

CHRISTIANITY BEYOND THE "POLITICAL": THE TEMPTATION OF ONTO-THEOLOGY

Ion Josan

Babeş-Bolyai University

Abstract:

Even though the western society has experienced a profound process of secularization the legacy of Christian culture has still affected and preoccupied European philosophers. Thinkers such as Heidegger or Agamben have analyzed the elements of the Christian culture that are still parts of the European mindset. In this article, I will try to show how segment of the philosophical thinking of Martin Heidegger propose a deconstruction of philosophical grand narratives that encapsulate and diminish the values and possibilities of actual Christian experience. I will try to take a closer look at the concept of ontotheology and the critique related to it elaborated by Martin Heidegger that repositions us under the sign of Salvation liberated from the determinism of the "Political"

Introduction

After the Second World War, the western world was in the middle of a process of reconstruction that had to tackle a complex variety of aspects beginning with economics and ending with religion and culture. In this context, the intellectual space of the Western World was in a way divided into two worldviews (Capitalism and Marxism) that had as their ideological base the idea of continuous progress and technological development. Following these conceptual frameworks, deeply beholden to the legacy of intellectual figures such as Comte, Durkheim, Darwin or Marx, the intellectuals of the Western World foresaw and supported a worldview that would repudiate the religious aspects of human life ;guiding society towards rationalism and progress. Emerged in this Universe of rationalism and progress, a great part of the western minded intellectuals could hardly imagine a return of religion in the public space and politics, but events like the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the rise of political Islam proved them wrong. Religion was to be an active social phenomenon even in the 20ths century and it was to be present even in the most secular parts of the western world. In Western Europe for example, despite a process of fragmentation of faith facilitated by the rise of post-modernism and other alternative epistemologies, religion and faith remained a subject of discussion and a hot topic related to identitarian issues. In fact, due to this proliferation of post-modernist and new age-ist

"faiths" the importance of the Christian legacy began to be revalorized even by neo-Marxist thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek. In his book "The Fragile Absolute or why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?" he argues that, "Christianity and Marxism should fight on the same side of the barricade against the onslaught of new spiritualisms - the authentic Christian legacy is much too precious to be left to the fundamentalist freaks" (Žižek, 2000: 2). Although Žižek did not point to this precisely, it is clear that Christianity as a worldview can provide the intellectual framework able to fight both the relativism of post-modernism and the hegemony of Capitalism (if we look at things from a Marxist perspective) or any other ideology. In fact, Christianity has this extraordinary ability to reveal the impermanent nature of human absolutisms and in the same time to keep us sane from the haunting chasm of post-modernism. In this line, Christianity is reappearing in the intellectual discourse of modern philosophers and under its shadow, the European thought is once again debating its Christian legacy. In this article, I will try to indicate the philosophical elements that predispose the Christian worldview to pluralism and acceptance of the "other" (basic ideas without whom, democracy is unconceivable). My aim is to show the trajectory of a philosophical direction that shares a Christian tension, aiming to fight back against the hegemony of ideologies and in the same time keep a coherent view about the world. In order to understand this philosophical longing for the Christian cultural legacy we have to analyze some aspects of the Heideggerian thought so that we can understand that "the only possibility of salvation left to us is to prepare readiness" (Heidegger, 1966).

From Metaphysics to Theology

Martin Heidegger considers that "Metaphysics grounds an age". So that "Western humanity, in all its comportment toward beings, and even toward itself, is in every respect sustained and guided by metaphysics". Which means that when we "assert that metaphysics grounds history", we postulate that metaphysics "establishes both the most basic conceptual parameters and the ultimate standards of Legitimacy for history's successive "epochs" of united intelligibility". In this way, every epoch is grounded in the historical transformations of our metaphysical understanding of what is "being". (see Iain Thompson, 2000)

For Martin Heidegger, metaphysics asks what it means for a being to be and understands the answer to this question as "Being". Asking what

beings *are* (or what a being is) means asking about the “Being” of those beings. As Heidegger puts it: “Whenever it is said of beings, the little word “is” names the *Being* of beings” (Heidegger, 1991: 125). Iain Thompson points out that “Metaphysics speaks of the totality of beings as such, thus of the Being of beings” (Iain Thompson, 2000). Something which Heidegger calls the “fundamental metaphysical positions” an endeavor to establish ‘a truth about the totality of beings as such’ (Iain Thompson, 2000).

Heidegger’s tries to show here that in the same way as ontology, metaphysics searches for the most general ground of being, looking for what all beings share in common. So that metaphysics is ontology when it ‘thinks of beings with an eye for the ground that is common to all beings as such’ (Martin Heidegger, 1969: 139).

Heidegger assumes that metaphysics thinks theologically when it “thinks of the totality of beings as such . . . with regard to the supreme, all-founding being” (Martin Heidegger, 1969: 139). In this way, metaphysics is theology whenever it determines the Being of beings as an ‘all-founding being’, whether as an ‘unmoved mover’ or ‘self-caused cause’ (Iain Thompson, 2002)

The major difference between ontology and theology as Iain Thompson explains is that Ontology discovers and sets out the foundation beneath which the metaphysician’s investigations cannot ‘penetrate’ (Ergründen) whereas in Theology the highest being “grounds” in the sense of “founding” (begründen) beings, “establishing” the source from which beings issue and by which they are “justified”. (Begründen meaning not only “to give reasons for” or ‘justify’, but also “to establish” or ‘found’, in the sense of ‘to give for the ground’) (Iain Thompson, 2002).

Heidegger points out that “An explicit ground-laying of metaphysics never happens *ex nihilo*, but rather arises from the strengths and weaknesses of a tradition which designates in advance its possible points of departure (Iain Thompson, 2005). With reference to these this tradition is self-enclosed, for every groundlaying is, in its relation to what came before, a transformation of the same task.” (Martin Heidegger, 1997: 2). As a result “within the tradition of Western metaphysics all metaphysical systems attempt a “ground-laying”, and, as we have seen, one which takes the form of a “double grounding” of beings in a fundamentally ontotheological duality (Iain Thompson, 2002).

To put it simpler, Merold Westphal explains that Heidegger describes onto-theology as the claim that there is a highest being who is the key to the meaning of the whole of being. Westphal thinks that Onto-theology occurs when "philosophy allows God to become a theme of its discourse only on its terms and in the service of its project". He further elaborates, "Philosophy's project is to render the whole of being fully intelligible to human understanding, to have the world at its disposal, first conceptually and then practically". Westphal considers that onto-theology has begun with metaphysical systems like Aristotle's, Spinoza's, and Hegel's and reached its peak in modernity when science and technology "placed the world at man's disposal first conceptually and then practically" (see Penner, Westphal, 2005; 144-148).

The Heideggerian critique of ontotheology takes into discussion the way in which we can interpret our own place and nature. In the first place, the Heideggerian problematization of grounding takes us out from the imprisonment of auto-referentiality making us aware of an essence that is beyond us. Secondly, this philosophical attitude that takes into account what lays beyond human daylines, becomes an disposition that can be hardly integrated or appropriated by a "political" project, because there will always be something that "escapes us". So that the specter of "possibility" can emerge.

The absolutism of the "Political"

Werner Marx, in his book "Heidegger and Tradition" argues that for the German philosopher, "Nietzsche is the last thinker of the West who brings to fulfillment the consummation of metaphysics The rational will now knowingly posits "values" and thereby determines itself to the "will to power". The essence of the will to power lies in its being directed not toward possession but only toward itself, so that it is accordingly a "will to will". By this, nature under the domination of the "will to will" becomes objectified (Werner Marx, 170-171). A will which aims ultimately only at its own unlimited self-aggrandizing increase and thus becomes nothing but "the will to insure the overpowering of everything", that is, sheer "will to will" (Dreyfus, Wrathall, 2002: 116).

For Heidegger, Nietzsche's legacy is profoundly linked to our "nihilistic epoch of "cybernetics" which, in its pursuit of "truth" comes progressively

to embody its own groundless metaphysical presuppositions". By this, everything is standardized and modified so that it can justify human meaning in concordance to empty optimization imperatives, so that in the end we experience the graduate reducing of all intelligibility to that which can be "stockpiled as bivalent, programmable information" (Iain Thompson). In a reality shaped like this, we can have different perspectives going against such a background, but this technological understanding of the Being of beings is no longer actually in the service of any person or goal but is rather, "accelerated by the proliferating technologies of cyberspace, beings increasingly enter into a state of pure circulation" (Dreyfus, Wrathall, 2002: 68). To put it shortly, we have here a "mechanism" that was built by men for the sake of man which eventually has enslaved man in its own ways of operating.

For Martin Heidegger, the fundamental modern form that has adopted this "mechanism" that models everything upon itself and which orders beings accordingly to itself is the State. He argues that because of for this reason "Politics" become the normative self-certitude of "historical" consciousness. By this, "Politics" determines itself from a History conceived according to the norms of its own consciousness that is a "technological" experience. In this perspective, "Politics" becomes the completion of History and therefore, "Politics" becomes "the historic-technological and fundamental certitude of all action: such that "Politics" shall be characterized by the utter and unconditional absence of all questioning of itself. "This unconditionality of "Politics" and its Totality go hand in hand. And the reason for this mutual embrace and its content hardly rests - as we would believe - upon the accidental arbitrariness of dictators: but rather, upon the metaphysical essence of modern reality in general." (Miguel de Beistegui, 2002 :117-118).

Following this heideggerian argumentation, Miguel de Beistegui opines that what distinguishes the modern experience of the "political" from the ancient "polis" is a certain lack of questioning with respect to itself, and with respect to its own essence. By this, Modern consciousness perceives itself as all encompassing and all mighty, because it is self-positing as "its essence or its being is not derived from anything outside of it, but is its own foundation. (Miguel de Beistegui 2002: 115)

Heidegger perceived the crisis of the Western spirit as a religious crisis and saw it as manifesting as nihilism understood as the death of God. This

nihilism as Christopher Rickey puts it, describes a threefold alienation: the human alienation from being, the human alienation from the divine, and the human alienation from an authentic community and thereby from his or her own self. For him, Heidegger's aim was to heal the alienation inherent in modernity. "Politically, this project demanded a sacralization of the public sphere – so necessary for an authentic existence. This sacralization, however, was to be brought about through a revolution in metaphysics that can only occur "in and through the question of being, which opens a space in which the Gods can appear" ". (Christopher Rickey: 4).

The moment of vision and the longing for conciseness

Heidegger borrows from Kierkegaard and Luther the term of "Augenblick", "the moment of vision" a correspondent of the Greek term of Kairos, understood as the right or the opportune moment. Christian theology understands the concept of Kairos as the fulfilment or redemption of time that occurred with the appearance of Christ. For Heidegger this "moment of vision", the Kairos, corresponds with the appearance of the authentic Dasein (Critchely, 2009). This is a moment when being understands the call of conscience and takes it into, "wanting to have a conscience" (*Gewissen-haben-wollen*).

For Tillich "Kairos" is a new inner historical manifestation of the Kingdom of God, a fulfilled, creative moment of time and a time of decision. The historical period in which the knowledge is formed demands a decision in relation to the Unconditioned. A positive decision towards the Unconditioned and the Kairos would be a decision to actualize the creative possibilities of the moment, as a negative decision would be a refusal of the same possibilities (see Carey, 1984: 247). In his Systematic Theology, Tillich says that individuals and groups re-experience the central Kairos, the manifestation of the New Being in Jesus as the Christ, through relative kairoi in which the Kingdom of God is present in several particular manifestations. The central Kairos is both the criterion and source of power of all the relative kairoi. This experience of Kairos is an involved experience, not a detached analytical observation. (see Stenger, Stone, 2002: 102)

When talking about the kairotic moment the temptation to encapsulate it into a political formula (meant to contain it) is always present, but

“revolutionary movements inevitably runs the risk of utopian deception and disillusionment” (Parella: 90). The utopia of a mundane paradise or the enactment of the Kingdom of God in history must be met with reservation and skepticism. This is because “the Kingdom of God is not to be understood as consummation or redemption in the historical process as such”. We have to understand that “providence works so that the secular world of political institutions and their history nurtures the circumstances within which divine grace can operate within individual lives. So the work of providence within history is directed towards sustaining the church within which people come to experience grace”. In this way, the church prefigures The Kingdom of God within the world, but the consummation of that kingdom has to take place in another space that is not of this world (see Raymond Plant: 50).

Conclusion: “Possibility” and the return to Christianity

Beginning with thinkers such as Martin Heidegger the European philosophical thought brought politics nearer to the messianic event or the Truth-Event. By this “the universal horizon of the emancipatory and world-historical event is brought back from the realm of what is to be expected on the basis of what is known into the realm of the unanticipated and unbidden”(John Roberts, 2008). In this way, the political “is being opened up for the specter of “possibility that eludes the cold mechanism of “inauthentic being”. This makes John D. Caputo refer to Bultmann who pointed out that when Christian theologians looked into the pages of “Being and Time” they found themselves staring at their own image - formalized, ontologized, "demythologized. In Being and Time they encountered the very structure of religious and Christian existence but without the ontico-mythical worldview that was an idiosyncratic feature of first-century cosmologies”. Caputo points out that Heidegger was “clearly Hellenizing and secularizing a fundamentally biblical conception of the history of salvation.” So that a Christian ethos is difficult to be dismissed as purely coincidental in the works of Heidegger (Guignon, Caputo, 1993: 270-288).

Bibliography:

- Agamben, Giorgio 1993. *Infancy and History: The destruction of experience*, Translated by Liz Heron, London, New York, Verso.
- Beistegui, Miguel 2002. *Heidegger and the Political*, New York, Taylor & Francis e-Library.

- Benjamin, Walter, 1968. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York, Schocken Books.
- Bradley, Arthur and Fletcher, Paul 2010. *The Politics to Come Power, Modernity and the Messianic*, New York, Continuum International Publishing.
- Caputo, J.D. 1993. *Heidegger and Theology*, in Ch. B. Guignon (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Carette, Julien, 1999. *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality*, London and New York, Routledge.
- Carlson, A. Thomas, 2003. *Locating the Mystical Subject*, in Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard, eds. *Mystics*, Chicago University of Chicago Press.
- Dreyfus, Hubert and Wrathall, Mark 2002. *Heidegger Reexamined, Vol. 2: Truth, Realism, and the History of Being*, New York, Routledge.
- Foucault, Michael 2003. *Politics, Philosophy and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, London and New York, Routledge.
- Froment-Meurice, Marc, 1995. *Solitudes: From Rimbaud to Heidegger (Suny Series, Intersection: Philosophy and Critical Theory)*, New York, State University of New York Press.
- Gilkey, Langdon 2005. *Through the Tempest: Theological Voices in a Pluralistic Culture*, Eugene, Wipf & Stock Publishers.
- Heidegger Martin 1997. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* Trans. Taft Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin 1962. *Being and Time*, Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Heidegger, Martin 1969. *Identity and Difference* Trans. Stambaugh, New York: Harper & Row.
- Heidegger, Martin, 1977. *The Age of the World Picture, in The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Translated by William Lovitt, New York, Harper and Row.
- Heidegger, Martin 1991. *The Principle of Reason* Trans. Lilly Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lowith, Karl 2011. *Meaning in History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Parrella, J. Frederick 1995. *Paul Tillich's Theological Legacy: Spirit and Community*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter.

- Rickey, Christopher 2002. *Revolutionary Saints: Heidegger, National Socialism and the Antinomian Politics*, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Roberts, John, 2008. *The 'Returns to Religion': Messianism, Christianity and the Revolutionary Tradition. Part II: The Pauline Tradition*, *Historical Materialism*, 16, 3: 77-103
- Schmitt, Carl 2008. *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology*, Translated and Introduced by Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Tillich, Paul 1968. *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, New York, Simon and Schuster.
- Tzamalikos, Panayiotis 2007. *Origen: Philosophy of History & Eschatology*, Leiden, Brill University Press.
- Wolin, Richard 1990. *The Politics of Being: The Political Thought of Martin Heidegger*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Wolin, Richard 2006. *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Wrathall, Mark and Malpas, Jeff 2000. *Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity: Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus, Vol. 1*, Cambridge.
- Westphal, Merold, 2005, *Onto-theology, Metanarrative, Perspectivism and the Gospel*, in Penner, B. Myron, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, Grand Rapids, Brazos Press.
- Heidegger, Martin 1966, *Der Spiegel Interview*, <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~other1/Heidegger%20Der%20Spiegel.pdf>, [accessed 04.06.2015]
- Carey, John, Jesse 1984, *Theonomy and Autonomy: Studies in Paul Tillich's Engagement with Modern Culture*, Macon, Mercer University Press.
- Stenger, Ann, Marry, Stone, H., Roland, 2002, *Dialogues of Paul Tillich*, Macon, Mercer University Press.
- Critchely, Simon, 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/20/heidegger-being-time-critchley> [accessed 23.04.2015]