

NOTES AND COMMENTS

TO SAY NOTHING OF GOD: HEIDEGGER'S HOLY ATHEISM

Laurence Paul Hemming has written an important and challenging book.¹ Not only is this a very significant contribution to the literature on Heidegger's relation to theology, it also has much to say to those interested in Heidegger's thought more generally, and renders questions of Heidegger's work relevant and accessible to broader theological debates.

In lectures given in 1993–94 John Macquarrie, one of the original translators of *Being and Time*, suggested that 'despite his equivocal remarks about Christian theology and the belief of some critics that he was an atheist, it may be affirmed that no philosopher had more influence than Heidegger on the theology of the twentieth century'.² Macquarrie notes Heidegger's dialogues with figures such as Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich and Rudolf Otto, and his influence on Karl Rahner. We could broaden this out in the Anglophone world by noting that several key interpreters of Heidegger – Macquarrie, William J. Richardson and Thomas Sheehan among them – do this from a religious perspective. Hemming's aim is at once a confirmation of Macquarrie's claim of influence, and a criticism of his qualification. For Hemming, it is precisely because Heidegger's thought was an atheism that he is important.

Right at the outset Hemming sets up two quotations from Heidegger that frame his inquiry: 'philosophical research is and remains atheism'; only when philosophy is properly atheistic 'is it honest...before God'.³ What Heidegger might mean by atheism and how he understands God are therefore crucial issues. Fortunately Hemming immediately eschews any attempt to seek answers to these questions in Heidegger's biography. Heidegger's atheism is 'his strictly philosophical concern' (pp. 1–2; though see pp. 41–2). Indeed Hemming suggests that his whole argument is an 'attempt to demonstrate philosophically' what others – notably Hugo Ott – have shown through historiographical or biographical research, that the God of Heidegger is the Christian God (p. 44). What is potentially more contentious is his only tangential treatment of the question of God and the overlooking of the question of the holy (p. 17). These seem strategically sensible – the latter question, for example, takes us deep into the mines of Heidegger's interpretation of Hölderlin and the *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* – but potentially problematic in terms of the argument, especially given the final twist of the book: 'To come to my-self and seek union with God demands, at every step along the path, that I say nothing of God'. It is here that Hemming claims that Heidegger's atheism is potentially 'a holy atheism' (p. 290). To say nothing of God may therefore be essential; but to overlook the issue of the holy raises important and essentially unanswered questions.

To be fair to Hemming, the few comments he does make about the holy provide us with a path towards such an answer. He claims that 'the "holy" is the relation of the gods to being, but through an other, who as the place of the holy, takes up this relation between human beings and the gods, unequal to either of them' (p. 18). This is not Christ, who is both human and god, nor is it pagan, but requires us to think about the interrelation of Greek and German myth, as Heidegger does in his lectures on Hölderlin. But Hemming himself takes no more than this initial step, or, rather, points the way rather than walks the path indicated. Indeed, the unanswered question seems

to be that if Heidegger's atheism is 'an explicitly Christian affair' (p. 18) and yet is 'a holy atheism' (p. 290), that is through something which is not Christian, how precisely are these things reconciled? Perhaps this is in some sense resolved through Hemming's intriguing suggestion that Heidegger's refusal to come to the problem of God is a pedagogical tactic which forces us, as his interlocutors, to precisely that problem (p. 45).

Hemming offers some particularly valuable correctives and challenges to Heidegger literature when he discusses the issue of the putative 'turn' (*die Kehre*) in his thought. As Hemming convincingly argues, we need to distinguish a number of different ways in which this term is used both in, and to describe, Heidegger. Heidegger's issue is a turn in being, rather than in his own work, and his first explicit discussion of this turn (in the 'Letter on Humanism') is to express its failure. Essentially the turn was from being and time to time and being, and is concerned with the failure of *Being and Time* to articulate a problem that was recognized as important from very early lectures. All talk of earlier and later Heidegger is therefore rendered inadequate, Hemming contends, and Richardson's distinction between a 'Heidegger I' and 'Heidegger II' extremely suspect. Indeed he claims that Heidegger's foreword to Richardson's book – embraced as a confirmation – is 'ironic and ambiguous. He is poking fun at Richardson's reading of his work' (p. 130; see p. 90). Hemming's account – spread across two chapters – is admirably clear and textually rigorous. All subsequent discussion of this issue will have to come to terms with the matters he raises. And yet this problematic issue is important in terms of the project here, for as Hemming argues, the distinction – there in Löwith as well – may well result from thinking Heidegger in relation to God (p. 3). However, does the critique of the biographical application of the turn mask important developments in Heidegger's thought? While I am not advocating its retention, there seems a danger that some of the insights that have been gained along the way are abandoned. For example, Hannah Arendt has noted shifts in position within the Nietzsche lectures that help to explain Heidegger's changing attitude to Nietzsche's position within Western metaphysics.

Equally, there is perhaps a willingness to overemphasize points to make the case. For example, in the discussion of Heidegger's reading of St Anselm in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Hemming claims that we 'have a clear statement of the meaning of Heidegger's atheism' (pp. 12–13). This supposedly clear statement is, I think, anything but. Heidegger suggests that 'it is not the question of the proofs of God's existence here that interests us, but the problem of the interpretation of being'.⁴ For Hemming, 'it is impossible to unfold the interpretation of being at work here without reference to God, but it is not God that is at issue here' (p. 13). What I am concerned about is the elision of the 'here' – in Heidegger and Hemming. Heidegger regularly uses this tactic: a topic is examined for what it can say about the question of being; but this does not mean that that topic is either necessary or sufficient for an examination of being. It is not clear that 'Heidegger's atheism is an attempt to show the genealogy of thinking itself, unfolding as it does through successive encounters with God' (p. 12). Rather, it seems to me, Heidegger's work is such an attempt to examine the genealogy of thinking itself, as an examination of the history of being, which is sometimes – but not exclusively – revealed through an examination of the question of God in the tradition. However, Hemming is almost certainly right to suggest, in this context, that 'it is only when philosophy itself addresses the place of God in its interpretation of being... that the question of God can emerge at all' (p. 13). Indeed, in other places we find a weaker statement of essentially the same point – 'Heidegger traces the genealogy of how God has been thought' (p. 16); 'Heidegger's question of being will have an outcome for any understanding of God' (p. 17). But accepting the validity of such statements does not mean fully supporting the earlier stages of the argument.

The thinking of the death of God is most obviously found in Nietzsche's work, although it is there in Hegel to a lesser extent (p. 13). For Hemming the death of God is an event, an *Ereignis*, an event of appropriation, the turning itself. Nietzsche's inversion (*Umkehr*) of Plato exhausts the possibilities of metaphysics and 'shows it to be a ring, a *Wiederkehr*'. As Hemming shows this takes on a new role in the *Beiträge* – the critique of metaphysics becomes the possibility of its overcoming, a twisting free from, a *Wider-kehr*, a turn against (p. 119). The death of God, the God of the metaphysical-theological tradition, opens up the possibility of a new relation to the divine, through a 'return to the record of preaching, return to the sacraments again and again'. It is therefore argued that 'far from abolishing the possibility of God, *die Kehre* is that which makes my authentic, ownmost being-with God possible at all' (p. 117). Nietzsche's word that 'God is dead' is partnered by the lament that there have been 'well-nigh two thousand years and not a single new God!'⁵ It is this new god, a God of faith that Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche may open the way for (see p. 177).

This raises some further important questions, which I offer here as requests for clarification. How consistent is Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche with Nietzsche himself? As Hemming rightly contends, for Heidegger, his reading of Nietzsche was akin to Aristotle's of Plato: 'Heidegger resolved what Nietzsche understood figuratively, especially in the person of Zarathustra, in a thematic way' (p. 137). But the question remains as to whether this *is* what Nietzsche understood. In other words, is the death of God only to be embraced from a religious perspective when read through Heidegger? Zarathustra may be 'the very figure of radical, individualistic atheism' (p. 230), but was this really intended to make space for a new relation to God? How does Nietzsche's quest for a revaluation of all values, and above all his work *The Anti-Christ* function in this regard?

Given that Hemming claims that 'Heidegger's critique of Christianity always relies on a distinction between faith and metaphysics' (p. 180), we might expect more to be said on the question of faith. Faith, we are told, is not simply 'dogmatic teaching or biblical revelation as doctrinal truth' (p. 181), but theology is something revealed through 'a thinking and questioning working through of the Christian experiencing the world, i.e., of faith'.⁶ What role does the problematic notion of formal indication play in this argument? This seems especially important given that one of the fullest discussions of this is found in the religion lectures.⁷ How can this be reconciled with the suggestion Heidegger makes that 'a "Christian philosophy" is a round square and a misunderstanding'?⁸ How then can Christian, that is religious, phenomena function as a way into any philosophical inquiry? Does this not fall into precisely the problem Heidegger suggested was true of the ontic sciences, especially if theology itself can be understood in this way (see p. 272)?

If part of the point of Heidegger's retrieval of the Greeks was to rid them of the accumulated weight of the tradition, in large part the misleading readings of scholasticism, where does the Greek notion of the divine stop and the Christian metaphysical God commence? There is some discussion of this in the text (pp. 186–7, for example), but it still feels rather unclear. Hemming notes that his study of Paul, Augustine and Luther on the one hand, and Aristotle (and through him, Plato) on the other pointed to a need for a deconstructing that 'would reveal both philosophy and theology in their originary grounds' (p. 68). Is this a clear distinction? Hemming's work certainly opens up new possibilities for thinking about Heidegger and his relation to the tradition. In the literature on Heidegger this relation has been largely pursued through Kant, Descartes and Aristotle as the thinkers Heidegger intended to discuss in the promised but unpublished divisions of the second half of *Being and Time*. As Kisiel has shown, these three were in a sense secular replacements of earlier religious figures Heidegger had discussed in his courses – that is St Paul, St Augustine

and Luther.⁹ But, if, as Hemming attests, it was 'specifically the early Luther's radical critique of Aristotelian metaphysics' that had attracted Heidegger to him (p. 188), what is the role of Luther in this work? Does Hemming propose something akin to Lutherism (see, for example, p. 272)?

All that said, it is worth stressing again the importance of this inquiry. Hemming's virtue is that he has rendered the religious side congruent with wider intellectual and biographical issues. As such this work sits well with important studies such as Kiesel, van Buren and Dahlstrom, even as it seeks to offer critiques, particularly of the second.¹⁰ Where it breaks new ground is in the discussion of neglected aspects, particularly in the later parts of Heidegger's career. Karl Löwith's relation to Heidegger is treated in some detail, as is Jean-Luc Marion's reading. Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche is explored in some new ways and there are some important remarks on the challenging and difficult claims of the *Beiträge*. It is worth noting just how scholarly an enterprise this all is. Hemming's translations are useful and accurate, but by providing the original language in a footnote he offers the possibility of divergence and critique. The bibliography of Heidegger's works is exceptionally helpful, listing the volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe* and the breakdown of pieces collected therein, along with English translations. The glossary of Greek terms and a translation of a question and answer from Heidegger's 1951 Zurich seminar (pp. 291–2) – otherwise unavailable in English – also adds to the book's worth.¹¹

In the conclusion Hemming suggests that

It should by now be entirely clear that I do not believe Heidegger's work is hostile to or destructive of faith or the theologian's task, though it reinvents the sharpest requirements of the theologians' self-perspicacity and discipline in what and how he might speak. Quite the opposite from hostility, an adequate engagement with Heidegger can inform and fructify theological thinking to the deepest extent (p. 282).¹²

Hemming's purpose is to 'raise Martin Heidegger's atheism as an issue, one which has consequences for contemporary theology' (p. 249). He has succeeded in this aim, and additionally raised it as an issue for contemporary Heidegger studies. As such it demands to be read widely and studied carefully.

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Notes

1 Laurence Paul Hemming, *Heidegger's Atheism: The Refusal of a Theological Voice* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002). Future page references given in parentheses in the text.

2 John Macquarrie, *Heidegger and Christianity: The Henley Henson Lectures 1993–94* (London: SCM Press, 1994), p. 6.

3 Martin Heidegger, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte der Zeitbegriffs, Gesamtausgabe Band 20* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1979), pp. 109–110; *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles: Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung, Gesamtausgabe Band 61* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985), p. 246.

4 Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie, Gesamtausgabe Band 24* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975), p. 58.

5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, §19, *Samtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, edited by Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari (Berlin and München: W. de Gruyter and Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, Fifteen Volumes, 1980), Vol 6, p. 185. See Hemming, *Heidegger's Atheism*, pp. 163–4.

6 Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953), p. 6.

7 Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens, Gesamtausgabe Band 60* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995), Part I. On this see Theodore Kiesel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Daniel O. Dahlstrom, 'Heidegger's Method: Philosophical Concepts as Formal Indications' (*Review of Metaphysics*, 47 [1994]), pp. 775–95.

8 Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, p. 6.

9 See Kiesel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*.

10 Kiesel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*; John van Buren, *The Young Heidegger: Rumor of the Hidden King* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1994); Daniel O. Dahlstrom, *Heidegger's Concept of Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

11 See Martin Heidegger, *Seminare, Gesamtausgabe Band 15* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1986), pp. 436–7.

12 For a related inquiry, see Jeff Owen Prudhomme, *God and Being: Heidegger's Relation to Theology* (New Jersey: Atlantic Highlands, 1997).