

Izvirni znanstveni članek/Article (1.01)

Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly 79 (2019) 2, 395—410

Besedilo prejeto/Received:08/2019; sprejeto/Accepted:08/2019

UDK/UDC: 165.18:2-184.2

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2019/02/Alvis>

Jason W. Alvis

Anti-Event: A Case for Inconspicuousness in Religious Experience

Proti-dogodek: zagovor neopaznega pri religiozni izkušnji

Abstract: It generally goes assumed that philosophical movements provide the fundamental inspiration and content for new theological reflection. Yet it also is the case that some philosophical concepts are secularized Christian theological concepts. Contemporary »postmodern« philosophy, for example, holds to the idea of »the event« as essential to its parting ways with the Modern philosophical tradition; an idea that is strikingly similar to how individual experiences of »revelation« have been understood in the Christian tradition, both as a personal and political phenomenon/phenomenality. Further, remaining unreflectively and theoretically beholden to the idea of the event may actually entail falling into its more negative form, the »spectacle«. By calling into question some of the negative potentials that clinging to such a notion could pose, this paper proposes a developed notion of »inconspicuous« as a means of countering such negative potentials. It engages the work of Heidegger, Debord, Janicaud and others in order to provide another angle by which it is possible to interpret the by now well-known »Theological Turn in French Phenomenology«. If over-reliance upon the concept of »the event« may fall prey to overemphasizing the outsourcing of imagination to a third party so that an agent might benefit from the novelty of surprise, difference, and newness, then both theological and philosophical engagements with »the event« run the risk also of becoming a »spectacle«.

Keywords: inconspicuous, spectacle, religion, event, phenomenology

Povzetek: Običajno se predpostavlja, da filozofska gibanja prinašajo temeljni navdih in vsebino novim teološkim razmišljanjem. Toda istočasno drži, da so premnoga filozofska pojmovanja le sekularizirana različica krščanskih teoloških pojmov. Sodobna »postmoderna« filozofija, na primer, kot točko razhajanja z novoveško modernim filozofskim izročilom izpostavlja idejo »dogodka«, ki močno spominja na način, kako so bile posamezne izkušnje »razodetja« razumljene v krščanskem izročilu tako na ravni osebnega kot tudi političnega fenomena/fenomenalnosti. Poleg tega pa lahko nereflektirana teoretična privrženost ide-

ji dogodka vodi k njegovi negativni različici – dogodku kot »spektaklu«. Z izpostavitvijo nekaterih negativnih potencialov, ki jih nosi nekritično oklepanje pojma dogodka, ta članek ponuja koncept »neopaznosti« kot možnost zoperstavitve tovrstnim negativnim potencialom. Članek premišljuje dela Heideggerja, Deborda, Janicauda in drugih ter ponuja nov zorni kot za soočenje z dobro znanim »teološkim obratom v francoski fenomenologiji«. Pretirano poudarjanje pojma »dogodka« lahko vodi v prekomerno pomembnost domišljijških podob, ki si jih želijo tretje osebe, da dogodek zaradi novosti, presenečenja in drugačnosti pridobi na privlačnosti. Toda s tem tako teološko kot filozofsko ukvarjanje z »dogodkom« tvega, da se pretvori v »spektakel«.

Ključne besede: neopazno, spektakel, religija, dogodek, fenomenologija

It often is understood that contemporary Philosophy – known for its means of developing logical distinctions and arguments in a *clear* way and without recourse to contradictions – often runs counter to practical religious experiences and revelation – which attest to the enchanting, unpredictable, shocking, and »eventful« nature of life beyond epistemological conditions. Yet in many ways, these two tendencies or aspects of understanding the human condition share more similarities than we imagine, as both focus upon, and seek to unfurl in their own ways, what *shines* with apparent brilliance and what *shocks* with an eventful spectacularity. From Tillich's *Unbedingtheitserlebnis* (1940) to Badiou's ontology of *l'événement* (2013), the idea of »the event« has become a central means of describing the most fundamental ways the human condition (on both autonomous and societal levels) receives its continued shaping and meaning of influence. That is, »the event« is a primary *Stichwort* of postmodern philosophical discourse in general, as well as in contemporary postmodern theology and theory.

How is the idea of the event presented in such discourses and theories? It was Heidegger whose thought in the mid-30's (surely influenced by historical »events« such as the world wars) was transformed by this key term, *das Ereignis*, or »the event of appropriation«. The »overcoming« (*Überwindung*) of the blindness expressed in the metaphysics that dominates our Western age is an expression of the Event, and the Event is a showing (Er-eigen) or bringing under our eyes' visibility (*Er-äugen*) that which is lit up in clarity in order that we can take responsibility for something as our own (*eigen*); to accept that our empirical reality is an expression of our metaphysical commitments. It was precisely this ontological aim that Badiou has integrated within his politically-oriented concern with *how* the »Event« is defined as that which is new and disrupts the present political »situation« as »Trans-being« or how something can be *recognized* to bear such newness and disruption. Or for Deleuze, »in all my books, I have tried to discover the nature of the event«, (Deleuze 1995, 141) and »I spent a lot of time writing about this notion of the event« (160). The event follows his symbol of the unpredictable rhizome, which expresses an ontological priority of immanent »Events« over »substances« (Bowden 2011; Zourabichvili, 2012).

This is just to scratch the surface of 20th century postmodern theorists who rely heavily upon the idea – and explication – of cognates of the event within their work, as it is a topic that continues to exert a heavy influence still today by signaling towards political disruption and the upheaval of traditional subjectivity. Further, being passively affected by the shock of the *unpredictable* is essential to notions such as Derrida's »différance«, »messianism«, and event-mentality, or Arendt's optimistic »newness« of natality. Although for Marion »the event« is limited to being one of the 4 (or 5) types of saturated phenomena, held »in the restricted sense, according to quantity« (Marion 2015, 362), it may be that, according to his more recent *Negative Certainties*, it is no longer simply that saturation determines the event, but that the event determines saturation. For »a phenomenon shows *itself* to be all the more saturated when it gives itself with a greater eventness« (362).¹ Most recently, Claude Romano has built an entire phenomenological approach to the event, which »upsets the hierarchy of the agent's objectives, the configuration of his possibilities, the way in which he understands them, and himself in light of them, that is, his world as such« (2015, 15). For him events are fundamentally impersonal, and mark the overall »transformation of the world« (XVI).

I realize the main title of this paper, »Anti-Event«, is rather bold, and I certainly do not dismiss wholesale the value the idea of the event may hold in many instances of thought. Yet one caution needs to be posed to the wholesale reliance upon the idea of the event. My criticism of the contemporary uses of the event hinges upon a) how I perceive a strange deviation from Heidegger's original intent with *Ereignis*, as the *idea* of event today often is automatically praised and broadly applied to all circumstances related to the positive benefit of the contemporary human condition; and b) the negative dark side of being utterly and passively beholden to the novelty that events are supposed to furnish us, thus (and here paradoxically) reinforcing the importance of nature (what gives itself, the world, the conditions that exert their power over us) over freedom (the voluntary, the risk, the agency of action). Indeed, the aforementioned understandings of the event as seemingly coming from nowhere and enrapturing us have a striking parallel to what Guy Debord referred to as a more negative notion of »spectacle«, with which, as he critiqued, western societies are obsessed.² The spectacle, whi-

¹ It is an open question for me if for Marion the greater the degree of unpredictability or »eventness« of a phenomenon signals to the greater the degree of its »saturation« and potency. Since most references to the event are situated according to being *but one* kind of saturated phenomena, it is not entirely clear what weight Marion wishes to give »the event« in his phenomenological approach, for Marion also critiques the very idea of passivity of intuition without passion, which also points to a responsibility to act. What he will refer to elsewhere as »poor« or »common law« phenomena are poor or common because they are predictable; not to mention the fact that Marion's dictum still stands: »so much reduction, so much givenness« (Marion 1998, 203). Regarding the event as a saturated phenomena, »in happening /.../ attests to an unforeseeable origin, rising up from causes often unknown, even absent, at least not assignable, that one would not therefore any longer reproduce, because its constitution would not have meaning« (2002, 31).

² The spectacle says »imagine for me in my place so I do not have to«, and this is not unlike what Robert Pfaler will refer to as »inter-passivity« (Pfaler 2017) like the »canned laughter« on sitcoms.

ch also expresses itself with a phenomenality or »spectacularity«, is the uncritical privileging of whatever automatically grabs attention with the highest degree of bedazzlement, and in a way that presents a certain *Bildung* of reinforcing an overemphasis upon shocking *appearance*.³ The moral consequences of a society of the spectacle operates implicitly by a maxim that auto-ascribes spectacularity with a certain Divine quality: »what appears is good; what is good appears«. Although contemporary post-structuralist theory is quick to judge the »spectacle«, and the proletariat we claim are unreflectively beholden to an undisciplined clicking on flashy political fake news and prescient internet fads, »the event« somehow is given a futural *carte blanche* with unlimited discretionary force as a purely neutral and laudable »idea«.

One also cannot overlook the fact that the event/spectacle is a typology that follows from the secularization of theological concepts, namely in this case, of certain aspects of revelation. Although some Christian denominations would find reference to contemporary revelation as concerning, I take it that revelation is a phenomenon that always necessitates first an individual, phenomenological encounter, as an experience of consciousness. It is in this sense that one can give description of revelation through various ways, for example, as an event. As Fr. Giussani put it in 1968, Christianity arose »as an event. Christianness is a social and historical furrow, but Christiaity is an event«. As expressed recently by Caputo – following Deleuze and Derrida, building his own theology around the event –, overall »religion has the structure of the event, and that theology takes the form of the analysis of that event«. ⁴ The event for him is a pre-personal and »anonymous transcendental field« that gets actualized in the world yet gains its power from calling the individual back and forth: back to its own original creative ability to change, and forth towards becoming and a messianic outside in the play of differences. Although religion has this evental structure, providing the underlying intelligibility of a particular »happening«, the event does not, for Caputo, have a religious structure. They belong to two »different orders«. ⁵

³ Debord here reflects a certain reliance upon Günther Anders here in the sense that he is charting a Western cultural shift. We »Westerners« are no longer obsessed with »being« or »having« but rather »appearing«. (Debord 2005, 10).

⁴ For Caputo, »My notion of the event is inspired by the work of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, which gives it a double valence. On the one hand, events are a kind of pre-personal and anonymous transcendental field, a scene of virtualities or creative potencies which are expressed in names and actualized by things. Events make up a groundless ground, a ground that is not a foundation, a non-originary origin or quasi-arche, a becoming, which recalls the creature to its creative sources and resources. Events represent a kind of »inside« of things and that inside is the more Bergsonian and Deleuzian side of events. On the other hand, the event is the scene of a promise, of a solicitation, which calls the present beyond itself, so that whatever is present is not the event but something that has been and is continually solicited by the event, constituting not the inner vein of becoming, the inside, but the structure of the to-come, the outside. That outside is its more messianic and Derridean side of events. The world is an open-ended non-totalizable totality, an open quasi-system, a linking, a chain of differences, of *différance*, of effects in space and time, history and nature, nature and culture, a complex of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. A theology of the event takes heed of both sides.« (Caputo 2010, 38, n 5)

⁵ Caputo: »To say that religion has the structure of the event is to say that religion gives allegorical expression to the event, so that the parables we find in religion are parables of the event. The event

This striking claim of Caputo's that religion has the structure of the event also could be reversed, especially if we consider that the idea of the event has appeared in a Western philosophy that is undoubtedly enervated by Christianity; that is, *the event also has the structure of this Christianity*. This, especially if one *either* holds to theology as the queen of the sciences, or religion to be an irreducible drive within the *conditio humana*. From a more Catholic perspective, the event is writ large within the language of recent Popes within the 20th century to describe Christianity (Lewis 2019): Francis emphasizes »the amazement of the encounter«, John Paul II the energizing of a »new impetus« and Benedict XVI the decidedly new »horizon« and »direction« events of given-grace bring about in disrupting our rationalisms and discursive formulae.⁶

With its persistent futurity, its overall insistence upon shattering the presently given with something new, the event in contemporary discourse could be interpreted as a secularized expression of some aspects of how *revelation* generally gets understood as a life-course-altering in-breaking into the finite landscape with a super-immanence that transcends the everyday and given. Taking this latter point as a presumption (and here not disagreeing per se with Caputo's insight), the remainder of this paper aims to locate and describe particular aspects of the emphases upon the more negative version of the event within the spectacle, or a spectacular phenomenality, then develops a »phenomenology of the inconspicuous« in response to it. It in fact is possible to define the word »inconspicuous« (or that which is non-apparent, *Unscheinbar*), according to its etymological basis as »co-unter-spectacular« (*spek*). After (1) locating a particularly paradigmatic debate that reflects these tensions within the pejoratively named »Theological turn in French Phenomenology« and the work of Dominique Janicaud, I then (2) introduce Heidegger's notion of a »phenomenology of the inconspicuous« in order to demonstrate three reasons why »inconspicuousness« may be used to give us some hesitation over any wholesale acceptance of the »event«. After demonstrating how this secularized theological notion of the spectacle is an outgrowth of modern philosophical thought with its emphasis upon clarity/appearance, I then demonstrate three ways such a notion of »inconspicuousness« may be used for more theological reflection.

does not »compete« with religion, the way Platonism competes with Aristotelianism, because religion and the event belong to different orders. Religion is something that happens, while the event is not what happens but what is going on in what happens. The event belongs to the order of a virtual or potential complex of operations or openings, while religion belongs to a different order, the order of what is concretely deployed, of what has been opened. The event belongs to the order of conditions, while religion is something unconditioned.« (Caputo 2010, 30)

⁶ Here I am reliant upon Stephen Lewis' reading, and his recognition of their uses of the language of the event. Lewis emphasizes especially that Francis frequently speaks of Christianity as an event (Lewis 2019, 3).

1. From Modern Clarity to Ontotheology

After Heidegger's early theological treatments of St Paul, Augustine, and Luther, and his 1927 diminishment of theology as »ontic« and under the oversight of philosophy, three years later in his 1930/31 Hegel Seminars he calls upon metaphysicians to avoid ontotheology, later qualified in the early 50's as a means whereby philosophy »requires how the deity enters into it«, and refuses to acknowledge the limitations of knowledge. Ever since ontotheology has been that which philosophers within the continental tradition have sought to »overcome« (a very effort that still may be ontotheological), as it points also to how there are implicit theologies hiding within everyone's metaphysics, one task becomes the peeling apart of ontology from theology. Derrida once referred to implicit theologies as »unavowed theologeme[s]«, (2003, 155), which are at work within the social imaginaries of contemporary »secular« life. In a similar vein, in his recent and cleverly titled *The Insistence of God*, John Caputo proposes a synthesis of Hegel's »Protestant Principle« and Tillich's »ultimate concern« in order to conceive of a counter-relativistic »radical« theology in efforts to further continue separating the ontological from the theological.⁷ As he put it 10 years earlier, however, and reflecting his Derridean and Heideggerian influences, »secularism is the continuation of theology by another means«⁸ with its ethically entangled »unconditionals« like legal justice, human rights, or public rationality.⁹

What this approach initiated by Heidegger never seemed to account for are the ways in which the critique of modern philosophical metaphysics could ingrow within contemporary postmodern theory. The former emphasizes appearance and clarity, and the latter (especially as it has become socially embedded) is motivated by the spectacle/event. The former, concerned with appearance and theoretical focus, the latter, insistent upon the unforeseeable, spontaneous, passive, and »evental« dimension of life. In a nutshell, the modern insistence on clarity is sutured to contemporary, »postmodern« insistence on the event.

There are two senses at work here in the association between modern philosophy and clarity. First, when we hear the phrase »clear and distinct«, we of course are reminded of Descartes, for whom those ideas or propositions are indubitably clear and capable of acting as a fundament upon which warrant for an argument can be built. »Triangles have three sides« is a clear and distinct proposition beca-

⁷ For Caputo, Continental Philosophy of Religion is a direct product of the tensions produced in precisely the earlier movement of »Phenomenology and the theological turn«: »The expression ›theological turn‹, coined by Janicaud, was intended as a complaint that philosophy was again becoming a handmaiden of a theological agenda. But it also described a genuine renewal of what had been traditionally called the ›philosophy of religion‹, resulting in a new subdiscipline, a specifically ›Continental philosophy of religion‹, offering an alternative to the reigning neo-Scholastic and analytic approaches, conceived in the spirit of Heidegger's critique of ›onto-theo-logic‹ and his meditations on ›non-objectifying thinking‹. God is not an object for a subject, not the referent of a propositional assertion, not the subject matter of a demonstration, all staples of ›modernity‹.« (Caputo 2012)

⁸ For Caputo »secularization always presupposes a theology to secularize, so that, for better or for worse, secularism is the continuation of theology by another means« (Caputo 2006, 139).

⁹ As Caputo continues, sovereignty is the »heritage of a barely secularized theology« (Caputo 2006, 140).

use it is relatively self-evident, as the conclusion already is contained within the proposition. As Descartes understood, this is *how* consciousness *grasps* information: constantly sorting out the clear from the unclear, which also entails distinguishing the valuable from the insignificant. Such propositions lead to metaphysical certainty, *Adequatio*— a truth of »correctness« armed with unquestionably that sutures Clarity and truth. Second, this clarity involves implicitly a religious dimension. Without going into too much detail regarding his ontological argument, it is the clear and distinct idea of God that reasserts Descartes' own existence and indubitability. This three-fold argument follows the following structure: 1. that which I clearly and distinctly perceive to be contained in the idea of something is true of that particular thing. 2. I clearly and distinctly perceive that necessary existence is contained in the idea of God. And 3. we therefore might conclude God exists. Clarity of this perception (or at least the intuition of what is obvious) becomes immediately associated with divinity *and* to some degree, *vice versa*.

The twin impulses of philosophical clarity and the unpredictability of eventhood can lead us to some extent in the direction of phenomenology, a self-proclaimed inheritor of Cartesian self-consciousness that seeks truth through *focused description* of things as they present and illuminate themselves in differing modes. It is of no coincidence that the word phenomenology, rooted in *Phainesthai*, relates to the Greek *phōs*, which concerns what »burns« and thus shines its revelatory light upon something to make it obvious. The tendency has been to reproach phenomenologists as claiming full right to allow them control over the things of this world, as their illuminators. Yet it is actually in this total commitment to the clear, obvious, and illuminated that – like Plato's cave dwellers stuck in passive stupor – phenomenology's practitioners run the risk of abstract *prehension* and detailed attention, that loses the textures of the lived involvement with that which is – or in their temporal element, have been – perceived. In other terms, when a phenomenological study of experience is limited to clear »presentation« of the given, its results may yield little value because illumination always, by its very nature, is limited with its scope-like focusing. Without refracting this illumination back into the everyday, what is achieved through this focus borders on abstraction and reification. While one might laud phenomenology for its ability to create distance from the thing perceived in order to get a better grip on it, there also comes a sense of urgency upon us for experiences do not allow us to presume we are inactive. As we might learn from the lives of religious mystics, »we are either moving in the direct of verticality or in the direction of idolatry« (Steinbock 2009, 6; 10).

2. Janicaud and the Theological Turn in French Phenomenology

Stunningly paradigmatic of making phenomenology a question unto itself, and of inquiring into it as an approach that can/cannot be used to study religious experience (as well as to its relation with »clarity« and illumination) are the debates

that began in the 60's regarding the work of Levinas, Ricœur, Derrida, Henry, Chrétien, and Marion. These debates reached a climax in 1991, with Dominique Janicaud pejoratively dubbing this work to mark *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (The theological turn in french phenomenology).¹⁰ For him, these thinker's works made them religious wolves in phenomenological sheep's clothing. They were accused of misusing phenomenological language to address theological interests, and this was deemed inconsistent with Husserl's »methodological atheism« (in §58 of *Ideen*), the aim of which is to study the activities within pure consciousness with a presuppositionlessness in our descriptive enterprises *that does hinder an accurate description of whatever appears*. Claiming they presumed an idealist *metaphysica specialis* to describe an *invisible* hinterland that does *not* appear *clearly* and *obviously* to the senses, Janicaud was motivated by seeking to protect the method from any delusional transcendence seeking to infiltrate immanent life. It is perfectly fine if an individual wishes to believe in the transcendence of God and any invisible hinter-world, nevertheless it »must remain excluded /.../ insofar as this field must be a field of pure consciousness.« (Janicaud 2000) Phenomenology, after all, describes things as they are constituted *prior to any evidential character* of epistemological justification, and religion seems to be a laminate that gets placed onto the experiences of the everyday lifeworld.

At various points during the last 30 years, the very same critique has been turned back on Janicaud's insistence upon methodological atheism, which could just as easily entail a different kind of a priori requirement by claiming that theological concepts putatively *cannot* appear for investigation, and that religion is not phenomenologically describable, thereby limiting phenomenology's wide-open, »unsuspecting« horizon. Yet Janicaud raises some reasonable caution that needs to be considered carefully: if any claims or »prejudgments« are to be taken seriously as having social-explanatory power, then taken to its extreme the method can be commandeered easily to proclaim as *true* whatever *can be imagined*. For Husserl, although immanent reality is essenceless without a transcendental and intersubjective connection to the outside world, we are to take his »golden rule« of phenomenology very seriously: to not to claim anything that we »*cannot make essentially transparent to ourselves by reference to consciousness* and on purely immanent lines.« Especially in an age that once held religion antithetical to the secular hypothesis, Janicaud thus brings to a climax a central double-bind of any phenomenology of religion: phenomenological description must be presuppositionless and not import what cannot be valid as undisguised and obvious (*selbstverständlich*) upon its horizon. Yet, any methodological »mustness« also can just as well limit what phenomenology is capable of achieving for thought to think. »Method« may leave phenomenology under threat of the de facto abandonment of the primacy of description and thus dissolution into epistemology; yet an unruly

¹⁰ This of course was not the first iteration of phenomenology of religion, which has a rich—although at times scattered—heritage, from Gerardus van der Leeuw's 1925 contribution to more recent attempts of James Cox, to use the approach as a method for empirical sociology.

openendedness to a description of religious phenomena easily waters-down the approach, leaving the findings threatened by being trapped in abstraction as *solus ipse*, and lacking social power.

Within Janicaud's critique of these young French thinkers, something goes generally overlooked, yet it is what he calls the core, »sick root« of their work: they relied on Heidegger's »phenomenology of the inconspicuous«. Under this notion, which concerns claims to the viability of »the nonvisible«, Janicaud claims even »the most audacious soundings stand permitted«. That is, anyone can claim anything as true so long as they can reference its status as »inapparent«. (Janicaud 2000, 30–31; 28–29) Janicaud briefly returns to this notion over a decade later, insisting that »the inconspicuous« is »not reducible to a mere appendix to the thought of the later Heidegger«, and indeed presents »a new meditative form of thought« (2005, 75). At the very least, it certainly is not a banal or marginal concept, for it is »an oxymoron, a supreme paradox, or a disconcerting impossibility« (1998, 106). This somewhat ambiguous idea of inconspicuousness did not appear formally until Heidegger's 1973 *Zähringen Seminar*, in which he claimed: »Phenomenology is a path that leads away to come before /.../ and it lets that before which it is led show itself. This phenomenology is a *Phänomenologie des Unscheinbaren* [inconspicuous] /.../ Indeed, in conceiving [*Be-greifen*], there is the gesture of taking possession.« Yet »that which sight takes into view, it does not conceive.«¹¹

What might this »approach« or typology of phenomenology concern beyond this ambiguity? What of the phenomena it describes? Would they be phenomena that 1) have-not-yet-appeared, 2) have-appeared-yet-are-obscured, 3) never-are-to-appear, or 4) always-already-remain-in-the-blind-spots-of-appearance?

3. Phenomenology of the Inconspicuous

I have tried to fill in some of the gaps where Heidegger – likely intentionally – remained opaque (or as he might say »fortuitously ambiguous«) by developing this notion further, then applying it to Religious Experience. It is clear that for Heidegger »The inconspicuous is by no means to be confused with »the invisible« and that we are always to begin with our immanent place and moment in the world. As addressed throughout his works, the mundane things of the world – carpentry shoes, workers' hammers – paradoxically have the greatest potential to impact us in the world. This, it seems, is one of the motivations that have driven interest in the inconspicuous.

Building upon, yet also departing from Heidegger's work, here is my running definition of inconspicuousness/*Unscheinbarkeit*: it characterizes an experience of phenomena whose aspects of intelligibility oscillate between presence and

¹¹ Heidegger, 2003, 80. Or, in German: »So verstanden ist die Phänomenologie ein Weg, der hinführt vor /.../ und sich das zeigen läßt, wovor er geführt wird. Diese Phänomenologie ist eine Phänomenologie des Unscheinbaren.« (Heidegger 1986, 397)

withdrawal, specifically *in a way that disturbs (with a very unique »ability«)* the presumptions of both the *spectacular* (what snatches our attention) and any vacuous, empty, or banal ideal of »unthinkability« (what leads attention to indifference).¹² Inconspicuousness thus is paradoxical, running contrary to expectation, and resisting extraction from that within which it mundanely is integrated in the *Lebenswelt*, like a wallflower. It may refer to something with which we are in relation, yet as unobtrusive (*Unauffällig*), and as without *signifying* itself by being bright (*leuchtend*), manifested (*offenbar*), or clear (*klar*). Since it is not awareness-grabbing (*Aufmerksamkeit erregen*), it thus is transfixed with a phenomenality that is apresentative and inconceivable.¹³

Some phenomenal experiences indeed actively evade any attempt to be grasped directly, and they require a broadened vision to be experienced because they are so deeply imbedded and integrated within the lifeworld. The visual example of the Mona Lisa smile depicts this quite nicely: It enigmatically only can be seen through a peripheral glance that eludes the conceptual grasp of directedness, thus *requiring some creative imagination*. That is, the Mona Lisa smile is not given without co-creation. This inconspicuousness is *essential to the experience* of her smile.¹⁴ Such experiences help us deprivelege, even if but momentarily, our prevailing presumptions regarding presentation, and our own relational opening to the world as co-constituted.

This leads us also back to the overall interests of phenomenology. One of the most relied upon half-truths of phenomenology is that it provides only pedantic and painstakingly detailed descriptions of phenomena. Yet more fundamentally, it concerns »the how« of appearance (Husserl's »*Gegenstände im wie*«), the suspension (*epoché*) also of all presumptions regarding *appearing*.¹⁵ Any detailed or »ontological« description cannot be untethered therefore from its turn *to recontextualize* the experience back in its holistic context. Otherwise, we end up with a hyperfocus that births, somewhat ironically, a certain deficit of attention to no longer see the thing in its lifeworld or environment, thus ultimately *losing a grip on the thing itself as it was given*. Husserl's categorial/sensical intuition distinction inspires towards an example: When I write with my pen, I am not engaged in a judgement but a state of affair: the *hyle* of that pen (blue, ink, cylindrical, etc) in fact (and thankfully!) withdraws in favor of the pen-in-use. And thus the most *objecti-*

¹² I rely here upon the German ending *-barkeit*, which points to a thing as dynamic and active.

¹³ Françoise Dastur interprets, Heidegger's »inapparent« is »the nonappearance that resides in all appearing, the event itself of apparition and the giving of being« (Dastur 2002 146). Jacques Taminiaux, who played a decisive role in the early reception of the Zähringen seminar, concludes that the com-ing-into-appearance of things is inconspicuous insofar as it always is transfixed with an inaccessible »excessiveness at the very heart of seeing« (Taminiaux 1977, 79).

¹⁴ As the neuro physicist Eric Kandel recently discovered, our peripheral »cone« vision allows us to experience things that otherwise are impossible to experience in central »foveal« vision because despite not being able to »perceive details well, [it] employs a holistic analysis that enables us to see.« Indeed »We can perceive things in peripheral vision – like Mona Lisa' smile – that we miss in central vision« and in this case »peripheral vision may often be better than foveal vision« (Kandel 2012, 246).

¹⁵ Phenomenology's aim is to describe this »how« structure or phenomenality. See Husserl 1991, 121.

vely or materially present becomes inconspicuous. If this were not the case, then I would be stuck as a kind of *Grüßelsucht* of appearances, compulsively obsessed and fixated upon only a few material aspects, never even using the pen.

4. Inconspicuousness as Useful for Describing Religious Experiences

Among the many possible tasks for a phenomenology of religious experience, there are three that stand out to benefit from the concept of »inconspicuousness«: 1. to develop concepts that do justice to religious experience and revelation *as lived*; 2. to probe the *socially* influenced notions of God's phenomenality; and 3: to describe the types of evidence appropriate to religion's modes of givenness. I will sketch here a few ways the notion of inconspicuousness has been employed to take up these three tasks, keeping in mind the aforementioned matrix of clarity/spectacle and event as a backdrop.

1. Religious Experience can be understood as an inconspicuous and paradoxical kind of »unveiling«. It typically gets conceived that only *exceptional* or superlative experiences of everyday life are religious, and thus our philosophical devices are employed to study it from a particular *arch* that conceives religion as ever in reference to a superlative, namely, from *abstracted distanciation*. Religion, for example, has been theorized as the experience of »invisible things« (Jevons) that overwhelm us with »the greatest« holiness (Otto), as distanciated from us a pure and untouchable (Eliade), our most laudible or »ultimate concern« (Tillich) or a kind of system of life-ordering *penultimate* symbols (Geertz).¹⁶ Although these theories may be an historically accurate means to discuss normatively some aspects of religious traditions, overemphasizing the »awe« and distance of revelation may come at the expense of forgetting the re-joining (*re-ligare*) of the sacred *within* the profane and in a way that a spectacular clarity is given even more credence.

Inconspicuousness might help draw our attention to the exceptional from within the insignificant; the holistic imbeddedness of revelations and their unique kinds of unveiling from-within a certain atmosphere essential to their expression. If an experience of revelation is meant to be shocking and inherently *paradoxical*, then the content of this shocking should come *precisely* from out of *unexpected* and non-spectacular things, places, and people. Following Heidegger, there is a *saving* power of the ordinary, especially that which resists passive assimilation into technological efficiency and enframing machination. And indeed those of us not fortunate enough to have had spectacular supernatural experiences must find

¹⁶ As Geertz claims »[A] religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts (2) to establish powerful, pervasive, long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence« (Geertz 1966, 4). Or as Tillich puts it »Religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-giving substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself« (Tillich 1964, 42).

revelation among St Teresa's pots and pans or what the lowly kitchen assistant, Brother Lawrence (who some thought had a mental disability) commonly referred to as »Common Business«.

2. Next, inconspicuousness can be a means of describing the kind of social-explanatory power or paradoxical *evidence* unique to such religious experience. Usually evidence is achieved by isolating information relevant to an experience or phenomenon, then applying it back to the whole context to learn something new about it (this is what happens in a court of law for example). Yet in the case of religious experiences, which inherently are paradoxical, it seems the means to attaining the »evidences« of their phenomenality concerns locating what *cannot* be isolated or extracted from the whole. Experience, the means of grasping from within the steady stream of consciousness, takes on a different sense when it becomes »religious« insofar as it ascribes intelligibility and meaningfulness without total comprehension. To attest to an inconspicuous religious experience, then, is to bear witness and give testimony to that which strangely is qualifiable neither as visible nor invisible.

Coincidentally, the root of the German *Unscheinbar* is *schein*, a ticket, warrant (such as *Der Fahrschein*, or travel ticket) or *evidence*. It concerns licenses and tickets that present their reasons easily and clearly upon command. Thus, what is *Unscheinbar* furnishes an index of questionability both to whatever presents itself as obvious and neutral, and any »direct« and univocal manifestation of its evidence. It is not *contrary*, however, to evidence. It seems an »inconspicuous evidence« used to characterize Religious experience would shroud its warrant in a unique way *necessarily* because the vast intelligibility of the *content* is so overwhelmingly significant that it cannot be extracted from the *form* of presentation. Such evidence would not attain any such level of provability, for this would entail that the person or figure of religious experience (often, although not always associated with gods or the Absolute) can be *conjured* upon our command.

Yet on the other hand, inconspicuousness is not the same as invisibility, and what is given also would not simply slip into inconceivability. Such an evidence would thus *give itself* as *non-isolatable* in a way that its non-isolation becomes, itself, a phenomenon of experience. It attests to how »evidence« is not univocal, but indeed needs to be understood in proportion to that which it hopes to represent. Indeed, not all evidences are the same: being qualified to drive a car is not the same as the evidence of »qualification« or »defense« of one's religious experience. And since evidence also is meant to have socially explanatory power beyond *solus ipse*, the experiencer also would *express* that evidence and *enact* it in the world in a way that she emulates the phenomenality of that which she experienced as inconspicuous. That is, the individual herself would present evidence through acting in the world, and give witness inconspicuously as culturally imbedded and integrated.

3. And thirdly, inconspicuousness could be a characteristic of God. One of the most often relied upon character traits of God is invisibility or hiddenness, often

leading to God's unthinkability. Schellenberg's popular »Hiddenness of God« argument for example hinges upon precisely this to prove God's non-existence (Schellenberg 2015). The argument builds from the premise that people fail to believe in God by no fault of their own, and concludes therefore that this »hiddenness« of God contradicts that God is all loving. The salience of the argument pivots around a rather univocal dichotomy between the invisible and the visible, between the hidden and the revealed. Yet in thinking with Levinas in his *Of God who Comes to Mind*, is not hiddenness itself a phenomenon, and more than a total privation? The task then becomes deciphering *what kind* of hiddenness is experienced. Or as Tomás Halík has put it, in some way channelling both Levinas and Schellenberg: »If there is something that might be described as the religious experience of modern man, then it is the experience of God's hiddenness.« (2016, 36)

A phenomenology of the inconspicuous helps us work out in greater detail (yet again, without »conceiving« fully) the various *kinds* of hiddenness that could characterize God and God's phenomenality. The false dichotomy between unconcealedness and concealment (*Unverborgenheit*), should instead be thought according to distinct modes (*Weisen*) and kinds (*Arten*), for example, such as those of *displacement* (such as setting aside, making absent, destroying, or withdrawing) and those of *sheltering* (like preserving, safeguarding, rarifying, or treasuring). The claim that inconspicuousness is one means of characterizing God could be interpreted in many different ways, but here I rely here upon Levinas, whose »Other« is marked by a riddle and paradox: the Other becomes a phenomenologically inflected inconspicuous divinity. Here divine omnipotence is not just »all powerful«, but »all potential« (as Catherine Keller insists). It would mark precisely the cunning of God to integrate within the marginal and insignificant. This is not a defect. Not unlike what political theorists call the *détournement* of capitalist production, a subversion of the spectacular *from within* the mundane, is a core paradox of God's phenomenality.

5. Conclusion

Concluding, over-emphasizing the shockingly spectacular eventhood, unpredictability, or enchanting newness of religious experience may leave its subjects in a strangely *passive* state; yet a surgeon-like precision that demands that all experiences fit into the model of direct appearance and clarity often lack attention to the ethical context, texture, or lifeworld of presentation. Our contemporary society obsessed with spectacles, and its entanglement in implicit theological imaginaries, is not simply antithetical to philosophical clarity, *but also its product*. One reason: the modern search for clarity that has insisted upon a solipsistic and individual way of establishing experience of the world has been inherited by the postmodern, which expresses this search in its even greater emphasis upon appearing, as our present, media-frenzied society of the spectacle demonstrates. The search for »clarity« has shifted from ideas to images.

This is not to discount either the modern or postmodern projects, however, yet to demonstrate the productivity of their internal contradictions and challenges. As we learn from Freud's *Civilization and its discontents*, praiseworthy and necessary social imperatives entail the provocation of the very negative effects that seek to erode those imperatives. Likewise, the hopes for philosophical clarity and distinction inadvertently have played a role in birthing what intuitively seems to be their opposite, yet in fact are their stunning discontent – our contemporary society of the spectacle, obsessed with images and illusions. Today we live with the fundamental anxiety that we are just one click away from missing the essential; with the information not being in the form of words, but rather of images and hype. The unconditioned call to *comprehensivity*, i.e. *to see and experience it all with a still focused and abstracted perception*, innervates our social relations and quietly motivates our thinking.

Given this context, should the idea of »the event«, which fundamentally refers to the experience of being enraptured with something, be a primary and fundamental *telic end* for philosophical thinking? Similarly, can there be any salvation from the aforementioned and related idea of the spectacle? And thinking theologically, could it be that theologies that overemphasize revelation as all shock, awe, and hype – think here of St Paul's being knocked down from his horse and blinded as *the* paradigm of revelation – in part be to blame for insisting that we await whatever spectacle God is going to bring us? I have sought here to point out simply that there are phenomenal experiences that do not fit into either category of »shining with brilliance« or »not shining«, and rather present their phenomenality through »counter shining«. Returning once again to the etymological basis of *inconspicuous*: at the root of *conspicere* is *specere* or »spec«, the basis of *spectacle*. It thus is necessary to not overlook how »inconspicuous« is precisely »the-counter spectacular« – it acts not as a simple, passive privation, but rather with a force and dynamic *ability*. This counter spectacularity could mark the subversion of the holy, the *detournement* of God, neither through the provision of an image, nor through the removal of one. We scholars of religion who are interested in the idea of »the event« (perhaps even Christianity is, par excellence, *the* religion of the event!) would do well to mind the difference between looking-at and looking-longingly-at in order to prevent a total beholdenness to a passive *awaiting itself*. Abraham looks at (שָׁקַף *šāqap*) Sodom, while Lot's wife looks longingly back (טָבַחַ *tābet*) at it (Genesis 19). The former experiences the event by actively taking account of the breadth of the present context; the latter surrenders to the event as a spectacle of the desired, ultimately turning into a pillar of salt.

Acknowledgements

This article was made possible due to the generous support of two research grants from the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). It was conceived within the framework of the project »Secularism and its Discontents. Toward a Phenomenology of Religi-

ous Violence« [P 29599], and concluded within the project »Revenge of the Sacred: Phenomenology and the Ends of Christianity in Europe« [P 31919].

References

- Alvis, Jason.** 2018. *The Inconspicuous God: Heidegger, French Phenomenology, and the Theological Turn*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvqh1z>
- Badiou, Alain.** 2013. *Being and Event*. Trans O. Feltham. London: Bloomsbury.
- Bosteels, Bruno.** 2010. Thinking the event: Alain Badiou's philosophy and the task of critical theory. In: *Emerging Trends in Continental Philosophy*. Ed. Todd May. Durham UK: Taylor and Francis Press.
- Bowden, Sean.** 2011. *The Priority of Events*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Caputo, John.** 2006. Without sovereignty, without Being. In: *Religion and Violence*. Ed. Clayton Crockett. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- . 2010. The Sense of God: A Theology of the Event with Special Reference to Christianity. In: *Between Philosophy and Theology: Contemporary Interpretations of Christianity*, 27–42. Eds. Christophe Brabant and L. Boeve. London: Routledge.
- . 2012. Continental Philosophy of Religion: Then, Now, Tomorrow. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2:347–360.
- Dastur, Françoise.** 2002. La pensée à venir: une phénoménologie de l'inapparent? In: *L'avenir de la philosophie est-il grec?* Ed. Catherine Collobert. Saint-Laurent, Quebec: Fides.
- Debord, Guy.** 2005. *Society of the Spectacle*. Trans Ken Knabb. London: Rebel Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles.** 1997. *Negotiations: 1972–1990*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Espinete, David.** 2017. *Ereigniskritik: Zu einer Grundfigur der Moderne bei Kant*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Derrida, Jacques.** 2003. *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Fontes, Osvaldo.** 2012 »An Impossible possibility of saying«: the event in philosophy and literature, according to Jacques Derrida. *Trans-Form-Acao* 35, 2:143–161.
- Geertz, Clifford.** 1966. *Religion as a Cultural System*. London: Tavistock.
- Giussani Luigi.** 2018. *Alive Means Present! Introduction to the Spiritual Exercises for the C.* Péguy Cultural Center, Varigotti, Italy, November 1, 1968. Ed. Julián Carrón. In: *Traces: litterae communionis*. <https://english.clonline.org/traces/page-one/alive-means-present> (accessed 24, June 2019).
- Halík, Tomás.** 2016. *I Want You to Be: On the God of Love*. Trans. G. Turner. Notre Dame, In: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Heidegger, Martin.** 1986. *Seminare (1951–1973)*. GA 15. Ed. C. O. Schwadt. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann.
- . 2003. *Seminar in Zähringen (1973)*. In: *Four Seminars*. Bloomington, In: Indiana University Press.
- . 2012. *Contributions to philosophy (of the event)*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Husserl, Edmund.** 1991. *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*. Trans John B Brough. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-011-3718-8>
- Janicaud, Dominique.** 1991. *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*. Combas: Editions de L'Eclat.
- . 1998. *La phénoménologie éclatée*. Combas: Editions de L'Eclat.
- . 2000. *Phenomenology and the »Theological Turn«: The French Debate*. New York: Fordham Press.
- . 2005. *Phenomenology »Wide Open«: After the French Debate*. New York: Fordham Press.
- Kandel, Eric R.** 2012. *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present*. New York: Random House.
- Lewis, Stephen.** 2019. *Imagination, the Event of the Given, Resistance, and Christian Experience*. Unpublished paper presented at the conference »Sense and Non-Sense« at the International Network for Philosophy of Religion. Paris France, June 20, 2019.
- Marion, Jean-Luc.** 2002. *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*. Trans. Jeffrey Kosky. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- . 2015. *Negative Certainties*. Trans. Stephen E. Lewis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Patton, Paul.** 1997. *The World Seen from Within*.

- Deleuze and the Philosophy of Events. *Theory and Event* 1, no. 1. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.1991.0006>
- Pfaller, Robert.** 2017. *Inter-Passivity: The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Romano, Claude.** 2015. *There is: The Event and the Finitude of Appearing*. Trans. Michael B. Smith. New York: Fordham Press.
- Schellenberg, John L.** 2015. *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Steinbock, Anthony.** 2009. *Phenomenology and Mysticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Taminiaux, Jacques.** 1977. Heidegger and Husserl's Logical Investigations in Remembrance of Heidegger's last Seminar. *Research in Phenomenology* 7, no. 1. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916477x00068>
- Tillich, Paul.** 1940. Symbol and Knowledge. *Journal of Liberal Religion* 2.
- . 1964. *Theology of Culture*. Trans Robert C. Kimball. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zourabichvili, François.** 2012 *Deleuze: a philosophy of the event, together with The vocabulary of Deleuze*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.