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FOLLOWING THE WORDS:
HEIDEGGER'S ACCOUNT OF RELIGION AS *NACHFOLGE*

One significant obstacle we face in approaching Martin Heidegger's thinking about religion is that, at least after the 1920's, Heidegger addresses religion only indirectly. His famous critique of onto-theology, his repeated characterization of philosophy as essentially a-theistic, his account of the "holy" as something like the condition for the possibility of encountering "God" or "the gods" or "the divine"—all of this philosophical work relates obliquely to the question of religion, since the latter involves not only conceptions of God or the divine, but a whole array of inherited practices, a belongingness to tradition, and so on.¹ Indeed, for the most part we find Heidegger remarking only on specific facets of religion—for example, so-called "religious experience," or faith or religiosity—rather than on religion per se.²

¹ As to the complexity of what religion involves, Heidegger seems to be in agreement with Schleiermacher's analysis that religion at the very least involves both a way of thinking ("a theoretical structure"), and a way of acting "which develops into a morality; a practical phenomenon"—see his notes on Schleiermacher's Second Speech, "On the Essence of Religion," in *Becoming Heidegger: On the Trail of His Early Occasional Writings, 1910-1927*, edited by Theodore Kisiel and Thomas Sheehan (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), pp. 86-91.

² On faith, for example, Heidegger famously writes that "the unconditional character of faith, and the problematic character of thinking, are two spheres separated by an abyss [*Die Unbedingtheit des Glaubens und die Fragwürdigkeit des Denkens sind zwei abgründig verschiedene Bereiche*]"—but what does this tell us about religion as a matter distinct from faith, though related somehow to it? See Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, translated by J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper Collins, 1968), p. 177. On religiosity and "religious experience," Heidegger's passage on the Entgötterung in "The Age of the World Picture," is most illuminating: "A fifth phenomenon of the modern age is the loss of the gods. This expression does not mean the mere doing away with the gods, gross atheism. The loss of the gods is a twofold process. On the one hand, the world picture is Christianized inasmuch as the cause of the world is posited as infinite, unconditional, absolute. On the other hand, Christendom transforms Christian doctrine into a worldview (the Christian worldview) and in that

Nonetheless, there is a late text of Heidegger's that, while brief, does offer us an illuminating formulation of religion that is consistent with Heidegger's motivating concerns in his well-known discussions of ontotheology, technology and the "holy": namely, the interview from 1963, titled "Conversations with a Buddhist Monk." As I shall argue in what follows, Heidegger's account here of religion as *Nachfolge*, "following-after," emphasizes, first of all, the *historicity* of religion—the way in which religion attests to one's being claimed by a past that makes one possible; secondly, religion as responsiveness to a ground outside oneself—thus serving as what Ben Vedder calls a "counter-paradigm to technology"; and lastly it emphasizes the centrality of language to religion, and thus the *hermeneutic character* of religious tradition.

Heidegger's remarks on religion in the 1963 text are prompted by the question posed to him as to whether religion is nothing other than following the teachings [*Lehren*] of the founder. To this Heidegger responds (through the translator) as follows:

I consider one thing alone to be decisive: following the words of the founder [*den Worten des Gründers zu folgen*]. That alone—and neither the systems nor the doctrines and dogmas are important. *Religion is following-after* [Religion ist *Nachfolge*]... Without the holy we remain out of contact with the divinities. Without being touched by the divinities, the experience of God fails to come.³

This passage is extremely compressed, but its interest lies mainly in the way that it brings together a succinct formulation of what religion is—religion as

way makes itself modern and up to date. The loss of the gods is the situation of indecision regarding God and the gods. Christendom has the greatest share in bringing it about. But the loss of the gods is so far from excluding religiosity that rather only through that loss is the relation to the gods changed into mere "religious experience." When this occurs, then the gods have fled."—See Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 116-117.

³ Martin Heidegger, "Conversation with a Buddhist Monk," in *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 16: *Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges 1910-1976*, edied by Hermann Heidegger (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), p. 590. Mark Wrathall gives attention to this text in addressing Heidegger on religion, and translates the passage a bit differently than I have here. For one, Wrathall translates *Nachfolge* as "succession," which is indeed one possible meaning of the German, but "following-after" strikes me as a better rendering, in part because it is less specific (succession is but one kind of following-after), and also because Heidegger's use of *Nachfolge* follows immediately on the heels of his use of the verb, *folgen*. In this way, Heidegger seems to be clarifying the sense of "following" that he has in mind with respect to the words of the founder in glossing religion as "following-after." Secondly, Wrathall translates *das Heilige* as "the sacred," but "the holy" has less baggage than "the sacred" as a translation, and moreover it corresponds with most scholarly treatments of *das Heilige* in Heidegger's thought. See Mark Wrathall, "Between the Earth and the Sky: Heidegger on Life after the Death of God," in *Religion After Metaphysics*, edited by Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003).

Nachfolge, “following-after”—and the thought expressed repeatedly in the “Letter on Humanism” and afterward, that an experience of God or the appearing of God is made possible by the divinities, which are themselves made possible by the holy.⁴ While it is not at all clear how to understand Heidegger’s thought of the holy in relation to religion—after all, he says elsewhere that “there is no trace of the holy” or that the holy has been “wiped away”—it does seem clear that the holy is introduced in order to approach religion in a non-subjectivistic way.⁵ As Ben Vedder has argued convincingly, the holy, along with its attendant conception of the “fourfold,” operates in Heidegger’s thought as a counter-paradigm to the enframing or *Ge-stell*.⁶ Benjamin Crowe argues something very similar to this when he writes: “Religion, at its roots and in its essence, actually represents a spirit totally alien to that of technological modernity... Religious patterns of life represent a concrete historical instantiation of a radical alternative to the conceptual paradigms of late modernity.”⁷ And finally, Mark Wrathall has drawn attention to this text from 1963 in an essay where he addresses the question as to how Heidegger helps us to understand why a religious life “should seem a plausible way to redress the failings of our technological and secular age.”⁸ In what follows I shall discuss further these and other interpretations of Heidegger, but to begin we should devote attention to

⁴ See Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism”: “But the holy [*Das Heilige*], which alone is the essential sphere of divinity [*der Wesensraum der Gottheit*], which in turn alone affords a dimension for the gods and for God [*für die Götter und den Gott*], comes to radiate only when being itself beforehand and after extensive preparation has been cleared and is experienced in its truth”—*Gesamtausgabe* Vol. 9: *Wegmarken*, edited by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976), p. 169. For further insight into Heidegger’s conception of the holy, see, above all, the essay on Hölderlin, “As When on a Holiday...,” where Heidegger writes: “The holy is the essence of nature”—in Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* Vol. 4: *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung. 1936-68* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1981), p. 59.

⁵ “The basic experience: the whole horizon from out of which God could appear as God is wiped away—the holy”—Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 75: *Zu Hölderlin - Griechenlandreisen* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann), p. 355. Heidegger writes that “there is no trace of the holy” in the essay, “What Are Poets For?,” in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). As Ben Vedder puts it, the holy is “the condition of the possibility for the appearing of the divine”—see Ben Vedder, *Heidegger and the Philosophy of Religion* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press), p. 234.

⁶ Ben Vedder, *Heidegger and the Philosophy of Religion* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2007), pp. 222-24. See Vedder’s further claims: “In order to get a nonsubjective approach to religion, Heidegger introduces the notion of the holy,” *Ibid*, p. 7; “The subjectivistic interpretation of humanity is most radically rejected in Heidegger’s notion of the fourfold [*Geviert*],” *Ibid*, p. 211.

⁷ Benjamin Crowe, *Heidegger’s Phenomenology of Religion* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 137. Relatedly, Crowe argues: “To be religious is to inhabit a sphere of religious meaning, a sphere that is not constructed or projected by human subjectivity, but is instead given and then preserved in communal practices and traditions.”

⁸ Mark Wrathall, “Between the Earth and the Sky: Heidegger on Life after the Death of God,” in *Religion After Metaphysics*, edited by Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 69.

Heidegger's carefully chosen words in the passage: what is involved in the notion of *Nachfolge*, "following-after," such that the basic character of religion can be grasped in its terms, and how is this related to the thought of religion as a matter of "following the words of the founder"?

We should note, first, the immediate context of this formulation: Heidegger is trying to say succinctly what religion is in dialogue with a Buddhist monk, which means that the formulation aims at a kind of generality across traditions in determining what religion is. Yet, as Heidegger makes clear in other writings, we are able to approach such generality only from out of our own determinate religiosity – which, in Heidegger's case, means only from out of his own lived Christianity. Consider his words on this very point in the 1921-22 lecture course, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*:

Genuine philosophy of religion does not emerge from previously held concepts of philosophy and religion. Rather, the possibility of its philosophical comprehension is provided by a determinate religiosity – for us, the Christian. Why Christian religiosity lies immediately in the field of our investigation is a difficult question; it can be answered only through the solution of the problem of historical contexts. The task is to achieve a genuine, original relation to history, which must be explicated from out of our own historical situation and facticity... Only in this way can the possibility of philosophy of religion be grasped.⁹

In light of Heidegger's reflection on historicity here, the gloss on religion as *Nachfolge* in the 1963 text is important in part because of its distinctly *Christian* meaning: it stems from Jesus' call to "follow me," *folge mir nach* – which is not anything incidental to the Christian message, but rather, as the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it, "we are called to follow-after by the whole Word of Scripture."¹⁰ To be sure, in saying this, I do not mean to suggest that Heidegger is deliberately orienting his thinking on religion in a specifically Christian direction or that, as late as 1963, Heidegger himself wishes to emphasize the

⁹ Benjamin Crowe's translation of the following: "Die echte Religionsphilosophie entspringt nicht vorgefaßten Begriffen von Philosophie und Religion. Sondern aus einer bestimmten Religiosität – für uns der christlichen – ergibt sich die Möglichkeit ihrer philosophischen Erfassung. Warum gerade die christliche Religiosität im Blickpunkt unserer Betrachtung liegt, das ist eine schwere Frage; beantwortbar ist sie nur durch Lösung des Problems der geschichtlichen Zusammenhänge. Es ist Aufgabe, ein echtes und ursprüngliches Verhältnis zur Geschichte zu gewinnen, das aus unserer eigenen geschichtlichen Situation und Faktizität zu explizieren ist. Es kommt darauf an, was der Sinn der Geschichte für uns bedeuten kann, damit die »Objektivität« des Geschichtlichen »an sich« verschwindet. Es gibt nur eine Geschichte aus einer Gegenwart heraus. Nur so ist die Möglichkeit einer Religionsphilosophie anzufassen" – Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* Vol. 60: *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995), pp. 124-25.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1937), p. 58. The gospel passages on which Bonhoeffer is commenting are *Mark* 1:16-18 and *Matthew* 16:24.

Christianity of his earlier years in how he approaches religion.¹¹ Whatever may be the case as to Heidegger's own relationship to Christianity, the very word, "Nachfolge," in a German context, cannot but bring to mind its importance for German-language Christian theology. For this reason, we may hope to capture the resonances of meaning of Nachfolge, "following-after," by drawing on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's illuminating book of 1937, titled, *Nachfolge*.¹²

The first point in Bonhoeffer's account that is significant for us is his argument that Jesus' call to follow him has no intelligible content apart from attachment to Jesus' person. Bonhoeffer explains this as follows:

And what does the text inform us about the content of following-after [*Inhalt der Nachfolge*]? Follow me, run along behind me! That is all [*Folge mir nach, laufe hinter mir her. Das ist alles*]. To follow in his steps is something which is void of all content. It gives us no intelligible programme for a way of life, no goal or ideal to strive after... It is nothing else than bondage to Jesus Christ alone, completely breaking through every programme, every ideal, every set of laws [*Es ist abermals nichts anderes, als die Bindung an Jesus Christus allein, d.h. gerade die vollkommene Durchbrechung jeder Programmatik, jeder Idealität, jeder Gesetzmäßigkeit*]... When we are called to follow Christ, we are summoned to an exclusive attachment to his person [*Der Ruf in die Nachfolge ist also Bindung an die Person Jesu Christi allein*].¹³

A related point is that following-after Jesus is not something that exhausts itself in some doctrinal system: "An idea of Christ, a doctrinal system, a general religious knowledge on the subject of grace or on the forgiveness of sins, makes following-after unnecessary, and in truth they altogether rule out following-after, and are inimical to it. With an abstract idea it is possible to enter into a relation of formal knowledge, to be inspired by it, and perhaps even to put it into practice; but it can never be a matter of following-after in personal obedience [*aber niemals der persönlichen gehorsamen Nachfolge*]... Christianity without following-after is always Christianity without Jesus Christ; it is an idea, a

¹¹ However, Heinrich Petzet does point out, in his account of the encounter between Heidegger and the Buddhist monk, that Heidegger was keen to convey the difference between Christianity and "Christianness [*Christlichkeit*]" to his Buddhist visitor—see Heinrich Wiegand Petzet, *Encounters and Dialogues with Martin Heidegger: 1929-1976*, translated by Parvis Emad & Kenneth Maly, (Chicago & London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 166-83.

¹² A detailed comparison of Heidegger and Bonhoeffer's thinking on religion is clearly beyond the scope of this essay. What is offered here is meant to get at the nuances implicit in their use of the word, "Nachfolge," and not meant to suggest that Heidegger shares Bonhoeffer's much more doctrinal preoccupation with the implication of Nachfolge.

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1937), p 49; see also pp. 29-30.

myth."¹⁴ Nachfolge understood in this sense would thus appear to underscore Heidegger's emphatic rejection of the thought that religion could be a matter of following the *teachings*, rather than the *words* of the founder.

A closely related point made by Bonhoeffer is that Nachfolge is not the sort of thing that can be negotiated in advance, according to one's understanding of what is entailed by it. Bonhoeffer argues this point in commenting on a passage in *Luke* chapter 9, verses 57-62, where the gospel-writer narrates three people called by Jesus. The first person says to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go," and Jesus replies: "Foxes have their holes, the birds their roosts; but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head." To another Jesus says, "Follow me [*akolouthei moi*]," but when the man replies that he must go and bury his father first, Jesus says: "Leave the dead to bury their dead; you must go and announce the kingdom of God." Finally, a third person says that he will follow him, but bids Jesus let him first say goodbye to his people at home. To him Jesus replies: "No one who sets his hand to the plough and then keeps looking back is fit [*euthetos*] for the kingdom of God." This last would-be disciple, according to Bonhoeffer, approaches following-after as something "which can only be realized when certain conditions have been fulfilled." Bonhoeffer comments:

This is to reduce following-after to the level of the human understanding. First you must do this and then you must do that. There is a right time for everything. The disciple places himself at the master's disposal, but at the same time retains the right to dictate his own terms. But then it is no longer following-after, but a human program that I arrange according to my judgment, and which I can justify rationally and ethically [*Sie wird zum menschlichen Programm, das ich mir einteile nach meinem Urteil, das ich rational und ethisch rechtfertigen kann*]... By making his offer on his own terms, he negates following-after, for following-after allows for no conditions which might come between Jesus and our obedience to him.¹⁵

The scriptural passage itself, on which Bonhoeffer offers this commentary, is noteworthy, for the question that Jesus asks about the third would-be follower is whether he is *euthetos*, "fit" or "suitable" for the kingdom of God. The primary meaning of the Greek *euthetos* is "well-placed" or "well-situated" in the sense of being-usable-for, even being-convenient-for such and such purpose. Thus, whereas the would-be follower, on Bonhoeffer's interpretation, wants to establish conditions for his following-after Jesus, to arrange the following-after to suit his own purposes, Jesus reverses the instrumentality in question: is the would-be follower, rather, suitable for or of use to the kingdom of God?

In any case, Bonhoeffer's interpretation of Christian Nachfolge gives us a sense of how the concept would resonate with Heidegger's own attention to religion as

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 50.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 51-52.

a lived practice. We should recall that in the 1921-22 lecture course, Heidegger focuses our attention on religion “in factual life-experience [*in der faktischen Lebenserfahrung*],”¹⁶ and precisely so as to avoid what he calls “the naive way of proceeding with a philosophy of religion,” which he characterizes as follows: “Religion should be philosophically understood, conceptualized. Religion is to be projected into an intelligible context. Hence, the philosophy of religion’s posing of problems depends on conceptualization [*Daher hängt die Stellung des religionsphilosophischen Problems vom Begriff ab*].”¹⁷ In this light, what is so illuminating about Bonhoeffer’s interpretation is its demonstration that *Nachfolge* is a way of enacting one’s religious commitment, such that the basic orientation in following-after is not the demand that one understand everything from the outset. Indeed, on this point Bonhoeffer quotes Luther saying of *Nachfolge* that “it must proceed not according to your understanding, but beyond your understanding [*Es muß gehen nicht nach deinem Verstand, sondern über deinen Verstand*].”¹⁸ Furthermore, in light of Bonhoeffer’s interpretation it is striking that Heidegger glosses *Nachfolge* as *following the words of the founder*. What is implicit in this formulation is that the ground, *Grund*, of one’s religious following-after is found outside oneself: I myself am not the founder, I myself do not supply the ground of what makes for my religion, but rather my being-religious lies in following the words of the founder, being moved by a ground that is outside myself.¹⁹

Beyond this, the very word, “*Nachfolge*,” conveys the historicity that is at stake in literally following-after religiously. “*Nachfolge*” expresses the historicity of one’s relationship to tradition perhaps better than any other single word, as its typical meanings range from biological inheritance, to organizational succession (e.g., the “succession” of apostles, etc.), to the sort of “emulation” that we have in mind when we speak of following-after Jesus, *Nachfolge Jesu*. In other words, “*Nachfolge*” expresses the sheer facticity of one’s belonging to a tradition that

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* Vol. 60: *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, p. 82.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 75.

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1937), p. 69.

¹⁹ Crowe puts it this way: on Heidegger’s view, “religion positively insists on the idea that meaning is given rather than constructed,” *op. cit.*, p. 13; “[T]he meaning of religious practices like prayer, worship, social action and theological reflection all depend upon a basic response to an independent realm of meaning,” *op. cit.*, p. 59; “What shapes religious life and motivates the commitments of religious people is the prior givenness—as an experienced reality—of religious meaning. A religion that proceeds by creating meaning willy-nilly is, on Heidegger’s view, not a religion,” *op. cit.*, p. 60. Furthermore, in line with Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of *Nachfolge* is Crowe’s statement that “On Heidegger’s account, the heart of religion is not assent to a doctrinal system, nor a particular pattern of behavior, but what might be called religiosity, a way of being, of inhabiting a determinate ‘space’ or ‘nexus [Zusammenhang]’ of meaningfulness... Heidegger concludes that the ‘understanding’ constitutive of the immanent sense of religious life is not something that can be achieved by human reason, but something that must be given.” *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66

defines one in the strong sense.²⁰ It turns out, therefore, that the proper account of religion suggested by Heidegger here is in terms of the historicity that is itself defining of the one who, in whatever way, “follows after” in following the words of the founder. This aspect of Heidegger’s formulation of religion as *Nachfolge* accords with the way in which Heidegger, throughout his career, traces religion back to historicity.²¹ This is related to the previous phenomenological point about responding to a ground outside oneself because historicity names the way in which our identities are formed by religious tradition as a decisive matter of our historical situatedness. Religion as “following after” is not the sort of thing that I can ground for myself precisely because of my historicity – in Bonhoeffer’s words, it is not the sort of thing “that I arrange according to my judgment [*das ich mir einteile nach meinem Urteil*],” for to relate to it in this way is precisely to destroy what is essentially religious about it.

Yet it would be wrong to suppose that religion in the strong sense of “*Nachfolge*” indicated by Bonhoeffer rules out the possibility of there being differing interpretations of a given religious tradition by those who find themselves in the train of that tradition. I take it that Heidegger’s emphatic rejection of “doctrines” as the proposed object of religious following is motivated in large part to preserve the hermeneutic openness of religion, for following the words of the founder will always allow for differing interpretations, competing “doctrines” or “systems.” Clearly, in the case of following after Jesus, one is engaged in an interpretive effort of understanding and emulation that is not without difficulties. We find Heidegger emphasizing this hermeneutic character of *Nachfolge* when, rather than understanding religion in terms of doctrines or systems of teaching, he insists that what one follows in being religious are the words of the founder – that the words alone are what is decisive.²² The obvious implication is that one may keep to the tradition that determines one in a strong

²⁰ Crowe echoes this point when he writes, in the conclusion of his book, that “Religion is...constitutive of our identities, and has the potential to be a powerful force in shaping new post-technological, post-nihilistic identities,” op. cit., p. 139.

²¹ Ben Vedder’s recent work traces through the entire corpus Heidegger’s approach to religion “as an expression of historicity,” and Vedder writes: “In Heidegger’s thinking, the orientation toward the highest is instead reformulated as a historical orientation. The historicity of religion has to be understood out of its own situation and out of the presuppositions contained within it.” – Vedder, op. cit., p. 66. See also his claim: “Heidegger was able to conclude that the religious is none other than the historical, due to the fact that the radicality of a personal position is only to be uncovered within history” – op. cit., p. 267.

²² Ben Vedder’s “The Question into Meaning and the Question of God,” in *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion*, edited by James E. Faulconer (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press., 2003) brings together the sense of religion as historicity and hermeneutic openness in a way that is illuminating for our discussion of Heidegger: “If I want to interpret something, the object that I interpret changes and appears to be different from what I thought. Stimulated by the interpretation of and comment on the word, God, the issue of God calls for understanding. It calls for us to clarify the meaning and interpretation of that word... in the course of time, the issue yields a richer, and perhaps even unexpected, image concerning that first reference to the name of God that is the point of departure,” p. 43.

sense even when—perhaps most of all when—one follows the words of the founder in ways that break with received interpretation, doctrinal requirements, and so on.²³ Indeed, Christianity exemplifies this hermeneutic openness in a particularly interesting way, since Jesus as founder breaks with his own inherited religious tradition dramatically—or, at least, his own interpretation of its religious teaching differs dramatically from the received interpretation in his day—and thus, by his example, Jesus brings to the fore the question of interpretation in how one relates to the ground of one’s religiosity.

We can see that this hermeneutic aspect of Heidegger’s formulation of religion as *Nachfolge* is essentially tied up with the previous points about ground and historicity: for, it is precisely because one relates to the ground of religious following-after through the words of the founder, and by way of one’s historicity, that one’s particular interpretation of the words does not exhaust all possible interpretations. To be related to the ground in this way is just to have one’s interpretation of the words open to contestation.²⁴ Here it is telling that, in one of the passages connecting the holy with the experience of God in the “Letter

²³ The philosophical significance of this claim is underscored by the personal significance it has in Heidegger’s own life: in his letter to Father Krebs of January 1919, explaining his and Elfride’s decision not to have their newborn child baptized in the Church, Heidegger described the transformation, through philosophy, that he had undergone and that made “the system of Catholicism problematic and unacceptable.” See the letter translated in *Becoming Heidegger: On the Trail of His Early Occasional Writings, 1910-1927*, edited by Theodore Kisiel and Thomas Sheehan (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), pp. 71-72. Sheehan points out that the letter does not say that Heidegger lost his religious faith or that he had abandoned the Catholic Church—and apparently, later in life he told a confidant that he had never left the Church, *ibid.*, p. 72. As Vedder points out, in the ensuing years Heidegger turned his attention toward Luther and Protestant theology, taking part in dialogue with Rudolf Bultmann in order “to return to the original message of the text without falling back upon dogmatic doctrines”—see Ben Vedder, *Heidegger and the Philosophy of Religion* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2007), p. 30.

²⁴ See Robert S. Gall, *Beyond Theism and Atheism: Heidegger’s Significance for Religious Thinking* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987) on Heideggerian religion: “Heidegger’s account suggests a description of religion and religious activity in terms of a thinking-speaking-devoted response and recollection of one’s way to be. In such a scheme, religion could no longer be seen as an assertion of what is, affirming and uncovering what is already there, but must be viewed as a destructive-creative-preserving activity which makes and lets appear what has not been seen before. Men of ‘faith’ would not be believers who hold onto and believe a credo which religion has already established, but [would be] annihilating the rigid structures of the new, not just at the ‘beginning’ of a religious tradition, but throughout,” p. 115. Charles Taylor has captured this point about the hermeneutic openness of religious traditions when he writes: “It is open to me to try to convince a Buddhist, a Muslim, or an unbeliever, that they could see their Buddhism, Islam, humanism differently, and thus accept different consequences. They should be ready to return the favor. This kind of debate is even essential to a healthy society under diversity, and is both sign and support of real mutual respect among people of different fundamental commitments.”—Charles Taylor, “Closed World Structures,” in *Religion After Metaphysics*, edited by Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003).

on Humanism," Heidegger orients the discussion toward the question of being able to hear and understand the very meaning of these terms:

Only from the truth of Being can the essence of the holy be thought [*Erst aus der Wahrheit des Seins läßt sich das Wesen des Heiligen denken*]. Only from the essence of the holy is the essence of divinity [*Gottheit*] to be thought. Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word "God" is to signify. Or should we not first be able to hear and understand all these words carefully if we are to be permitted as men, that is, as ek-sistent creatures, to experience a relation of God to man? [*Oder müssen wir nicht erst diese Worte alle sorgsam verstehen und hören können, wenn wir als menschen, das heißt als eksistente Wesen, einen Bezug des Gottes zum Menschen sollen erfahren dürfen?*].²⁵

While Heidegger does not mention "religion" per se in this passage, nonetheless his orientation is toward the hermeneutic openness of the word "God" and so on to various interpretations, to the various possibilities of understanding or misunderstanding. This would suggest, then, that religion as we understand it only ever comes to be within the hermeneutic space of being able to hear and understand the words of a founder.

So, returning to the 1963 text, how are we to understand religion—here glossed as *Nachfolge*—in relation to this proposed link between the holy and a possible experience of God? Are we to think that the holy can be fostered only through the religious practices that have been handed down to us? On this point, Mark Wrathall has argued as follows:

It is important to see that Heidegger is not a nostalgic and sentimental thinker. His claim here is not that lapse into an accustomed mode of religious life is an end in itself. To the contrary, we can only be conditioned by the divine if we find that if we find our own authentic relationship to divinities. The problem is that, barring a new revelation, the only practices we have for getting in tune with the divine are the remnants of past religious practices. These, Heidegger thinks, must therefore be nurtured in order to preserve a sense for the holy, because God can only appear as a god in the dimension of the holy.²⁶

Crowe offers a similar interpretation to Wrathall when he writes: "Heidegger suggests that the practices whose meaning is grounded in religion be preserved

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* Vol. 9: *Wegmarken*, edited by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976), pp. 181-82.

²⁶ Mark Wrathall, "Between the Earth and the Sky: Heidegger on Life after the Death of God," in *Religion After Metaphysics*, edited by Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.2003), p. 85.

and nurtured, even in the face of growing meaninglessness.”²⁷ And Albert Borgmann would appear to echo these interpretations when he argues that “Making room for Christianity is in fact the most promising response to technology.”²⁸ But how are we to evaluate these claims? Certainly we do not want to say that inherited religious practices are somehow immune to the “growing meaninglessness” of technological modernity. Heidegger, for one, in his famous discussion of the *Entgötterung*, declares that the modern preoccupation with so-called “religious experience” is itself a symptom of the gods’ flight, and identifies Christendom as the principal cause of this historical development.²⁹

On the other hand, the idea that turning to Christian or other sorts of religious practices could make for a “positive response to the challenge of technology” (Borgmann) seems unobjectionable as far as it goes. Borgmann details a number of Christian practices that work to resist technological commodification, and in connection with our discussion of religion in terms of following the words of the founder, perhaps the most interesting religious practice that he focuses on is the reading of Scripture. Borgmann writes: “If generally to read is to gather one’s past and to illuminate the present, this is eminently true of reading the Bible... for Christians, at any rate, holy texts are a bond that unites the generations of believers into the people of God.”³⁰ And yet, in his discussion of Christian efforts to reach out to non-Christians in secular society, Borgmann argues that we should recognize loci of the divine in activities that are not at all “religious” in the typical sense:

The truth of Being, we might say, is that reality today is ruled by the device paradigm and [is] therefore inhospitable to the holy. In a society where the sense for the sacred has largely atrophied, sacraments are unlikely to have a focal place. Thus as Christians we must be concerned to strengthen reverence and piety wherever we find it: the natural piety of environmentalists, the aesthetic reverence of the arts community, the sense of wonder in the sciences. Proceeding from the holy to the divine, we should

²⁷ Benjamin Crowe, *Heidegger’s Phenomenology of Religion* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 134.

²⁸ Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2003), p. 8. Borgmann goes so far as to say that “technology, coming to the end of its rope, will have to turn to Christianity for guidance if it is to avoid self-destruction,” p. 83.

²⁹ A fascinating *sociological* application of Heidegger’s interpretation of the *Entgötterung* is found in Daniele Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, English translation by Simon Lee of *La religion pour mémoire* (1993), (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2000). Like Heidegger, Hervieu-Léger assigns to Christianity principal responsibility for the *Entgötterung* of our age—a historical transformation that she describes as the “subjectivization of religious experience,” p. 170. “Christianity...has facilitated the destabilizing of the essential structure of the religious...by giving the believer’s personal faith...pride of place,” p. 170. See her remarks on Heidegger’s conception of *Entgötterung*, p. 75.

³⁰ Borgmann, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

support the intimations of divinity that are differently celebrated in our society. I mean those occasions where people gather to be entertained and end up being inspired by the grace of an athletic event or an artistic performance that supervenes on everyone as an unexpected and undeserved gift.³¹

On the face of it, this recognition of “intimations of divinity” in thoroughly secular activities would seem to count against Wrathall’s claim that “the only practices we have for getting in tune with the divine are the remnant of past religious practices.” Of course, this issue unavoidably involves us in the complicated question as to the relation between specifically religious and specifically secular domains—and pursuing this would require that we veer far from Heidegger’s writings to the recent philosophical work of thinkers like Gianni Vattimo, Charles Taylor and Jean-Luc Nancy. In any case, while Heidegger’s thinking underdetermines the account that we will give of the secular/religious question, I imagine that he would be sympathetic with the view that certain non-religious practices may in fact get us closer to the divine than inherited religious practices.³² Here we might think of Bonhoeffer’s “worldly” or “secular” interpretation of Christianity in his letters from prison, inspired by the thought that “Jesus calls us not to a new religion, but to life” [*Jesus ruft nicht zu einer neuen Religion, sondern zum Leben*].” Describing the godless world as a world “come of age” [*die mündige Welt*], Bonhoeffer writes: “The world come of age is more godless and for precisely this reason is perhaps closer to God than the world not yet come of age” (181; letter on July 18, 1944).³³

³¹ Ibid.

³² Quite a similar thought to the one above is captured in his lectures from Winter 1921-1922, when he writes: “Philosophy, in its radical, self-posing questionability, must be *a-theistic* as a matter of principle. Precisely on account of its basic intention, philosophy must not presume to possess or determine God. The more radical philosophy is, the more determinately is it on a path away from God; yet, precisely in the radical actualization of the ‘away,’ it has its own difficult proximity to God” – Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*, translated by Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 2001), p. 148. Compare his thinking here in *Identity and Difference*: “The god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as *causa sui*, is thus perhaps closer to the divine God. Here this means only: god-less thinking is more open to Him than onto-theologic would like to admit” – Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, translated by Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 72.

³³ On this point we should remember that Bonhoeffer, like Heidegger, was looking for a language different from traditional religious language to make possible an encounter with the divine. Compare Bonhoeffer’s thought of a new language, perhaps quite non-religious, with what Gadamer says about Heidegger’s thought of the holy: “With this he probably also means that we cannot reach God because we talk about God in a way that can never serve the self-understanding of faith” – Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Religious Dimension in Heidegger,” in *Transcendence and the Sacred*, edited by Alan M. Olson & Leroy S. Rouner, (Notre Dame & London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 207.

So, if Heidegger's thinking on religion does not necessarily lead to a turn toward inherited religious practices, what is its practical significance? To my mind, Heidegger's account is entirely *preparatory*, making possible the sort of rigorous philosophical reflection upon religion that is desperately needed today, when religion provokes intellectual polemic, on one side, and fundamentalist reactions on the other. The historicity and hermeneutic openness that are brought to the fore in Heidegger's thought of religion as *Nachfolge* recalls the Latin etymology of religion—both the presumably correct etymology of *religio*, “to bind again,” conveying the core sense of religion in terms of ligature, as well as the apparently incorrect etymology proposed by Cicero in *On the Nature of the Gods*: *religio* as *relegere*, to reread, thus conveying the core sense of religion in terms of legibility, indeed, a problematic legibility since it allows for, or calls for, rereading. Perhaps these differing etymologies belong together, and religion should be approached in terms of its bindingness, but a bindingness that has to do with legibility, either that of sacred texts, or the legibility of ourselves to ourselves. What is illuminating about Heidegger's thought of religion as *Nachfolge* in this connection is that it gathers together these two senses of religion as ligature and legibility in the way that it expresses both historicity—i.e., the bindingness of tradition—and legibility, the hermeneutic openness in which the meaning of tradition allows for rereading, reinterpretation.

Furthermore, a significant advantage of Heidegger's formulation of religion is that it allows us to appreciate the kinship between philosophical questioning and the religious tradition that is itself subjected to questioning.³⁴ Notice that, with respect to the etymology of “religion,” there is nothing in the word itself that excludes philosophical questioning, and Cicero's etymology of the word suggests that we understand philosophy as continuous with, perhaps even an essential part of, the religious tradition.³⁵ However we assess Heidegger's claim, in *What is Called Thinking?*, that philosophical questioning is separated from faith by an abyss, it is striking that “faith” [*Glaube*] does not enter into his formulation of religion as *Nachfolge*, and indeed this sense of following the words of the founder is something that applies just as well to our interpretive work on philosophical texts—particularly if we keep in mind Heidegger's caveat that what we are following are not doctrines or dogmas or systems, but the *words* of those foundational thinkers. Because Heidegger's formulation of religion as *Nachfolge* omits faith as an essential component, which means omitting belief in God or the “transcendent” as essential components, it allows us to understand

³⁴ This is, in fact, very similar to what motivates Hervieu-Léger's turn to a “de-substantialized” definition of religion, as her initial work in sociology was to understand the “religious” character of wholly secular efforts in the 1960's and 1970's to create utopian communities in rural France—see her discussion of this in Daniele Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, English translation by Simon Lee of *La religion pour mémoire* (1993), (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 75-82.

³⁵ What Bas van Fraassen says of Cicero's characters in *On the Nature of the Gods* is that “it is hard for me to imagine anyone more secular than the officially pious Roman gentleman”—Bas Van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 176.

religion as something more fundamental than either theism or atheism.³⁶ In this way it captures the *depth* of religion as a fundamental aspect of our historicity.³⁷

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³⁶ On this point, Heidegger's approach would appear to be more radical than that of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), where religion (as opposed to the secular) is always understood in terms of an explicit theism or at least in terms of the "transcendent." See also Paul van Buren, *The Edges of Language: An Essay in the Logic of a Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), where the author writes that neither theism or atheism "is sufficiently independent of the positivistic tendencies at work in our culture to be able to challenge them in a significant way," p. 169. Van Buren's proximity to the Heideggerian approach appears when he writes that both theism and atheism "depend upon a too narrow conception of the ways in which our language works... The issue is...how to speak, whether to use words in certain ways, and therefore at the same time how to live, how linguistically to inhabit our world. The choice about religion is the choice between resting exclusively in language's central plains and exploring out to some of its frontiers," 168).

³⁷ I wish to express my gratitude to the participants of the Heidegger Research Group's meeting on "Heidegger and Religion," in Messkirch, Germany, May-June 2007, and especially to Bret Davis and Friederike Rese, whose comments on an earlier version of this essay helped me to think through the issues addressed. I am indebted to the conference organizers, Alfred Denker and Holger Zaborowski, for inviting me to present an earlier version of this essay at the meeting.