

CHAPTER ONE

From Positivism to Postmodernity

Like a river that weaves its way back to its source, Heidegger's thought continually nurtures its religious origins. Yet there is no convenient pattern, no easy formula by which we can gauge his interest in religious matters. Even Heidegger's autobiography suggests that religion offered him more a felicitous detour than a straight path to his destination. In 1909 he entered a Jesuit seminary only to renounce his priestly vocation shortly thereafter.¹ During that period Heidegger first acquainted himself with Husserl's master text the *Logical Investigations*. Yet only after having written his qualifying dissertation on Duns Scotus (1916) and then having familiarized himself with the writings of such theological stalwarts as Eckhart, Luther, and Kierkegaard, did Heidegger pursue an apprenticeship with the father of phenomenology. A number of starts and stops, detours and transitions, characterize Heidegger's early development. This trend continues throughout the lengthy maturation of his thought up to and including his later devotion to Hölderlin, his concern for the holy preserved in the "last god," and his experiment with mythic-poetic thinking.

In the following chapter, I will initiate my own variation of a thought-experiment, which elicits a polymorphic form of religious experience and testifies to the mystery of the Divine. As such, Heidegger's thought offers an opportunity to evoke a religious response to the crisis of our age. We must first take a clue from Nietzsche's example of skepticism towards God, and yet must also consider whether Heidegger's overcoming of Western metaphysics provides a catalyst for a new understanding of the Divine. We seek a response to God that is polymorphic in its occurrence, which is as much open to the creation of new myths as committed to the "glad tidings" of love pronounced in the Gospels. Rather than abandoning the Christian legacy, it is necessary to return into its roots to revitalize the possibility of faith, as Heidegger did in the early 1920s in considering "primal Christianity." In fact, the pluralistic development which shapes Heidegger's early interest in theology will provide the clues to unfolding the quest for the Sacred in his later recollective thought (*Andenken*).

We will begin this chapter by examining the ambivalent place of myth as it resurfaces as an issue at the conclusion of modern thought. Then we will rediscover the hermeneutic trail taken by Heidegger's student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, as he identifies the crossroads between hermeneutics and the development of theology in the 20th century. By following Gadamer's legacy, we will arrive at the threshold of the most pivotal religious and theological questions. This threshold is one that both appears and recedes as we confront the elusive character of language, which provides the haven for mystery and myth, the flight of the gods and the epiphany of the Divine.

THE DOUBLE PLAY OF MYTH

1. *Theological Beginnings*

Heidegger borrows a page from the mystics when he suggests that thinking is essentially a solitary vocation.² Yet it is equally the case that thought can come into its own only by contending with difference, by entering into dialogue with the most heterogenous sources. As a greater claim than the purity of any discipline, whether religious or philosophical, Heidegger pursued the fluidity of questioning as it responds to the changing crisis of his day. What distinguishes the farsightedness of his approach is his ability to take the questions that are relevant in one context, e.g. religion, and transpose them into another context, e.g. philosophy. At the beginning of the 20th century, theologians like Bultmann, Barth, and Otto experienced the shock waves threatening the collapse of their own enterprise; these shock waves originated in an adjacent philosophical domain with Nietzsche's pronouncement "God is dead." And yet Heidegger will not remain content with the innovations which are accomplished within strict theological boundaries. Instead, he will seek in them the seeds for the cross fertilization that can then enrich the soil of philosophy, which had become increasingly sterile through the dominance of late nineteenth century positivism.

Of course, Heidegger's expanding the frontiers of hermeneutics constitutes the most noteworthy example of this transformation. In its inception, Heidegger's thinking occupies the crossroads between philosophy and religion. From the period of his dissertation on Duns Scotus (1916) until his 1920/21 lectures on the "Phenomenology of Religion," Heidegger undertakes his inquiry into being in conjunction with religious concerns. Only later does he develop the question of being as a separate issue in direct contrast to the Western attempt to elevate a concern for God as the supreme ground above the question of what it means to be. Beginning in the late 1920s and early 1930s,³ he coins the expression "onto-theo-logy" to distinguish the unique form of Western metaphysics as the forgetting of being. According to Heidegger, metaphysics epitomizes this forgetting

due to its theological twist, that is, by introducing God as the highest being so as to cover over the distinction between being and beings, the ontological difference. As he remarks in the "Speech of Anaximander" (1946): "*The forgetting of being is the forgetting of the difference between being and beings.*"⁴

Yet if Heidegger later undertakes a sharp critique of onto-theo-logy, it is equally the case that earlier he charts the landscape for the question of being by pinpointing the parallel controversies which threaten the theological enterprise. The attempt to address being as the most encompassing of all topics parallels the task of re-examining the most exalted spiritual concerns insofar as they intersect with experience. For in either case we are dealing with issues which at first seem to elude the acceptable paradigms of expression, which unfold at the margins of intelligibility. Hermeneutics negotiates this nebulous zone of meaning in order to mark the crossover between philosophy and religion. As Theodore Kisiel remarks, "Religion is to be understood and conceived philosophically (the problem of philosophical concepts!). It is to be placed in a context in terms of which it comes to be understood."⁵ As Heidegger points out in his 1919/21 lectures *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*,⁶ the immediacy of factic life experience yields this context, which we can only unfold through the non-objective stance of hermeneutics.⁷ The hermeneutical endeavor resists the tendency to cement meaning in the univocal terms of scientific positivism as the external correspondence between signifier and signified. Instead, hermeneutics cultivates a plurality of meanings which exhibit the tension between signifier and signified, thought and being, language and God.

We can distinguish theology's way of confronting a threefold controversy, which influences the direction of philosophy in this way. First, we can identify the skeptical challenge as it disputes the intelligibility of all supernatural, otherworldly religious motifs. Rudolf Bultmann, Heidegger's colleague at Marburg in the early 1920s, develops his unique strategy of "demythologization" to recapture the nascent meanings of religious motifs. Bultmann depicts the *kerygma* or core message of Christianity less as a fixed doctrine and instead as unfolding within the context of the personal "life-relation."⁸ The believer appropriates Christian belief, insofar as it arises from and speaks to his/her unique historical predicament.

Second, we can distinguish the pluralistic, heterodoxical challenge that considers Christianity as one possibility among others by which we experience the inscrutable mystery of the Divine. Due to its affiliation with Western philosophy, Christianity may welcome rational models of explanation which in turn obscure and even domesticate the raw dimension of humanity's awe before the Sacred. In 1918, Rudolf Otto published the *Idea of the Holy*, in which he developed an archaeology of humanity's primal experience of the Divine, of his encounter with the numinous.⁹ Almost immediately, his graphic formulations of the *mysterium tremendum* had a huge impact on his contemporaries, including Heidegger, by

cutting beneath the superstructure of theological doctrine and reaching the concrete root of religious experience, of its configuration into a phenomenon as such. Otto and Bultmann make explicit the biases in our Western, scientific world-view, which conceal Christianity's pre-dogmatic sources as well as its ties to non-Western traditions. The characterization of Christianity as an exclusively "Western" religion becomes increasingly problematic.¹⁰ Conversely, the attempt to circumscribe the limits of Western thought goes hand in hand with the quest to re-examine Christianity within a polyvalent, "multivocal" context.¹¹

Third, we can discern the challenge of adjusting the basic tenets of Christianity to meet the religious pathos and doubt of a Europe torn asunder by war and destruction. What we might call "neo-orthodoxy" arises to face this problem and emerges in the vacuum left by undoing the optimistic vision of cultural progress as advanced under the auspices of Hegelianism. As Karl Barth and later H. Richard Niebuhr would suggest,¹² it is just as important to recognize the darkness within the human soul as stemming from original sin, as to accentuate the luminosity of Absolute Spirit which Hegel described as the pinnacle of God's self-revelation in human culture. In taking its cue from the breakdown in the modern ideal of historical progress, the inquiry into God emerged as "crisis theology." Barth re-directed theology to its roots in St. Paul and the need for a "reawakening" of the spirit. As Charles Bambach states: "In *Romans* [1919] Barth proclaimed an end to the liberal era by focusing his attention on the sterility and spiritual exhaustion that had claimed the German world."¹³

In responding to the modern crisis, Barth identified the key motifs of Christianity as a call to faith and a "decision" to commit one's existence to God's eternal plan rather than to the ideal of secular progress. To quote Barth: "And for this reason the incarnation of the Word means the judgment...which is passed on all flesh. Not all men commit all sins, but all men commit this sin which is the essence and root of all other sins....This is what makes His coming a coming to judgment, and His office as Savior His office as our Judge."¹⁴ Thus, Barth responds to a skepticism which arises less on the epistemic front¹⁵ of positivism and more on the moral front of the decline of Western culture as announced by Oswald Spengler and ultimately Nietzsche.¹⁶

Richard Niebuhr becomes especially important by building on the insights of the great Protestant theologians of the nineteenth century, especially Schleiermacher. Interestingly enough, Schleiermacher exerted a profound influence not only on Niebuhr and Barth in the theological domain, but also directed the young Heidegger's attempt to recover the dimension of concrete, factual experience in the believer's response to God. Indeed, Schleiermacher reemphasized the believer's personal relation to God as embodied in the *feeling* of piety, and thereby countered the speculative attempt to define religion as a moment of universal cognition. As Niebuhr states: "It was Schleiermacher's knowledge of the inseparability of God

and faith quite as much as his idealism which led him to reject the speculative method in theology and to approach his subject through the pious feelings of the religious man."¹⁷

Thus Niebuhr reaffirms the primacy of the historical Jesus and of the historical context of faith in which the Christian community finds itself *already* bound by the collective sense of the revealed Word of God in the Son. The entire course of human history is now seen to prefigure and prepare for the realization of this distinctive event of God's incarnation in human form. The development of history as *eschatology*, as a divine agency acting within the context of the moment (*kairos*), becomes the cornerstone of Niebuhr's theology. "That Jesus had been born in the fullness of time meant that all things which had gone before seemed to conspire toward the realization of this event."¹⁸ The young Heidegger and his colleague, Rudolf Bultmann, saw the need to redefine eschatology in regard to the historical constellation of the moment, as anticipating a salvation already at work. Eschatology should not be construed in terms of the annihilation of time in a catastrophic moment of apocalypse.

Heidegger's theological contemporaries stand at the outskirts of modern thought and criticize the complex set of problems which he outlined. Yet none of them necessarily succeed in divulging the limitations of modernity. It is not sufficient to expose the narrowness of the secular outlook couched in modernity, as Bultmann does. Indeed, to criticize modernity for abandoning God is almost to beg the question; for it is the development of an increasingly skeptical stance which exposes the practice of the Christian faith to its own inconsistencies and prefigures its collapse. By contrast, Heidegger seeks in this *skepsis* the prototype of a more radical questioning that takes its clue from the self-showing of the things themselves. Rather than identify with one side of the secular-religious debate, he seeks a language that considers the concrete situation in which the inquirer already stands. Heidegger will take various methodological steps to foster this concrete orientation. He not only establishes the interdependence between phenomenology and hermeneutics, but also incorporates into that descriptive method the criticism which Nietzsche pioneered in diagnosing the ills of modernity, the bacillus of nihilism.

Thus Heidegger integrates into his hermeneutics the counterpoint of *Abbauen*, of de-structuring or undoing the sedimented layers of the philosophical tradition. This strategy of *Abbauen* is the essential step in unfolding the parameters of the inquirer's historical situation, in order to reach the threshold where it becomes possible to formulate the question of being. Heidegger can expand his interpretive horizon, however, only by engaging his predecessors and thereby infusing hermeneutics with a rich historical tapestry of its own. Heidegger's interest in Nietzsche will evolve over the course of two decades. Yet even early on we can witness Heidegger's receptivity to the paradigm shift which Nietzsche implements

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