

## CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARY OF CHRISTIANITY

Daniel Patte, General Editor

### “HEIDEGGER AND CHRISTIANITY”

Thomas Sheehan  
Stanford University

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was raised a Roman Catholic, studied briefly for the Catholic priesthood (1909-11), and unsuccessfully sought a Catholic chair of philosophy (1915). He abandoned dogmatic scholastic Catholicism in 1917.

As a young scholar he read Schleiermacher, Luther, Kierkegaard, and Barth, but rejected dialectical theology.<sup>1</sup> In the early 1920s he taught courses on Paul and Augustine, and he lectured on “Luther and Sin” in Bultmann’s Paul seminar. His lecture “Phenomenology and Theology” (1927) mandated a strict separation between faith and philosophy and between God and being – a Lutheran position that Heidegger maintained throughout his career. In 1929 he declared that *Being and Time* (1927) made no argument for or against God’s existence,<sup>2</sup> although privately he wrote that human existence “must remain open to divine grace.”<sup>3</sup>

In the 1930s Heidegger attacked Christian theology for being based on an untenable metaphysics/onto-theology. Insofar as metaphysical Christianity relegated God to the status of the highest entity, Heidegger saw it as a major source of contemporary nihilism.<sup>4</sup> Before the God of the philosophers, he wrote, “one cannot fall to one’s knees in awe,” and he claimed that his “god-less thinking, which abandons the philosophical God . . . is perhaps closer to the divine God. That means it is more open to Him than onto-theo-logy would like to admit.”<sup>5</sup>

In his 1966 Spiegel interview Heidegger declared, “At this point only a god

---

<sup>1</sup> GA 9,162n.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*,159n.

<sup>3</sup> *Briefwechsel Blochmann*, 32.

<sup>4</sup> GA 65, 139-40.

<sup>5</sup> GA 11, 77.

can save us.”<sup>6</sup> He made it clear, however, that this “god” was not the Jewish-Christian divinity but only the god of the poet: being as “the holy” in Hölderlin’s non-metaphysical sense.<sup>7</sup> Heidegger’s work has nothing to do with preparing for Christian revelation and grace. The “god” that Heidegger’s philosophy awaits is simply the *epiphany of world*<sup>8</sup> in Heidegger’s sense of the term, as the utterly groundless source of all meaning. The arrival of such a world within the lives of human beings would constitute “the turn (*die Kehre*) from the forgottenness of being to the protecting of its presence.”<sup>9</sup> That event would also be the arrival of the “last god,”<sup>10</sup> i.e., world as such, and with that the possibility of secular-philosophical salvation.

### Further reading:

- Vedder, Ben, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Religion: From God to the Gods*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007.
- Crowe, Benjamin D., *Heidegger's Phenomenology of Religion: Realism and Cultural Criticism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Kearney, Richard and Joseph Stephen O'Leary, eds., *Heidegger et la question de Dieu*, Paris: Grasset, 1980.

---

<sup>6</sup> GA 15, 671.

<sup>7</sup> *Anstöße*, I (1954) 33.

<sup>8</sup> GA 7, pp. 73.13; 74.24-5; 75.24-5; 77.3, 16.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 73.12.

<sup>10</sup> GA 65, 288-93; cf. GA 65, 35.2.