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“WE MAKE RELIGION”: WHY IS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE SO IMPORTANT TODAY?

Viktoriia Yakusha interview with Jason Alvis

The phenomenon of religious experience is of interest to modern researchers in the field of phenomenology and analytical philosophy abroad, but remains unpopular in Ukraine. The interview talks about why philosophy does not stop trying to explore such experiences, and raises the question of the relevance of religion in the age of secularization. Jason Alvis clarifies some points of his project «phenomenology of inconspicuousness» and shares an unpopular view on the work of Martin Heidegger in general and on his concept «eine phenomenologie des Unscheinbaren» in particular. The researcher draws attention to the difference in the reading and interpretation of Heidegger's philosophy in the USA and Europe. J. Alvis responds with his own concept to the challenge of the «spectacle era», which seeks to perceive God as another performance with special effects in the form of a miracle. But the most important thing is that the phenomenologist finally suggests moving away from obsessive dialectics, because God cannot be explained using the categories of «visible» or «invisible». So inconspicuousness does not mean that God cannot be seen. Just the opposite - it can and should be seen in completely everyday moments. Such a vision gives an active role to the subject of religious experience. The philosopher explains why the thesis that religion is irrelevant and unimportant today does not stand up to criticism and points out that in fact there is rather a turn towards religion. The good thesis «We make religion» reflects not only the modern view and possibilities of science in researching this issue. This is a call to fill religion with a new meaning, to finally notice in it a personality whose role could previously be leveled by tradition. In this conversation, you can find the destruction of clichés related to religiosity as such. The text also contains references to modern trends not only in the study of religious experience, but also in the social reinterpretation of the content of this experience through the prism of faith.

Keywords: religious experience, phenomenology, religion, Heidegger, *phänomenologie des Unscheinbaren*, inconspicuousness, theism, mysticism.

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Viktoriiia Yakusha: Jason, what do you think is the relevance of religious experience today? After all, many who hear the phrase «religious experience» note the obsolescence, metaphysics, and archaicness of this problem. Why is it so important to study religious experience today, especially since the world seems to be moving into an even more secularized era?

Jason Alvis: Given the current context in the Western or «Global North» today in which Christianity is statistically waning, and in which more people think religiosity is irrelevant, one might be inclined to think reflection on Religious experience is also less necessary. I am convinced that precisely the opposite is the case. Perhaps more important than ever, we need deeper reflection on religious experiences (what they are, how they can work, and how they might be deepened). Further, despite those statistics, there are increasing numbers of those who refer to themselves as «*Spiritual but not Religious*» (SBNR), or those who simply reject the constraints of religious institutions, yet still have their individual and autonomous faith. What we are witnessing are more self-selected and «blended» models of do-it-yourself spirituality. And as religions dynamically change with these social interests, new possibilities and challenges arise that call for assessment. Although some think religion is obsolescent, it is doubtful that those persons also would think that *what humans believe about religion* is socially irrelevant or unimportant. That is, most people would agree that what others believe about religion is indeed highly significant for all of us.

A second argument for thinking about religious experience is that, despite any waning or obsolescence of religion in the Global North, we see the exact opposite trend in the Global South or so-called developing countries. There, we are witnessing the great comeback or «*return of religion*». Of the 7 billion people on this planet, most of them still in some way would self-identify as «religious». So to say that religion is, in the most general terms, «irrelevant», is to have a very limited, geographical, and minority view. Such broad, sweeping dismissals of religion also could be critiqued as yet another form of colonialism or Western, hegemonic, arrogance that does not take the interests and values of those persons in other parts of the world seriously.

It also is essential to mention, I think, that most of the world religions have developed ways to respond to human suffering. And today, in our current crises, suffering is definitely on the rise. Everyone either is suffering, has suffered, or will in the near future, suffer. Suffering is universal, and our religions tend to provide highly nuanced grammar and practices for dealing with our suffering. So to have a religious experience is by and large a wrestling with suffering (of oneself, of others, of one's God). This is not to delimit the definition of religious experience, but rather to broaden it to show that it is not confined to predetermined traditions or «wooden» dogmatic systematics. Instead of talking about «religion» (one of the most hotly debated words in history!) the concept of «religious experience» places the emphasis upon the first-person and communal affects and practices of religious engagement. We make religion.

V.Y.: *Is it possible to say that today the experience of transcendence is still the experience of perception, for example, in the way described by Thomas Aquinas? Let's*

say, since that time, the relationship between children and parents has changed many times, up to the point that children have become more independent and free. Could this be a metaphor for God and humans? Does a person still believe in God at the level of fear and awe, or is he already consciously coming to faith?

J.A.: Perception is a very tricky thing, and it would be hasty of me to presume too much here, as culture, context, and family (all structures and institutions, really) shape not just the content of what we see, but also «how» we see it. This does not mean that perception cannot be changed, or that we are bound to these «how» structures. But it does lay a groundwork for thinking more carefully about habituation in which we might engage in order to change our perception, and to allow the perceptions of others to be meaningful to us via empathy. Hallucinations, poor judgments, beliefs in incredibly «irrational» things of course tend to come to mind when we reflect skeptically upon the perceptions of others — especially when other persons claim to have had experiences of otherworldly transcendence (as in «overcoming» the status quo of natural experience). Yet without other persons' experiences, even the ones with whom we disagree with or might critique, our life-world would be empty and without content. No one is an island.

I think your question about the dynamic changing of faith, like in a child-parent relationship, is important here! Anyone who thinks that the total eradication of fear is essential to having greater faith has never stood face-to-face with a bear in the woods! Everyday experiences of faith and doubt can strengthen faith. Faith does not mean we are frozen or emotionless, or that we eradicate anger, fear, and other emotions. But it does help us process those experiences in constructive ways. Still, fear needs to be put in its proper place. A healthy honor or respect for God is blocked by a disproportionate «fear of God» that shuts down relationship. I am associated with a group of international scholars associated with what is today being called «Open and Relational Theism». We believe that some of the traditional depictions of God as an omnipotent, all-knowing, sovereign, near tyrannical figure need to be countered by focusing on different aspects of God's character that first insist upon inter-relationality, and a willingness to suffer and essentially «change» with humans. We certainly do not have it all figured out yet. But this is one movement today that seems to be gaining theological attention, mostly because it provides another grammar for making sense of why God «allows» suffering.

V.Y.: In your book “*The Inconspicuous God: Heidegger, French Phenomenology and Theological Turn*” you derive your own concept of inconspicuous phenomenology based on Heidegger's concept of «eine phänomenologie des Unscheinbaren». How should the term inconspicuous be understood in relation to religious experience?

J.A.: In my project on inconspicuousness, I first tried to determine the degree to which the contemporary problem of the «society of the spectacle» is imbedded in our modern philosophical tendencies for which we yearn, perhaps like never before, for clarity and the ultimate dissolution of problems. I determined that there indeed is a correlation: the way modern society prefers shiny, spectacular images (bombastic films, passive acquiescence to our phone screens, media consumption,

and «events» that entertain our imaginaries) can be compared to our attempt to achieve once-and-for-all formulas and formulations to philosophical and social problems. That is, the way we want clarity in philosophy is eerily similar to how we consume media: we want to be entertained by new ideas, we want to accept certain conclusions quickly, passively relate with them, then move on to another problem. The problem of this kind of acquiescence to what I have called «spectacularity» is as theological as it is cultural and philosophical.

The second step of my project was to determine exit strategies from these ways of thinking and living. It is here that I came across the idea of «inconspicuousness». What is inconspicuous is absent-yet-present. It is what is there right in front of us, yet is *overlooked*. Etymologically, what is inconspicuous is a *kind of* opposite of a spectacle. Yet it is not a yin-yang dialectic. The first tendency is to think a spectacle is a «Visible» phenomenon, while an inconspicuous thing is «invisible.» This would be a grave mistake. One finds this mistake in the many interpretations of the Christian applications of Heidegger's phenomenology in the last half century. For example, the French and English translations of *Unscheinbarkeit* have mistakenly referred to it as «inapparent», which is more akin to what is «invisible». The theological and metaphysical presumptions that I think are falsely made here are obvious: God is invisible, therefore any attempt to describe relations with, or experiences of this God, are then on the level of what is not present, or does not appear. I think that the common depictions of God as simply or straightforwardly «hidden», absent, or «invisible» lack sophistication, and are inaccurate ways of how we experience our life worlds in general! Yet I also think that the views that God is present all around us, is involved in everything (even violence and suffering?!) can be equally flawed, and end up overcompensating for this problem. Anyone who claims to have had religious experiences can attest to how this dichotomy is simply insufficient. So I tried to develop «inconspicuousness» as a way to mediate these extremes, and to imagine (especially Christian) religious experiences are somewhere in the «borderlands» between visibility/invisibility, presence/absence. The spectacle traffics in the dichotomy between presence/absence. An Inconspicuous God is far too cunning and influential to fall into that trap devised by modern thinking.

To return to your great question of what this has to do with religious experience, I would say that religious experiences are precisely ways of wrestling in/with this middle-ground. Here we are not relieved of the faith/doubt problems with which we all, as humans, are faced. Even those who claim to have had the most profound, miraculous, and eye-opening religious experiences do not simply move on with life and never again doubt. They are not immediately converted into holy saints. Their experience has impacted them, but they are not protected from suffering and pain, which then can produce doubt again. This is one reason why the traditional depictions of being «religious» or «not religious» are called into question today — because it is an insufficient categorization of human beings whose faith is constantly being shaped by their surroundings and the God in whom they believe and sometimes doubt. Doubt is perhaps the most essential resource of faith.

V.Y.: *It's funny, but Heidegger, for example, is being studied by researchers with clear positions of agnostics and atheists in Ukraine. You turn the angle of consideration of Heidegger's work 180 degrees. And while Ukrainian philosophers stubbornly fight over how to translate his central concept «Dasein», you consider «eine phenomenologie des Unscheinbaren». How would you assess this? What is the value of your unique interpretation of Heidegger or how might the understandings of Heidegger by Ukrainian philosophers be insufficient?*

J.A.: It's important to acknowledge from where we philosophize and theologize. My background in reading Heidegger has deeply shaped the way I have developed my conclusions about what is relevant about his work and why we need to read him today. I studied Heidegger mostly in an American context that especially sought to use his work to rethink metaphysics and to deconstruct theological thinking. This context also is known for trying to demonstrate how Heidegger's work has been distinctly relevant and different from past phenomenologies and analytic philosophies. Unfortunately, this dichotomy has become an even harsher reality in the USA.

I also was lucky to study Heidegger in France, Germany and Austria, which usually do not fall into this continental/analytic trap. Yet I found that the «contextualist» argument was much more relevant in Europe when it comes to Heidegger's reception. The degree to which he was a Nazi plays important roles in how his ideas are studied. I always found it fascinating how even the French-Jewish-Lithuanian Levinas was able to overlook Heidegger's Nazi fascism and truly see the value of his ideas! This acceptance was revolutionary. In especially the German scene, Heidegger scholars are forced to take a position of either defending Heidegger, or attacking him for political reasons, and at times this can be a distraction from the true value of his work.

It would be far too simple to critique the historical positioning you describe in Ukraine over etymological debates as «missing the forest for the trees» in Heidegger's work. What is great about his work is that it is fully open to those who find value in such debates, which indeed are important to a degree. What becomes problematic, in my view, is when these debates overshadow our ability as thinkers to communicate to others *outside* our community why Heidegger's work has value for *us all today*. This is essential to the very reasons why we engage in such fine, etymological translation! That is, the focus on how words work and find new meaning is precisely what Heidegger's work was about. So it should motivate us to ensure that the value of Heidegger's scholarship finds its way to others and is accessible and not lost. I think the entire breadth of Heidegger's work (especially later work) that applies philosophy beyond the typical constraints is often overlooked. This is an important work for Heidegger, as he made many shifts in his thinking. His ideas teach us so many unique ways about the dynamicity of life and language, showing how words can be applied and re-applied. His ideas come alive by finding ways to apply them to address some of the contemporary problems we face.

Regarding Heidegger's own personal religiosity/a-religiosity, it is also important to understand his German context. As I outline in the introduction to my book, Heidegger shifted and converted *constantly*. Even up to the point of the final

weeks before death, he confided in a colleague that he «never officially left the church». That might come as a surprise to anyone who wants to make him out to be a staunch atheist! At different phases of his life, he identified with Catholicism, Protestantism, Atheism, Agnosticism, and towards the end of his career, some form of his own Spirituality with the «fourfold» he developed. These shifts are not irrelevant, but it would be a big mistake to think that because of any particular personal position Heidegger held, his work is irrelevant for theological application.

V.Y.: *Reading your book led me to such a thesis: «Do you think that God does not exist? You simply cannot see Him!». Do you agree with this thesis? In addition, you say that we must move away from the dual metaphysics of absence/presence. Is this the main reason why we «don't notice» God?*

J.A.: I think you develop a very interesting claim here via the book, and I would not outright disagree with it. The book could have developed more carefully how the proposal for inconspicuousness has apologetic merits for arguing against the old dialectic of visibility/invisibility and the modern demands for «clarity», as if God should be a spectacle, dancing on a stage for all of us to see. Do your dance, God! Perform!

My position still is that by referring to God as «inconspicuous» we might at least short-circuit some of the arguments against the existence of God, and some of the standards of «logic» we tend to require even of ourselves in order to allow ourselves to believe. If, for example, someone has the standard that God must make Godself «visible» as opposed to being more inconspicuously «hidden», then their idea of God is very different from mine. Instead, we might assume that, if there is a God, then this God is far more complex than we might think. If we smell smoke, we do not need to see the fire. Although my argument for inconspicuousness is likely to not convince anyone who has not had any «religious experiences» before, it can be helpful to support those who are looking for more detailed and nuanced ways of describing how their own experiences are somehow uncomfortably hedged between secularization and religiosity. Unfortunately, this does not «solve» the «God problem», but merely can relieve us of the pressure to defend ourselves in every way.

V.Y.: *In the book «Homo Religiosus? Exploring the Roots of Religion and Religious Freedom in Human Experience» the authors say that it seems that religiosity is a more natural form for a person than atheism. Is it possible to say that this to some extent reflects your concept? That is, that the person himself consciously dulls his perception of transcendence?*

J.A.: That book definitely is worth reading because it at least makes the sociological argument for some of the «goods» of religiosity. I think an atheist or agnostic could still defend their position by simply saying that religion is something with which humans have evolved, and now are ready to evolve out-of. This «primal» religiosity is merely descriptive of how humans have «coped» with the world up until this point in history. Harvey Cox's thesis on «primal religion» moved in similar directions, but more specifically sought to acknowledge that some of the most basic human «needs» can be met in healthy ways by religion. This can be a good «defense» of religion, but it may not be a good «offense» for why people should therefore be religious.

I would not go so far as to say that my work presents incredibly compelling reasons for people to convert or to become believers, mostly because of my understanding of the human condition, and what it takes, quite simply, to change peoples minds. It is so hard for humans to change their minds, especially when they have deep-seated beliefs on important topics. We see this taking place today in the political debates in the USA right now, as the two reigning parties have demonized one another to the point that compromise and any willingness to change are foreclosed and becoming virtually impossible. This may sound nihilistic. But I think that this realism is incredibly relevant when we talk about religious disagreement.

As for dulling our perceptions, you raise an important question. On the phenomenological and psychological levels at least, it has been shown over and over again that perception bias is real. Even to the point of not being able to recognize basic material changes in a room or space, we can so easily overlook what is right in front of us. And this also moves in the direction of my point about inconspicuousness: so many things are right there in front of us, yet we often do not have time to see them, or choose not to see them. At points, this «overlooking» actually is a good thing! Imagine I am walking through a busy train station. If I were to stop and look at every face, every person, and every detail, I would be exhausted after just a couple minutes, and would never reach my destination. In order to reach my goal of getting to where I need to be, at the university office, I have to overlook most things.

Growing up in the 80's/90's in the USA, we had these toys called «View Finders»: little plastic glasses into which you could slip a small thin colorful slide. When you look towards a light, put the slide into the glasses, and press the button, new «laminates» or pictures would show up for you to see. I think this is a good analogy for perception. We all are walking around with our little «View Finders» (or perhaps to use the more modern, yet failed invention, our «google glasses») and we all are automatically and involuntarily slipping laminates into them to color our world and make it come to life for us.

V.Y.: You say that the world still perceives God as a spectacle. And the truth is, it seems that even analytical philosophers like John Schellenberg, with his argument about the hiddenness of God, still talk about him as a new friend, who must show initiative even for the most inveterate atheist, perform a miracle in his eyes and literally to force believe in him. Where is the border between the spectacularity of the modern external world and the inconspicuousness of the spiritual world? Is there even such a border today? It seems that the values of everyday behavior are a maxim for a modern person.

J.A.: I have only respect for analytic philosophers of religion, as my earliest teachers in philosophy were highly influenced by this way of thinking. Necessary today is more interaction between analytic and continental philosophers in order to productively tackle the problems that face our societies. With that said, I think Schellenberg has a very compelling thesis for many persons who have not had religious experiences. It seems almost too easy, however, and perhaps that is where its genius lies. Have you never experienced God? Then there is no God! Yet imagine applying this to almost any other aspect of human life: «Have you never seen a black

hole? Well, then there is no black holes!». God, if you are there, then come out and dance for us! Here I think the play by Samuel Beckett, «Waiting for Godot» is genius in this regard.

Unfortunately, however, it seems that these philosophical positions are also hampered by bad, modern theologies that made «faith» out to be mono-dimensional. You either «believe» or you «doubt». They have taught that we could «think ourselves» into faith. If we only have the right recipe to be religious (the orthodoxy) then we can believe. I think that Schellenberg follows a similar definition of faith that does not leave much room for layers, doubts, or paradoxes. And I find paradoxes to be the true «stuff» of religiosity. In my book, I present a modified Anselmian argument that it is precisely God's unprovability that makes God so interesting and different. In this sense also, God is inconspicuous, as the «evidence» needed to «prove God» would therefore only lead us to the conclusion that this «thing» that was proven, in fact, was not truly God in the first place. God is much more powerful than the very human idea of evidence.

Following this bad theology of «thinking ourselves» into faith, is the expectation that God is *or would be* a spectacle if God appeared. If God shows up, it will be a show, with flashes and lights and bangs and fireworks. For most people, that simply is not the case in everyday life. Even people who have experienced some of the most incredible miracles you can imagine at some point have to pick up all the pieces and move on with their lives afterwards. I can imagine that for many of these people the miracles they have experienced are heavy luggage, perhaps even burdens at times because the miracles set a standard for them to which every (normal) minute of every (boring) day cannot compare. I imagine it is hard to get back to work at the factory after experiencing a life-changing miracle!

V.Y.: How do you think it is necessary to be ready for a religious experience? After all, we are not talking about the experience of the holy fathers in general. Even a simple event that does not contradict common sense and the laws of physics can be perceived by a person either as a sign from God or as a simple coincidence of circumstances. Are you in favor of the active or passive role of the subject of religious experience?

J.A.: As mentioned before, religious experience is straddling two things we tend to believe are contradictory. It is a navigation between everyday experience, and what is exceptional. Religious experience is not just about accessing an invisible, transcendent, «Exceptional» non-world, but about seeing how these «two worlds» in fact are overlapping. Unfortunately, many of the typical definitions of religion on the market today, in some way or another, pedal in the kind of «two worlds» religiosity, which then continue to sell the dichotomy once more between absence/presence, visibility/invisibility. Inconspicuousness is a challenge to prevailing views that religion is about exceptions only to nature — this split world idea.

Eugen Fink (Husserl's protégé, and Heidegger's good colleague) developed a cosmology of how humans are in the world. He said we are «not in the world like a worm in an apple, or money in the bank». What did he mean by this? He wanted to show that humans are really unique in that we are so integrated in this world that

every «experience» we have is sutured to *this* world. Yet this is precisely what makes us so «different» from all the other «things» that are in the world, like benches and computers. Although Christianity has a history of monasticism, of Benedictine detachment from all things «worldly», around Christmas time we are reminded of God coming into the world in the most human and inconspicuous way possible, as a helpless baby born in a barn among dirty farm animals. This incarnation of Christ sparked a great revolution in how we think about secularity vis-a-vis religiosity in so far as it baptizes the profane, and allows for the possibility of everything and everyone to become holy.

V.Y.: *Should religious experience not be only mystical? What do you think about how a departure from this prejudice could reanimate religious experience today, and as a philosophical problem?*

J.A.: The classical approach to mysticism certainly had its merits, at least in terms of scholarly production. Some of the greatest theologians and philosophers have been mystics. Yet for obvious reasons, this more extreme lifestyle is not accessible (or even desirable) to most humans today. It, of course, was tied to traditional forms of patriarchy, a life detached from «worldly» experience, and a way of life free from «carnal» or bodily distraction. Most of us cannot give up taking care of our children, or drop our jobs. I recently participated in a conference at the Institut Catholique de Paris, and they gave us a surprise tour through their church’s catacombs, which was the resting ground for many Christian monks who were political dissidents. I was surprised to hear that the well-known mystic «Brother Lawrence» also worked in this monastery. He is most famously known for his work *Practicing the Presence of God*, in which he describes how he engaged menial, everyday tasks (from cooking noodles, to sweeping the floor) as if they were worship of a present God. He tried an experiment. He committed himself to imagine God with him all day, even in the «profane» tasks of cooking. By the end of the experiment, he noted that it was the most profound religious experience he ever had, even beyond the stunning aesthetic of the beautiful cathedrals of Paris at that time! Here we are reminded that almost any experience can be «infused» with religiosity.

It is also in this sense that an inconspicuous Go waiting for us to invite God to «incarnate» in these profane everyday experiences. In Tanya Luhrmann’s insightful book *When God Talks Back*, she immersed herself, as a non-religious anthropologist, in Renewalist, Charismatic Christian Churches (2 of which I also was a participant in Chicago and Stanford USA) to determine how they had religious experiences. Pastors in these churches would tell their participants to imagine «having a beer with God», «sitting on God’s lap», or even asking God about «what shirt to wear in the morning». These churches teach that the mind is not a sealed-off place, but a space of inter-relation between oneself and God, and a space in which «imagination» is key to spiritual encounters. This, of course, already runs counter to the prevalent modern paradigm, that imagination is a game of mirrors, fakes, and fantasies. Yet the skeptic, Luhrmann ran empirical controlled experiments with these people via two test groups to determine who was having the most «vivid»

religious experiences. The group that actively practiced detailed imagining of God in everyday life reported and described much more colorful and sharper mental images, as well as a greater sense of God's presence. They cultivated their «inner senses» and claimed to have more religious experiences.

Statistically, the majority of humans have had some kind of «spiritual» experience, yet the majority often also think that those who are «blessed» to have many of these experiences are born that way, or simply have the right «mental furniture» and abilities. Luhrmann rightly concluded that this is a major misconception, and that anyone, with practice, can have religious experiences. This again is reflective of my view that religious experience is cultivated through inconspicuousness. The experience of God is made slowly, much less spectacularly than we think, or tend to want. In commodity culture, when we want something, we want it now! And this is mirrored in the «clarity culture» of modern philosophy. If we just could affirm the right positions (orthodoxy) then there would be an expected outcome. Yet in religious experience, «orthopraxy» is more fundamental. We learn to ride a bike as a child by first taking a risk. The choices that we make change us, yet when it comes to religious experience, it can so easily integrate into our daily activities. Perhaps it is relieving for some to hear this: we do not need to live double lives — one religious, one secular.

V.Y.: What is it exactly about phenomenology, in your opinion, that can help us find answers to the questions that religious experience poses today? What tools help the phenomenologist talk about the relationship between God and man?

J.A.: It is super interesting that Heidegger, in his early phenomenology of religious experience, focused on St. Paul and the importance of Witness and testimony. Giving testimony is how Christianity spread, and this is the template for mission. We experience vicariously through empathy, so it makes good sense that one of the booming sub-fields in philosophy today is «collective intentionality» or social ontology. How do we develop our experiences together? In what way are we affected by other persons' stories? Traditionally, phenomenology has been considered a rather solitude affair, as a subjective experience for the sharp-minded and patient. Yet we are learning more and more from sociologists that this is simply an unrealistic way to imagine what «experience» is. It is usually collective, in groups, messy, and in relation with others. So the young Heidegger's claim about testimony and witness are especially relevant here, because he is essentially arguing that testimony is essential to faith. Faith is intertwined with «proclamation» and «witness». Testimony gains its power of communication not from what one *comprehends* or knows. Testimony is powerful because it communicates, in faith, what one *does not know* and could never reproduce in a 100% sufficient, or empirical way. Religious experience is necessarily inter-social. And this, I think, points us towards the values of phenomenology, which helps us carefully reflect upon our experiences and the experiences of others skeptically, yet generously.

V.Y.: In Ukraine, the topic of religious experience is not very popular. What can you say about Germany and Austria? How actively and how long have the studies in this area been developing there?

J.A.: The language of «religious experience» is starting to gain more attention in Germany and Austria, although in relation to philosophy it still has not received much of a focus. Yet the term has been around for quite some time, especially since it has been a sub-field of study in psychology, neuroscience, and anthropology. «Religious experience» is something that one can study empirically, at least in terms of case studies and interviews of those who claim to have had religious experiences. Since there is a broad range of phenomena that might count as «religious» (from seeing an image of the holy mother Mary in your toast, to experiencing healing from terminal cancer, to coming back from the dead in near-death experiences [NDE]), these empirical fields can benefit greatly from philosophical attempts to give greater specificity to the meaning, sense, and language of religiosity. Our young, yet growing «Society for the Phenomenology of Religious Experience» is gaining new members every year, as we actively hold conferences, are open to new and differing interpretations, and seek an «inclusive» approach to phenomenology that is not so dogmatic.

V.Y.: You talk about the inconspicuousness of God, but what could allow a person to see God already today? How would you address those who have not yet seen him?

J.A.: I think that your point earlier about activity/passivity here would be relevant.

But I would first begin to answer this question by suggesting two different types of religious engagement. I think there is an inadvertent *de facto* religiosity with which most persons live their everyday lives. It is a very religious thing to «worship» a political leader, or to attach oneself to the habit of watching the same Netflix series every day. James K.A. Smith referred to these actions as «cultural liturgies». That to which we commit ourselves fashions our gods for us, even when we are not thinking this is at all religious. Perhaps these are replacement or placebo religions. Nevertheless, when Elon Musk claims to have faith in the fact that it is *most likely* that our world is a simulation put together by super-beings or extra-terrestrial aliens, he also is pointing to a «higher power» who guides our lives and helps give them meaning. This is religious.

A second type of religious engagement is a purposeful, intentional shaping or reaching out to God. This also takes faith and worship, and of course the persons/communities who engage religiously in these ways also are not immune to the more involuntary, *de facto* type of religious engagement I mentioned earlier. Yet these persons intentionally attach themselves to communities of faith, open themselves up to being wrong, and find spaces of moral virtue that help them give their lives an ultimate, overarching «sense». Giving things sense, making sense, is a highly Heideggerian scene and theme (See Thomas Sheehan’s *Making Sense of Heidegger* for this very argument).

As for seeing God, or accessing God today, it is hard to make concrete recommendations for others, especially in the face of massive crises, wars, and sufferings that others undergo. It is hard to imagine talking about God without talking about suffering, and vice versa. The initial tendency of humans in the face of suffering is to use it as an argument for why God does not exist. The theodicy arguments often

make this presupposition. They are important arguments, and help us wrestle with the possibility /impossibility of God. But I prefer more of an inverted theodicy, in which the question is not «why is there so much suffering and evil?», but rather «why is there so much good in this world?». That is an equally relevant question. I also think that many religions would not make any sense at all if we removed suffering from their commitments and conclusions. Christianity, without a suffering Christ, would be irrelevant. Christ's dedication and commitment to love humans involved intense pain and death. Zeus and the many other Greek gods and demi-gods never would have imagined coming down to the earth and suffering for the sake of even the most holy and pure of human beings. I think they would have zapped them just for the fun of it!

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«МИ РОБИМО РЕЛІГІЮ»: ЧОМУ РЕЛІГІЙНИЙ ДОСВІД СЬОГОДНІ ТАКИЙ ВАЖЛИВИЙ?

Інтерв'ю Вікторії Якуші з Джейсоном Алвісом

Феномен релігійного досвіду цікавить сучасних дослідників у галузі феноменології та аналітичної філософії за кордоном, але залишається малопопулярним в Україні. В інтерв'ю йдеться про те, чому філософія не полишає спроби досліджувати такий досвід, та порушується питання про актуальність релігії за доби секуляризації.

Джейсон Алвіс прояснює окремі моменти свого проекту «феноменології неявиленості» та ділиться непопулярним поглядом на доробок Мартина Гайдегера загалом та на його концепт “eine phänomenologie des Unscheinbaren” зокрема. Дослідник звертає увагу на різницю у прочитанні та інтерпретації гайдегерівської філософії в США та Європі. Дж. Алвіс відповідає власною концепцією на виклик «епохи видовищності», яка прагне сприймати Бога як чергову виставу зі спецефектами у формі дива

У цій розмові можна зустріти руйнування кліше, пов'язаних із релігійністю як такою, а також звернення до сучасних тенденцій не лише у дослідженні релігійного досвіду, а й у соціальному переосмисленні змісту цього переживання крізь призму віри.

Ключові слова: релігійний досвід, феноменологія, релігія, Гайдегер, phänomenologie des Unscheinbaren, неявиленість, теїзм, містицизм.