

# Religious Experience and the Crisis of Secular Reason

Society for the Phenomenology of Religious Experience — Second Plenary Congress

<https://sophere.org/conferences/>

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University of Vienna, Department of Philosophy, Vienna, Austria

## Confirmed keynote speakers:

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In recent years we have witnessed the loss of hope for neutral, secular 'reason' as the backbone for social and political engagement and transformation. In the wake of globalization, 'ideological secularism' and its propagation of a disengaged brand of reason rather has created its own set of discontents and crises. Related social trends in both Europe and North America demonstrate that people are increasingly divided and sectarian, pulled into their respective echo chambers and left unsure how to even talk with those trapped on 'the other side.' The traditional idea of using neutral 'reason' to cross this divide clearly has been swept aside by the power of social criticism. In its attempt at unveiling the bias, structural oppression, and political correctness that seems to be part and parcel of our self-righteous conceptions of reason (be it discursive, communicative or procedural), the domain of reason is no longer seen as value free. Rather its aspirations have been exposed to parade as purported neutrality, and hence it is increasingly viewed as a weapon wielded in ideological warfare, rather than a means of creating social cohesion.

Introducing religion into these conversations is not usually seen as the best way to reconcile people from opposite ends of the spectrum. Many in fact rather blame religion for the erosion, breakdown, and crisis of secular reason we are witnessing today. However, there is also reason to think and believe otherwise. Recent advances in the study of religion have shifted our understanding of religion away from cognitive beliefs and doctrines and toward more material and affective engagements. Could such a focus on embodiment, practice, and experience (rather than reason or mere belief assertion) provide a model for social and political engagement that also might contribute to restoring our unfulfilled hopes in secular reason? Or would such a model rather lead us toward a different, 'experiential reason' irreducible to perspectivism and individualism, or away from a social or communal reason as the basis of

human interaction? And what role might distinctly religious experience play in helping us understand and clarify social and epistemological interaction? Or, in terms of a general proviso, may we really understand the 'return of religion' as the missing catalyst that will help us to overcome the "disarray of the current crisis" (Husserl) in order to finally reconstitute its "primal institution" (*Urstiftung*)? And, if the last cohort, "generation Z," claims to be the least religious generation in (at least Western) history, what does "return of religion" mean in the zeitgeist—a quest for personal meaning, a spiritual society, or an experiential metaphysics?

In light of these more general considerations, this conference invites phenomenological explorations of the vexed relationships between reason and the various forms of religious intuition and experience. Does religious experience invite irrationality, or on the contrary, does it contribute a missing piece which can heal contemporary irrationality in all spheres of life? Do the semantics and pragmatic potentials of religious experience simply testify to an outdated model of social order that is by definition prone to violence and intolerance? Or do they rather offer a counterweight to a modernity disconcertingly spinning out of control? Are there ways to conceive of religion in light of the apparent crisis of secular reason beyond the old yet still functional dichotomy of myth and Enlightenment, given that the latter has itself resulted in a series of neo-myths that work hard to stigmatize religion as its very other? What are the relationships between religious experience and knowledge, and does religion enhance or stifle the possibilities of arriving at a "fuller consciousness" of our present? Can the failures of secularized reason in axiomatic, pragmatic, and evaluative spheres be amended by the restitution of some 'spiritual intelligence' whose loss is often lamented yet also explained away as necessary step in the coming post-history of humankind? Against the bankruptcy of value-free, neutral reason, can experiences of transcendence, hope, compassion, justice, love, unitive experiences, experiences of ultimacy and unconditionality, and other spiritual and religious experiences resolve to fractures of a late modernity that has still not arrived past the last post? And can experience animate religion per se, e.g., with indigenous forms of spiritual intelligence bringing Abrahamic religions out of their nascent metaphysical, cognitive, and ethical cul de sac? Bearing these questions and ambiguities in mind, this conference seeks to examine both the promise and peril that engagements with religious experience can bear upon engaging, clarifying, and supplementing the 'crisis of secular reason'. To do so, we invite reference to the whole phenomenological movement, including post-phenomenology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction; historical and contemporary research with the engagement of phenomenology, experienced based comparative studies like cultural anthropology of experience, qualitatively based sociology of religion, as well as theological and psychological perspectives that utilize phenomenological research methods.

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**Please submit** papers of no more than 600 words, formatted for anonymous review, to [congressvienna2020@sophere.org](mailto:congressvienna2020@sophere.org) before May 30, 2020. You can also enclose a full paper; submissions with ready papers will be given a priority. Include biographic information in the body of email. Notifications of acceptance will be emailed by June 15, 2020.

**The format of presentation:** 45 minutes including question and answer period, i.e. a paper of approximately 4000-4500 words. *Selected papers will be published in special guest-edited issues of well-known journals in philosophy and religion.*

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[The Problem of Religious Experience:](#)  
Case Studies in Phenomenology, with Reflection and Commentaries,  
V.1 and 2 (Springer, 2019, forthcoming)

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