
THE ‘RETURN OF RELIGION’ IN MARTIN HEIDEGGER’S WORK: OVERVIEW AND CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT

Martin Heidegger’s thought is often seen in the context of its opposition to the traditional notion of religion as expressed especially in Christianity. Since Heidegger became not only estranged from, but even inimical to Christianity at least from his mid-period, some interpretations label his thought atheistic. However, as was pointed out among others by John Caputo or Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, the relationship between religion and Heidegger’s thought is complex. As a young person preparing for Catholic priesthood, Heidegger had a deep understanding of religion on the spiritual as well as the theological level. This essay attempts to show the general background of Heidegger’s attitude concerning religion in the tradition of the medieval writing entitled *German Theology* and also in the age when Heidegger developed his insights. It argues that, especially from his mid-period, Heidegger developed a peculiar kind of mysticism, which can be conceived in the context of the critical tradition of previous forms of religious mysticism. This tradition is even more critical if we leave the realm of German ‘titanism’ and seek for alternative philosophical expressions not arising from that linguistic context. The essay concludes that it is possible to understand Heidegger’s proposals as instrumental to a new understanding of the continuously changing forms and contents of religion if and only if one is prepared to apply the necessary amount of critical reflection.

Key words

Martin Heidegger; Black Notebooks; Philosophy of religion; ‘Vallásbölcsélet’; Philosophy of revelation

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There is an ambiguous relationship between the work of Martin Heidegger and the problem of religion.¹ Some of the early interpreters declared Heidegger's work atheistic.² On the other hand, the influence of Heidegger on theology has been immense as is shown by the work of Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner or by the reception in post-modern and post-secular thought. Heidegger himself gives sufficient ground to have such contradictory views on the character of his work. Sometimes we find outright anti-Christian claims in his writings, but we can also retrieve references to mysticism, often in a poetic form, which may contribute to a better understanding of the nature of religion in a secular age.³

The best way to consider the problem of religion in Heidegger's work may be chronological. Originally a Catholic novice, Heidegger studied theology thoroughly and produced his doctoral thesis and habilitation work on philosophical-theological problems. His first main work, *Being and Time* is a scrupulously scholastic book in character, and deep layers of *What is Metaphysics* of 1929 border on the mystical. However, from the mid-1930s, Heidegger's thought became more and more esoteric in language and content. The posthumously published *On the Event* (*From Enowning, Vom Ereignis*), which was written during the 1930s, shows this peculiar turn in a detailed fashion. The published volumes of the *Black Notebooks* (*Schwarze Hefte*) give us a clear account of the way how Heidegger's thought, with a special relevance to religiosity and mysticism, developed throughout his mature philosophical career.

If we want to conceive how Heidegger understands religious topics, we need to go back to the tradition of 'German theology' in the sense John Niemeyer Findlay used the term.⁴ According to Findlay, the best way to understand German philosophy during the nineteenth and

¹ In what follows, I use the expression 'religion' especially in its traditional, i.e. Christian sense. In this sense, religion entails religious experience, faith, and also theology as the theoretical expression of religion. For a detailed discussion of the development and the ramifications of the notion of religion see Balázs M. Mezei, *Religion and Revelation after Auschwitz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 29–53.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism is a Humanism,' trans. Philip Mairet, in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Plume Books, 1975), 345.

³ Cf. Peter Fritz, 'Heidegger on Revelation,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Divine Revelation*, eds. Balázs M. Mezei, Francesca Murphy and Kenneth Oakes (Oxford: University Press), forthcoming.

⁴ J. N. Findlay, *The Philosophy of Hegel. An Introduction and Re-Examination* (New York: Collier Books, 1966), cf. Mezei, *Religion and Revelation after Auschwitz*, 53.

twentieth centuries is to put it into the perspective of German mysticism expressed originally in the anonymous writing entitled *Theologia germanica* (*German Theology*) written in the fourteenth century. This mystical work explains that God and man can be united by following a path of perfection, as exemplified by the life of Christ, renouncing sin and selfishness, ultimately allowing the union of God's will and human will. The writing was in its age an expression of a mystical tradition the leading authors of which were among others Johannes Teuler and Meister Eckhart. Martin Luther produced a new edition of the writing in 1518 which strongly contributed to the surge of various streams of mystical thought in German Protestantism and – as is testified e.g. by the work of Angelus Silesius – also in Catholicism. Findlay applies the title *German Theology* to describe the perspective in which theology, arts, poetry and philosophy in the German territories can be better understood. The key to the proper understanding of the influence of *German Theology* is taking into consideration its presence even in the seemingly anti-religious outputs of German scholarship, such as the works of Ludwig Feuerbach or Friedrich Nietzsche.

Heidegger's work is deeply rooted in the history of Western philosophy and especially in German thought. However, even within this tradition, the perspective opened by *German Theology* seems to be seminally important. Heidegger continued in an idiosyncratic form the mystical perspective in philosophy as it was well explained for the first time by John Caputo.⁵ It is part and parcel of this tradition that it does not only receive traditional topics of mysticism but even further develops them into new kinds of thinking. This tradition explains the depth and the innovative character of Heidegger's religious thought, a character which does not only inherit but even points beyond the received views of Christian origin.

Heidegger's *oeuvre* seems to possess its unparalleled power precisely by its innovative nature in both content and form. To reach clarity about the importance of this innovation we need a thorough understanding of Heidegger's notion of be-ing (*Sein*). This task is not dissimilar to the problem of a proper understanding of the central expressions of Plato or Aristotle. The difficulty with them is that it appears challenging to find a perspective and a vocabulary beyond the work we consider. In

⁵ Cf. John Caputo, *The Mystical Element In Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 261–270.

discussing Plato, we need to use the word ‘idea’, although the exact meaning of this term is far from being clear. In examining Aristotle, we cannot avoid using his expression of ‘form’, which again, if seen with the eyes of more modern accuracy, is at least vague. It seems that in our attempts to understand Heidegger we have to use the key expressions of his work in a similarly axiomatic way. This difficulty ultimately makes it unavoidable that only a mind more innovative or even deeper than Heidegger would be able to offer the perspective and terminology in which Heidegger’s work can be properly investigated. This is somewhat similar to the way how Aristotle corrected and further developed Plato’s views or how Thomas Aquinas was able to synthesise the works of Aristotle and Dionysius the Areopagite. In other words, only an original thinker with an important philosophical discovery may be able to offer us an overall perspective in which Heidegger’s work may be properly considered.

In my view, the merits of Heidegger’s work counterbalance the embarrassment caused by some of his confusing political remarks.⁶ One is inclined to consider such remarks as derivations of a hyperbolic mysticism belonging to the tradition of German theology. However, Heidegger goes far beyond the horizon of that tradition and creates a uniquely innovative and complex building of thought in which the problems related to religion is considered again and again. Here it is important to point out that even when Heidegger does not use the expression ‘religion’ but rather parallel words, such as God or the Gods, the holy or the sacred, or even in some respects being and be-ing, it is legitimate to recognize in them problems belonging to the more general scope of religion.⁷

⁶ Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann and Francesco Alfieri, *Martin Heidegger. Die Wahrheit über die Schwarzen Hefte* (Berlin: Dunker & Humblot, 2016). For the list of the so-called ‘antisemitic’ remarks, see Zachary Siegel, ‘7 New Translated Excerpts on Heidegger’s Anti-Semitism’, last modified February 23, 2015, accessed March 3, 2018, <http://www.critical-theory.com/7-new-translated-excerpts-on-heideggers-anti-semitism/>. Peter Trawny, *Heidegger und der Mythos der jüdischen Weltverschönerung* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2015) is sharply criticised by von Herrmann 2016.

⁷ I shall detail this point below with respect to Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, ‘Die drei Wegabschnitte der Gottesfrage im Denken Martin Heideggers,’ in *Die Gottesfrage im Denken Martin Heideggers*, eds. Norbert Fischer and Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2011).

1. The Historical Context

The notion of religion shows a peculiar development paralleled by some similar concepts in the history of Western thought. Not unlike the notions of 'person', 'freedom', or 'revelation', 'religion' has gone through a spectacular semantic trajectory.⁸ Arising from a humble beginning in Latin antiquity, the term 'religion' developed into a synthetic notion encompassing the entire building of culture from theology to the sciences, from the arts to politics, or from individual psychology to military matters. At the time of its highest development, i.e. during the first half of the nineteenth century, 'religion' was not just a name; it had a nimbus, a radiance, a power expressing the accumulated results of the development of the Christian centuries. Either in Victorian England or in France of the Restoration, either in the Catholicism of the Habsburgs or in the Protestant spirituality of Prussia, 'religion' appeared as the crown of human achievements in all walks of life.⁹

Not that challenges had been missing. The rise of the Enlightenment, the anti-religious atheism of the Encyclopaedists, the bitter experiences of the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars, or the appearance of the Russian army in such old European centres as Paris (during and after the Battle of Paris in 1814) – all these occurrences sent the signals of an epochal change in European history. After the suppression of the terror of Jacobinism, secret societies with ideals of a communist or socialist utopia strived to challenge the existing political order, not least the newly restored glamour of religion. When, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel re-established the importance of religion as opposed to philosophy, there were among his students thinkers of the coming generation who denied the existing form of religion and offered either an existential reform or even a full destruction. The left Hegelians continued the legacy of searching for a substitute for religion. The right Hegelians, on the other hand, attempted to maintain the architectonic unity between state and culture, religion and society.

⁸ Cf. Balázs M. Mezei, *Radical Revelation. A Philosophical Approach* (London and New York: T&T Clark and Bloomsbury, 2017), 1.

⁹ It is this development of 'religion' that made it possible to have an understanding of 'world-religions', i.e. religions outside Christianity. Remarkably, it was Nicolaus of Cusa that first extended the use of 'religio' to Islam and Judaism after 1453 (the fall of Constantinople) in his short work *De pace fidei*.

Parallel to the scientific explosion of the second half of the nineteenth century, the meaning of ‘religion’ was rapidly losing attraction. The ceremonial blessing of the classicist basilica in Esztergom (Gran) in 1856 – the monumental attempt of the Habsburgs to create a Central European version of the Vatican – took place only ten years before the collapse of the military power of Austria at Königgrätz. Franz Liszt’s becoming a Franciscan tertiary in 1857 preceded just a generation the composition of Wagner’s *Parsifal*. While Liszt decided to dedicate his life to ‘religion’ in a post-Napoleonic sense, i.e. in the sense of the Restoration, Wagner offered the idea of a groundbreaking reform of religion in many of his musical poems.

The nineteenth century, thus, offered two directions in the development of religion: on the one hand, it opened the conservative way of the return of established religion and, on the other, the way of radically challenging established religion. When challenges were becoming stronger in the political as well as the cultural senses, the reactions turned out to be also tough, sometimes even ruthless. Just think of the occupation of Rome in the midst of the First Vatican Council by the army of General Cadoma and the ensuing liquidation of the Papal State in 1870! The answer was the inexorably rigid anti-modernism of the Church expressed variously in Catholic teaching and practice.

While God may have died during these epochal events, as Nietzsche suggested, religion did not really pass away.¹⁰ Religious renewals appeared in several outlines, some of which pointed to a complete reform, and some others to a full return of earlier forms. From Socialist reformers, such as John Ruskin, to the ‘religion of humanity’ of August Comte, new attempts were formulated to renew religion. While these attempts disappeared in a few decades, Catholicism also began the process of self-renewal, most definitively formulated in the encyclical letter *Rerum novarum* of 1891.¹¹ This game of ‘change things so that the essence remains unchanged’ continued up to the First World War with overall and tragic consequences to established religion. Pastors and priests blessed the cannons of national armies entering battles against

¹⁰ Cf. my text on ‘the death of God’ in Balázs M. Mezei, ‘Death of God,’ in *The History of Evil in the Early Twentieth Century. 1900–1950 CE*, ed. Victoria S. Harrison (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016), ch. 12.

¹¹ Leo XIII, ‘Rerum Novarum. Encyclical Letter (1891),’ accessed June 1, 2019, http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html.

each other. Theologies were developed against countries belonging to the same confession. Catholic countries, such as Austro-Hungary and Italy, were fighting desperate and mutually devastating battles. And the deeply protestant United States hastened to help – not the country of origin of their faith, i.e. Germany, but rather the officially laicized, but still massively Catholic France ... While Pope Benedict XV attempted in vain to create peace among the warring parties, the topical atmosphere was better expressed by *The Holy* of Rudolf Otto published in the middle of the war in 1917. Many contemporaries considered this book as the revelation of a renewed Christianity which evil powers were trying to destroy.

After the war, as for instance the work of Max Scheler clearly demonstrates,¹² the call to conversion and a new beginning was initially very strong. However, the life and work of Scheler demonstrates that the period of religious renewal gave way to a second kind of conversion, a conversion to esotericism and mysticism.¹³ Or again, it was overwritten by a conversion to radical atheism. The work of Heidegger shows this trajectory very clearly.

Heidegger faced the problems of religion in his *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* of 1920/21 (Einleitung in die Phänomenologie der Religion, cf. Heidegger 1995). He offers a profound understanding and interpretation of the then contemporary philosophies of religion, with a strong emphasis on the notion of the 'factual experience of life' (*faktische Lebenserfahrung*). In Heidegger's understanding of life, life-experience, or facticity, we find the preliminary notions of his emerging framework of *Being and Time*. Heidegger does not offer a theory, explanation or interpretation of religion; rather, he *reduces* religion to factual life-experience of the individual (*Dasein*) and points out the importance of a 'destruction' of religion as a structure opposing the reality of factual life.¹⁴

¹² Max Scheler, *Vom Ewigen im Menschen* (Leipzig: Der neue Geist, 1921).

¹³ Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (Darmstadt: Otto Reichl, 1928).

¹⁴ Cf. 'Trotzdem leistet auch die moderne Religionsgeschichte viel für die Phänomenologie, wenn sie einer phänomenologischen Destruktion unterworfen wird.' Also p. 135: 'Es wird nicht zu vermeiden sein, daß die Aufdeckung der Phänomenzusammenhänge die Problematik und Begriffsbildung von Grund aus ändert und eigentliche Maßstäbe beistellt für die Destruktion der christlichen Theologie und der abendländischen Philosophie.' Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens* (GA 60) (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995), 78.

The *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* does not represent a ‘return of religion’. Rather, Heidegger analyses various theologians, philosophers, and phenomenologists (especially Ernst Troeltsch) in order to point out the complexity of the meaning of religion. He never tries, however, an independent and overall interpretation of the notion of religion. Instead, he offers readings of various authors on religion and develops their criticism based on the notion of factual life-experience and the ‘formal indicator’ (*formale Anzeige*). The ‘formal indicator’ is Heidegger’s early description of the specific character of human beings bound up with the understanding of their uniquely concrete life.

This move, nevertheless, contributes to a better understanding of the changing character of religion during the first decades of the twentieth century. Rudolf Otto’s *The Holy* outlined a grandiose view of religious sentiment as centered on the notion of the holy. The holy was defined as ‘the irrational’. Heidegger rightly pointed out that, by introducing the category of ‘the irrational’, Otto tacitly presupposed a full-fledged notion of rationality of which he never offered a structured description. After Otto, the emergence of various ‘phenomenologies of religion’, such as that of Gerardus van der Leeuw or Friedrich Heiler, developed complex notions of religion so that a new understanding of religion may have become possible.

We need to understand the two ways outlined by these authors: on the one hand, a return of, and to, religion was taking shape in authors like Otto, van der Leew, Scheler, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and others. On the other hand, a sharp criticism of religion emerged, a criticism often spilling over to atheism. One should not forget that, with the establishment of the Soviet Union, history’s first officially atheistic state was created in 1922. In this state, the destruction of religion did not remain on the theoretical level; it actually resulted in the ruins of church buildings and the dead bodies of Christian priests. While Catholicism was shaken by the consequences of the Great War, it succeeded in re-establishing its state form in 1929 and began to modernise its theological structures in many ways, for instance in the movement of *nouvelle théologie*.

Heidegger’s relationship to religion must be seen against these historical developments. We can add the rise of national-socialism and the devastating course of the Second World War together with its fatal consequences to Western culture; without any question, all important

factors in the development of Heidegger's understanding. Since this background cannot be outlined here in more detail, let me summarily say that the gradual collapse of the traditional forms of religion is reflected in Heidegger's work in three different ways: first, in the attempt to reach a deeper understanding of the theological traditions; second, in the distance created by the mature Heidegger between his work, expressed especially in *Being and Time*, and the subject matter of religion; and thirdly, in an often mystical-sounding attempt to rephrase and rewrite traditional religious subject matters in radical new ways, which started in the 1930s and continued till the end of the work of the philosopher.

2. Spiritual Background

We can see Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* as one of the greatest proposals of an overarching reform of *religion* in the synthetic form of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* (comprehensive artwork). The opera is in fact the expression of the rebirth of religion in line with the tradition of Christian Protestantism, pietism, religious philosophies of the nineteenth century, and the musical development of the same period. In terms of music, Wagner's opera is perhaps the peak of nineteenth century composition. In terms of symbolism, it expresses the hard way to the renewal of religion.

According to the plot, when Parsifal appears in the woods, the Order of the Holy Grail is in utmost ruins. Evil Klingsor possesses the Holy Spear and hits the holy order with fatal wounds; the knights of the order are after pleasures and they have forgotten their sublime legacy. The wounded Amfortas and the lazy knights point to various faces of then contemporary Christianity; Klingsor symbolises the magical power of the age. Parsifal is the providential renovator of religion, but even he is submitted to the temptations of Kundry and other unknown demons. Yet Parsifal emerges victorious, because he was able to retrieve the Spear; through his victory, he frees the Grail and activates its holy might. By this act, he receives the Holy Spirit expressed, in accordance with the original instruction of Wagner, by the traditional symbol of the white dove. Parsifal proves to be the saviour of religion who thereby also renews humanity.

We know that Nietzsche abhorred the opera. His *Zarathustra* was actually a response to *Parsifal*. Instead of the renewal of religion,

Nietzsche talked about the ‘death of God’, about the God who died ‘of his pity for mankind.’¹⁵ According to Nietzsche, God is dead and ‘now we want the overman to live.’¹⁶ It is important to emphasise that while Nietzsche may have wanted the destruction of ‘religion’ in some form, he still insisted at the recovery of truth in an original sense. Truth, as expressed in the life of the overman, is like religion reborn in a new form. Nietzsche’s influence originated in his attitude to truth, which appeared to him as absolute and undeniable, something which ‘eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man ...’¹⁷ Nietzsche’s protest notwithstanding, Parsifal is the archetype of the *Übermensch*.

Heidegger’s understanding of a return of religion may be better understood in the perspective of Nietzsche than in the contexts of Troeltsch, Barth, Rahner, or Hans Urs von Balthasar.¹⁸ His criticism of Nietzsche confirms that the Nietzschean revolt against religion was actually the highest expression of religion itself. Nietzsche in fact offered a fully renewed form of religion, as it is suggested by the entire genre and content of his (religiously sounding) *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. Inasmuch as Nietzsche is crucially important for Heidegger, we may see here a kind of affirmation of a notion of the return of an at least *Nietzschean* religion. While acknowledging the paramount importance of Nietzsche, Heidegger offers a criticism of his work as well in terms of Nietzsche’s fulfilment of Western metaphysics and his ignorance of the genuine sense of being.¹⁹

¹⁵ Cf. Nietzsche’s sarcastic references to Wagner and his *Parsifal* e.g. in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo. How To Become What You Are*. Translated with an introduction and notes by Duncan Large (Oxford: University Press, 2007), 26–9, 38, 45, 48–50, 52, 56–8, 102, 107.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: University Press, 2006), 59.

¹⁷ 1 Cor 2:9. See Mezei, *Radical Revelation*, 323f.

¹⁸ Cf. Cyril O’Regan, *The Anatomy of Misremembering: von Balthasar’s Response to Philosophical Modernity* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad, 2014).

¹⁹ Cf. ‘For Heidegger, the most important thing is not the overcoming of nihilism, but rather to answer to Being in its failure to appear, to wait for it and thus to think it anticipatorily. The respect for Being as Being ends the murder of god, which began with the metaphysics of the Greeks and reached its fulfillment in Nietzsche’s metaphysics.’ (My translation). Johannes Brachtendorf, ‘Heideggers Metaphysikkritik in der Abhandlung Nietzsche’s Wort “Gott ist tot,”’ in *Die Gottesfrage im Denken Martin Heideggers*, eds. Norbert Fischer und Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2011), 126.

Thus, we need to be very careful as to what Heidegger may consider acceptable in the notion of a 'return of religion'. Heidegger would clearly reject the notion of return as the return of an earlier phase in the development of the notion of religion. He would never accept that, for instance, the notion of religion as reflected in the canons of the Council of Trent could be fully or even partially re-established. Nor could he accept the distinction between Christendom and Christianity along the lines of Kierkegaard's evaluation.²⁰ Heidegger considered Christianity both as Christendom (official forms of religion) and as *Christensein* (the personal dedication to Christ) as part and parcel of the same Christianity; and he opposed 'Christianity' in a peculiar way, in which criticism becomes the most important form of appreciation. In Heidegger's view, the 'genuine criticism' of the ideas of a thinker equals 'the genuine appreciating of a thinker'.²¹

However, in a fundamental sense, Heidegger would certainly accept the importance of a return. In terms of the notion of the 'eternal return of the same', i.e. the continuous emergence of the absolute (if I may reinterpret here Nietzsche's dictum), we have the possibility of an understanding of return which fits in with Heidegger's mind. Here return refers to the irreducible importance of the emergence of reality, i.e. *Sein*. More concretely, if by return we understand a turn back to the absolute, *Sein*, Heidegger could not be more in accord with us. For indeed, 'return' is not only about religion's reappearance in some form, but rather the change of our attitude to religion, just as John the Baptist preached conversion.²² Return may express a deep conversion of the

²⁰ In a text entitled 'The Tragedy of Christendom Is That It Has made Christianity into Nothing but a Doctrine', Kierkegaard complains that treating Christianity as doctrine eliminates the obedience, renunciation, and self-denial that constitute genuine Christian discipleship. Indeed, 'if it were God's idea that Christianity be merely a doctrine, the whole apparatus of the New Testament and Christ's life betrays that God as a student of human nature is, to put it bluntly, a complete bungler' Quoted by David R. Law, 'Kierkegaard as Existentialist Dogmatician. Kierkegaard on Systematic Theology, Doctrine, and Dogmatics,' in *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Jon Stewart (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 256.

²¹ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche I-II* (Stuttgart: Neske, 1961), i. 5: 'Auseinandersetzung ist echte Kritik. Sie ist die höchste und einzige Weise der wahren Schätzung eines Denkers.' See also Martin Heidegger, *Anmerkungen I-V. Schwarze Hefte 1942-48*, ed. Peter Trawny (GA 97; Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2015), 168: 'Aus der Kritik stammend steht das Denken in der Gerechtigkeit zur Sache.'

²² In Mat 3:2, we read 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!' (NKJV). The Greek for 'repent' is μετανοείτε, which expresses the turn of the mind, a return to God, 'religion'.

heart and the mind; and it may express the return of religion to us in the form of illumination, insight, new awareness, faith, and knowledge.

Heidegger did not talk about 'religion' in many of his writings, but rather of fundamental ontology, the opening of truth on the horizon of being, of Being and Be-ing, that is, of the Event – and of gods, godhead, god, the last god. I am going to say a little more about these aspects of Heidegger's work below; here let me add that Heidegger's terminology, much before the publication of *Being and Time*, became highly idiosyncratic. His entire vocabulary and semantic network presuppose not only the original German, but also the complicated developments we find in the language of academic philosophy after the turn of the century and especially in phenomenology. The centrality of expressions, such as *Dasein*, *Sein*, or even *formale Anzeige* grew out organically from academic philosophy of his age and led him develop one of the most original, consistent, and illuminating vocabularies in the history of Western thought.²⁵

3. *Vom Ereignis*

Part Eight of *Vom Ereignis* or *On the Event* or *On Enowning* begins with the motto: 'The totally other over against gods who have been, especially over against the Christian God.' We need to understand these words properly. Heidegger's thought is directed to the 'totally other' as a preparatory action. This thought is capable of conceiving, though not grasping, the truth of the totally other. This is the reason why Heidegger applies his characteristic mode of writing of Be-ing: *Sein*. Since Heidegger talks about the totally other, he implies thereby the rejection of what has been before, that is, 'the gods who have been'. It is especially the 'Christian God' that is judged to be *passé*. Heidegger suggests that the Christian God, in the form of theologically and philosophically limited approaches, expresses the classical case of ontotheology, i.e. a fundamental kind of idolatry, in which God as the Highest Being is construed from our subjective experience of particular or limited beings. What can thus be construed is indeed an idol which turns out to be the universal automaton, the archetype of all machine-like misuse of reality in the form of *Machenschaft*, i.e. machination.

²⁵ A more detailed account of the place of Heidegger's ideas in twentieth century German thought, especially phenomenology, see my chapter 'Revelation in Phenomenology.'

We do not have space here to go into the numerous details of the extremely rich and enlightening text of *Vom Ereignis*. I focus only on the famous expression of the 'stillness of the passing of the last god' (*Die Stille des Vorbeiganges des letzten Gottes*). What does Heidegger mean thereby?

First, the notion of 'stillness' (*Stille*) shows a Biblical parallel in The Book of Revelation: 'When He opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour'. To refer to the Bible is not irrelevant, since Heidegger was also a Bible scholar. When he speaks of 'the last god', he was aware of the parallel place in the Book of Revelation ('I am the first and the last'); and he was aware of the parallelism between the expression and traditional Christian eschatology. Second, *Stille* in the work under consideration comes to the fore in its various meanings: stillness is silence, quietness, speechlessness, and tranquility. For the author, stillness is at the same time expectation, preparation, and the capacity of receiving. These terms refer to the conceiving of the totally other of the absolute as it is given to the few prepared to receive him.

What is the meaning of passing, *Vorbeigang*? This word is quite complex, because *vorbeigehen* means both to go past and to stop by. I believe that the implications of this double meaning express the message of the author. The absolute in its new form as 'the last god' – as the ultimately divine – may go past us or stop by us, depending on our preparedness and its own decision. The English translation here has 'passing', which also has a double meaning: passing by and passing away. The last god may remain unnoticed and pass away; or else he may come to us in the silence 'when the seventh seal was opened'. We should not forget that, in the Bible, the opening of the seventh seal launched the apocalyptic events leading to the revelation of the New Jerusalem. In Heidegger, the stillness is again connected to the apocalyptic scenes determined by technology, machination, and *Ge-Stell*.²⁴

The last expression in our phrase is 'the last god'. Here the situation is so much clearer as Heidegger gives us a definition: 'last' does not mean the last element of a countable series but rather the unique moment that cannot be reduced to anything; its better translation is

²⁴ 'Wir nennen jetzt die von sich her gesammelte Versammlung des Stellens, worin alles Bestellbare in seinem Bestand west, das Ge-Stell.' Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, ed. Petra Jaeger (GA 79; Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994), 52.

‘ultimate’. The attribute ‘last’ refers to ‘the uniqueness of the essence of God’ which cannot be expected, counted, measured, or grasped. This last god is the god that, through the activity of the gods, i.e. the prepared few, makes it possible to conceive the godhead un-ontotheologically. The un-ontotheological understanding of god is the conceiving of the totally other in his absolute otherness.²⁵

One needs to comment on the so often described notion of ‘the gods’, *die Götter*, in the same volume. *Die Götter* is indeed a crucial expression for Heidegger and refers to the *few* that are able to conceive being and contribute to the emergence of the last god. The gods shape the One God on the basis of be-ing (*Seyn*). For Heidegger, being is indeed the first and the last; it is the absolute in the sense of an absolute event, *actus purus*. ‘The gods’ are agents by whom the divine is newly constituted. The rise of the ‘god’, especially the last god, is closely connected to the apocalyptic and eschatological activity of these agents.

4. *Schwarze Hefte*

Finally, let me point out a few important references in Heidegger’s *Black Notebooks* (*Schwarze Hefte*) of which so far five volumes have appeared.²⁶ In these volumes, ‘religion’ is used in line with the earlier critical approach. Religion is ontotheology in theory and practice.²⁷ One cannot compare *Ereignis* to religion, because *Ereignis* is more original and more primary than religion. *Ereignis* is the occurrence of the truth of being as the totally other elevation of men and the opening of the other abysmality.²⁸

²⁵ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (GA 65; Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989), 406.

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Überlegungen II–V. Schwarze Hefte 1931–1938*, ed. Peter Trawny (GA 94; Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2014), Martin Heidegger, *Überlegungen VII–XI. Schwarze Hefte 1938/39*, ed. Peter Trawny (GA 95; Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2014), Martin Heidegger, *Überlegungen XII–XV. Schwarze Hefte 1939/41*, ed. Peter Trawny (GA 96; Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2014), Martin Heidegger, *Anmerkungen I–V*, Martin Heidegger, *Anmerkungen VI–IX. Schwarze Hefte 1942–48*, ed. Peter Trawny (GA 98; Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2018).

²⁷ ‘Ein wesentlicher Unterschied ist es, ob der Mensch schaffend vor den Gott zu stehen kommt oder ob er nur die “Religion” als eine für seine Zwecke nützliche Einrichtung in die Rechnung stellt.’ Heidegger, *Überlegungen II–V*, 331.

²⁸ Cf. ‘Das Ereignis aber ist ursprünglicher, weil anfänglicher als alle »Religion« – das Geschehnis der Wahrheit des Seyns als die ganz andere Erhöhung des Menschen und als die Eröffnung der anderen Abgründigkeit.’ Heidegger, *Überlegungen II–V*, 357.

In the second volume of *Überlegungen*, religion refers to experience, *Erlebnis*, which is the content of the radical subjectivisation of being.²⁹ Experience defines religion and experience defines god; both become empty and meaningless thereby. Religion becomes also 'culture', which is the expression of the extreme emptiness of reality. There is no possibility of the rise of a new religion or even the return of religion; religion is defined in terms of the past, which sank into subjectivity together with its theology and church forms. Religion belongs to the series of 'science, art, morality' – all are expressions of the forgetfulness of being in various forms. The only positive context in which Heidegger mentions religion is the notion of religion by the poet Hölderlin. Hölderlin is the prophet of the totally other and thus his 'religion' – when he uses this expression – can be seen as a reference to the totally other absolute.

In the third volume of *Überlegungen*, religion appears as the expression of machination (*Machenschaft*). Machination is the word to name the subject's objectifying (*vorstellende*) activity, by which the subject reduces the totally other to its own partial being, while declares this partiality totality. Religion is functional in this process, especially in the form of the emphasis on 'religious experience.' Religion contributes in this way to the rise of the gigantic (*das Riesige*), which aims at the collapse of reality.³⁰ The first volume of *Anmerkungen* confirms this thesis and links religion to the 'hidden essence of technology'.³¹ In the same volume, religion is used as the reference to publicity, which is cultivated by national-socialism; national-socialism is indeed a form of religion in the sense of an attempt at the revival of the past. Heidegger notes too, that genuine thinking is sometimes tempted to interpret itself as a form of science or a kind of religion. However, these are indeed temptations and thinking must be seen as the opening to the totally other.³²

²⁹ Heidegger, *Überlegungen VII–XI*, 51.

³⁰ Heidegger, *Überlegungen XII–XV*, 125.

³¹ Heidegger, *Anmerkungen I–V*, 65.

³² 'Auch das Denken unterliegt Verführungen, insofern es sich an der öffentlichen Verwendbarkeit und Zugänglichkeit der Wissenschaft mißt oder sich nach der Religion und deren Rolle geartet meint. Beides ist irrig. Aber der Weg zurück ist schwer und durch seine wesenhafte Unmerklichkeit selber unbemerkt und unbeflegbar.' Heidegger, *Anmerkungen I–V*, 479.

5. Heidegger's Influence

While Heidegger could have seen deeply problematic to talk about a 'return of religion', many of his interpreters had a different opinion. Authors beginning with Emmanuel Lévinas through John Caputo to Gianni Vattimo seem to think that Heidegger's philosophy of being is in some way linkable to a renewal of religious thought and practice. We would need separate chapters to show in detail the various interpretations in accordance with their merit and demerit. It may suffice here to point out that the authors just mentioned have very different ways of the interpretation of Heidegger's legacy. Lévinas shows the kind of criticism vis-à-vis Heidegger that counts to be a thorough reception and opposition. Heidegger's thought of the totally other found its way into the notion of the Other in many forms, not least through the sources of dialectical theology which both Heidegger and Lévinas knew very well. On the other hand, Lévinas's understanding of the Other is still different from Heidegger's 'other thinking' and 'totally other' inasmuch as the latter are not put into the relationship of an irreducible antagonism between the same and the other. Heidegger's totally other is in fact not of the kind of a polarity but rather of an unconceivable unity of difference. There is no way to identify the totally other with the God of traditional metaphysics either; the totally other as *Sein* is the source of the divine.⁵³

Similarly, John Caputo's interpretation of a religious return points rather to the direction of simple realism instead of a post-metaphysical thinking. His 'weak theology' appears to be very different from the position of the end of philosophy of Heidegger; instead of an end, Caputo appears to defend a weak form of the 'life after life' of classical metaphysics. A similar point is true of Vattimo, whose thought could never reach beyond an eclectic set of various propositions borrowed from other authors. While these attempts are connected to what Dominique Janicaud called the 'theological turn of French phenomenology', we need an additional occasion to enter this field. In the latter development, nevertheless, Heidegger's influence is thoroughly mediated by Lévinas's thought deeply rooted in Jewish beliefs.⁵⁴

⁵³ Cf. Mezei, *Radical Revelation*, 266f.

⁵⁴ Cf. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), John Caputo, *Theology and Philosophy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds), *Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998),

In an interview, Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann makes it clear that Heidegger's criticism of religion – especially the criticism based on ontotheology – cannot be considered as ultimately anti-Christian in any superficial sense. 'As a reflecting person', von Herrmann 'takes the liberty' (as he himself says) to override Heidegger's self-interpretation in the sense that he calls our attention to the profoundness of Heidegger's thought and its ability to contribute to an overall renewal of Christianity. Von Herrmann believes that Heidegger's thought is ultimately Christian even when it is apparently directed against Christianity. In other words, 'religion' – and Christianity is religion in the full sense of the word – can be renewed on the basis of what Heidegger's thought expressed about the status of our reality.⁵⁵

Here I repeat what I mentioned with respect to Nietzsche: to think 'against' an idea is part and parcel of the reception of that idea. The more radical we think against it, the more deeply we are involved in the realisation of the idea. One of the consequences of the idea is precisely its rejection, because rejection is the ultimate affirmation, more robust than all other kinds of affirming or reaffirming. This is not only valid for Nietzsche's criticism of metaphysics and religion, but also for Heidegger's opposition to 'the Christian God'. 'Opposition' is a form of *entgegendenken*, to think against something, but also: to think anticipatorily about something. Heidegger's sharp opposing 'the Christian God' may very well be understood as thinking anticipatorily of what is hidden in our thinking itself. 'Anticipation' fulfils in fact both proleptic expecting of something and, at the same time, thinking against it in terms of time and essence.

6. Summary and Critique

One can clearly see that a return of religion on the level of the primary meanings of these words is out of the question for Heidegger. One need not take seriously that Heidegger did not offer a reform or a new

Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the 'Theological Turn'* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

⁵⁵ Cf. Von Herrmann's interview at <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=b95z2yPo4pA> (accessed June 26, 2019), where von Herrmann explains in detail in which sense the Christian idea of God is compatible with Heidegger's criticism in its ultimate form. As von Herrmann says (after the 50th minute), 'the future God can become effective in the reality of the Christian God.'

kind of religion but rather a totally other kind of thinking by which the divine may become expressed (even in a Christian sense) in an ultimate way. His radical thought, however, is not fully disconnected from what we normally conceive by religion. The complex development of the notion of religion shows the flexibility and further possibilities of this expression. In a peculiar way, Heidegger's criticism of religion together with the development of the notion of being, event, and be-ing, may be subjected to an even stronger criticism. If one uses the expression of 'the totally other', one gets into a performative contradiction, because the totally other appears in his or her mind as part and parcel of the not totally other, i.e. immanence. We can understand that Heidegger criticises the notion of transcendence, because transcendence – in the accepted, i.e. inductive sense – is the classic case of ontotheology: it approaches the absolute from the relative as what is transcended. However, once thought of, the totally other is still expressed in our mind and that far it belongs to the identical as opposed to the totally other.

On a different level, Heidegger's thought appears to parallel the sociological form of a 'disconnected connection'. We often face the phenomenon that a social form, like the form of government, is re-established in a new version just after a radical break in society, such as a war or a revolution. One form of government is abolished, but the new is strikingly similar to the abolished one. In a similar fashion, Heidegger tried to abolish religion in the traditional sense. Nevertheless, what he restores is strikingly similar to the abolished form. Indeed, elements of the tradition of German Theology, the tradition of original mysticism, can easily be recognised in the philosophical mysticism of Heidegger. His personally intimate link to Be-ing, the often Biblical flavour of his narrative of history, present, and future, put his figure in line with the great thinkers and poets of German mysticism, pietism, and idealism from Meister Eckhart through Luther to Angelus Silesius, Georg Hamann, or J. G. Fichte.³⁶

My final criticism is based on language. German is an original language as opposed to the derivative languages of Italian, Spanish, French, or English. German has its peculiar character and a way of expression, which can be detected also in German music and poetry. Perhaps we can identify this character as 'titanism', an expression

³⁶ Fichte's use of *Daseyn*, *Seyn* in his various works obviously points to Heidegger's meaning.

developed by Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker.⁵⁷ 'German titanism' attempts to break through limits and borders and reach the unreachable – with an unavoidable and even tragic failure. We can recognise philosophical features of this German titanism in Heidegger's thought and language. And we can also understand its utmost failure, not only to conceive, but also to grasp the totally other *as* totally other.

A few languages express the notion of religion with a word *not* originated in the Latin. Hungarian *vallás* is one of these words. *Vallás* as a noun literally means disclosing: the personal revealing or confessing something uniquely important as truly as possible. Yet, its accepted meaning in everyday use is 'religion'. By using this word, however, the verbal root, *vall*, i.e. disclose or confess comes to the fore. One hears that 'religion' in essence is about the most important 'disclosure'; it *entails* the personal dedication to truth and reality and its unmediated and sincere revelation by an ultimate act of a person. *Vallás*, thus, is about the disclosure of truth in its essence and also in its various forms and contents. Based on this characteristic, I have developed the notion of a 'philosophy of *vallás*' (*vallásbölcsélet*), which considers the tradition of religion in terms of a recurring attempt at a fundamental renewal of the notion of absolute and personal reality as disclosure.⁵⁸ *Vallásbölcsélet* is not a 'totally other' sort of thinking, not a titanic attempt to conceive the unconceivable, but rather an organic kind which discloses the fundamental newness in all traditional and contemporary forms of religion, a newness which is at work even today in our thinking and life.

On the same token, I have developed a similar train of thoughts concerning the notion of revelation.⁵⁹ Since *vallás* is fundamentally about disclosing, it was not difficult to find the term more or less equivalent in other languages, i.e. 'revelation'. Revelation is the essence of religion; yet revelation is not confined to the secondary, cultural, and political roles religion is often put into. Revelation is irreducibly original, yet at the same time a historical process in which various forms or models can be identified. Thus, instead of religion, we may focus on the notion of revelation, so that we conceive the reality of the absolute as much as

⁵⁷ Carl Friedrich v. Weizsäcker, 'Der deutsche Titanismus,' *Merkur* 32, Heft 367 (Dezember 1978): 1207–1217.

⁵⁸ Cf. Mezei Balázs, *Vallásbölcsélet. A vallás valósága*, 2 vols. (Budapest: Attraktor, 2004–2005).

⁵⁹ Cf. Mezei, *Radical Revelation*.

possible in itself as well as in its historical contexts. Instead of the titanic thinking of a German philosopher, in *Radical Revelation*⁴⁰ we are given the possibility of a different tradition, in which history is a meaningful and organic process aiming at a continuous renewal in all possible forms – not in spite, but in virtue, of its abysmal interruptions.⁴¹

By the emphasis on the notion of revelation we are given the possibility of leaving behind the semantic framework of ‘religion’. Despite the fact that the notion has been in a constant change throughout the centuries, in its essential form ‘religion’ has remained attached to its original meaning of ‘binding’, ‘being bound’ (*religo*).⁴² Religion was and still is a notion of binding, i.e. something compulsory, obligatory, or requisite. The consequence of this semantic legacy is that religion even today conceals the reality of freedom. Freedom, however, is the essence of revelation.⁴³ Thus, instead of a ‘destruction of religion’, we have the possibility to work out in all details another notion, deeper and richer in semantics, which permeates and transcends the notion of religion and leads its enduring contents to a higher fulfilment. In this way, we may overcome the ambiguous legacy of a titanic thinker so profoundly determining our thought today.⁴⁴

As to the question if Heidegger could see in this approach anything relevant to his thought, one may give this answer: To understand Heidegger we have to immerse in its incredible complexities made possible by the unique kind of form (language) and content (Heideggerian thought). Heidegger would agree, however, that as soon as we leave the matrix of the original language of the texts, we need to find words expressing notions close to the intention of the author. And he could also accept that some new expressions, such as ‘vallás’ or ‘revelation’, may contribute to a better understanding of his thinking of being. He would also argue that the tradition of a subjective interpretation of such expressions may be overridden by a deeper and more proper understanding. ‘Revelation’ can be understood along the lines of the ultimate freedom referred to by Heidegger in his definition: ‘The essence

⁴⁰ Cf. Mezei, *Radical Revelation*.

⁴¹ As it happened in ‘Auschwitz’, cf. Mezei, *Religion and Revelation after Auschwitz*.

⁴² ‘Religio est!’ in the Classical period meant: it is strictly forbidden. The history of the notion is explained in more detail in Mezei, *Religion and Revelation after Auschwitz*.

⁴³ Mezei, *Radical Revelation*, 154 (chap. 4, section 3).

⁴⁴ *Radical Revelation* is a systematic attempt to realize this project. See: Mezei, *Radical Revelation*.

of truth is freedom', where freedom expresses the original openness of reality.⁴⁵ Revelation is also related to 'event', *Ereignis*, both as a special event and as the ultimate structure of original giving and receiving. Revelation, thus, is about the utmost openness of reality which has the concrete form of the divine. 'The last God' is nothing else than the occurrence of the ultimate event of openness, i.e. the ultimate event of radical revelation.

Here the points can be connected and the structure of a unitary tradition and common thinking is clearly disclosed. It is impossible to discard the richness of Heidegger's thought in any appropriate philosophical investigation of religion. If we reject the proper analysis of his works, we avoid the greatest challenge in understanding the problems of religion. 'As a reflecting person' – to repeat the words of von Herrmann – I also take the freedom to say that *it is* possible to continue Heidegger's path, necessarily in a critical fashion, to find the way to the meaning of religion in our days as well as in the future.

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⁴⁵ Cf. Martin Heidegger, 'Vom Wesen der Wahrheit,' in *Wegmarken (1919–1961)*, Martin Heidegger and ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1976).