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Herkunft and *Zukunft*: Heidegger, Christianity, and Secularization

Heid[egger] is right in one thing, the remnants of Christianity must be exorcized from Philosophy. Only he does not do it (does he?)¹

In a particularly honest moment, Heidegger describes his struggle with Christianity as

affecting the whole path of my questioning so like subterranean, seismic shocks . . . and who should fail to recognize that my entire path so far has been accompanied by a salient engagement with Christianity: an engagement that has never taken the form of an explicitly raised “problem,” but was rather at once the preservation of, and *at the same time* a painful separation from, my ownmost provenance – the childhood house, home and youth.²

Laying the groundwork to the ensuing discussion as a whole, the present chapter aims to explore the ambiguity characterizing Heidegger’s relation to Christianity. While an exhaustive account of the evolution of Heidegger’s thought and the knotty contours of “Heidegger and religion” are beyond its scope, we will touch on some key moments of this theme. Throughout this chapter we aim to establish the integral role of Heidegger’s engagement with Christianity for the development of the ideas laid out in *Sein und Zeit*, examining in particular the transition from his early theological endeavors to the analytic of Dasein in his 1927 magnum opus. In the center of our discussion stand the themes of secularization and the self-professed theological neutrality of his philosophy. Second, we shall discuss the efforts in his later thinking to overcome the technological tradition of metaphysics, which he perceived to be interlinked with Christianity, and to prepare for a future advent of the

¹ Taubes, *Die Korrespondenz*, vol. II, 72.

² GA 66, 44–28, 415/Heidegger, *Mindfulness*, 368.

gods and the divine. Third, we shall survey some of the initial debates in Christian theological circles surrounding his early work. We begin with Heidegger's relation to Christianity – its role in the development of his thought and its role as a foil for the innovative theoretical path he sought to blaze – not only because it is fundamental to understanding the architecture, motivations, sources, and goals of his philosophy, but also because it is vital for coming to grips with his Jewish reception.

THEOLOGICAL INCEPTIONS

Since the publication of the “earliest” Heidegger's lectures and notes, it has become undeniable that the trajectory of his philosophy as a whole is thoroughly indebted to his Christian origins.³ Biographically, the young Heidegger was raised in a devout Catholic home in the rural town of Messkirch in Baden. As he came of age, he aspired to become a priest and began formation in a Jesuit seminary. While his quest for priesthood was cut short, Heidegger remained a passionate disciple of the Catholic faith, publishing polemical and apologetic pieces in various conservative Catholic journals and enrolling as a student of Catholic theology at the University of Freiburg. His initial philosophical training was in neo-Scholasticism and neo-Kantianism, and he wrote his dissertation on psychology (1913) and his *Habilitationsschrift* on “Duns Scotus' Doctrine of Categories and Signification” (1915). Increasing dissatisfaction with the assumptions and efficiency of his philosophical commitments and his eventual marriage to the Protestant Elfride Petri in 1917 contributed to his estrangement from Catholicism and adoption of the Protestant confession. Correlatedly, he immersed himself in what was at the time regarded as the anti-metaphysical Protestant theological tradition, including the writings of Paul, Augustine, Luther, Schleiermacher, Overbeck, Kierkegaard, Dilthey, and others, which had an immense impact on the development of his original thought.⁴

³ Much has been written on this topic, but the most authoritative works remain Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*; Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*; *Reading Heidegger from the Start*, edited by Kisiel and Van Buren; *Becoming Heidegger*, edited by Kisiel and Sheehan.

⁴ While there is no denying that Heidegger's Catholic upbringing and scholastic training left their mark on his work (cf. Ott, “Martin Heidegger's Catholic Origins”), I focus on the Protestant layers in his thought because it is mainly these that are picked up by his Jewish readers. Of course, the twentieth century is replete with Catholic thinkers who were attracted to Heidegger's thinking. Karl Rahner, Bernhard Welte, Hans Urs von Balthazar, Johannes Baptist Lotz, Richard Williamson, Max Müller, John D. Caputo, to

Heidegger's writings and lectures from this early period hold nascent formulations of much of his later work.⁵ A central theme in his early intellectual endeavors is the rejection of the "Scholastic" attitude of *philosophia perennis*, with its ideal of static, a-temporal, and metaphysical abstraction, in favor of an attitude faithful to the factual lived experience. Metaphysical language, he believed, objectifies, de-worlds, and de-historicizes the immersive and unsurveyable flow of being. One correctly finds echoes of Wilhelm Dilthey's historical focus (drawn from Hegel) in Heidegger's rejection of the detached and a-temporal Greek metaphysics and his shift toward the historical, temporal, and factual existence. Heidegger also follows Dilthey in attributing the origin of this shift to the advent of early Christianity.⁶ For Dilthey, the turn to history is rooted in the incarnation, wherein "God's essence, instead of being grasped in the self-enclosed concept of substance of antiquity, was now caught up in historical vitality. And so historical consciousness, taking the expression in its highest sense, first came into being."⁷ Christianity validates history as the site of significance, Dilthey holds, for it is the realm in which the drama of Christ's life, suffering, and death unfolded. Mirroring this view, Heidegger states in the 1919/1920 lecture course "Basic Problems of Phenomenology" that "the deepest historical paradigm for the peculiar process whereby the main focus of factual life and the life-world shifted into the self-world and the world of inner experience gives itself to us in the emergence of Christianity."⁸ One of Heidegger's first independent phenomenological undertakings is an attempt to explicate this originary inward religious experience from within. By approaching religion as a phenomenological lived experience, Heidegger intentionally rebels against the *Religionswissenschaft* school's approach to religion as an object of science. By this time, he had already departed from the phenomenological method of his mentor Edmund Husserl, with its transcendental phenomenological reduction and non empirical, pure

name only a few, drew to differing extents on Heidegger for their respective theologies. On the consequential pre- and postwar Catholic reception of phenomenology (in particular, Husserl, Heidegger, and Scheler), see Baring's rich *Converts to the Real*.

⁵ This is fleshed out in Wolfe, *Heidegger and Theology*; Caputo, "People of God, People of Being"; Caputo, "Heidegger and Theology"; Crowe, *Heidegger's Religious Origins and Heidegger's Phenomenology of Religion*; Vedder, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Religion*; Kovacs, *The Question of God*; the collection *Heidegger und die christliche Tradition*, edited by Fischer and von Hermann; Hemming, *Heidegger's Atheism*.

⁶ Heidegger, "Wilhelm Dilthey's Research."

⁷ Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, 230.

⁸ GA 58, 61–62/Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 47.

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consciousness of transcendental subjectivity, and in its stead he developed an alternative phenomenology centering on the hermeneutics of facticity of Dasein's being-in-the-world. Heidegger found this model of phenomenology to be particularly potent for the task of uncovering the pristine existential disposition of authentic religiosity, found, he believed, in *Urchristentum*, which was unadulterated by "Greekizing."⁹ This is because, for him, phenomenology's liberation from the agglomeration of unnecessary preconceived conceptuality and its focus on the pre-theoretical immediacy of facticity is comparable to the liberation of the immediacy of factual being-Christian from the restrictions of alien Aristotelian metaphysical categories.¹⁰ As such, Heidegger perceived himself as reenacting the rare yet "powerful eruptions" of authentic Christian assertion, found likewise "in Augustine, in Luther, in Kierkegaard."¹¹

Participating in the contemporary resurgence of Pauline theology, Heidegger turns to Paul's letters to the Galatians and to the Thessalonians – the earliest texts of the New Testament – in the winter semester lecture course given in 1920/1921, as part of his aim to unearth the experience of primordial Christian life. These texts are not systematic philosophical treatises, and deliberately so – they are external to the metaphysical-Scholastic tradition and, as epistles, convey the situation of a concrete, temporal existence. Consonant with the then-prevalent view, Heidegger presents an eschatologically centered account of early Christianity. In his reading of Paul, the coming of Christ as a moment of actualization is not to be understood as an event that will come to pass in a certain particular moment. "Paul does not say 'When,'" he observes, "because this expression is inadequate to what is to be expressed."¹² The indeterminacy of the Second Coming grounds a life of insecure anticipation, emphasizing the lack, the still-to-come of salvation. Authentic Christian life, Heidegger determines, subsists in the experience of not-yet, in the pending openness in the face of divine absence, in the eschatological suffering and fragility in light of the undetermined *parousia*.¹³

⁹ GA 61, 6/Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*, 6.

¹⁰ As Wolfe notes: "Heidegger discovered the phenomenological method, together with Protestantism, in large part as a means to adequately describing religious experience." Wolfe, *Heidegger's Eschatology*, 44.

¹¹ GA 58, 205/Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 155.

¹² GA 60, 102/Heidegger, *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 72. An excellent collection of essays on these lectures is McGrath and Wierciński, *A Companion to Heidegger's Phenomenology of Religious Life*.

¹³ On Heidegger's early eschatological horizon and its prefiguration of later developments see Wolfe, *Heidegger's Eschatology*.

Being Christian, according to this construal, consists of inhabiting a certain mode of temporality. More specifically, it is the unstable historical process of *becoming* Christian, whereby the anticipated eschatological future throws the believers back unto their “already-having-become” Christians, creating the uncertainty of the present “now being” which can reach its abrupt end at any given moment. In *Sein und Zeit*, one finds a replication of this tripartite originary Christian existence in the phenomenological construal of Dasein’s ec-static temporality. The very conceiving of Dasein’s existence in terms of temporality is modeled in accordance with the earlier eschatological hermeneutic of primordial Christian religiosity. We shall see that the configuration of temporality that is spelled out in his early lectures on Paul is de-Christianized in the Dasein analytic, where Dasein’s being-toward-death replaces anticipating the *parousia*.

In this context, Heidegger contrasts the eschatological tendencies of early Christianity with “late-Judaism” (*Spätjudentum*), for whom the messianic anticipation is directed at the coming to pass of a particular futural moment.¹⁴ This is an aside comment, stated almost inadvertently, but it is characteristic of Heidegger’s overall treatment of Judaism: judgments are made, almost always in passing, with virtually no textual or historical substantiation, nor with any actual engagement with Judaism as a real textual, practical, and lived tradition. As will be discussed below, in the rare cases he refers to it, Judaism functions as a cipher and foil against which his proposal is positioned. In any event, with this judgment, Heidegger implicitly couples Judaism with Greek metaphysics, both of which betray what Kierkegaard calls the “vulgar” conception of temporality as the succession of present moments; time as chronology (*chronos*), *Historie*. As Heidegger explains soon after, on this account time undergoes a “homogenization” – “an assimilation of time to place, to Presence pure and simple.”¹⁵ As such it correlates with a defunct ontology of presence, as it presupposes that “to be” means “to have presence in the moment that now is.”¹⁶ In contrast to this rendition of time stands the authentic Christian *Augenblick*, time as eschatology (*kairos*), *Geschichte*. In *Sein und Zeit*, this temporal distinction is reproduced in the distinction between the inauthentic relation to death characterizing *das Man*, that of

¹⁴ GA 60, 114; Heidegger, *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 81. Wolfson critiques this understanding of Jewish messianism in *The Duplicity of Philosophy’s Shadow*, 98–99.

¹⁵ Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*, 18e.

¹⁶ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 373, and *Being and Time*, 425–426. Hereafter cited as SZ/BT.

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awaiting (*Erwartung*) a futural point in time in which death “comes to pass,” and the authentic anticipation (*Vorlaufen*) toward death, in which Dasein’s possibilities in the present are illuminated by its being-ahead-of-itself (*sich-vorweg-sein*).

The textual analysis of Paul is colored by perhaps the most crucial theological influence on Heidegger at the time, Martin Luther. Heidegger began reading Luther, to whom he refers as “a companion” in his quest, around 1918 in Freiburg and even taught seminars on his theology with Rudolf Bultmann in Marburg after moving there in 1923.¹⁷ Heidegger was inspired by Luther’s attempt to purge Christianity of the infiltration of Greek metaphysics. Luther’s admonishment of the Scholastic belief in a natural and speculative access to the divine, as well as his emphasis on God’s extreme externality, particularly impressed the young Heidegger. His portrayal of Christian existence in a world in which God is experienced only as absence and concealment reflects Luther’s pessimistic anthropology of the postlapsarian human state of existence as *status corruptionis*. According to the dominant reading at the time to which Heidegger concedes, Luther held that the corruption of the Fall is so deep and constitutive that it completely eliminates humanity’s prelapsarian character, generating an unbridgeable gap between a radically distant God and the utterly sinful human being. This view is contrasted to Scholastic theology’s belief that while deeply marred by the Fall, something of the original prelapsarian state of human existence remains, and thus some form of continuum and connection between God and the human being is maintained. That Heidegger adheres to Luther’s view is evident from a 1923 lecture course, where he defends Luther’s radical anthropological view over against Max Scheler’s idea of the human’s natural orientation toward God. The human being is not a “God seeker,” as per Scheler, but is by definition in a *status corruptionis*, a state of *ignorantia Dei* which is “a determinatively negative relation to God, in which man stands against God” – and Heidegger adds: “*this* is as such *constitutive!*”¹⁸ By aligning himself with the implications of the doctrine of the radical otherness of God and the abyss between the world and God, Heidegger accords with the present-day “Gnostic” theological trend permeating Germany at the time. It should be noted, however, that unlike the

¹⁷ GA 63, 5/Heidegger, *Ontology*, 4. See Van Buren, “Martin Heidegger, Martin Luther”; McGrath, “The Facticity of Being God-Forsaken,” reprinted in McGrath, *The Early Heidegger & Medieval Philosophy*; Lehmann, “Sagen, was Sache ist.”

¹⁸ GA 63, 27/Heidegger, *Ontology*, 22–23.

typical “Gnostic” attitude, he maintains that through the focus on factual life, the absence of God does not lead to a devaluation of the world, but rather to the opposite: the anxiety embedded in the salvation-seeking historical temporality reveals, paradoxically, this world as the arena of meaning.

Luther’s mark is also discernible in the lecture course, “Augustine and Neoplatonism,” delivered in the following 1921 summer semester, dedicated to book X of Augustine’s *Confessions*.¹⁹ Carrying out the exegetical attempt to extract Neoplatonism from Augustine, Heidegger differentiates between “metaphysical” (“Greek”) and “factual” (“Christian”) layers in Augustine and parallels them to Luther’s distinction between *theologia gloriae* and *theologia crucis*. The former, he maintains, is manifested in Augustine’s hope to reach eternal and all-fulfilling peace in God, the *summum bonum*. This Scholastic-metaphysical God, Heidegger contends, following Luther, is an object of conceptual vision and thus a readily available, calculatable, and masterable God; a God of presence, an idol. The message of the Cross, on the other hand, is that the Christian God, the *Deus absconditus*, is not a God of harmony and serenity but of concealment, fear, and trembling. The historical facticity of the Christian in-faith is thus constituted by the struggle, guilt, and humility of finite existence in the face of divine absence. Here, as in his exegesis of Paul, it is the mood, the affordance (*Befindlichkeit*) – a notion Heidegger seems to have developed on the basis of Augustine’s *affectio* – that is central, and it remains so in *Sein und Zeit*’s phenomenological hermeneutic of Dasein. Likewise, the feature of Dasein’s guilt or debt (*Schuld*) is foreshadowed in the irreducibility of existential guilt to any religiously charged action, be it sin or partaking in Christ’s suffering. And as Heidegger readily admits, the very characterization of Dasein as care (*Sorge*) was first uncovered in his reading of Augustine.²⁰ Indeed, it has been suggested that in *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger turns Luther’s *theologia crucis* into an *ontologia crucis*.²¹

¹⁹ On Heidegger and Augustine, see for example, Coyne, *Heidegger’s Confessions*. Coyne offers close readings of processes of de-theologization of Christian concepts in Heidegger’s thought as they emerge from the philosopher’s encounter with Augustine. See also van Fleteren, *Martin Heidegger’s Interpretations of Saint Augustine*.

²⁰ *SZ* 199/BT 492; *GA* 20, 418/Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, 302.

²¹ Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 167. Van Buren also quotes Edmund Schlink, the noted Luther scholar: “Heidegger’s existential analytic of human Dasein is a radical secularization of Luther’s anthropology” (*ibid.*, 159).

Shortly after the lectures on Paul and Augustine, Aristotle and Kant assume a more central stage in Heidegger's developing thought. There is, however, no question that his engagements with the canonical Christian texts markedly affect his approach toward these philosophers. Indeed, given that many fundamental categories of Dasein's ontological explication are prefigured in the configuration of "Christian existence" in these early commentaries on Paul and Augustine, they are to be rightly considered as core building blocks in the development of his thought toward *Sein und Zeit*.²²

A-THEISTIC PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE QUESTION OF NEUTRALITY

Before we turn to discuss *Sein und Zeit*, a point about Heidegger's phenomenological method needs to be made. In the early 1920s, Heidegger adopts an a-theistic methodology, one which does not take a definitive stand on the question of God, but rather brackets it out of the philosophical purview. In his 1921–1922 lecture course "Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle," he exclaims that "Philosophy, in its radical, self-posing questionability, must be *a-theistic* as a matter of principle. Precisely on account of its basic intention, philosophy must not presume to possess or determine God."²³ With this Heidegger is following Husserl's "principle of presuppositionlessness" ("des Prinzip der Voraussetzungslosigkeit"), whereby metaphysical speculations and the positive teachings of all scientific fields are to be bracketed from the inquiry of phenomenology.²⁴ "The object of philosophical research," Heidegger maintains, "is the human Dasein as it is interrogated with

²² Though Fergus Kerr's claim that "it may be said, without much exaggeration, that almost every philosophical innovation in *Sein und Zeit* may easily be traced to a theological source," is indeed an exaggeration. Kerr, *Immortal Longings*, 47. It is important to keep in mind, as Van Buren notes, that "Heidegger's ontology in the twenties was decisively influenced not only by religious sources but also by Aristotle, Husserl, Scheler, Jaspers, Lask, Natorp, and Bergson, as well as by such sources as Plato's dialogues, the ancient skeptics, Seneca, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Van Gogh's letters, and perhaps also Ortega y Gasset and Georg Lukács." Van Buren, "Heidegger's Early Freiburg Courses, 1915–1923," 141–142.

²³ GA 61, 197–198/Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*, 148). On Heidegger and Aristotle, see Volpi, *Being and Time*; McNeill, *The Glance of the Eye*; Brogan, *Heidegger and Aristotle*; Taminiaux, "The Interpretation of Aristotle's Notion of Aretê in Heidegger's First Courses."

²⁴ Husserl, *Ideas*, 188.

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respect to the character of its being.”²⁵ God is never given as a *Gegenstand* of phenomenological investigation, and as beyond the phenomenological horizon, any recourse to God must be excluded from philosophical reflection. Phenomenology is and only can be concerned with the immanent world of human existence, and is thus limited, from within, by human finitude. Not God or eternity, but death is the horizon of human existence. This position has its philosophical justifications, but we would do well to point out that Heidegger’s methodological bracketing of God and his implicit premises that God serves only an ontic rather than ontological role in the constitution of human existence parallels the commitment to radical divine externality and acknowledgment of human forsakenness to which Heidegger subscribed at the time. For, from within the utterly sinful world, no recourse to God can be made; human existential structures are to be articulated on their own terms.

Following Luther, Heidegger’s approach draws a clear line of demarcation between theology and philosophy. The result of this demarcation is the methodological emancipation of theology from the constraints of philosophy and of philosophy from dealing with claims of faith. “Could it be,” he suggests, “that the very idea of a philosophy of religion . . . is pure nonsense?”²⁶ Nevertheless, not unlike Husserl, who perceived his “atheological” phenomenological approach to be a way of arriving “at God without God,” Heidegger intends this methodology to operate as a *preparatio evangeliae*.²⁷ “The more radical philosophy is,” he remarks, “the more determinately is it on a path away from God; yet, precisely in the radical actualization of the ‘away’, it has its own difficult proximity to God.”²⁸

Heidegger held fast to this a-theistic methodology also after he parted company with Christianity in the mid-1920s. This is evident from his lecture “Phenomenology and Theology,” delivered shortly after the publication of *Sein und Zeit*, to the Protestant theological faculty in Tübingen (and then in Marburg). In this lecture, he articulates his views on the relationship between philosophy (phenomenology) and theology in a more organized way. He proceeds by dismissing the common way of approaching the matter through the distinction of reason/faith, in favor of the distinction – so central to the entire project of *Sein und Zeit* – between

²⁵ GA 62, 348–349. ²⁶ GA 62, 363n54.

²⁷ Jaegerschmidt, “Conversations with Edmund Husserl”; Moran, *Edmund Husserl*, 16–18.

²⁸ GA 61, 197–198/Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*, 148.

the ontological (“existential”) dealing with being and the ontic (“existentiell”) dealing with beings. Ontic sciences, Heidegger determines, deal with their respective ontic subjects and take for granted the being of their researched entities. The subject of inquiry of philosophy, on the other hand, is being as such, and thus it serves as the ultimate foundation for all ontic sciences. Theology is a positive ontic science, dedicated to “the specific mode of being of the Christian occurrence,” and as with all ontic sciences, any attempt at scientific systemization or reflection on its pre-Christian foundation must call upon philosophy. Theology needs philosophy only as the “science of faith”; in terms of its particular content and concepts, it functions autonomously. Theology is a “calling to faith in faith”; the disclosure of “theological knowledge” is grounded in faith itself and is not given outside of faith. Its self-attestation, as Heidegger asserts in *Sein und Zeit*, “remains closed off in principle from any philosophical experience.”²⁹ In this regard, it is restricted to a specific realm of operation and is “absolutely different from philosophy”; or as he puts it, “faith is so absolutely the mortal enemy” of philosophy.

Two points are noteworthy in this context: first, Heidegger designates theology, as a positive science, to the ontic sphere. Theology, he maintains, is “closer to chemistry and mathematics than to philosophy.”³⁰ Second, he claims that “God is in no way the object of investigation in theology,” but rather the “believing comportment itself.”³¹ This positioning allows Heidegger to neutralize theology’s common claim to probe into the nature of being, and thus to intercept in advance the potential competition with philosophy over its subject matter. In so doing, he can affirm that ontological structures are always ontically concretized and never free-floating universals, and that the concrete, “tainted” and “committed” ontic moments instantiate uncommitted ontological structures. When it is posited as a-theistic and undergirdingly prior to ontic theology – Christian and non-Christian alike – fundamental ontology emerges as neutral with regards to theology, *in principle*. As Heidegger writes in 1929, “the ontological interpretation of Dasein as Being-in-the-world does not determine against or in favour of a possible being-toward-God.”³²

Heidegger’s claim for neutrality, thus, is predicated on the distinction and separation between theology and philosophy. This, as noted, has its

²⁹ SZ 306/BT 496. ³⁰ GA 9, 6. ³¹ GA 9, 25/Heidegger, *The Piety of Thinking*, 15.

³² GA 9, 159n56/Heidegger, *The Essence of Reason*, 91n56.