HUSSELR'S GOD IN THE FICHTE LECTURES
FROM 1917-1918

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines Husserl views on God and religion as presented in the Kaizo articles and in his 1917/18 lectures on Fichte. It argues that Husserl's own views end up quite close to the views that he presents in those lectures as Fichte's. In the end, belief in God serves as a postulate of practical reason for him, but one that goes beyond mere intellectual insight or hope for rewards in a future life. Rather, following Fichte, Husserl believes that the experience of the power of love and blessedness (Seligkeit) are not only consistent with the demands of morality but also can serve as a kind of healing power in this life for those who are open to their motivating power. This he believes is also the underlying motivation for religious intuitions that he takes as genuine and as finding different expressions across various ages and cultures.

KEYWORDS: religion (rational and historical), religious intuitions, practical reason, theology, morality, god, blessedness.

Compared to many of the topics that have played a central role in most comprehensive philosophical projects not just over the past few centuries, but since the very beginning of philosophy, the questions of God and religion for Husserl have not figured very prominently in scholarly discussions of his phenomenological philosophy. This is due in great part to the relative scarcity of texts until recently in which Husserl explicitly addresses those topics and the fact that, even where he does address them, those texts are relatively brief and address these issues indirectly by reference to religion more as a historical and cultural phenomenon than as a philosophical topic per se. That also explains why the question of Husserl and religion has arisen primarily as the question about Husserl's own personal religion instead of his phenomenologically grounded philosophical views on God and religion.

Over the past few years, a few leading Husserl scholars and phenomenologists like Klaus Held1 and Philip Buckley2 have begun to fill in some of these blanks, citing refer-

1 The recently published research manuscripts EDMUND HUSSERL, Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie, «Husserliana» 81, edited by Rochus Sowa and Thomas Vongehr, Dordrecht, Springer, 2011, do contain a wealth of texts where Husserl very explicitly discusses questions of religion and rational theology. In this essay, I will be concentrating on the Fichte lectures, which were publicly presented in Freiburg right after the First World War (see below, footnote 3, p. 28). It should be noted, however, that the texts from the research manuscripts in «Husserliana» 81 confirm that the theological views Husserl presents as Fichte's were indeed consistent with Husserl's own personal positions on these matters as well.

2 KLAUS HELD, Gott in Husserls Phänomenologie, in ISO KARL et al., Philosophy, Phenomenology, Sciences: Essays in Commemoration of Edmund Husserl, «Phaenomenologica», 200, Dordrecht, Springer, 2011, pp. 723-738. In that article, Held mentions a wider group of scholars including, for instance, Landgrebe, Strasser, Alex Bello, Kern, and Hart who have also commented on Husserl's views on God and religion but concedes that they too have addressed these issues only obliquely in their treatment of other topics (Held, p. 723). He also cites J. C. Lo's Die Gottesannahzung in Husserls Phänomenologie, Frankfurt, Peter Lang Verlag, 2006, which takes a similar line to Held's.

3 PHILIP BUCKLEY, Husserl and the Rationality of Religion (yet unpublished).
ences to some still unpublished manuscripts or relatively recently published texts. Held cities manuscripts from the E group that were analyzed in detail by a doctoral student of his from Taiwan, and Philip Buckley focusses on the fifth of the Kaizo articles, some of which, including that article, had never been transcribed or published until the full critical edition of those articles in Volume xxi of the «Husserliana» in the late 80's. In this paper, I will begin by summarizing some of the main phenomenological insights from Husserl on God and religion that they have presented in their essays and then spend most of the paper arguing that their results can be complemented and augmented in significant ways by supplementing those insights with Husserl's very impassioned and, I believe, telling account of the central role that the notions of God and religion play in Kant's and more particularly in Fichte's practical philosophy as outlined in his three lectures on Fichte that were delivered in 1917 and again in 1918 to returning German veterans from the First World War. I will be suggesting that the descriptions of Fichte's positions actually reflect Husserl's own views very closely and present some arguments why I think this is the case. The basic conclusion I will draw is that Husserl's own views on the subject can indeed be described appropriately as a kind of «rational religion» if and only if one fully takes into account Husserl's notion of reason not primarily as an intellectual and theoretical faculty but as a kind of rationality that involves the inherent practical teleology involved in appropriate valuing and acting as well.

Held's essay concentrates on the notion of God as a kind of epistemological warrant for the inherent teleology of intentions and fulfillment that characterizes intentional consciousness in general. He refers to passages in the E manuscripts in which Husserl explicitly endorses Platonic positions about the agathon as the ultimate principle of all that is and is knowable in the world. Husserl translates this doctrine into a phenomenological insight into the absolute epistemological necessity of having a complete trust in «die universale Bewährbarkeit und Erreichbarkeit von Einstimmigkeit (the universal sustainability and achievability of unity)» (4) in all aspects of the intentional life of consciousness. According to these manuscripts as cited by Held this «universal sustainability of unity» extends beyond any one individual's conscious life and includes the notion of an intersubjective compatibility of individual perspectives from the higher perspective of what we, in 20th century parlance, might call a «God's eye view» of things in an «Allbewusstsein (all-encompassing consciousness)» (6) that would accommodate various historical perspectives across various ages and cultures as well. Held closes by noting that this kind of epistemological «idealization» in these later manuscripts, written about the same time as his Crisis manuscripts, should be subject to the same kind

1 Two other notable exceptions, also mentioned by Held, are Angela Anselm Bello, The Divine in Husserl and Other Explorations, «Analeacta Husserliana», xv, Dordrecht, Springer, 2009 and James Hart, A Précis of Husserlian Philosophical Theology, in S.W. Laycock and J. Hart (eds.), Essays in Phenomenological Theology, Albany, SUNY Press, 1982, pp. 89-269. Each of them offers phenomenological reconstructions of Husserlian texts based on their reading of fundamental Husserlian positions and some brief passages from Husserl on the subject scattered across various works, including volume xiii-xv of the «Husserliana» on intersubjectivity. The texts recently published in «Husserliana» xlix confirm that their reconstructions are consistent with Husserl's own thinking. This essay takes a somewhat different but complementary path by concentrating on the Fichte lectures where there are extended passages by Husserl concerning philosophical theology that he did present in public lectures.


of critique that Husserl himself in the Crisis applies to the uncritical "idealizations" of modern natural science that all claimed to represent a kind of transtemporal or even ahistorical universal knowledge outside of the life-worlds—a critique that I will return to in my discussion of the Fichte lectures.

Buckley by contrast locates Husserl's discussion of religion in the Kaizo articles within the project of the call for a return to the life-worldly, i.e. historical and genetic, approach to questions of reason and rationality as opposed to the narrow notion of rationality allowed by the natural sciences and philosophical approaches modeled on them. What has been lost in that narrow notion is the relationship to the original experiences that formed the basis for the constructions of natural science so that a call for a return to the life-world is at the same time a call for the return to the experiences that originally served as the "primal establishment (Ursteifung)" of all of our systems of beliefs, including those of the natural sciences. Buckley sees Husserl's broad overview of the history of various religious cultures as mirroring the development of an increasingly self-responsible and self-critical awareness of the origins of the norms and laws governing our practical lives both as individuals and as societies through the conscious awareness of and return to the original experiences giving rise to and serving as authentic justifications for such norms. The paradigmatic figure for such awareness, as Buckley points out, is for Husserl the person of Christ, properly understood. Moreover, the authentic experiences of such paradigmatic individuals can also form the basis for "authentic communities" of persons who come to recognize and share such authentic experiences that form the proper legitimation for the shared norms of such communities that represent the "kingdom of God on earth". But what are those authentic experiences that are the legitimating basis for religious individuals and communities? The Kaizo articles themselves provide some hints in terms of such concepts as "infinite striving" and "blessedness" (Seligkeit) that Buckley rightly cites, but in those brief essays Husserl more alludes to and presumes them instead of spelling out exactly what they mean and what a truly authentic religion, a religion consistent true rationality actually entails. Here is where the Fichte lectures can be helpful, for it is there that Husserl spells out what the true insights and achievements of Kant and German Idealism were in pointing to a kind of authentic religious experience that is consistent with the insights of pure practical and valuational reason that can be phenomenologically reconstructed in Husserl's view.

In the Kaizo articles, Husserl closes with a nod to the opportunities for renewal heralded by the emancipatory impulses of the early modern age in response to the dogmatism of the middle ages. In order to understand better what Husserl finds so significant in the practical and religious insights of the modern age, particularly in the philosophies of Kant and Fichte, it is helpful to recall the very broad outlines of the history of religion and of philosophical culture that came together in the modern age as he describes them in the Kaizo articles.

In most highly-developed, i.e. state-level societies Husserl claims that the basic norms of society were historically promulgated in terms of absolute norms deriving from divine authority and justifying the institutional powers vested in political and religious leaders (XXVII, 60-62). Divine authority was invoked not only as the basis for

\[\text{\footnotesize 1} \quad \text{Hibl., pp. 12-13.} \]
\[\text{\footnotesize 2} \quad \text{Buckley, pp. 8-9.} \]
\[\text{\footnotesize 3} \quad \text{Ibid., p. 11.} \]
\[\text{\footnotesize 4} \quad \text{Ibid., p. 15.} \]
practical and religious norms, but also as the source of basic beliefs about nature and the world as well (61). As these norms break down by failing to provide what he calls their promise of «salvation» (Heil), however one understands it, this opens the door to alternative sources of justification (64). One of these comes in the form of persons who serve as instruments of religious renewal by appealing to absolute norms of religious experience outside of the traditional institutions and norms, most prominently in the person of Christ who claims to embody the possibility of divinity within human form or of the human manifestation of divinity here on earth, a possibility in principle open to all persons as «children of God» and not just members of a specific ethnicity or heritage (65-66). The other source is the possibility of scientific or philosophical inquiry based not on claims of religious authority or revelation, but on finite experience and reason that in principle should be able to provide a foundation not only for theoretical claims about nature but also for rational norms for human living — what Husserl calls the Socratic/Platonic beginnings of philosophy (79-89).

Husserl’s analysis of the Middle Ages sees them as the process whereby the original insights and impulses of Christian religion become institutionalized and forgotten in the attempt to harness them to found a civitas dei under either secular or ecclesiastic leadership through the Roman empire or the Roman Catholic church, thereby subjugating originary philosophical insights to the constraints of dogmatic religion and also losing much of the authentic power of the original Christian experience (68-72). The Kaizo articles close by recalling the original emancipatory impulses of Protestant Christianity and Cartesian philosophy. Of course, their overall aim was to urge both non-Western and Western thinkers to recall and renew those impulses — impulses that in the further course of modernity and in the face of the challenges posed by reductionist naturalism that had taken hold of European humanity over the last few centuries had been forgotten, thereby effacing the possibilities of genuine religious experience as well as responsible ethical and practical reflection on the ultimate norms for knowing and acting in general. The name for this renewal in philosophy would be the return to the idea of «philosophy as a rigorous science»; in religion, it would be to authentic faith based upon religious intuitions and experience (91-94).

We are well familiar with the project Husserl undertakes as his version of philosophy as a rigorous, i.e. phenomenologically grounded, science. But what are the religious intuitions and norms he is referring to more than spelling out in the Kaizo articles? It will turn out that they alone insights into the actual origins and nature of practical norms themselves, but before turning to the question of practical norms, it is helpful to see what Husserl found so attractive in Fichte in the first place.

At the beginning of the lectures, Husserl speaks for his age, but certainly also for himself when he says that, in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, any appreciation for the achievements of German idealism as a viable source of philosophical insight had been almost completely lost (xxv, 267-68). Part of what motivates Husserl’s return back to German idealism in these lectures is of course that it is German, and he is desperately seeking alternative justifications for a specifically German mission in philosophy in particular, but also in history in general that would provide an alternative to what he sees as the illegitimate political manipulations and lies that had resulted in the catastrophe of World War I and the very personal disappointments and losses that Husserl had suffered, including the loss of one of his sons, the grave wounds the other son had suffered, and the loss of all of Husserl’s own
personal financial means that had been sacrificed to what he had taken to be a noble cause. However, another part of it is his conviction that Kantian transcendental philosophy, and the tradition of German idealism that followed, provided a stark contrast to modern philosophies of naturalistic objectivity that fail to grasp the fact that even knowing itself is an activity for which one can and must take responsibility and that reality is not simply out there but constructed individually and socially, and that the ultimate norms underlying even knowing are both practical and rational, that is that there is indeed something like pure practical rationality that is the proper domain for authentic human reflection, including and especially philosophical reflection (272-73). He sees Kant and German idealism as an extension of the fundamental Cartesian questioning that established the priority of subjectivity and established the responsibility of each and every person for reflecting on the sources of his or her fundamental beliefs.

Even more important than Kant's insights into the subjective sources of theoretical knowledge are, in this context for Husserl, his insights into the possibility of pure practical reason through the discovery of the categorical imperative as a source of practical norms within finite reason itself. Kant thereby uncovers a universality, an unconditional, non-empirical and hence infinite source of obligation in the moral law that came to be formulated in German idealism as the source of a second, higher nature in human existence. What Husserl finds in Fichte is a practical philosophy that builds on this Kantian discovery of an infinite dimension within the finitude of human practical reason, a universality within each individual that transcends the bounds of the merely empirical and opens up the possibility of – to use Kant's words, not Husserl's or Fichte's – a pure «Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone».

Before we examine how Husserl sees Fichte's later writing as going beyond these Kantian beginnings, it is first important to note what Husserl sees Fichte as taking over from Kant. Among the things he accepts are the insight that human beings as moral agents, as instances of pure reason, are ends in themselves and that the realization of pure practical reason, of human beings as moral agents represents both the only unconditional good and thereby the goal of history – not just of individual moral development, but for humanity as a whole.

Although Husserl does not mention it here, it is important to recall how Kant takes these philosophical insights into the nature of morality, of pure practical reason as a possibility for each human agent that are developed in his second critique, then extended in the third critique and in his later political essays, and translates them into religious terms that he uses to evaluate and confirm the validity of various religious insights and doctrines, especially those of Christianity properly considered and understood in this light and purged of dogmatic, superstitious, and inappropriate metaphysical dogmas. When Husserl approvingly describes a Christ not as the one who performs miracles, not as the one who is promising a life after this one, not as the one who is proclaiming a transcendent heaven ruled by a transcendent God – in short, not the Christ of the traditional Church, but the Christ who finds the divine element in the human and calls upon each finite individual to transform him or herself into something universal, who

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1 Buckley is much clearer than Held about how early Husserl came to see his own work as the response to a crisis in modern thinking in general, not just in this article but also in his Husserl, Heidegger, and the Crisis of Philosophical Responsibility. Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1993. Another excellent overview of the continuous development of Husserl's thinking on this question is Hans Rainer Sepp, Praxis und Theorie: Husserls transzendentalphilosophische Auseinandersetzung des Lebens, Freiburg, Alber, 1997.
proclaims the dignity of each human being, and uses the yardstick of moral progress to assess genuine progress in history as steps toward the realization of the kingdom of God on earth—it is Kant’s Jesus that Husserl through Fichte is endorsing.¹

Fichte, however, expresses this in a language that takes Kant’s insights an important step further. On Fichte’s (or rather Husserl’s reading of Fichte’s) reading, the ego of pure practical philosophy is no longer simply the individual ego, but rather “the pure or absolute ego is nothing other than this subjectivity in which (according to the lawful interplay of the active deeds (Tathandlungen)) the phenomenal world of all human-I’s has its very genesis” (276). Hence because “cognizing humans are egos into which the absolute ego has divided itself up, we can, if we immerse ourselves intuitively into the pure essence of the ego, into what belongs to subjectivity, reconstruct the teleological processes out of which the whole world and finally we ourselves were constituted (in the unconscious sway of absolute intelligence)—constituted in teleological necessity” (ibid.) And he traces the original impetus for this teleology to forces inherent within all of nature prior to and more basic than fully developed pure practical reason. Inherent in all of nature and all of nature is a “striving”, a “drive towards satisfaction” (277) that finds its ultimate and truest expression in the production of a world in which ethical agency has its place, “... a world of free spirits (Geister) who stand in ethical relationships to each other and who, guided by the sublime command of duty, realize an ethical order in the world” (ibid.).

Following Kant, who recognizes this normative ideal as the only conceivable absolute purpose in the world, Fichte recognizes that the absolute norm for all practical reason, the ultimate value in the world, is the realization of this ethical order inherent within the very nature of the absolute ego as a principle within each human being so that truly rational striving is directed to the realization of this ideal. The transition from the language of morality to the language of religion is made when Husserl (following Fichte) asserts that “This ideal is the teleological cause of this world, in other words, it is God” (ibid.) and notes that Fichte says “God is the ethical world order, there can be no other. At the same time, though, God is thoroughly immanent to the absolute ego. He is not an external substance, he is not an external reality outside of the ego that would act upon it. The ego is absolutely autonomous, it carries its God within it as the purposive ideal that animates and guides it, as a principle of its own autonomous reason” (277-78). These religious insights are insights not into the nature of a God completely different from and transcendent to human life, but rather fundamental insights into the very nature of life itself, if one understands life not simply as a biological phenomenon, but rather as a teleologically ordered and organized history of intentional life itself.

If there is any doubt about whether this is just Fichte or whether Husserl thinks this is a genuine insight, then Husserl’s parenthetical remark that follows should suffice to dispel it: “(That is perhaps a somewhat free interpretation, but it might serve to clar-

¹ Of course, it is important to note that Kant is not alone or even so original in this general tendency towards an interpretation of Jesus as a great moral teacher whose true nature has been distorted by dogmatic religion. In this regard, one need only recall Frieder’s Edification of Mankind or Thomas Jefferson’s very abridged version of the Gospels. However, it is important to note that Kant provides a thoughtful philosophical account of how his version of a rational religion does not eliminate a very different kind of transcendency that escapes most other versions and thereby avoids much of what would otherwise be more reductionist versions of religion grounded in humanistic ally oriented ethics.
ify the cloudiness of what Fichte is intending here)" (278). Further confirmation that Husserl considers this a genuine insight is the fact that he sees this insight not just as something recognized by Fichte following Kant, but as one of the guiding insights of Plato who recognizes "God as an Idea, the Idea of the good, that he characterizes as the sun over the domain of Ideas, as the source of light from which all genuine values originate. And this Idea is also for him the teleological cause of the given world of the senses, which is also a merely phenomenal world for him" (ibid).

Husserl's Fichte goes beyond Kant in another way too, though. For Fichte the individual as an ethical human being has his or her place squarely in a social context. He or she has specific duties within the social context of the ethical world in which he or she finds him- or herself. And Fichte recognizes a kind of satisfaction for a human life that is very different from Kantian "happiness" as the fulfillment of all of one's natural desires. The Fichtean notion of "Seligkeit" (commonly translated as "blessedness") refers to a kind of satisfaction higher and more genuine than happiness as the satisfaction of natural urges and wants. Whorever has taken up or been taken up by the infinite, the godly, the divine and allows the absolute purposes of pure practical rationality to become one's own can achieve blessedness as a form of satisfaction that transcends mere natural 'happiness'. Hence for Fichte there is a kind of reward for moral conduct that transcends the merely natural and thereby provides a kind of immortality in this life so that the authentically moral and the authentically religious coincide for Fichte at this point in his development, says Husserl (281), and with the qualifications just mentioned this equates more or less to Kantian morality as well.

Husserl then describes what he sees as an important turn in Fichte's description of the relationship between religion and morality as his thought develops and he moves further away from Kantian moral philosophy as his primary point of orientation for his view of the religious sphere and develops his conception of "Seligkeit" a step further by stressing the connection between blessedness and love (Liebe), and the way that love implies a striving to connect and become one with that which is other than oneself. At this stage the focus shifts to the way that one can see this ideal of God as the telos of history in terms reminiscent more of Spinoza than Kant, namely as God's increasing revelation or even self-revelation in history. As human beings move from one stage of ethical free self-determination to another, as they recognize ever higher forms of blessedness, and become aware of love as the highest form of blessedness, and this is nothing other than the realization of the divine nature itself, of God as pure blessedness and pure love. As humans individually or collectively come closer to realizing this ideal, they are approaching unification with divine love itself and the blessedness that is part of it.

Husserl recounts five stages of development to the level of the religious for Fichte in his further development, only the second of which overlaps with morality. The specifically religious enters into the picture only when one has moved beyond the conflict between inclination and duty that characterizes the stage of morality. Although Husserl (and Fichte) are not completely clear here, and even conflate Kantian ethics and Stoicism in their emphasis on rejecting inclinations and natural desires as the key element of moral morality, the fundamental tendency here is clear. Fichte (and Husserl) are striving to describe the fullness of living as expressed more adequately in religious instead of moral terms as an attraction to positive values. At the very least, the first step beyond morality would be the move from a duty-based ethics of self-abnegation to a virtue-based ethics of freely embracing the good. However, for Fichte at this stage,
the good is not merely overcoming the evils of natural desires, but rather the positive attraction to the true, the good, and the beautiful in which one finds the higher satisfactions through the striving after and realization of positive values, whether in the pursuit of scientific knowledge, artistic creation, or enactment of the good in a political order. The emphasis here is not simply on the awareness of moral obligation but on the feeling of attraction for that which is valuable as true, beautiful, and good that becomes the goal that fills the one who pursues it with joy in the pursuit of that which he or she loves. Moreover, different people will be most attracted to and suited for the pursuit of one instead of all of these goods, yet they will recognize that all of them are specific expressions of the divine—each of them at the highest stages will have his or her own kind of genius appropriate to it. At the truly religious stage, each of them will recognize him or herself as a particular expression of divine longing and God's realization of the good, the true, and the beautiful in the world. The genius replaces Kant's dutiful servant of morality, and blessedness now becomes a feeling of joy in pursuing those things that have inherent value in the world at the third stage; at the fourth stage the central motivation is joy in the recognition, pursuit, and realization of such values and knowing oneself as one with God in serving as a divine vessel and in recognizing his or her kinship in love with others who each in his or her own way participates in humanity's diverse ways of instantiating God's love in the world. Here the emphasis has shifted from duty to blessedness as delight in the valuable, and joy in being able to pursue and create it. «Blessedness», «love», «delight» are feelings and so religion is a matter of feeling, the intuitions not just of duty but of what is worthy of our love and what fills us with joy. The world and the human beings within it are expressions of a divine love that is «God's kingdom on earth» (291). Finally though, even higher than the religious as a feeling is the recognition that these feelings are precisely the revelations of divinity in the world, the «intellectual intuition» in which the religious person achieves the highest stage of self-realization that approaches a kind of mystical union (a word Husserl does not use in the Fichte lectures, but does use in the Kaino articles when speaking of the human intuition of the divine and the accompanying feelings) that Husserl reports bring «joy that would not be merely the satisfaction of a theoretical interest, but would flow forth with religious blessedness and would thereby exceedingly elevate itself» (292).

To what extent is Husserl merely describing Fichte's own views here? The language in which he presents these descriptions and the way that he passionately urges his audience to take up Fichte's texts in order to reinvigorate themselves through the pursuit of what can still make it possible for them to experience «Seligkeit» in those difficult times, not simply through Stoic resignation but through an active embracing of positive possibilities in the pursuit of pure ideals, suggest that the feelings he is describing are not far from what is motivating him to continue to pursue phenomenological philosophy with such passion. It suggests that rational religion for him is not simply an intellectual or even a moral enterprise but involves the almost ecstatic and positive commitment not only to what is true but what is also beautiful and good in life and can make even the most difficult life a blessed one. That is also why I do not see it as the same kind of universalizing idealization that Held takes it to be based on the B manuscripts. It seems to me then, that at the very least at this stage of his life, Husserl found comfort and motivation not just in the language of morality, but in the feelings that Fichte, and I think he himself, thought of as even higher, namely the language of religion as an
expression of feelings that for Husserl himself were genuine and served as part of his own motivation for the passionate pursuit of the work to which he devoted his life and that gave meaning to his life in the most difficult times, only some of which were going to occur in the years immediately following the First World War.

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