
On the Track of the Fugitive Gods: Heidegger, Luther, Hölderlin

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Was ist Gott? Unbekannt, dennoch / Voll Eigenschaften ist das
Angesicht / Des Himmels von ihm. (FRIEDRICH HÖLDERLIN,
“Was Ist Gott?”)¹

Heidegger’s engagement with the poetic opus of Friedrich Hölderlin began in his student years and continued for the remainder of his life.²

¹ Friedrich Hölderlin, “Was Ist Gott?” in *Friedrich Hölderlin: Selected Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Penguin, 1998), 271.

² In citing works by Heidegger, I have followed recent conventions by using abbreviations for volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe* and, where applicable, abbreviations of English translations (these are parenthetical in the text and followed by page numbers): Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 4, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1996)/Keith Holler, trans., *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry* (Amherst, NY: Humanity, 2000), hereafter G4; vol. 5, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2003)/Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, ed. and trans., *Off the Beaten Track* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), hereafter G5; vol. 9, *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1976)/William McNeill, ed., *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), hereafter G9; vol. 15, *Seminare* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1996), hereafter G15; vol. 24, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1975)/Albert Hofstadter, trans., *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), hereafter G24; vol. 26, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik im Ausgang von Leibniz* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1978)/Michael Heim, trans., *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), hereafter G26; vol. 39, *Hölderlins Hymnen “Germanien” und “Der Rhein”* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1999), hereafter G39; vols. 56/57, *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1987)/Ted Sadler, trans., *Towards the Definition of Philosophy* (London: Athlone, 2000), hereafter G56/57; vol. 60, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1995)/Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gossetti-Ferencei, trans., *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), hereafter G60; vol. 61, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles. Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1985)/Richard Rojcewicz, trans., *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle: Initiation into Phenomenological Research* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), hereafter G61; vol. 63, *Ontologie (Hermeneutik der Faktizität)* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1983)/John Van Buren, trans., *Ontology: Hermeneutics of Facticity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), hereafter G63; and Martin Heidegger and Elisabeth Blochmann, *Briefwechsel, 1918–1969*, ed. Joachim W. Storck (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1989), hereafter IIB; Martin Heidegger and Heinrich Rickert, *Briefe, 1913–1933*, ed. Alfred Dinkler (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2002); hereafter IIR; John Van Buren, ed., *Supplements: From the Earliest Essays to “Being and Time” and Beyond* (Albany: SUNY

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At each of the decisive turning points in his philosophical career, Heidegger found inspiration in Hölderlin.³ More recently, commentators have raised questions about the role that his reading of Hölderlin played in Heidegger's political actions of the 1930s. It has been suggested that Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin is linked with a troubling nationalism, romantic militarism, and cult of the German "fatherland."⁴ On this reading, Heidegger's lectures and essays on Hölderlin from the 1930s and 1940s testify to his betrayal of his youthful work that had been animated by the more congenial spirits of early Christianity and Kierkegaard.

While I by no means wish to deny the troubling aspects of Heidegger's romantic politics, I also want to retrieve another aspect of Heidegger's engagement with Hölderlin that has received less attention. In particular, I hope to show in what follows that Heidegger's essays and lectures on Hölderlin can be read, in part, as attempts to work out a philosophical theology. This is grounded in the claim that philosophical theology is the "red thread" that runs through all of Heidegger's work, uniting his early lectures in Freiburg and Marburg with his later essays and lectures on Hölderlin during the 1930s and beyond. In order to substantiate this claim, I will first of all show how Heidegger developed a tentative philosophical theology during the early 1920s that was heavily influenced by his reading of Luther. The characteristic positions worked out during these early years reappear much later, in the 1940s and 1950s. Having thus outlined Heidegger's basic theological position, I will go on to examine three of his most important discussions of Hölderlin's work: (1) the lecture course for winter semester (WS) 1934–35, (2) the address on the centennial of Hölderlin's death in 1942, and (3) the postwar essay "Wozu Dichter?" (1946). I will show how, in these

Press, 2002), hereafter S; Martin Heidegger, *Zollikoner Seminare, Protokolle—Gespräche—Briefe*, ed. Medard Boss (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1987)/Franz Meyer and Richard Askey, trans., *Zollikon Seminars: Protocols, Conversations, Letters*, ed. Medard Boss (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), hereafter ZS. Similar abbreviations are used in the case of Luther's works: *Luther's Works*, vol. 25, *Lectures on Romans: Scholia and Glosses* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1974), hereafter LW25; *Luther's Works*, vol. 29, *Lectures on Titus, Philemon, Hebrews* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968), hereafter LW29; *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, *The Career of the Reformer I* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), hereafter LW31.

³ For an overview of Heidegger's relationship with Hölderlin's work, see Otto Pöggeler, "Heideggers Begegnung mit Hölderlin," *Man and World* 10 (1977): 13–61. Pöggeler notes that Heidegger was quite familiar with poets like Hölderlin and Trakl even during his student days, prior to World War I, and that, later in life, he testified to his interest in Hölderlin during the 1920s (15). The recent publication of Heidegger's lecture course for the War Emergency Semester of 1919 testifies to his early interest in Hölderlin's work (see G56/57 74/62).

⁴ See, e.g., John Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger: Rumor of the Hidden King* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 389–90, 392–93.

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texts, Heidegger continues to articulate his basic theological position in interpreting Hölderlin's poetry.

I. HEIDEGGER AS PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGIAN

Before proceeding to the explication of Heidegger's basic theological position, three points of clarification are in order. First, and most important, is the question of whether it is even legitimate to talk about Heidegger's "philosophical theology" in the first place. Legitimate questions have been raised with regard to giving such a reading of Heidegger.⁵ For example, Hans Jonas, a student of Heidegger's during the 1920s and 1930s, warned theologians that Heidegger's later thought was fundamentally incompatible with Christian theism. Jonas, however, overstates his case; after all, theologians have fruitfully appropriated Heidegger's work without thereby having to accept all of his views on particular topics. None can deny that Heidegger had a lifelong interest in religion and theology, nor can it be gainsaid that there is indeed a "religious dimension" to his philosophy.⁶ The question is, does Heidegger have something like a "philosophical theology"?

First of all, the meaning of the phrase "philosophical theology" needs clarification. There seems to be no obvious, ready-made definition to which all would agree. Some, for example, might hold that a philosophical theology makes no recourse to scriptural tradition. But this would seem to exclude many thinkers, including Leibniz and Kant, who make liberal use of the Bible. Thus, to avoid begging any questions, I will make use of a minimal conception of philosophical theology in what follows. On this conception, philosophical theology is the attempt to explicate the meaning of religious discourse, to lay bare its underlying conceptual structure, and, if need be, to revise it. To say that Heidegger is doing "philosophical theology" is just to say that he is doing something like this.

A further issue, however, concerns the use of the phrase "philosophical theology." Why not use one of the terms native to Heidegger's thought itself, like "phenomenology of religion," "hermeneutics," or

⁵ See, e.g., Hans Jonas, "Heidegger and Theology," *Review of Metaphysics* 18 (1964): 207–33; and Theodore Kisiel, "War der frühe Heidegger tatsächlich ein 'christlicher Theologe?'" in *Philosophie und Poesie: Otto Pöggeler zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1988), 59–75.

⁶ This term is borrowed from Hans-Georg Gadamer's classic study, "Die Religiöse Dimension," in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 3, *Neuere Philosophie: Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987), 308–19. See also Bernhard Welte, "God in Heidegger's Thought," *Philosophy Today* 26, no. 1 (1982): 85–100.

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“thinking”? First of all, the latter two designations are much too broad, in that they encompass Heidegger’s project as a whole. My focus here is on a particular, though central, aspect of this overall project. Furthermore, “phenomenology of religion” is also too broad. My interest here is in one part of the phenomenology of religion, that is, the concept of God. “Phenomenology of religion” embraces much more than this. Perhaps the most serious challenge to the reading of Heidegger that I am proposing here lies in his own well-documented critique of “ontotheology,” or with the traditional approach to theistic metaphysics in general. As I will show in what follows, Heidegger is at pains to suggest that one can do philosophical theology without falling into the trap of ontotheology.

Heidegger’s early interest in theology has been extensively documented and continues to be examined by commentators. This interest continues throughout Heidegger’s time at Marburg (1923–28). At the outset of his second Freiburg period, Heidegger could often be found in retreat at the Benedictine monastery at Beuron (HB 31–32, 40–41). One commentator feels quite comfortable in talking about Heidegger’s “theology” in the 1930s, particularly in the unpublished work *Beiträge zur Philosophie* (1936–38).⁷ His earliest postwar statement of his philosophical position, the “Letter on Humanism,” addresses the concept of God quite directly (G9 161/252–53, 169/258). In 1951, Heidegger told participants in a seminar in Switzerland that he was still very much “inclined” to write a “theology” (G15 436). Several years later, he entered into a relationship with a group of Protestant theologians. In 1961, he participated in a seminar at Freiburg with noted Lutheran theologian Gerhard Ebeling, who also asked for Heidegger’s assistance in editing a later manuscript by Luther (ZS, Meyer and Askey translation, 256). Clearly, then, Heidegger meets at least a minimal requirement for having a theological position.

The second and third points of clarification concern the nature of Heidegger’s philosophical theology. First, Heidegger’s is a philosophical theology through and through. By that I mean that his reflections about God and about religious life and history are not restricted by a prior commitment to the dogmatic system of any confession. Heidegger began distancing himself from any sort of “official” theology quite early on. Writing to Rickert on February 27, 1917, Heidegger tells his adviser that “I have never stood on the *narrow* Catholic standpoint, i.e., that I would

⁷ Günter Figal, “Forgetfulness of God: Concerning the Center of Heidegger’s *Contributions to Philosophy*,” in *Companion to Heidegger’s “Contributions to Philosophy*,” ed. Charles E. Scott (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 198–212.

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or had to somehow orient the problems, the conceptions, and the solution to a traditional, extrascientific point of view. I will seek for, and teach, the truth according to a more free personal conviction" (HR 42). The import of these remarks for the present discussion is clear enough—Heidegger's philosophical investigations into the concept of God will be carried out as far as possible independently from prior commitment to a doctrinal system. This is not to say, of course, that Heidegger completely detaches himself from Christianity. It is only against the larger background of his attempts to come to grips with the theological and philosophical heritage of European culture that Heidegger's own efforts in philosophical theology can be located accurately.

Second, Heidegger's philosophical theology, like his thought on virtually every other subject, was always tentative, provisional, and elusive. Thus, it would be a mistake to expect Heidegger to give a fully worked-out philosophical theology after the fashion of Kant or Hegel. Loose notes attached to his WS 1921–22 lecture make it clear that Heidegger is not interested in fleshing out a full-blown "dogmatics" in any sense, but rather with tentatively and hesitantly "leading" his readers "into" (*ein-leiten*) the "basic experience" that is and remains the core of religion (G61 197/148).⁸ Further, it is no part of my account here that philosophical theology is Heidegger's exclusive concern. Instead, it is merely a part of his overall project, albeit one that comes into play at the very beginning of his career as a central motive and remains operative as a crucial concern throughout the remainder of his life.

To summarize these clarificatory points: (1) Heidegger's lifelong interest in theology and religious life certainly qualifies him as a "philosophical theologian"; (2) however, his work in this area does not respect traditional confessional boundaries; and (3) Heidegger never provides a fully worked-out system of philosophical theology, but rather a series of suggestive hints, intriguing historical analyses, and biting criticisms of traditional philosophical theology.

⁸ In his notes for a cancelled lecture course on medieval mysticism, Heidegger articulates his project thusly: "A part of the ontology of religion, major aim: phenomenology. Only a certain rigorously methodical domain. No high-flying philosophy of religion. We stand at the beginning, or, more exactly: we must go back to the genuine beginnings, and the world can calmly wait. As a *religious person* I need no trace of the philosophy of religion" (G60 309). A related point is that Heidegger's most detailed discussions of philosophical theology usually involve more negative or critical assertions than they do constructive theorizing. Heidegger's most well-known discussions of philosophical theology are devoted to attacking what he eventually called "ontotheology," that is, the tradition of philosophical monotheism inherited from the Greeks. For an excellent discussion of this aspect of Heidegger's thought, see various essays in Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Towards a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

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II. HEIDEGGER'S PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

Having established that Heidegger does indeed have something to say about philosophical theology, the goal of the present section is to set out his basic position in outline. The sheer volume of Heidegger's discussions of God and of religious ideas and history is such that I cannot hope to provide an exhaustive account here. As is the case with virtually all the important aspects of his work, Heidegger's theological reflections are closely intertwined with a host of complex philosophical and personal issues. Nevertheless, it is possible to outline the basic contours of a position that, while first articulated in the years immediately following World War I, endures more or less unchanged throughout the rest of Heidegger's life.

The contours of Heidegger's theology were decisively shaped by his powerful encounter with Luther in the early 1920s. Others have extensively explored the historical details of Heidegger's Luther research.⁹ I am more interested here in the conceptual, philosophical, and theological fruits of this research. But, in order to demonstrate the depth of Luther's influence on Heidegger's own philosophical theology, a brief discussion of Luther's thought is in order.

By all accounts, it was Luther's early "theology of the cross" that most decisively influenced Heidegger. It was the "young Luther" whom Heidegger explicitly acknowledged as a tutor in these matters (G63 5/4).¹⁰ The "theology of the cross" is Luther's designation for any theological position, such as his own, that repudiates the classic tradition of philosophical monotheism, which he called the "theology of glory."¹¹ Luther worries, first of all, that philosophical monotheism actually misses the real message of Christianity. As he puts it in the "Heidelberg Disputation" from 1518, "The theologian of glory does not recognize, along with the Apostle, the crucified and hidden God alone (1 Corinthians 2:2)" (LW31 227). More than that, however, Luther worries that

⁹ John Van Buren has given the most extensive documentation of this encounter between Heidegger and Luther. See "Martin Heidegger, Martin Luther," in *Reading Heidegger from the Start: Essays in His Earliest Thought*, ed. Theodore Kisiel and John Van Buren (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 159–74, and *The Young Heidegger*, 146–90, 307–13.

¹⁰ While it has been suggested that the "theology of the cross" remains in force throughout Luther's career, it is nevertheless the case that the term itself ("*theologia crucis*") is used only in works from about 1515 to 1518. For a recent analysis of Luther's early thought, see Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985). The classic study, which argues for the presence of the "theology of the cross" even in Luther's more mature thought, is Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976).

¹¹ By "philosophical monotheism," I mean the tradition stemming from Xenophanes, Plato, and Aristotle, where the term "god" (*theos*) has its place within an attempt to explain the rational order of nature and of human society through theoretical reason.

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the “theology of glory” reflects the same drive for human self-aggrandizement that surfaces in the more familiar phenomenon of the “righteousness of works.” More specifically, the “theology of glory” is the issue of a perverted desire to determine the nature of God independently of God’s own free self-disclosure in the “foolishness” of the cross.¹² In the end, the “theology of glory” puts itself above God, dictating who and what God is and what God can do. Luther writes, “But alas, even now very many people think in an unworthy way about God and claim in bold and impudent treatises that God is this way or that way. . . . They so raise their own opinion to the skies that they judge God with no more trouble or fear than a poor cobbler judges his leather” (LW25 167).

God’s free self-disclosure is locked into the straitjacket of “human metaphysical rules” (LW29 111). The partisans of the “theology of glory,” Luther tells us, “want to be like God, and they want their thoughts to be not beneath God but beside Him” (LW25 366).

The central concept that Luther uses to undermine the “theology of glory” is that of the “hidden God” (*deus absconditus*). By “hiddenness,” Luther clearly does not mean “nonexistence.” He tells us what he means quite clearly in the lectures on Romans: “[The work of God] is never hidden in any other way than under that which appears contrary to our conceptions and ideas” (LW25 366). The “hidden God” is contrasted with the “naked” God longed for by theologians of glory, that is, God as an object of immediate apprehension. For Luther, the “hidden God” reveals himself, paradoxically, in the suffering humanity of Christ.¹³

This paradoxical “revelation in hiddenness” does not call for self-satisfied certainty or for boasting in the powers of reason, but rather for self-sacrificing trust (*fiducia*). The “kingdom of Christ,” Luther tells us, is “a place of exile, or to be living but to be constantly dying, or to be in glory but to be in disgrace, or to dwell in wealth but to dwell in extreme poverty, as everyone who wants to share in this kingdom is compelled to experience in himself” (LW29 117).

This experience of “riches in poverty” is, of course, faith. Faith, Luther writes, is like a state of being suspended between “heaven and

¹² In his lectures on Romans in 1515–16, Luther asserts that the “natural knowledge” of God through theoretical reason serves only to increase human pride and self-satisfaction (LW25 10). In the “theology of glory,” God is “changed and adjusted” to fit human “desires and needs” (LW25 157).

¹³ In order to remove the primary cause of alienation between humanity and God, that is, human pride, God reveals himself in “his human nature, weakness, foolishness” (LW31 52). God must be seen in the “humility and shame of the cross” (LW31 52–53). The God “hidden” in the humanity of Christ is elsewhere called “the God who is not seen” (LW29 111).

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earth,” of lacking any foothold (LW29 185). One who believes dwells in “the deepest darkness of God” (LW29 216). Luther tries to express faith thusly: “And this is the glory of faith, namely, not to know where you are going, what you are doing, what you are suffering, and, after taking everything captive—perception and understanding, strength and will—to follow the bare voice of God and to be led and driven rather than to drive” (LW29 238).

Faith in the “hidden God” requires that one bear the “cross” of being a finite, historical being, a being that is incapable of ever “having” God except by continuously seeking after him. Luther stresses that “the condition of this life is not that of having but of seeking God” (LW25 225).¹⁴

Alongside the faith that God is indeed at work in the dereliction of the cross goes hope. Another favorite passage of Luther’s was Rom. 8: 24, “Now hope that is seen is not hope.” Hope, according to Luther, “transfers [one] into the unknown, the hidden, and the dark shadows, so that [one] does not even know what [one] hopes for, and yet [one] knows what [one] does not hope for” (LW25 364). In faith and hope God is “hidden” or “absent,” in the sense of being inaccessible to immediate apprehension. At the same time, God is also mysteriously present in a way that solicits human trust and gratitude rather than pride and presumption.

During the early 1920s, Heidegger’s philosophical theology begins to take on a notably Lutheran cast. While Heidegger never simply signs on to Lutheran theology, his basic position clearly shows the influence of Luther. That this is the case can be seen in four points that capture Heidegger’s inchoate philosophical theology during this period, and, indeed, throughout the remainder of his career: First, the most obviously Lutheran element of Heidegger’s theology is his critique of ontotheology, that is, of the tradition of philosophical monotheism that Luther had called the “theology of glory.” Second, and closely related to this, is Heidegger’s willingness to embrace the label of “atheism” in order to avoid falling into the conceptual traps of philosophical monotheism. Third, Heidegger maintained that a critical perspective on ontotheology could be sustained and enriched by examining the phenomena of religious life. Finally, Heidegger also sought to articulate the presence of God in factual, historical life as a way of developing a conception of God freed from the assumptions of traditional ontotheology.

¹⁴ Compare Luther’s similar comment elsewhere: “For this reason the whole life of the new people, the faithful people, the spiritual people, is nothing else but prayer, seeking, and begging by the sighing of the heart . . . , never standing still, never possessing” (LW25 264).

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All of these elements show up in numerous places in Heidegger's work. The first, and most obvious, place to look is in Heidegger's well-known WS 1920–21 lecture course on Pauline Christianity. Heidegger first of all picks up on Luther's critique of the way in which ontotheology actually distorts the message of Christianity, which he views as being rooted in the "proclamation" of Jesus as Christ (G60 116/82).¹⁵ Following Luther's emphasis on revelation, Heidegger maintains that being a Christian is, fundamentally, a gift, rather than an intellectual achievement. Heidegger denounces the attempt to "gain a hold [*Halt!*]" in life through a personally willed act of "transcendence" (G60 122/86). Heidegger radicalizes Luther's thought, arguing that "the Christian does not find his 'hold' in God (cf. Jaspers). That is a blasphemy! God is never a 'hold!'" (G60 122/86).

In this same lecture course, Heidegger is interested in thematizing the actual relation to God that is articulated in Paul's earliest letter. The life of the early Christian community has been subjected to an "absolute reversal [*Umwendung*]," a "turning toward God and away from idols" (G60 95/66). That is, the relation between the believer and God has the character of a total way of life, as opposed to the strictly theoretical intentional stance of a classic philosophical theologian. "The absolute turn towards God is explicated within the enactment sense of life in two directions: *douleuein* and *anamnein*, living before God [*Wandeln vor Gott*] and waiting in endurance [*Erharren*]" (G60 95/66).

Despite the fact that no one ever has a "hold" on God, Heidegger is quick to point out that there is nonetheless a "living, effective connection with God." "God's presence has a basic relation to the way of life [*Lebenswandel*] (*peripatein*). The reception is itself a living before God" (G60 95/66). While not simply "available" to human beings like a tool or a piece of leather, God is nevertheless present in an elusive way within factual, historical life itself. Here again, Luther's work has a clear relevance. Luther's "theology of the cross" locates the definitive revelation of the nature of God within history, within the life of a particular individual, and, by extension, also in the ongoing life of faith. What was decisive for Heidegger was the elusive presence of God in the midst of a life of "anxious worry" rather than in the ahistorical conceptual space of philosophical monotheism. Heidegger explores this elusive presence particularly in connection with early Christian eschatology, where an attitude of wakeful expectation replaces that of

¹⁵ Elsewhere, Heidegger accents the disturbing, disquieting aspect of the "proclamation" of the "crucified God" (G60 136–37/96–97, 143–44/101–2).

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self-satisfied contemplation (G60 97–100/66–70, 102–105/71–73, 112/79).

Many of the main elements of Heidegger's Luther-inspired philosophical theology reappear the following semester in his "Augustine and Neoplatonism" lecture course.¹⁶ The critique of ontotheology emerges here in connection with Augustine's use of the Neoplatonic concept of the "highest good." In denying this version of philosophical monotheism, Heidegger is by no means denying that human beings can actually have a relationship with God. To the contrary, it is in the name of an authentic relationship to God that he undertakes this critique, castigating philosophical monotheism as mere "doing business [*Geschäftigkeit*] with God" (G60 265/198).¹⁷

Materials that have been collected from Oskar Becker's transcript of this lecture course continue in much the same vein. Commenting on some of Augustine's sermons, Heidegger argues that the "objectivity" (*Gegenständlichkeit*) proper to God can be adequately grasped only by paying attention to the nature of God "as appropriated [*zueignet*] by the heart in its authentic life" (G60 289/219). By locating the encounter with God in the "heart" rather than in abstract theorizing, Heidegger is not advocating subjectivism. God is not "made" by human cognitive faculties. Rather, God is mysteriously present in the elusive depths of factual, historical life. "God as object in the sense of the *facies cordis* [face of the heart] exists [*wirkt*] in the authentic life of human beings" (G60 289/219).¹⁸

Three years later, in the summer of 1924, Heidegger had the occasion to deal with Luther in the classroom once more. Here again, he focuses in on Luther's polemic against the "theology of glory," which defines

¹⁶ This lecture course also contains a brief discussion of Luther's "Heidelberg Disputation" of 1518, one of the most important articulations of his "theology of the cross." See G60 281–82/212–13. Heidegger's gloss on Thesis 19 reads like a formulaic encapsulation of his own philosophical theology: "The presentation [*Vorgabe*] of the object of theology is not to be achieved by way of a metaphysical reflection on the world" (G60 282/213).

¹⁷ On Heidegger's reading, such an "axiologized abstraction" conceals the actual experience of God in "existentiell anxious worry" (G60 259/195). In his 1947 "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger once again expresses his worries about conceptualizing God in the categories of value theory. In this case, he is more immediately concerned with neo-Kantianism than with Neoplatonism. He argues that "precisely through the characterization of something as 'a value' what is so valued is robbed of worth. . . . Every valuing, even where it values positively, is a subjectivizing" (G9 349/265). Thus, "When one proclaims 'God' the altogether 'highest value,' this is a degradation of God's essence" (G9 349/265).

¹⁸ This point is made more explicitly a bit later on in Heidegger's discussion: "Every cosmic-metaphysical reification [*Verdinglichung*] of the concept of God, even as an irrational concept, must be avoided. One must appropriate the *facies cordis* (inwardness) by oneself. God will be present in the inner man when we have understood what breadth, length, height, and depth (*latitude, longitude, altitude, profundum*) mean, and thus understand the meaning of the infinity of God for the thought of the heart" (G60 290).

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the being of God in advance of his own free self-disclosure, by means of borrowed categories like “first cause” or “unmoved mover” (S 107). Heidegger accurately summarizes the thrust of Luther’s position: “The Scholastic takes cognizance of Christ only subsequently, after having defined the being of God and the world. This Greek point of view of the Scholastic makes man proud; he must first go to the cross before he can say *id quod res est* [what the matter actually is]” (S 107).

Heidegger seems to agree with Luther that it is only in a contingent, finite, historical event of self-disclosure that one can catch a glimpse of the nature of God. Throughout the 1920s, Heidegger consistently argues that the categories of philosophical monotheism are simply not up to the task of making sense of this fundamental reality of Christian life and thought.¹⁹ Heidegger was, as I have shown in the preceding discussion, interested not only in the historical facticity of the cross as the revelation of God but also in the mysterious presence of God in the “cruciform” life of individual believers and of the primitive church. The heart of Heidegger’s philosophical theology during this period is the Lutheran concept of the “hidden God,” the God not available for the purposes of theoretical reason but nonetheless palpably present in “factual life-experience.” That such a God has eluded “metaphysics” should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Heidegger’s overall conviction that traditional philosophy has failed to adequately thematize or conceptualize human factual life itself.²⁰

Another significant element of Heidegger’s philosophical theology is also explicable in light of the influence of Luther on his thinking during the early 1920s. During WS 1921–22, while he was engaged in intensive study of Luther’s works, Heidegger makes reference to the “atheism” of philosophy.²¹ Rather than committing philosophers to some form of positive atheism, Heidegger is instead drawing the logical conclusions from his reading of Luther.²² Philosophy must, according

¹⁹ In his programmatic essay, “Phenomenology and Theology,” Heidegger argues that the revelation of the “crucified God” constitutes the ultimate ground for genuine “Christianity,” and so for any theology that can rightly claim to be “Christian” (GA 52–54/44–45). This is, of course, a manifestly Lutheran position.

²⁰ Heidegger’s critique of the limitations of the “theoretical attitude” begins in the War Emergency Semester of 1919. See GA 56/57 73–74/61, 85/71–72, 88/74, 91/76.

²¹ For a cogent analysis of this notion of the “atheism” of philosophy, see Istvan M. Feher, “Heidegger’s Understanding of the ‘Atheism’ of Philosophy: Philosophy, Theology, and Religion in His Early Lectures up to *Being and Time*,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 69 (1995): 189–228.

²² The term “positive atheism,” that is, the direct denial of the existence of God, is borrowed from Anthony Flew’s classic essay, “The Presumption of Atheism,” in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19–32.

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to Heidegger, renounce any and all attempts “to have and to determine God” (G61 197/148). The difficult bit, the “art” of it, is both to “do philosophy” and to “be genuinely religious” (G61 197/148). In Heidegger’s view, being “genuinely religious” has little to do with prattle about God and has nothing at all to do with successfully undertaking the project of ontotheology. Thus, philosophy is best characterized as being “away from” or “far from” (*weg*) God. This distance is more of the respectful variety, which, of course, can often be mistaken for standoffishness. Lest confusion befall his listeners, Heidegger makes it clear that in “carrying out” this distance, philosophy always has its own “difficult ‘near to’ or ‘next to’ [*bei*]” God (G61 197/148). Heidegger reiterates these ideas half a decade later, in his summer semester (SS) 1928 lecture course. He is quite willing to endure the charge of being “godless” in order to avoid “enormously phony religiosity,” which is presumably the opposite of being “genuinely religious” (see above; G26 211/165, n. 9). In his usual way, Heidegger goes on to make an even more suggestive comment, without, however, developing the suggestion: “But might not the presumably ontic faith in God be at bottom godlessness? And might the genuine metaphysician be more religious than the usual faithful, than the members of a ‘church’ or even than the ‘theologians’ of every confession?” (G26 211/165, n. 9).

Heidegger here radicalizes the spirit (if not the letter) of Luther’s theological revolution. For Luther, bad theology is, in a certain sense, worse than no theology at all. Bad theology blocks the appropriation of the saving power of the Gospel by veiling it under borrowed concepts. For Heidegger, too, upholding a particular dogmatic system is not necessarily the same thing as godliness. In fact, Heidegger wants to call into question the “Christianness” (*Christlichkeit*) of both much of the theological tradition and of modern liberal Protestantism. Like Luther, Heidegger is convinced that much of theology is complicit in an attempt to subvert the heart of Christianity and its startling message of the “crucified God.”

These, then, are the contours of Heidegger’s philosophical theology as it develops during the 1920s. First, following Luther, Heidegger rejects the tradition of philosophical monotheism *tout court*. At the same time, he attempts to avoid tossing out the real core of Christian faith and life and stops well short of positive atheism. He undertakes several halting and abortive attempts at a phenomenology of religious life as a means for developing a counterweight to ontotheology. In connection with this phenomenological move, Heidegger also expresses his interest in thematizing the elusive presence of God in the “heart,” in “anxious worry,” rather than in the cool room of theoretical reason.

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Finally, Heidegger is willing to be dismissed as an atheist and an apostate in order to avoid transgressing the boundaries set by his own critique of the tradition.

III. HÖLDERLIN: ON THE TRACK OF THE FUGITIVE GODS

Beginning in the mid-1930s, Heidegger began to work out some of these hints of a philosophical theology in the midst of his larger conversation with Hölderlin. Heidegger's interest in Hölderlin, and in other German-language poets, had started much earlier, during his days as a university student.²³ Following World War I, Heidegger enlisted the poets as allies in his attempt to grasp the pretheoretical immediacy of "factual life-experience" and to break the hegemony of the "theoretical attitude" that had characterized European philosophy since its inception in ancient Greece.²⁴

As several commentators have noted, Heidegger was also interested in the theological potential of poets like Hölderlin and Rilke. Pöggeler, for example, makes constant reference to Heidegger's ambiguous stance vis-à-vis theology in his own exposition of the dialogue between Heidegger and Hölderlin.²⁵ Figal has rightly characterized Hölderlin as Heidegger's "poet of the fled gods."²⁶ Heidegger himself tries to make this connection as explicit as possible at a number of points. In his 1970 preface to the programmatic essay "Phenomenology and Theology," Heidegger groups Nietzsche, Hölderlin, and Franz Overbeck together around the whole problematic of theology, of the "Christianity of Christianity and its theology" (G9 45–46/39). In the appendix to this essay, a letter written in 1964 to a group of theologians at Drew University, Heidegger suggests that poetry is a potentially powerful resource for the theological project of articulating Christian faith without importing foreign categories (G9 78/61). Referring to the 1946 essay "Wozu Dichter?" Heidegger suggests that poetry is capable of expressing the elusive, nonobjective, nonempirical presence of God in faith. In this section, I want to follow up on Heidegger's hints and suggestions about the theological aspect of his dialogue with poets, focusing particularly on Hölderlin. There are two reasons for this narrowing of scope, one having to do with Heidegger and the other with Hölderlin.

²³ See Pöggeler, "Heideggers Begegnung mit Hölderlin," 15.

²⁴ He quotes from Hölderlin's free translation of Sophocles' *Antigone* as an illustration of the pretheoretical "environmental experience" of meaning (G56/57 74/62). A number of years later, following the publication of *Being and Time*, Heidegger refers to Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* to much the same effect (G24 244/171–72).

²⁵ Pöggeler, "Heideggers Begegnung mit Hölderlin," 20–21, 24, 26, 38–39.

²⁶ See Figal, "Forgetfulness of God," 202.

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First, as is quite obvious, Hölderlin was the poet who most often engaged Heidegger's reflections. In numerous essays and lecture courses Heidegger explicitly deals with aspects of Hölderlin's work.

Second, Hölderlin's poetry has an obvious religious pathos to it, a pathos similar in many ways to that which animates Heidegger's own work. While Hölderlin clearly was willing to transgress the boundaries of orthodoxy in his poetry, he maintained a profound reverence for the Christian tradition. This is most evident in his later hymns. For example, in "Der Einzige," the poet enacts a passionate search for Christ: "Ihr alten Götter und all / Ihr tapfern Söhne der Götter / Noch Einen such ich, den / Ich liebe unter euch / Wo ihr den letzten eures Geschlechts / Des Haußes Kleinod mir / dem fremden Gaste verberget."²⁷ A similar sentiment is evoked in the fragmentary hymn "An die Madonna." In "Patmos," Hölderlin evokes the visionary experience of St. John. Thus, despite the fact that he was willing to sit loose with respect to orthodoxy, Hölderlin nevertheless expresses a profoundly religious sensibility. Heidegger, no doubt, saw his own mixture of passion and dis-ease with religion reflected in the works of his predecessor.

The sheer volume of the fruits of Heidegger's lifelong interpretive encounter with Hölderlin prevents me from attempting an examination of all of the many lecture courses, essays, and working drafts germane to the subject. Thus, I will focus on three of the most important of Heidegger's writings on Hölderlin: (1) the WS 1934–35 lecture course on Hölderlin's hymn "Germanien," (2) the centennial essay on the elegy "Heimkunft," delivered in 1943, and (3) the postwar essay "Wozu Dichter?" (1946).

The theological problematic appears at the outset of Heidegger's reading of "Germanien," focused on the very first lines of the poem: "Nicht sie, die Seeligen, die erschienen sind, / Die Götterbilder in dem alten Lande, / Sie darf ich ja nicht rufen mehr."²⁸ Heidegger zeroes in on the first word of the poem, "Nicht" (not). Despite appearances to the contrary, Heidegger wants to suggest, this word does not signify a straightforward negation or "refusal" (*Absage*, G39 81). Instead, in the context of these lines, "Nicht" expresses the situation of "having to give up a claim to something." Thus, rather than denying the existence of "the blessed," the poet is trying to articulate their distance

²⁷ Hölderlin, *Selected Poems and Fragments*, 219–20. In translation: "You ancient gods and all / You valiant sons of the gods, / One other I look for whom / Within your ranks I love, / Where hidden from the alien guest, from me, / You keep the last of your kind, / The treasured gem of the house."

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 188. In translation: "Not them, the blessed, who once appeared, / Those images of gods in the ancient land, / I may indeed no longer invoke them" (translation modified).

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from his present situation. According to Heidegger, the poet is “awaiting” (*erharren*) them as present, yet still distant. Heidegger’s choice of the word “*erharren*” is significant here. In his WS 1920–21 lecture course on Pauline Christianity, he had used precisely this rare term to characterize the expectant attitude of the primitive church, longing for the “day of the Lord” in the midst of the “night of the world.” The word that Hölderlin uses to characterize his attitude is “*Heiligtrauernde*” (holy mourning).

Heidegger’s exposition of the poem is now focused on the phenomenology of this “holy mourning” for the “gods who are fled” (*Entflohene Götter*). First, he argues that this attitude is “holy” because it is “unselfish” (*uneigennützig*; G39 84). The poet refuses to submit the absent gods to the demands of utility or productivity. Rather than simply denying the gods or acquisitively lusting for their presence, the poet is willing to endure their absence in longing expectation. In this respect, Heidegger argues that “holy mourning” is like love. He reads “love” after the fashion of Augustine, defining it as “wanting the beloved to stand firm in its essence, in its being thus and so” (G39 82). During SS 1921, the record indicates that Heidegger lingered over Augustine’s attempt to articulate authentic love, which he contrasts with the love of the “gourmand” (*Schlemmer*) for the “fieldfare,” which the gourmand loves and then uses up. Real love is a “will to the being of the beloved” (G60 292/220). “Genuine love of God,” moreover, “has the sense of wanting to make God accessible as one who exists in an absolute sense. This is the greatest difficulty of life” (G60 292/221).

Similarly, in Hölderlin’s hymn, the poet’s mournful “renunciation” (*Verzicht*) of the right to invoke the gods is an attempt to preserve their being, their divinity (G39 93). Heidegger summarizes: “Holy mourning has resolved upon a renunciation [*Verzicht*] of the old gods—but—what the mourning heart wants is something different—i.e., in sending the gods away, to preserve their divinity inviolate, and in a preserving renunciation to hold to the distant gods in the nearness of their divinity. . . . What is this besides—indeed, it is nothing besides—the only possible, decisive preparation for waiting upon [*Erharren*] the gods” (G39 95).

Thus, the poet’s attitude is indeed one of “mourning,” for he is not renouncing the gods or denying their existence. Indeed, Heidegger is careful to explicitly contrast “holy mourning” with straightforward atheism (G39 95). The gods are, to be sure, not simply available. But, given what we know about Heidegger’s views on God, there is no reason to think that there ever was a time when the divine was simply there for us, like a piece of shoe leather. Instead, the poet’s attitude,

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like the eschatological “anxious worry” of the primitive church and the trusting self-renunciation of Luther’s “theology of the cross” is the only one befitting the dignity of the object.

A bit later on in the lecture on “Germanien,” Heidegger takes an opportunity to develop one of the central themes of his philosophical theology, that is, the critique of ontotheology or philosophical monotheism. This time, he takes his cue from the ode “Dichterberuf.” The concluding lines of the poem appear, in much the same fashion as the opening lines of “Germanien,” to entail some kind of straightforward, positive atheism: “bis Gottes Fehl hilft.”²⁹ Talking about God being “missing” or “absent” seems one step away from talking, with Nietzsche, about God being “dead.”³⁰ Indeed, as Heidegger points out, this is just how the famous Hölderlin scholar von Hellgrath had read the word “*Fehl*” (missing). On this view, “*Fehl*” is a synonym for “*Abwesenheit*,” or “absence” in the sense of being nonexistent (G39 211). Heidegger wants to reject this straightforward reading, arguing that something much more subtle is going on than an expression of a poet’s despair at the loss of faith.

Heidegger’s argument turns, first of all, on contextualizing these lines within the ode as a whole. Two earlier lines are crucial in this regard. The first runs, “Noch ist auch gut zu weise zu seyn.”³¹ This line continues, “Ihn kennt / Der Dank.” The pronoun in this line refers back, on the most obvious reading, to the masculine noun at the beginning of the previous stanza, “Der Vater,” clearly a poetic appellation for God. In cautioning against being “all too wise” and suggesting that “thanks” rather than human cunning is the only viable attitude toward “Der Vater,” Hölderlin is chastening the titanic aspirations of humanity.

This is also the clear sense of the other lines that Heidegger refers to in his interpretation: “Zu lang ist alles Göttliche dienstbar schon / Und alle Himmelskräfte verschertzt, verbraucht / Die Gütigen, zur Lust, danklos, ein / Schlaues Geschlecht und zu kennen wähnt es.”³² Note the contrast that Hölderlin has drawn between those who are “danklos” and the “Dank” that alone is a suitable means of access to the divine Father. The whole thrust of the poem is captured in the

²⁹ Ibid., 83. In translation: “until God’s being missing helps.”

³⁰ For Heidegger’s own take on this famous trope of Nietzsche’s, see his 1943 essay “Nietzsche’s Word: ‘God is Dead’” (G5 157–99).

³¹ Hölderlin, *Selected Poems and Fragments*, 80. In translation: “Nor is it good to be all too wise.”

³² Ibid., 80. In translation: “Too long now things divine have been cheaply used / And all the powers of heaven, the kindly, spent / In trifling waste by cold and cunning / Men without thanks.”

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lines “Nicht liebt er Wildes! Doch es zwinget / Nimmer die weite Gewalt den Himmel.”³³ Thus, on Heidegger’s view, the concluding phrase “Gottes Fehl” can be properly understood only within the context of the poet’s critique of a kind of knowledge “rooted in cunning and selfish calculation,” a knowledge that is “merely clever” and “only finds something if it has a use for it and if it promotes its own power” (G39 229). Hölderlin draws a proper contrast between titanic knowledge and the attitude of the poet, “alone” and without artifice before God, protected only by his “innocence” (G39 232).

According to Heidegger, “What is to be accented is not God’s *being missing* [*Fehl*], but *God’s being missing*” (G39 232). That is, the point of the poem is not to assert God’s nonexistence, but rather to defend his unavailability to human “cunning and selfish calculation.” The concept of God’s “being missing,” like Luther’s concept of the “hidden God” (*deus absconditus*), is meant to play a role in a critique of philosophical monotheism. As Heidegger himself shows in his 1924 lecture on Luther, the whole problem with the scholastic “theology of glory” is that it defines God in advance in terms of borrowed metaphysical categories. In so doing, it forecloses on the possibility of really being faced with the “scandal” of God’s free self-disclosure in a finite historical reality.

In Heidegger’s philosophical theology, then, God is “missing” or “hidden” insofar as he ultimately transcends the categories of the dominant tradition of Western metaphysics. At the same time, God is not totally inaccessible, but is present in a mysterious way in factual, historical reality. As I have already discussed, this element of Heidegger’s philosophical theology first comes on the scene in his working notes for the undelivered lecture course on medieval mysticism, and it also shows up in his WS 1920–21 lectures on Pauline Christianity and his SS 1921 lectures on Augustine. In the “Germanien” lectures from WS 1934–35, Heidegger finds a new vocabulary for articulating this idea. Here, he draws on the hymn “Wie wenn am Feiertage” and the ode “Rousseau.” In the former, Hölderlin describes mediated presence of the divine in the creative fires of poetic inspiration.³⁴ He uses the imagery of lightning, of the “heilgem Stral,” “himmlisches Feuer,” “Des Vaters Stral,” which the poet mediates to the people.³⁵

³³ Ibid., 80. In translation: “He loves no Titan! Never will our / Free-ranging power coerce his heaven.”

³⁴ See the discussion of this hymn in Richard Unger, *Hölderlin’s Major Poetry: The Dialectics of Unity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 107–22.

³⁵ Hölderlin, *Selected Poems and Fragments*, 174, 176. In translation: “holy ray,” “heavenly fire,” “the Father’s ray.”

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In “Rousseau,” Hölderlin praises the prophetic type who heralds the arrival of the “Kommenden Göttern.”³⁶ In his lecture, Heidegger draws out the eighth stanza of the ode: “Vernommen hast du sie, verstanden die Sprache der Fremdlinge, / Gedeutet ihre Seele! Dem Sehnenen war / Der Wink genug, und Winke sind / Von Alters her die Sprache der Götter.”³⁷ Heidegger takes these materials from “Wie wenn am Feiertage” and “Rousseau” together as outlines of the poetic vocation, here conceived in explicitly religious terms. The poet is one who is sensitive to the elusive “language” of God, which consists in nothing more than “hints” (*Winke*) and lightning flashes of momentary insight (G39 32). Heidegger goes on to probe more deeply into the meaning of “*Winke*” as the “language” of God. On his reading, the key to understanding what Hölderlin is saying lies in seeing the link between the nominal “*Winke*” and the verb “*winken*,” meaning “to gesture, beckon.” The meaning of the latter is best grasped in the context of departure and arrival. In “taking leave” (*Abschied*) of someone, to “*winken*” is to “hold fast to nearness in the growing distance.” As one moves away, a gesture of the hand marks one’s presence, even as one is no longer directly available. So similarly, in “arriving” (*Ankunft*), to gesture in this way is to anticipate a “gladdening nearness” despite the fact that distance still remains between two parties (G39 32).

As Pöggeler points out, this whole discussion represents an attempt to conceive of the divine as in process, as a dynamic event of revelation in hiddenness.³⁸ To speak in this way about God’s “hints” is to speak about his elusive presence within historical reality. Thus, despite the fact that God is “missing” from the point of view of calculative rationality, God is nonetheless present. This presence, however, cannot be pinned down to any particular historical event or theological formula. The divine withdraws from such attempts, and yet it leaves behind “hints” of its presence.³⁹ This emphasis is a staple element of Heidegger’s philosophical theology. As I have already discussed, beginning in the years immediately following World War I, Heidegger attempted to thematize this elusive “objectivity” (*Gegenständlichkeit*) of God within finite, temporal, historical reality. Heidegger picks up on the “scandal”

³⁶ Ibid., 50. In translation: “arriving gods.”

³⁷ Ibid. In translation: “You’ve heard and comprehended the stranger’s tongue, / Interpreted their soul! For the yearning man / The hint sufficed, because in hints from / Time immemorial the gods have spoken.”

³⁸ See Otto Pöggeler, *The Paths of Heidegger’s Life and Thought*, trans. John Bailiff (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1997), 223.

³⁹ Similarly, in his WS 1920–21 lecture course, Heidegger stresses that, despite the “incalculability” of the advent of the “day of the Lord,” a “living effective connection” nonetheless obtains between God and the community of faith (G60 95/66).

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of the cross, the historical event of the “proclamation,” the expectant faith of the community, the inwardness of the mystic, and *facies cordis* of Augustine’s disquieted soul as points at which the elusive “objectivity” of God can be located. Hölderlin’s formulation of the “hints” of God in the “lightning bolts” of poetic inspiration and historical cataclysms provides Heidegger with a new vocabulary for working out these ideas. However, as is the case with his philosophical theology as a whole, Heidegger himself never gives us much more than suggestive “hints” about the direction he is ultimately working in.

In a 1943 address given on the occasion of the centennial of Hölderlin’s death, Heidegger revisits the theological dimensions of the poet’s work. Commenting on the elegy “Heimkunft,” Heidegger picks up on the poet’s experience of the “highest” as something ultimately inexpressible (G4 26–27/45). The poet can merely point to where God dwells, to some future event of revelatory disclosure: “Nenn’ ich den Hohen dabei? Unschickliches lieben ein Gott nicht, / Ihn zu fassen, ist fast unsere Freude zu klein. / Schweigen müssen wir oft; es fehlen heilige Nahmen, / Herzen schlagen und doch bleibet die Rede zurück?”⁴⁰ Once again, the God is “missing,” and yet sends “greetings” to the poet, who must pass them on to the people (G4 28/46). Heidegger understands the poetic vocation in this way: “Thus, for the poet’s care, there is one possibility: without fear of appearing godless, he must remain near to the god’s absence, and wait long enough in this prepared nearness to the absence, until out of the nearness to the missing god there is granted an originative word to name the high one” (G4 28/46–47).

This passage quite clearly recalls Heidegger’s own self-understanding, articulated during the 1920s, as someone engaged in the project of philosophical theology. In WS 1921–22, Heidegger suggests that, while standing “apart from” or “away from” (*weg*) God, the philosopher nonetheless stands “near” (*bei*) him in a difficult relation. Later, in 1928, Heidegger too confesses that he is willing to endure the label of “atheism” in order to avoid the pitfalls of popular religiosity and philosophical monotheism. This difficult position is necessitated, for Heidegger, by a full appreciation of Luther’s critique of the “theology of glory.” Recall that the “theology of glory” is characterized by the attempt to domesticate the free self-disclosure of God in the fold of Aristotelian metaphysics. The “theologian of the cross,” by contrast, is

⁴⁰ Hölderlin, *Selected Poems and Fragments*, 164. In translation: “Him, the most High, should I name then? A god does not love what’s unseemly / Our joy is too small to embrace and to hold him. / Silence often behooves us: lacking in holy names, / May hearts beat high, while the lips hesitate, wary of speech?” (translation modified).

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open to the paradoxical revelation of God in historical particularity, a revelation that can be neither anticipated nor demanded. Heidegger's own self-understanding as a "philosophical theologian of the cross" clearly finds its counterpart in the poet's patient waiting for "holy names" in "Heimkunft."

Many of the theological themes that Heidegger picks up on in his earlier readings of Hölderlin resurface in his 1946 essay "Wozu Dichter?" The essay as a whole is largely devoted to Rilke, not to Hölderlin. However, the title comes from Hölderlin's famous elegy "Brot und Wein."⁴¹ Heidegger points out that, as befits the elegiac tone of the poem, the question "What are poets for?" arises in the midst of Hölderlin's experience of "God's keeping himself afar, by 'God's absence [Fehl]'" (G5 269/200). Heidegger had treated of this idea of God's "absence" in the 1934–35 lecture course. The phrase itself, it will be recalled, comes from the ode "Dichterberuf," in which Hölderlin castigates the abuse of divine, life-giving forces by human beings. In "Brot und Wein," Hölderlin describes how human beings squandered the gifts of the gods and how for the "schwaches Gefäß" of humanity the "Fülle" of the divine is often too much to bear.⁴² Heidegger draws attention to the fact that in both "Dichterberuf" and "Brot und Wein," Hölderlin puts forth the claim that human beings must endure the "holy night" of the absence of the divine in gratitude and anticipation. The lines from "Dichterberuf" run: "Furchtlos bleibt aber, so er es muß, der Mann / Einsam vor Gott, es schützt die Einfalt ihn, / Und keiner Waffen brauchts und keiner / Listen, so lange, bis Gottes Fehl hilft."⁴³

The task of the poet, as Heidegger then reads Hölderlin, is to pre-

⁴¹ The relevant lines run: "Indessen dünket mir öftens / Besser zu schlafen, wie so ohne Genossen zu seyn, / So zu harren und was zu thun indeß und zu sagen, / weiß ich nicht und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit" (Hölderlin, *Selected Poems and Fragments*, 156). In translation: "But meanwhile too often I think it's / Better to sleep than to be friendless as we are, alone, / Always waiting, and what to do or to say in the meantime / I don't know, and why are there poets in lean years?" (translation modified).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 156. In translation: "frail vessel" and "fullness."

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 82. In translation: "Man however remains, as he must, fearlessly / alone before God, innocence protects him / and he needs no weapons and no / ruses for the duration until God's absence helps." This is Richard Unger's translation. See Unger, *Friedrich Hölderlin*, 64. On p. 65, Unger summarizes the principal thrust of Hölderlin's reflections. What he says about "Dichterberuf" is also, as Heidegger recognizes, true of "Brot und Wein": "The poets must now endure the night of divine absence in innocence and gratitude; eventually the divine absence will 'help' us, paradoxically, by making us strong enough to withstand the divine presence, which will be manifest as soon as our capabilities permit. It is, finally, the 'poet's vocation,' then, to endure deprivation and to proclaim his knowledgeable gratitude toward an obscure God until other men have also come to participate in this attitude so that they, too, may eventually face the presence of the fully manifest 'Angel of Day,' Apollo, the deity as revealed in light."

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pare for a proper residence of God, by enduring the “holy night” of the world, the “abyss” of the concealment of the divine (G5 271/201–202). In “Dichterberuf” and in “Brot und Wein,” this “holy night” of the divine absence is necessitated by the titanic aspirations of humanity. On the other hand, Hölderlin also suggests that the frailty of human nature is such that it cannot withstand the full presence of the divine.⁴⁴ Quoting again from “Brot und Wein,” Heidegger asserts that “the gods who ‘once were here’ ‘return’ only ‘at the proper time’—namely, when there is a turn among men in the right place in the right way” (G5 271/201).

In these brief and suggestive passages, Heidegger revisits and expands upon the theme of divine “absence” that he had explored earlier in the 1934–35 lectures. While this “absence” is certainly ominous and painful for human beings, it is ultimately fraught with promise. On the one hand, the divine withholds itself from the titanic aspirations of humanity. As in Luther’s “theology of the cross,” God “hides” himself in order to defeat the pride and presumption that are the ultimate source of the alienation between God and humanity. In poems like “Dichterberuf” and “Brot und Wein,” Hölderlin also suggests that the overcoming of this alienation requires a shift in the attitudes of human beings toward the divine. In the “holy night” of the divine absence, the only way to enjoy an effective connection with God is to adopt attitudes of expectancy, endurance, and gratitude. This is an idea that first enters Heidegger’s conceptual vocabulary in WS 1920–21, where he thematizes faith, hope, and eschatological anticipation as the basic intentional stances of the primitive church. The claim is that the mysterious “absence” of God calls for a special response on the part of human beings.

Heidegger dwells at length on this claim in “Wozu Dichter?” Following a brief reference to “Titanien,” he asserts: “The mortal who is to reach into the abyss rather than or differently from others experiences the marks [*Merkmale*] that the abyss observes [*vermerkt*]. These, for the poet, are the tracks of the fugitive gods. This track, in Hölderlin’s experience, is what Dionysus, the wine-god, brings down for the Godless during the darkness of their world’s night. For the god of the vine preserves in it and in its fruit the essential mutuality of earth and sky as the site of the nuptials of men and gods” (G5 271/202).

Abiding in the “absence” or “hiddenness” of God, the poet is attentive to the traces or tracks of the God. This image of the “tracks” of

⁴⁴ A similar idea emerges in the fragmentary hymn “Titanen,” where Hölderlin writes of the “Abgrund” in which new light eventually dawns.

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God also comes from "Brot und Wein": "Weil er bleibet und selbst die Spur der entflohenen Götter / Götterlosen hinab unter das Finstere bringt."⁴⁵ The "bread and wine" of the title of the elegy are reminders of "der Himmlischen, die sonst / Da gewesen und die kehren in richtiger Zeit."⁴⁶ The notion of the "tracks" (*Spuren*) of the absent gods calls to mind Heidegger's earlier discussion of the "hints" (*Winke*) of the gods, that is, about the mysterious and elusive presence of the divine within historical reality. Heidegger is interested in Hölderlin here for his vision of the poetic vocation as attentiveness to this elusive presence. This same interest can be found in his readings of mystics such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Theresa of Avila, for whom the soul is "somehow" the "site for God and the divine," the "*habitation of God*" (G60 336/254). Similarly, the elusive presence of God can be thematized in the eschatological anticipation of the primitive church, in Luther's understanding of faith, and in Augustine's *facies cordis*.

What is new in "Wozu Dichter?" is the appeal to tangible, physical manifestations of this elusive presence that is held to in memory and in expectation. This is, of course, a major theme not only in the Judeo-Christian tradition but also in Hölderlin's poetry. The premier Christian example is precisely the "bread and wine" of the Eucharistic feast. In a later version of the hymn "Patmos," Hölderlin evokes the inauguration of the Eucharist by Christ: "Er sah aber der achtsame Mann / Das Angesicht des Gottes, / Damals, da, beim Geheimnisse des Weinstocks sie / Zusammensaßen, zu der Stunde des Gastmals."⁴⁷ As Heidegger points out, Hölderlin links Christ and Dionysus together in his poetry, for example, in "Der Einzige." The Eucharist is, preeminently, an act of remembrance and of hope. The bread and wine point beyond themselves, like "hints" or "tracks," to a reality that is not fully manifest, but is nonetheless real. On Heidegger's reading, the job of the poet in a "destitute time" is to attend to these "hints" or "tracks" and so to keep alive the remembrance and expectation of the divine in the present "night" of the world. He writes, "Poets are mortals who gravely sing the wine-god and sense [*spüren*] the track [*Spur*] of the fugitive gods; they stay on the gods' track, and so they blaze [*spuren*] a path for their mortal relations, a path towards the turning point" (G5 272/202).

⁴⁵ Hölderlin, *Selected Poems and Fragments*, 158. In translation: "Since it lasts and conveys the trace of the gods now departed / Down to the godless below, into the midst of their gloom."

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 158. In translation: "the Heavenly who once were / Here and shall come again, come when their advent is due."

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 248. In translation: "But the attentive man saw / The face of God, / At that time, when over the mystery of the vine / They sat together, at the hour of the communal meal."

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IV. CONCLUSION

My goal in this essay has been to examine some of Heidegger's more well-known interpretations of Hölderlin's poetry, searching for traces of Heidegger's own philosophical theology in these readings. Beginning in the early 1920s, Heidegger began to develop a distinctive philosophical theology that he never fully articulated but that he revisited again and again throughout his career. His position was decisively impacted by his reading of Luther, whose critique of the "theology of glory" in the name of the "hidden God" defined the direction that Heidegger took in his own reflections.

Heidegger had always been interested in the philosophical potential of poets like Hölderlin and Rilke, even from his student days. In the mid-1930s, he began to read Hölderlin in earnest, a move that profoundly reflected the character of Heidegger's thought as a whole. Among the many themes that occupied him throughout his engagement with Hölderlin's work were those germane to his own inchoate philosophical theology: the "absence" of God, the phenomenology of religious experience, the elusive presence of the divine in historical life, and the critique of philosophical monotheism. Heidegger found in Hölderlin a new, more flexible vocabulary with which to express these themes.