–187.

121 Ricœur 1991a, p. 182.

122 Cf. Ricœur 1991a, p. 182.

123 Ricœur 1991a, pp. 183 et seq.

124 Mannheim 1997 [1929].

125 Cf. Ricœur 1991a, p. 187.

126 Asad 2003, p. 25.

127 Asad 2003, p. 200.

social imaginary's primordial ambiguity proves helpful. It clearly demonstrates that "we reach this sphere [sc. the social imaginary] *only through the figures of false consciousness*" and thus may "take possession of the creative power of the imagination *only in a critical relation* with these two figures of false consciousness"¹²⁸ i.e., their pathological dysfunctions. Yet acknowledging the dysfunction on one part requires but to trust in the functioning of the other, and vice versa. Acknowledging this intertwining between the two sides of the social imaginary, now viewed in terms of their potential for reciprocal illumination, could lead us beyond the parasitic relationship between the doctrine of secularism and the trope of religious violence I have attempted to single out in the preceding chapters. Such parasitism, as I have argued, goes back to a basic conflation of freedom and sovereignty. Habitually marked by this "original sin" (Arendt) of political theory, we do not see that it is not in the affirmation of the real or actual, but only "in the freedom of the imagination" as a "passion for the possible," (Kierkegaard) that may arise "what could be termed the imagination of freedom."¹²⁹

To assess this yet unthought potential of a truly *poietic* imagination, however, requires what I propose to call a *decolonization of imagination*. This gesture would entail a double liberation from, on the one hand, the avatars of modern, disengaged reason (most notably the ideals of progress and dialectical reconciliation), which distort the productive nature of social (and esp. religious) imagination on instrumental/discursive grounds, and, on the other hand, the idols of confessional unconditionals, which but repudiate its truly in-finitival, transformative power. What might finally result from such a gesture and what we would need to cultivate in order to escape our inherently violent modern social imaginaries, is the avowal of non-sovereignty and vulnerability as the marker of any transcendent principle, be it religious or political.¹³⁰ As such it would call for the risk of a co-participation, thus exposing its dependency and vulnerability, while poietically transforming such "passion for the possible"¹³¹ into a "weak force" (*force faible*) (Derrida) of joint transformation:

In speaking of an ontotheology of sovereignty, I am referring here, under the name of God, this One and Only God, to the determination of a

¹²⁸ Ricœur 1991a, p. 187.

¹²⁹ Ricœur 1991a, p. 178.

¹³⁰ While I cannot unfold this argument here, evidence for the insight that sovereignty is but the "heritage of a barely secularized theology" (Derrida) can be found in a line of thought from Hobbes and Schmitt, to Derrida and Caputo. See also my discussion of Goldstone above.

¹³¹ Kearney 1991, p. 42.

sovereign, and thus indivisible, omnipotence. For wherever the name of God would allow us to think something else, for example a vulnerable non-sovereignty, one that suffers and is divisible, one that is mortal even, capable of contradicting itself or of repenting (a thought that is neither impossible nor without example), it would be a completely different story, perhaps even the story of a god who deconstructs himself in his ipseity.¹³²

Such a “different story” might be found, to breach just one possible pathway in concluding, in the ancient idea of “theopoiesis,” already touched upon by ancient Eastern scholars like Ephrem of Syria, Irenaeus, or Basil of Caesarea. Here, however, is not the place to tell it¹³³ – and also not to assess the hauntingly tantalizing religious possibility that even such a radical human creativity always entails:

What should happen if [like these Church fathers, M.S.] we should invert the metaphor, if we should see the image of God not as an imposed mark but as the striking power of human creativity?¹³⁴

Nowhere, I would conclude with Wall, we can find assurance that a “*poetics* of the will (in the sense of describing the will’s Createdness) may (not) imply also a *poetics of the will* (the will’s own capability for Creator-like Creativity)”¹³⁵ and that the exposed “passion for the possible”¹³⁶ is not turned into a sovereign subreption of the actual. What still remains of it is a crack, which makes clear that not only faith and reason are the sources of religion within the limits of reason alone: it’s rather violence and care that take us beyond.

Biography

Michael Staudigl (*1971), Docent, Dr. habil., teaches philosophy at the Department of Philosophy, University of Vienna, Austria. Granted several

¹³² Derrida 2005, p. 157.

¹³³ Exemplary work in this direction can be found in Richard Kearney’s *The Art of Atheism* (Kearney 2018, cf. 2001) or Catherine Keller’s *Intercarnations* (Keller 2017).

¹³⁴ Ricœur 1965, pp. 110 et seq.

¹³⁵ Wall 2005, p. 53.

¹³⁶ Cf. Ricœur: “Freedom in the Light of Hope” [trans. by Robert Sweeney], in: Ricœur 1991b, pp. 398–420. The trope “Passion for the possible,” which is vibrant in Ricœur’s overall work and which testifies to a variety of sources, is explored in detail by Vanhoozer 1990.

research fellowships, he worked in Freiburg, Prague, Louvain-la-Neuve and New York. From 2000–2002 he was as a scientific assistant at the psycho-traumatological ambulance ESRA, Vienna; from 2003–2010 a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna; from 2003–2006 he held an APART-fellowship of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. From 2007 onwards he directed several research grants funded by the FWF (Austrian Science Funds), most recently the bilateral project “The Return of Religion as a Challenge for Thought” (with Branko Klun, Slovenia) and the stand-alone project “Secularism and its Discontents: Toward a Phenomenology Religious Violence.”

Selected recent Publications: *Phänomenologie der Gewalt* (Springer: 2015, English transl. forthcoming at Northwestern Univ. Press); Co-Ed., *Konturen europäischer Gastlichkeit* (Velbrück 2016); *Gesichter der Gewalt* (Fink 2014); Co-Ed., *Figuren der Transzendenz* (Königshausen & Neumann 2013); Ed., *Phenomenologies of Violence* (Brill 2013); Co-Ed., *Bedingungslos? Zum Gewaltpotential unbedingter Ansprüche im Kontext politischer Theorie* (Velbrück 2014); Ed., *Alfred Schutz and Religion* (Special Issue *Human Studies*, 40/4: 2017); Co-Ed., *Beyond Myth and Enlightenment: Reconsidering Religion* (Special Issue *Journal for Cultural and Religious theory* 17/2: 2018); Ed., *Phenomenologies of Religious Violence* (Special Issue *Continental Philosophy Review*, forthcoming 52/1: 2019).

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