



## Religiously We Dwell: Heidegger's Later Contribution to Philosophy of Religion

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### Abstract

The Enlightenment has bequeathed to us the notion that religion can be treated as an object of theoretical inquiry, giving rise to the “secular” concept of religion as a field of meaning or truth-content that is (ideally) isolable from the particular practices that constitute religious worship. I argue that the later Heidegger’s “poetic” thought disrupts the paradigm underlying the secular concept of religion and points us toward an alternative understanding of religion as tantamount to being-in-the-world. Heidegger thus opens the way for post-secular reflection on the transformative potential of religion in human culture.

### Introduction

Heidegger’s writings have a poetic quality that in some respects place them outside of what we might regard as conventional ways of doing philosophy. Indeed, throughout his corpus Heidegger often uses language in a way that shocks the reader out of habits of thought, i.e. common assumptions about the standard issues and the normative conceptual frameworks under which these surface. For instance, Heidegger famously contends in *Being and Time* that “The ‘scandal of philosophy’ is not that this proof [of the outside world] has yet to be given, but that *such proofs are expected and attempted again and again*” (SZ, 205 / BT, 249).<sup>1</sup> Classical epistemology presupposed the distinction between an “inside” of our knowledge (perceptions, sense-data, representations, etc.) of things and an “outside” of the things (objects, causes, etc.) themselves. Perhaps the most central issue at stake in the classical paradigm was that of the possibility

<sup>1</sup> I will give the full citation of each of Heidegger’s texts once. Each subsequent citation of that text will contain an abbreviation and page number of the published German text followed by a backslash and an abbreviation and page number for the English translation, where applicable. Abbreviations are noted in References.

of correspondence of our knowledge to the things as they are in themselves. Heidegger's original and insightful way of describing the human situation as "being-in-the-world" had the effect of upsetting the very categories operative within the traditional paradigm such that the traditional "problem of knowledge" appears, in light of the new description, as a non-problem and even an absurdity. Thus, in one respect, the "poetic" quality of Heidegger's writing issues from Heidegger's own attempts to use language in a way that *attunes* us<sup>2</sup> to new ways of thinking about and describing the ways in which experience manifests and unfolds.

Heidegger's method, however, is not mere revisionism or the exchanging of one word-set for another to redefine a problem. Philosophy is for Heidegger a kind of reflective turning whose aim is to achieve correspondence (*Entsprechung*) to what already "speaks" in and through existence, namely the transitivity of the "gathering together" (*Versammlung*) of things in the context of world which Heidegger variously names being (*Sein*) and logos (Heidegger *WIP*, 49, 69). In such a turning, one indeed does not (and cannot) take up existence as an abstract thought-object; rather, one must strive to be taken up into the matter itself, to orient one's own articulation as an existing being in such a way that one gives voice to this gathering. The aim of reflection is, accordingly, to become the very authentic existence toward which reflection turns. As Sonia Sikka notes, Heidegger therefore undertakes a "poetic revision of the language of metaphysics and theology, based on insight into what this language originally sought to articulate, that in response to which it was first uttered" (Sikka 1997, 6). Philosophical concepts tend over time to ossify into frameworks which hinder this kind of transformative reflection. They lull us into the illusion that to philosophize is in fact to master the "content" of specialized knowledge or to solve "problems" using the puzzle-pieces at hand rather than to effect a radical transformation of our very being in relation to the essentially *ungraspable*.

The question that I wish to raise in this paper is whether Heidegger's later writings disrupt and make strange ordinary ways of thinking about religion. There are two related issues here. The first is whether Heidegger's thinking enables us to understand religion differently from the ways we are perhaps accustomed to viewing it. The second issue is whether and to what extent Heidegger's thinking about religious existence is aimed at pointing us toward and directing us into its authentic mode. Is Heidegger's thought on religion

<sup>2</sup> Attunement (*Stimmung*) is a technical term in Heidegger's writings that refers to the character one's being thrust into a reflective attitude that holds one's own existence in question. Attunement is thus a kind of gestalt shift under which one becomes eminently questionable to oneself. Cf. *GA* 29–30, 199–200 / *FCM*, 132.

transformative in precisely this way? If so, what would this entail for our understanding of the concept of being-in-the-world?

In response to these issues, I argue in part that Heidegger's thinking upsets and disrupts what I am calling the "secular" notion of religion. According to this notion religion is something like a body of doctrines or beliefs to which one gives assent. One ontological assumption underlying this view is that there is a discrete "meaning" of religion that can thus be disassociated from its symbolic "expression" in practices. A *philosophy of religion* modelled on this view of the nature of religion aims to grasp the supposed central problems and tensions inherent to religious *beliefs* (such as the existence of God or of the soul, the nature of religious language, the epistemic status of religious beliefs, etc.) instead of attending to the very practices and forms of life that give rise to beliefs. The poetic language of those of Heidegger's later works that discuss the poetic dwelling of human beings in relation to the "gods", I argue, disrupts the secular notion of religion and opens us to a way of thinking differently about the religious as such. In part, it is the shocking (and sometimes hideous) character of Heidegger's language that disrupts "ordinary" ways of talking in the philosophy of religion to the effect that we are forced out of comfortable habits of thinking. In particular, Heidegger upsets the tidy distinction of meaning and expression that bolsters the secular notion of religion.

But Heidegger does not merely disrupt the concept of religion. Heidegger's thinking, I argue, opens the way for us to see religion as tantamount to being-in-the-world. Thus, Heidegger's work is potentially transformative in its capacity to shape our own relation to religion. In effect, Heidegger leads us to "see" the inner connection of religion and being-in-the-world through his own particular "poetic" articulation of existence. We must thus emphasize the point that, for Heidegger, to see the religion differently is at one and the same time always also to inhabit it differently. It is no longer to take it up as an object for disinterested "rational" discussion, but instead, to be called to a more authentic way of existing in relation to it. I contend in fact that religion is a central theme of Heidegger's philosophy and that the musings of the later Heidegger on the role of the gods in human dwelling constitute a kind of "poetic" retrieval and transformation of his earlier notions of care and being-in-the-world. The later writings enable us to see that our "care" for being (i.e. our own self-interpretive relation to things) which binds us to a meaningful "world" is religious in two senses. First, these writings interpret the care-structure of existence as ritual enactment of the "holy", i.e. as practices that open up a sort of "place" or locale wherein things become *sacraments* which point to the mysterious and inscrutable source of their gathering. Second, the writings encourage us to see that the hermeneutic relation of human beings to things in the

context of world in its very transitivity *is* the manifestation of divinity in the finite and particular.<sup>3</sup> It is my aim to show that for Heidegger, religion in these two senses *just is* being-in-the-world refigured as poetic dwelling. And if this is the case, and if Heidegger is correct, then our inherited “secular” concept of religion stands in need of revision.

### Being-in-the-world as Dwelling

The aim of this section is to interpret Heidegger’s discussion of “dwelling” – especially in his Bremen lectures in dialogue with Hölderlin’s poetry – in light of his earlier articulation of the “care” structure of being-in-the-world. This discussion will also draw from other works from Heidegger’s later corpus to unfold the meaning of the “poetic”. I think the poetic is to dwelling what the care structure is to being-in-the-world. Namely, it is the existential reflexivity that leads human beings to articulate or unfold (*auslegen*) a self-interpretive relation to things in the context of a world. Heidegger’s reference to “poetic” dwelling of human beings is thus, I argue, aimed at deepening our understanding of the care-structure of existence or *Dasein*, particularly by showing us that the self-interpretive articulation that *constitutes* our being-in-the-world is bound up in the practices that unfold the *ethos* of age, the dominant “metaphysics” or understanding of the truth of beings rooted and carried in praxis. As I will go on to argue, if we accept with Heidegger that being-in-the-world is poetic dwelling in the sense indicated, then this has fundamental and transformative implications for our understanding of religion.

As noted, some of Heidegger’s later investigations take the shape of a phenomenological exploration of what Hölderlin’s poems bring to language. A preliminary comment on the relation of phenomenology

<sup>3</sup> My definition of religion has antecedents in James K. A. Smith (2009) and Crowe (2008). However, against Crowe (and with Smith), I do not think that this definition necessitates a *realist* claim, i.e., that there is something really “out there” beyond our experiences (in the vein of Rudolf Otto) to which our practices inevitably point, even if this numinous object can only be felt immanently, as it were. Of course, that this may be the case is not at stake. What is at stake is whether such a realist claim is required in any phenomenologically sound definition of religion. I do not think that it is. Moreover, Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology calls into question and deconstructs the notion of any such “transcendental signified,” to use Derrida’s language. What is required is merely the notion that our practices and narratives embody an understanding of what is ultimately real and thus “image” this real in the human community. The measure of the truth and “authenticity” of this understanding comes only from within this or another equally “religious” form of life. I will return to this issue in the final section of the paper.

to (written) poetry<sup>4</sup> in Heidegger should launch our discussion. The key to the relation consists in Heidegger's notion of language. For Heidegger *language* (*logos*; *Sprache*) refers to the mysterious ground of the emerging presence of things. This ground "speaks" through the paradoxical situation that things are somehow more than their mere presence as things. The "being" of a thing consists in the way in which it points beyond itself (i.e. its actuality as a thing) into wider possibilities for meaning. For example, the jug is not *merely* a jug; rather it is an instrument which pours forth drink in a celebration or solemn festival. The jug participates in the gathering together of a context of meaningful relations which transcend the simple physical or material being of the jug (Heidegger GA 7, 173–75 / PLT, 171–4). But this *gathering*, for Heidegger, belongs to the essential meaning of the jug. It belongs to the being of the jug to point beyond itself to a meaningful context which it participates in opening up. This meaningful context (i.e. the celebration or festival) in turn fulfills the being of the jug as jug. The essence of the thing thus has a *referential structure*, i.e. the thing is insofar as it refers to and helps articulate the context which "carries" its thinghood. This referential structure of the thing is in part what Heidegger means by language. The other "side" of the phenomenon of language consists in the unity of contexts of meaning that Heidegger calls world. As Heidegger notes, "The world grants to things their presence. Things bear world. World grants things" (Heidegger GA 12, 21 / PLT, 201–2). Things point beyond themselves to the *unifying* structure of meaning wherein they occur as things. For Heidegger, this unifying structure is the arising or "worlding" of the world. Thus, the transitive interplay and interpenetration of things and world constitutes the "difference" which Heidegger names language. The essence of things is disclosed in their bearing a world; the essence of world consists in the granting of things their unity (GA 12, 22 / PLT, 200).

In his later lectures Heidegger often uses the term "thinking" (*Denken*) to refer to the task of reflecting on being in a non-representational way (Heidegger WM, 107 / PM, 237). Thinking is not a matter of grasping being, but of attuning oneself to it in the right way. It thus depends on the originary "tuning" (*Stimmung*) of being (Heidegger WIP, 76–7). The *tuning* of being is precisely what Heidegger means by language. It is the disclosure of world in things and things in world characterized by referential and unifying structures. Being itself is the inner essence of this disclosure. Insofar

<sup>4</sup> There are two senses in which I use the term "poetry" in this paper, one in reference to the written poem and the other in reference to the more fundamental event of language in which beings are disclosed. If I am referring to the former, I will explicitly mention the *written* poem. Let it be assumed that "poetry" by itself refers to Heidegger's more fundamental sense of the term.

as it is the very root of articulation, being always remains partially withdrawn or hidden from our articulations. Thus, Heidegger tells us that thinking is a kind of co-responding (*Ent-sprechung*) wherein we come to “speak” being in the right way, through our being disposed or attuned (*be-stimmtes*; *ge-stimmtes*) to it (76–7). Given Heidegger’s view of the character of language as disclosure, we can only be disposed or attuned to the *disclosure of being* in and through language. Moreover, the disclosure of being *is* itself language. This means that thinking must correspond to the essence of language as it unfolds as the interplay of things and world. Thinking must therefore turn to a “site” in language where reflection on the essence of language is enacted. For Heidegger, human activity constitutes the place where reflection on language can be opened up, since human activity itself belongs to the dynamic unfolding of things in world, i.e. is being-in-the-world (Heidegger GA 7, 163, 206–7 / PLT, 160–1, 227–8). The written poem is for Heidegger an exceptional case of human activity, since on Heidegger’s view it attempts to articulate or express being-in-the-world as such. Its relation to language is such that its aim is not to transmit information or to achieve some task but to “speak” language’s essence from out of an involvement in it. Philosophical thinking is certainly different in many respects from writing poetry. But for Heidegger, it takes its direction from and in some sense participates in a kind of “poetic” articulation of its basic matter.

Here poetry refers to the character of human activity whereby we bring things forth (*poesis*) into the possibilities for being that they present to us and step out into these possibilities by enacting them in the context of a world. Thinking explores the possibilities for such bringing-forth that are opened up in such things as the written poem. Mark Wrathall has given a convincing account of the way in which the written poem discloses to us an inhabitable world by opening up possible relations to things (Wrathall 2006, 76–7). As Wrathall notes, the written poem draws out and explores aspects of reality that might otherwise go unnoticed and enables us “to discern how we ought to orient ourselves with respect to the things that they show us” (85). This is only because poetry (*poesis*) is the disclosure of an inhabitable world in the sense that it brings things “near” to us and “makes them matter to us or concern us in a way that they did not before” (85). The poetic is a kind of making or producing that, as Heidegger puts it, brings things to stand in their truth (Heidegger GA 5, 59–60 / OBT, 44–5; see also Wrathall 2006, 84). As the appropriation of possibilities for bringing-forth, poetry participates in the essential unfolding of the play between world and things which Heidegger calls language. It As Heidegger states in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” “Poetry is thought of here in so broad a sense and at the same time in such intimate essential unity with language and word, that we must leave open whether art in all its modes, from

architecture to poesy, exhausts the essence of poetry” (Heidegger GA 5, 62 / PLT, 39–41). As Richard Polt notes, there is something inherently mysterious and inscrutable in this emergence (Polt 2006, 148, 198–200). Human beings “dwell” poetically in that they remain with the mystery of the emergence of beings into presence by shaping and giving rise to inhabitable worlds wherein beings come into play.

To understand the nature of dwelling, we must be clear that Heidegger is not presenting a kind of social constructivist theory of meaning according to which the ultimate referent of significance is human interests. Heidegger would likely contend that this sort of theory remains in the orbit of the modern “subjectivism” he critically rejects. As he notes in conversation with Medard Boss during his Zollikon Seminars of the 1960s, the human being finds itself already having been called upon to respond to beings. “This means,” he contends, “that he must respond in such a way that he takes what he encounters into his care and that he aids it in unfolding its own essence as far as possible” (Heidegger GA 89, 292 / ZS, 231). Human agency is a “standing-open-toward-the-world” or an existing standing-out into the opening of a world-context in which beings show up as what they are (GA 89, 292 / ZS, 231). For Heidegger, this standing-out into the world is *poetic* precisely because it draws or gathers things into a particular historical understanding of their being. It is characterized neither as purely “active” constitution nor purely “passive” reception. Paradoxically, human beings remain or “stay” with the being of things (passive) by in some sense *moving into* the possibilities for being in relation to things that present themselves (active) (Heidegger GA 7, 151 / PLT, 149). Human beings certainly play an active role in unfolding the latent potential of things by helping bring them forth into the very contexts of meaning to which they subsequently belong. Think of the artist bringing forth the sculpture from the block of marble or the farmer’s bringing forth crops from the land. But Heidegger characterizes this activity as a sparing (*Schonen*) which remains (*bleiben*) with the essence of things (GA 7, 151 / PLT, 149). Human agency remains with this essence insofar as it continually moves out into the possible, i.e. it *receives* the emergence of things into world. In some sense we can say that the artist receives the statue from the marble and that the farmer receives the crop from the land. Because human interests depend on the more fundamental event of the emergence of things in the context of world, the former cannot be the ultimate horizon of the latter. Human interests themselves are set within wider axes of significance which transcend our attempts at control and manipulation.<sup>5</sup> To dwell

<sup>5</sup> For Heidegger, these axes are the fourfold (*das Geviert*) of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. I briefly discuss this notion in the following section.

thus means to *inhabit* the world defined by these wider significances (see Wrathall 2003, 78–83 and Vedder 2007, 220–29).

Correlatively I contend that the “poetic” is a deepening of Heidegger’s earlier notion of “care”. In *SZ*, care is Heidegger’s term for the basic manner in which being-in-the-world “takes place,” as it were (Heidegger *SZ*, 192 / *BT*, 237). It is how the phenomenon of world is enacted and unfolds in experience. In *SZ*, every agent exists as care for his or her own being. In each case, I take up particular relations to things because my own existence matters to me (*SZ*, ¶32, 148–53 / *BT*, 188–95). Ontologically, I myself am constituted as a kind of unfolding self-interpretation. To exist is to have expressed one’s care for being in and through the various concerns that structure one’s being-in-the-world. It is thus interpretively to unfold a self-understanding in and through the traditions one inherits. Self-understanding, Heidegger tells us, unfolds as a kind of “repetition” (*Wiederholung*) wherein the agent takes up the project of being a self in ever new, shifting, and expanding contexts of significance. My narratability as a coherent identity thus, perhaps paradoxically, depends on the possibility of future “repetitions” of myself that transform my own understanding of what I have been as agent up to that point (*SZ*, ¶69(c), 364–67, 329–330 / *BT*, 377–78, 415–18). These creative, transformative repetitions that constitute my own narratability as a self are at the heart of what Heidegger’s means by care.<sup>6</sup> As Paul Ricoeur contends, repetition is the “retrieval of our ownmost potentialities inherited from our own past in the form of personal fate and collective destiny (Ricoeur 1991, 111).” The identity that emerges out of care for being has no prototype or identifiable “original” of which it is merely an instantiation. Because there is no stable “core” of my identity to which I could point in my present situation, the repetition of which Heidegger speaks can only be, as with Kierkegaard, a non-identical repetition “forward” where actuality *which has been* now comes into existence (Kierkegaard 1983, 149).

If for the earlier Heidegger care is the central phenomenon of being-in-the-world, so for the later Heidegger, the poetic is the most basic manner in which human beings “dwell.” As we have already seen, poetry is the later Heidegger’s term for world disclosure. We are now in the position to see how poetry projects a kind of narratability of one’s relation to things which invites one to be “repeated” as a self in the context of these projected relations. Poetry in Heidegger’s ontological sense discloses ways of dwelling with things because it opens a space or “locale” for things to come to be as what they are. Heidegger has given a number of famous examples, from the

<sup>6</sup> In respect to the self on this point, Heidegger is quite close to Søren Kierkegaard. Cf. *Repetition*, 149: “[w]hen one says that life is a repetition, one says: actuality, which has been, now comes into existence.”



jug “pouring forth” in the context of the celebration or solemn festival, to the bridge over the river which emerges as the locale that draws together the river banks and so an entire way of life centered on this place (Heidegger GA 7, 154, 174–5 / PLT, 152, 172–3). In my view, Heidegger’s later works drive home his notion that the care-structure is bound up in the *practices* which anchor our sense of world. Practices, especially ritual practices which continually reinforce a sense of communal identity, are the primary expression, if you will, of the care-structure of our being. Human beings dwell in the world primarily in the ways in which they enact self and communal identities through their relation to things. The care-structure that characterizes human existence is *poetic*. One important consequence of Heidegger’s retrieval of care in terms of the poetic is the way in which the latter term helps us understand being-in-the-world in a decidedly non-subjectivist way. Poetry unfolds the “open region” which is itself the essence of language. That is to say, it is an (always partial) unfolding or unconcealment of being in our relation to things. Human care is thus bound up in this originary unfolding; the practices that usher us into particular relations to things are a kind of “poetry” through which we come to a partial understanding of our interconnectedness with the gifts of nature, the fruits of culture, and with each other in our shared world (Heidegger GA 5, 62–3 / OBT, 46–7).

Correlatively, the notion of “dwelling” deepens Heidegger’s earlier notion of being-in-the-world. The word dwelling (*Wohnen*), Heidegger tells us, is derived from Old High German. It is etymologically connected with the German word for building (*Bauen*). Heidegger contends that the two words name a singular phenomenon. They denote the *activity* of building (constructing and cultivating) and of inhabiting a particular locale or place (*topos*) brought forth through building (Heidegger GA 7, 148–9 / PLT, 146–7). For example, human beings can relate to a river as a *locale* when they build on and cultivate the land around it. The river as locale gathers other things together and, as Graeme Nicholson notes, “gives each [thing] a specific function and imprints a local character on each” (Nicholson 1975, 500). The river in this case is the unique “place” of the interplay of things and world. It opens the referential structure or nexus of significances wherein things emerge. It is thus also the opening of possibility, which is an ecstatic unity. The locale brings the community into the gathering of things and opens up possibilities for relating to them. Human beings dwell *poetically* in that their works help bring forth a locale which in turn opens possibilities for being-in-the-world. The essence of locale is this transitive bringing-forth which Heidegger also terms the “open region”. Human beings “dwell” in the open region of being insofar as they participate in the bringing-forth, i.e. in the emergence of a locale which gathers

things together into a world. For Heidegger, our dwelling (and thus our being-bound to a locale) is an essential structure of human existence. It is tantamount to saying that to be is to *be in* the world.

Our major question concerns the insight into the nature of religion that Heidegger's notion of dwelling enables us to have. As I will argue in the next section, Heidegger's retrieval of the care-structure of being-in-the-world in terms of poetic dwelling pushes us also to deepen our understanding of religion. We will see that, in part, this deepening entails our letting go of a core ontological assumption about language that forms the basis of "secular" concepts of religion.

### Dwelling Religiously?

In a thoughtful article occasioned by the recent scandals of the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet of Islam,<sup>7</sup> Saba Mahmood critiques the secular notion of "religion", which, she points out, is predominantly a modern construction indebted to the legacy of liberal Protestantism. Religion, argues Mahmood, emerged as a clearly defined concept at roughly the same time when the modern state was in its self-legitimizing early stages. A space of supposedly pure "secular" interests was carved out and set in opposition to the spiritual interests pertaining to "religion." Accordingly, as Mahmood contends, liberal Protestantism and the secular modernity it birthed were largely responsible for the creation of the concept of religion as "a set of propositions in a set of beliefs to which the individual gives assent. The secular concept is meaningful only in the context of what Mahmood refers to as a "semiotic ideology," wherein "signifiers are arbitrarily linked to concepts, their meaning open to people's reading in accord with a particular code they share between them" (Mahmood 2009, 841). This ideology enshrines an understanding of the "*religious* subject" as one who simply accesses religious "meaning" or "content" through the practical use of signifiers. Such a view "fails to attend to the affective and embodied practices through which a subject comes to relate to a particular sign" (841–2). In other words, the insufficiency of the secular notion of religion stems from the equally insufficient notion of the dual role of signs and practices in the generation of meaning that it rests on.

<sup>7</sup> Mahmood contends that what is at stake in the publication of these cartoons in 2005 and 2008 is not some kind of "standoff between religious and secular worldviews," as mainstream media interpreters would have it. Rather, what is at stake for Mahmood is an "impoverished understanding of images, icons, and signs" on the part of Western interpreters, which "not only naturalizes a certain concept of a religious subject but also fails to attend to the affective and embodied practices through which a subject comes to relate to a particular sign." See Mahmood 2009, 838, 841–42.

Mahmood proposes to deepen our understanding of religion by pointing to the role of the *icon* as “a form of relationality that binds the subject to an object or an imaginary” (Mahmood 2009, 845). The icon, Mahmood notes is “a cluster of meanings that might suggest a persona, an authoritative presence, or even a shared imagination” (845). She draws from Aristotle’s notion of *schesis* to describe the kind of relation wherein one *habituates* that to which one relates through the image. On this account, the sign itself in part contributes to the unfolding of the very reality to which it simultaneously points (847–8). To take an example from our own experience, we might consider how the flag (e.g. a national emblem) is a peculiar sort of sign which performs several functions all at once. The flag signifies some intangible reality by drawing together disparate meanings into a kind of shared imagination, even a shared presence. Those who recognize the flag come to “see” the reality that it points out by learning to view the complexities of their world as in a sense belonging to it and being organized by it. In addition to this, the flag does not merely bring disparate meanings together under one focal point (i.e. “this is America”), but in some sense it enables subjects to *inhabit* the reality that it signifies. The flag as sign thus *participates* in the unfolding of this reality through orienting and guiding practices such that subjects come to see themselves as part of this greater reality. We can picture how some feel the urge to stand and even to salute in the presence of this iconic object. What Mahmood suggests is going on here is that subjects pre-consciously and affectively understand the reality of the flag to be almost embodied “in” their responses to the visual icon. To treat the flag with disrespect is thus a kind of sacrilege towards the reality which makes a claim on us. Mahmood contends that we fail to understand religion where our phenomenological grasp of iconic meaning is too shallow.

As I shall argue in this section, Heidegger’s notion of dwelling in fact shocks us out of ordinary ways of viewing religion and the religious. One key implication of Heidegger’s later writings is that human dwelling is *inherently* religious in the sense that it is world-formation – i.e. the “poetic” practices of human constructing and cultivating which collectively shape and ground for communities and individuals a basic orientation to reality. To say that human beings dwell poetically is to say that their basic mode of being consists in a kind of ongoing retrieval of self-identity through the ontologically *transcending* movement of existence that re-enacts the meaningful contexts that make up the world and which assign things their significances. These contexts of meaning themselves, in turn, are the *habitus* in and through which we find ourselves empowered to have individual and collective identities. If meaningful contexts are continually taken up and re-enacted through human practice, it also stands that these contexts themselves also form the “background” against

which human practices take on distinctive meaning. Heidegger famously calls this circular structure the “hermeneutic situation” of our constitution as existing beings. As I noted in the previous section, to be human is *constitutively* to interpret. Human existence itself is a kind of interpretation, the reciprocal unfolding of world (an understanding of what there is) and self-identity. But what makes the world-forming character of human dwelling distinctively *religious*? My claim is that, because human dwelling is inherently a kind of unfolding interpretation of being, it follows that the world-formation of human beings is religious, if with John Milbank we define religion as “a continuous reading of the world” embodied in the practices and beliefs of a cultural community (Milbank 2009, 292). To be more specific, my claim is that the central practices through which human beings come to some understanding of what ultimately pertains in the world, i.e. of what sorts of “realities” there are that make human existence a meaningful one, are religious because they embody a kind of iconic “reading” of realities which somehow transcend human interests and which make some kind of claim on human beings which binds them to a particular way of life.

There is good textual warrant in Heidegger to support this interpretation of human dwelling. For instance, in a 1936 lecture on Hölderlin and the essence of poetry, Heidegger claims that “Only where there is language is there world—that is, the constantly changing cycle of decision and work, of act and responsibility, but also of caprice and noise, decay and confusion. Only where world holds sway is there history” (Heidegger HEP, 121). For Heidegger, we human beings *are* the “conversation” of language insofar as poetically we bring beings forth into world (HEP, 122). The dominant conversation of an age, we might say, is the understanding of the basic truth of beings that holds sway in it. Things are disclosed in the context of a world that we cultivate and inhabit. The conversation of an age is its “metaphysics,” which for Heidegger is more than just abstract intellectual exercises performed by academics. As he put it in 1938, “Metaphysics grounds an age in that, through a particular interpretation of beings and through a particular comprehension of truth, it provides that age with the ground of its essential shape.” And further, “This ground comprehensively governs all decisions distinctive of the age” (Heidegger GA 5, 75 / OBT, 57). Human beings embody a kind of metaphysical “conversation” with the reality of what they encounter, which we recognize at some deep level is also our own reality. This is, in my view, what Heidegger means by suggesting that the human being is a “metaphysical animal” (*animal metaphysicum*); to exist is at some level to stand out into the “conversation” of language concerning the being of the realities we encounter and the very mode in which we encounter them (Heidegger WM, 197 / PM, 279).

At the heart of our embodied “conversation” of relatability is the poetic disclosure of a world. Thus, for Heidegger metaphysics is not distinct in its *essence* from poetry, even though academic metaphysics and artistic production might be worlds apart. Already in 1936, Heidegger contended that “the primordial language is poetry as the founding of Being” (Heidegger HEP, 125). Heidegger contends that human beings dwell un-poetically when they are no longer capable of allowing things to present themselves according to the multifaceted truth of their being. Another way of putting this is that human dwelling is essentially poetic, but it becomes inauthentically poetic or un-poetic when it is no longer able to “measure” things according to their truth (i.e. the way they present themselves). In this case, the metaphysical “conversation” with being that we are becomes stale and locked in expressions that no longer enable us to experience our own being as eminently questionable to us. The baseline of un-poetic (non)dwelling is for Heidegger the pathology of modern life which reduces all manner of relation to beings to calculative rationality and technological manipulation (Western consumerism is one facet of this wider phenomenon) (Heidegger GA 7, 207 / PLT, 228). For Heidegger, modern technocracy is the outgrowth of onto-theo-logy. Modern metaphysics as the project of an absolutely self-grounding thinking manifests itself in the will to power and control over reduced “objects” of nature, which is secretly the will to will – an absolute self-willing that wills only itself as absolute in every relation (Heidegger ID, 127; see also GA 5, 242–3 / OBT, 181). Heidegger is well regarded as a kind of 20<sup>th</sup> century prophet who pointed to the secret ontological kinship of Western science and capitalism and who anticipated the now global phenomenon of the *uprooting* of local identities through the reconfiguration of the sacred in the form of technological power.

Yet for Heidegger, even this global phenomenon is not completely devoid of religion. Modernity is indeed characterized in part by the loss of the gods (*Entgötterung*) (Heidegger GA 5, 76 / OBT, 58). More precisely, loss of the gods means something like “indecision about God and the gods” (GA 5, 76 / OBT, 58). The cultural and moral institutions of modernity are, more and more, shot through with a kind of agnosticism with respect to sacred realities. Modern humans, argues Heidegger, find themselves inhabiting a world in which it is increasingly difficult to bear witness in and through their relation to things to some reality which binds human community together. For instance, our institutions in the West which traditionally existed to bear witness to some higher good beyond sheer instrumental interests have increasingly become captive to the reductive logic of the global market. To a large extent, we moderns are no longer able to inhabit social institutions in such a way that we somehow understand

them embody and even manifest the unseen, immeasurable reality of the sacred. Yet for Heidegger, this is ultimate not because we human beings are *less religious* than we were at some earlier point in our history. Rather, onto-theo-logy is a nihilistic *reconfiguration* of the sacred itself which elevates sheer self-willing to the position of the absolute through denying things their sacramental or *iconic* role as “sites” for the embodiment of transcendent realities. This move is not to deny the sacred and thus to establish a “secular” humanity devoid of religion. But it does de-sacralize signs, i.e. deny any real presence of any transcendent reality “in” the world of human affairs. The ironic effect of this de-sacralization of the world is that dominant meaning-producing systems themselves begin to bear sacred meaning. They become ends in themselves which embody a kind of ultimately self-referential power structure.

To get a grasp on this point, we must return briefly to Heidegger’s philosophy of language. We recall that Heidegger argues that the practices of constructing and cultivating that shape and give rise to our sense of world are ultimately *poetic*. The poetic is Heidegger’s term for the way in which human existence is characterized by its standing-forth into the deep, unfolding reality of things and by in a sense bringing-forth this reality into a world. The poetic is Heidegger’s characterization of the way in which human beings are “enacted” in and through the event of language. Language is the “difference” and interplay between things (realities that bear up a world) and world (contexts of meaning in which things are things). At the centre of the phenomenon of language are the human relations to things which articulate a world. Poetry is thus the mediating “centre” of any human relation to the sacred. Put differently, for Heidegger the sacred can only manifest *in and as* the particular embodied forms of human making. Human building itself is a kind of *iconic* reference to the sacred reality taken to be at the heart of a community. For instance, the Christian practice of the Eucharist is understood by those who practice it to embody in a real way the sacred reality to which it simultaneously points (see de Lubac 1950, 32–48). The Eucharist in the Christian tradition is a kind of “poetry” of the divine which both shapes a locale for human dwelling around the communion table (“this is my body”) and binds the community to a reality that transcends sheer instrumental interests and purposes. This is what Heidegger means also in suggesting that, for ancient Athenians, the temple was not only the site or locale that gathered together a particular way of life but that in a real way it also was the “god”, i.e. the hidden reality it was understood to embody (Heidegger GA 5, 29–30 / OBT, 21–2). Thus, Heidegger seems to contend in his later work that authentic human dwelling continually unfolds as praxis that somehow provides the “place” and the “occasion” for the unfamiliar and to show up in the familiar. In Jean-Luc Marion’s idiom,

we might say that in Heidegger's understanding human dwelling is "iconic" because it points beyond itself to a transcendent dimension of meaning visible in it (Marion 1991, 17–24).<sup>8</sup> But even beyond Marion, Heidegger finally rejects the dualism of the visible and invisible in favour of the view of the poetic as a kind of *sacrament* wherein the divine inhabits the particular through the very agency of human making.<sup>9</sup>

Heidegger's claim, I believe, is that human dwelling is structurally iconic. The practices that are centered in the Christian Eucharist or in Greek temple life are analogously structured as ways of inhabiting the "play" of language that both give rise to locales and that bind human life to some sacred reality manifested in a way of life. In a 1936 lecture on Hölderlin Heidegger notes that, "[I]t is important to see that the presence of the gods and the appearance of the world are not a consequence of language's occurrence, but are instead simultaneous with it" (Heidegger HEP, 122–3). Heidegger seems to indicate here that the emergence of the world, the opening of human relations to things, is an event of language in which the gods simultaneously "speak". I follow Benjamin D. Crowe in interpreting the terms "gods" (*die Götter*) and "godly ones" (*die Göttlichen*) as particular manifestations of the meaning of divinity (*Gottheit*) (Crowe 2008, 129–30). These are the "beckoning messengers" that constitute the "givenness" of the divine in and through our very practices of dwelling (Crowe 2008, 129).<sup>10</sup> What is the role of these beckoning messengers of divinity (*die winkenden Boten der Gottheit*) as a phenomenological account of being-in-the-world? Heidegger is frustratingly vague on this point, but Mark Wrathall offers us helpful insight into the indispensable role of the divine in his understanding of dwelling. First, as Wrathall contends, the manifestation of divinity is for Heidegger a

<sup>8</sup> Because of the dualism in his own phenomenology, which at the end of the day lands his project squarely within terms set by Kant and the Enlightenment, Marion is unable fully to appreciate the radical implications of Heidegger's thought on religion. Albeit, Heidegger himself remains complicit with another Kantian dualism: that of faith and reason. This complicity detracts from the radicality of his other insights.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger is thus indebted to counter-Enlightenment thinkers such as J.G. Hamann. "The unity of the Author is mirrored even in the dialect of his works – in all of them a tone of immeasurable height and depth! A proof of the most splendid majesty and of total self-emptying! A miracle of such infinite stillness that makes GOD as nothing, so that in all conscience one would have to deny his existence, or else be a beast. But at the same time a miracle of such infinite power, which fills all in all, that we cannot escape his intense solicitude! –"Thus, Hamann denies the inner sanctum of an "invisible" beyond the realm of the visible, but at the same time points toward a mysterious self-emptying source that fills all things. The only proper "response" to such mystery is bound up in the "poetry" of the divine. Hamann (1762) / 2007, 75.

<sup>10</sup> In my view, Heidegger is thus also proposing that we reawaken and retrieve a sense of the enchantment of nature by spiritual energies; although admittedly, his discussion of the "gods" is frustratingly vague.

deranging one, in that through it we are called “beyond the existing configuration of objects to see things that shine forth with a kind of holiness (i.e., a dignity and worth that exceeds our will).” Secondly, the god or gods in a sense “show up” in and through human practices that image it. Phenomenologically, this means that the locale that is shaped by human practices has a kind of “existential importance” for human identity (Wrathall 2003, 83–4). In other words, the divine that “essences” in and through human existence holds in tension the inescapable fact of our being bound by locale with the notion of transcendence or movement-out-beyond-oneself which characterizes dwelling. The divine holds human beings in the transforming “play” of the emergence of things and world.

The important point to note here is that, through his analysis of language, Heidegger is isolating something like what he views to be the deep structure of human dwelling. To be human is in some sense to find the “measure” of one’s existence and of one’s fulfillment beyond oneself; but it is also to participate in an order of sacred meaning that in some sense manifests itself in the world, in and through our participation in a locale. As sociologist Christian Smith argues in his groundbreaking *Moral, Believing Animals* (2003), “In order to make sense of the meaning of self, life, history, and the world, one has to get outside of them, to ‘transcend’ them, and interpret them within horizons and frameworks of perspective derived from beyond the object of interpretation.” And again, the horizons of meaning and significance which constitute human “life, history, and the world,” are not at bottom completely self-referential, but “need a transcendent horizon or framework or understanding derived from above and beyond themselves to be given significance” (Christian Smith 2003, 120). I take Heidegger to mean something like this in suggesting that “The human being dwells, insofar as he is a human being, in the nearness of god” (Heidegger WM, 185 / PM, 269). Human dwelling at the very level of its practices is certainly a kind of “poetic” self-interpretation, i.e. an articulation of world in taking up possibilities for being in relation to things. But this means that human beings must in essence participate in the disclosure of an order that lies beyond them in the “nearness” of a transcendent source of meaning that always remains partially hidden from our understanding.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Smith calls this transcendent source a “superempirical order,” since it supposedly concerns an ontological order that supersedes our mere grasp of empirical givens. I am uncomfortable with the language of superempirical order because it can be too easily misconstrued as a kind of Platonic duality of the sensible and intelligible or spiritual worlds. In fact, Smith appears to use this duality as a criterion to distinguish “religious” from “nonreligious” or “secular” moral orders. The latter types of order, he claims, have “strictly empirical references,” and include worldviews such as “secularized liberal, democratic capitalism; Marxist communism; nonreligious expressive, Romantic individualism; and cynical nihilism.” But are the ultimate references of these cultural systems really strictly



But then what are we to make of the secular? Modern humanity, by and large, inhabits what Charles Taylor calls “closed” or “horizontal” worlds, by which he means “shapes of our ‘world’ (in Heidegger’s sense, that is, the ‘world’ in its meaning for us) which leave no place for the ‘vertical’ or ‘transcendent’, but which in one way or another close these off, render them inaccessible, or even unthinkable” (Taylor 2007, 556). I have argued that, even here, there is a kind of sacred, insofar as human beings still are “metaphysical” creatures, in Heidegger’s sense. That is, insofar as human beings continue, through their very world-forming practices, to unfold an understanding of “what there is”, they are in the purview of religion. Heidegger’s argument is that modern is particularly susceptible to the dangers of onto-theo-logy because it tends to lead to a kind of de-sacralization of signs and the human practices that form a *habitus* in relation to them. But there are still enough examples of “iconic” relations to unseen realities, even in secular contexts, to allow us to make the phenomenological point that these sorts of relations remain open to human beings.<sup>12</sup> Heidegger argues further that these kinds of relations in fact form the core of human identity and experience and “naturally” orient human beings in their very practices toward the divine. Moreover, I have argued that we can construe Heidegger to be suggesting that human dwelling is *religious* in the sense that it is a kind of poetic “witness to” or “testimony of” the very deepest levels of reality we take to be present in and through our relation to things. Religiously we dwell . . .

### Conclusion: Pathways for Thinking

We might take exception to the inherent bias in Heidegger’s recourse to Greek-Christian-Hölderlinian language (i.e. of “God” and the “gods”) in order to articulate what he views to be the inner structure of human dwelling. Heidegger’s epistemological grounds

empirical? That is so only if we define empirical to mean “this worldly”. But why do that? By Smith’s own admission, all of these cultural systems presuppose moral and narrative frameworks that are ultimately unverifiable (i.e. non-empirical in nature). Marxist communism, for example, certainly does not hold any belief in a superempirical order, where this means something like a real order of spiritual or intelligible entities. But it does not follow that the strictly “this worldly” concern of Marxism precludes its dependence on beliefs about what ultimately pertains to reality, beliefs which are empirically unverifiable. I would argue that this is precisely why all cultures are at bottom *religious* in nature, where the latter just means something like embodying some view to “what there is.” See Christian Smith, 2003, 96–106, esp. 98, 104.

<sup>12</sup> For an excellent analysis of the religious dimension of supposedly “secular” rituals of social life, cf. James K. A. Smith, 2009, esp. 89–129. The interpretation of Heidegger I am developing here overlaps a lot with the Augustinian anthropology that Smith develops in his groundbreaking book.

seem shaky. Thus, do we have sufficient warrant to make a claim about being-in-the-world in general on the basis of Heidegger's (albeit unique and interesting) reading of Hölderlin and various religious traditions? In this essay I have argued that phenomenological descriptions also proceed at least in part "poetically" in the sense that they are ultimately tools for helping us to "see" something for ourselves. In light of what I have said about Heidegger's views about the poetic character of human dwelling, we can say that for him there is really nothing outside of or beyond the reality of human making itself upon which we can base our insights. In the end, Heidegger's re-description of human being as dwelling, and by extension my own re-description of poetic dwelling as *religious* dwelling, are themselves *repetitions* that retrieve some interpretation of human experience as a meaningful, coherent whole. My implicit claim has been that, rather than hindering phenomenological insight into the structures that shape our world and our experience of it, the particular traditions and modes of life that we inhabit are, in fact, the conditions that *enable* these descriptions. The more suited the enabling conditions are to the reality being described, the more rich, complex, and satisfying will be our descriptions.

Of course, these descriptive qualities can be measured only from within a perspective, which is why I think that we do not completely understand Heidegger until we see that his own phenomenological descriptions are "indications" that are meant to draw us into a particular perspective, a particular way of viewing the world. In his "Letter on Humanism" Heidegger notes, citing Heraclitus, that the god is the "unfamiliar one" (*Un-geheuren*) in the "familiar abode" (*geheure Aufenthalt*) or dwelling place of man (Heidegger WM, 186 / PM, 258). The human being who has been shocked or deranged (*Ver-rückt*) by an experience of the god that upsets his ordinary perspective "moved out" (*ausgerückt*) into a different understanding of beings (Heidegger GA 5, 267 / OBT, 199). In some sense, we might say that Heidegger's thinking is aimed at triggering this kind of transformation of our own self-understanding in relation to things as much as it is aimed at helping us understand descriptive claims with respect to experience.

Where does this argument leave us with respect to the secular notion of religion? It at least calls into question ways of interpreting religion that ultimately reduce it to belief-contents or even as a way of life whose "truth" can be reliably "translated" into neutral ethical claims in the so-called public square (see Habermas 2006, 1–25). We are left with the room to question the assumption that religion could ever be isolated and analysed as a phenomenon independently of some decision concerning its "truth" (see St. Augustine 1959, iii.3., 3–5). Heidegger undercuts the simplistic view of language that bolsters this assumption and at least points us to the possibility that

human dwelling is inherently religious in the ways described. Finally, though I do not have the space to argue it here, I would contend that Heidegger thereby beckons us to take up the task of the philosophy of religion as the attempt to questioningly appropriate an *authentically religious* understanding of the world beyond the horrors of onto-theology and the technological nihilism of the modern age. I would add, beyond (and perhaps in spite of) Heidegger, that the texts and traditions of the Abrahamic faiths provide the nourishing poetic soil for such appropriation.

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