Historicity and Christian Life-Experience in the Early Philosophy of Martin Heidegger

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ABSTRACT In his early Freiburg lectures on the phenomenology of religious life, published as his *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, Heidegger sought to interpret the Christian life in phenomenological terms, while also discussing the question of whether Christianity should be construed as historically defined. Heidegger thus connected the philosophical discussion of religion as a phenomenon with the character of the religious life taken in the context of factical life. According to Heidegger, every philosophical question originates from the latter, which determines such questions pre-theoretically, while the tradition of early Christianity can also only be understood historically in such terms. More specifically, he holds that the historical phenomenon of religious life as it relates to early Christianity, inasmuch as it undergirds our conception of the religious phenomenon per se, reveals the essential connection between factical life and religious life. In this way, the conception of religion that Heidegger establishes through his analyses of Paul's Epistles takes on both theological and philosophical ramifications. Moreover, the historicity of factical life finds its fulfillment in our comprehension of the primordial form of Christianity as our very own historical a priori, determined by our own factical situation. Hence, historicity and factical life belong together within the situation that makes up the foundation of the religious life.

Keywords Christianity; factical life; historicity; phenomenology; theology; tradition

It is well known that Heidegger's approach to the phenomenology of religion did not arise from a personal religious commitment, but rather from the phenomenologically oriented interest in the problematics of historicity and religion typical of his time. As Barash also emphasizes, Heidegger's break with traditional metaphysics came together with his philosophical turn toward facts. This intention of Heidegger to investigate a problem of method rather than a theological question stands at the center of his interests in the 1920s. His phenomenological approach to religion is well documented in two letters to Karl Löwith, written before the commencement of his course on the phenomenology of religion in 1920:

For, to be frank, all that would come of it is the kind of babble on the philosophy of religion that want to eliminate from philosophy, this talk about the religious that is familiar to us from the secondary literature [13 September 1920].³

In the second letter he wrote:

I would like to do away with "talking" about the religious, but it is perhaps inevitable. It is also a false expectation regarding my lecture course, if anyone thinks that is what I plan to do. It is probably best to say so from the start [19 September 1920].⁴

- 1. Cf. Theodore Kisiel, "The Religion Courses (1920–21)," in *The Genesis of Heidegger's "Being and Time*" (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993), 149–220; Holger Zaborowski, "'Herkunft aber bleibt stets Zukunft': Anmerkungen zur religiösen und theologischen Dimension des Denkweges Martin Heideggers bis 1919," "Herkunft aber bleibt stets Zukunft': Anmerkungen zur religiösen und theologischen Dimension des Denkweges Martin Heideggers bis 1919," in *Heidegger und die Anfänge seines Denkens*, ed. Alfred Denker, Hans-Helmuth Gander and Holger Zaborowski, Heidegger-Jahrbuch, vol. 1, (Freiburg: Alber, 2004) 123–58; Johannes Schaber, "Martin Heideggers 'Herkunft' im Spiegel der Theologie- und Kirchengeschichte des 19. und beginnenden 20. Jahrhunderts," in *Heidegger und die Anfänge seines Denkens*, 159–84; Philippe Capelle, "'Katholizismus,' 'Protestantismus,' 'Christentum' und 'Religion' im Denken Martin Heideggers: Tragweite und Abgrenzungen," in *Heidegger und die Anfänge seines Denkens*, 346–71; István M. Fehér, "Religion, Theology, and Philosophy on the Way to *Being and Time*: Heidegger, the Hermeneutical, the Factical, and the Historical with Respect to Dilthey and Early Christianity," *Research in Phenomenology* 39, no. 1 (2009): 99–131, doi:10.1163/156916408X389659.
- 2. Cf. Jeffrey Andrew Barash, *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 12.
- 3. Theodore Kisiel, "Heidegger (1920–21) on Becoming a Christian: A Conceptual Picture Show," in *Reading Heidegger from the Start: Essays in His Earliest Thoughts*, ed. Theodore Kisiel and John van Buren (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1994), 176.
 - 4. Ibid.

Also in his early sketches for a lecture on Medieval Mysticism, Heidegger emphasizes: "Our goal can never be to awaken religious life. That only [occurs] through such life itself." These notes by the early Heidegger reveal his thinking as occurring not in a traditional theological context but rather in that of the phenomenological approach to religious life: that which will be examined by him later in *Being and Time* as the pre-theoretical existential character of Dasein. In my paper I would like to reveal, in two stages, how Heidegger's methodological interest in the lecture on the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* is connected with the existential life-experience of Dasein.

A METHODOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION TO FACTICAL LIFE-EXPERIENCE

Heidegger's early lecture *The Idea of the Philosophy*,⁷ and his later lecture *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*,⁸ offer an elementary investigation of the question of historicity in terms of an account of the historicity of our life-experience. Based on Heidegger's view, voiced in the *Basic Problems of Philosophy* that historicity is fundamentally connected to the individual's world-experience, so that our life is pre-elementarily determined by historical life, the question surfaces in the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* as one about whether or not there is a historical a priori that determines the life-experience of Dasein. At the start of the lectures, Heidegger pro-

- 5. Martin Heidegger, "The Philosophical Foundations of Medieval Mysticism," in *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2010), 232. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des Religiösen Lebens*, edited by Matthias Jung, Thomas Regehly and Claudius Strube, vol. 60 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1995), 303, hereafter *PhRL. Gesamtausgabe* will be cited as "GA," followed by the volume number and the page number; page references in braces refer to translations.
- 6. See also Fehér, "Religion, Theology, and Philosophy on the Way to *Being and Time*," 114: "In this formation two points must be stressed. First, religion is for Heidegger, in accordance with his distancing himself from the Scholastic tradition and embracing the Protestant problematic, primarily life, that is, praxis, not theory, doctrine, or speculation. To put it bluntly: religion is religious life, or it is not religion. Religion can meaningfully be conceived of only in terms of religious life."
- 7. Cf. Martin Heidegger, "Die Idee der Philosophie und das Weltanschauungsproblem," in *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*, GA 56/57, ed. Bernd Heimbüchel (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1999); published in English as *The Idea of Philosophy and the Problem of Worldview*, in *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*, trans. Ted Sadler (London: Continuum, 2002).
- 8. Cf. *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, GA 58, ed. Hans-Helmuth Gander (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2010); translated by Albert Hofstadter as *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

poses a twofold interpretation of the phenomenological method, insofar as the latter is based on factical life-experience, and factical life-experience is itself determined by the historical a priori:

We must reach a provisional understanding of the three concepts "introduction," "phenomenology"—which for us will have the same meaning as "philosophy"—and "religion." In the midst of these efforts, we will soon encounter a peculiar core phenomenon, the problem of the historical. This problem will lead to limitations upon our present aspiration.

(PhRL, GA 60, 5 [4])

In his elaboration of the phenomenological method itself, then, religious experience is to be regarded as the basic historical experience of Dasein: i.e., a pre-ontological experience revealed in the factical situation of individual life. However, Heidegger's task is not that of arriving at some sort of methodological affirmation of contemporaneous religious philosophy, but rather that of demonstrating how Christianity determines our factical life-experience historically, in order to show how our world-interpretation is determined historically.

Real philosophy of religion arises not from preconceived concepts of philosophy and religion. Rather, the possibility of its philosophical understanding arises out of a certain religiosity—for us, the Christian religiosity. Why exactly the Christian religiosity lies in the focus of our study, that is a difficult question; it is answerable only through the solution of the problem of the historical connections. The task is to gain a real and original relationship to history, which is to be explicated from out of our own historical situation and facticity. At issue is what the sense of history can signify for us, so that the "objectivity" of the historical "in itself" disappears. History exists only from out of a present. Only thus can the possibility of a philosophy of religion be begun. (*PhRL*, GA 60, 124–5 [89])

The Phenomenology of Religious Life is made up of three parts. In the first of these, which is based on his course of lectures "Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion," Heidegger investigates the relationship between philosophical ideas and factical life-experience using a theoretical definition. In this instance the historical a priori will be revealed in factical life by those philosophical notions whose meanings have changed during the course of the history of philosophy, but whose core meaning nevertheless shows up in the interpretation of actual life. In this sense the historical

phenomenon, which on the one hand embraces our entire cultural life and on the other shows up in individual lives, has two sources: the formation of concepts within the tradition, and the expression of an actual life.

The point of departure of the path to philosophy is *factical life-experience*. It seems, however, as if philosophy is leading us out of factical life-experience. In fact, that path leads us, as it were, only *near* philosophy, not *up* to it. Philosophy itself can only be reached through a turning around of that path, but not through a simple turning which would orient cognition merely toward different objects but, more radically, through an authentic *transformation*. (*PhRL*, GA 60, 10 [8])

Taking this historical meaning as his starting point, Heidegger raises the question of how the philosophy of religion is related to religion itself. Does this relationship derive from the meaning of religion, or is it the theme of religion that captures the interest of philosophy—and, if so, is the philosophical significance of this theme pre-religiously determined?

We must now understand in what way this philosophy of religion refers to religion, whether it grows from out of the meaning of religion, whether religion is not as much as grasped *in the manner of an object* and forced into philosophical disciplines—that is to say, integrated into *material* complexes that already exist in themselves before religion. (*PhRL*, GA 60, 27 [19])

Heidegger does not hope to arrive at this historical phenomenon through the contemporaneously given forms of religious philosophy, but rather seeks to contrast the historical attitude of religious philosophy with the historical phenomenon itself, arguing that the historical phenomenon becomes thematic in the context of religion itself.

Heidegger's pursues his examination of the problem of historical meaning with reference to two essays, one by Gustav Radbruch and the other by Paul Tillich, that were presented in 1919 as Kant Society lectures. Both of these were influenced by the Lutheran theologian Ernst Troeltsch, whose interpretation of the religion bears the hallmarks—according to Heidegger—of an objective-scientific view. This historical approach of Troeltsch to theology must, he thinks, be freed from its dogmatic bound-

^{9.} Cf. Gustav Radbruch, "Über Religionsphilosophie des Rechts," 9–25, and Paul Tillich, "Über die Idee einer Theologie der Kultur," 27–52, in Gustav Radbruch and Paul Tillich, *Religionsphilosophie der Kultur: Zwei Entwürfe von Gustav Radbruch und Paul Tillich*, Philosophische Vorträge, vol. 24 (Berlin: Reuther and Reichard, 1919).

aries and disclosed instead in the context of factical life-experience. Troeltsch's mistake is that he interprets the historical as a cultural dimension of life, and is not able to see the difference between philosophical consideration and scientific comprehension.

We must avoid taking the phenomenon of the historical from the *science* of history. The positing of the logic of history as the fundamental discipline of the philosophy of history already sets the problem up in the wrong context. The attitudinal meaning of history which appears here is a *derivative one*. Mostly, one falsely derives from it all other historical phenomena. We must then attempt to catch sight of the phenomenon of concern *unhidden* in *factical* life. (*PhRL*, GA 60, 51–2 [35])

This misunderstanding of the historical phenomena leads back to his thesis to the effect that the questions posed about religion by theology have been determined dogmatically. His own view, on the other hand, is that such metaphysico-scientific approaches must be surpassed if we are to reach the historical core of religion:

Current work in the philosophy of religion takes place primarily in theology, chiefly in Protestant theology; Catholic theology takes on philosophical problems with respect to the specifically Catholic understanding of Christianity. Protestant theology is essentially dependent upon the main respective philosophical trends to which it attaches itself. It is a prejudice of philosophers of religion to think that they are able to settle the problem of theology with a quick sweep of the hand. (*PhRL*, GA 60, 22 [16])

In short, the false definition of the philosophy of religion arises from the contemporary interpretation of historicity, and this false definition then engenders a deficient understanding of the religious a priori.

At the same time, Heidegger is appreciative of Troeltsch's approach to the problem of religious phenomena, interpreting the latter's terminology as itself revealing a twofold—traditional and historical—understanding of religiosity. Heidegger asserts that Troeltsch postulates an analogy between the a priori of the philosophy of religion and the logico-ethical a priori, which he employs in order to comprehend religion epistemologically. The religious a priori is explored on the four levels of psychology, epistemology, history, and metaphysics: the forms and figures of the psychological stage, the epistemology of the religious mind, a historical typology, and the metaphysical principle of all a prioris. According to Hei-

degger, these four approaches to religion are, indeed, religio-philosophical disciplines, but they "arise not from the religion itself qua religion" (*PhRL*, GA 60, 27 [19]). In opposition to this scientific understanding of the contemporary philosophy of religion, Heidegger locates the source of the religious method not in religion per se, but strictly in religious life. We must therefore distinguish between the scientific approach and the phenomenological method, or between science and religion as understood by Troeltsch.

The connection between religion and science is, according to Troeltsch, not a forced one. Insofar as religion finds itself in a cultural context, it must contend with science: defensively and negatively in its apologetics; but also positively, the science of religion, through prediction of future religious development, can achieve something in the further development of religion. Science indeed does not make religion, yet it represents a fruitful factor in its further development. According to Troeltsch, the history of Christianity shows this; through its alliance with ancient philosophy it has achieved its strong historical position. However, presently, the possibilities of religious-philosophical products are exhausted. (*PhRL*, GA 60, 29 [20])

Following the example of Troeltsch—where this means taking on board the cultural heritage of religion, explored in the fourfold terms of the a priori of psychology, epistemology, history, and the metaphysics of religion—Heidegger will therefore himself seek to investigate religious phenomena in the light of the ambiguity that is present here: namely, that on the one hand, Christianity presents itself as the cultural heritage of European culture, while on the other, over and against the tradition itself, it is religious life-experience that—for Heidegger—actually reveals the historical phenomena of religious life.¹⁰

The primordiality of religion's historicity will be articulated within Heidegger's phenomenological purview. It is not the historical meaning, or the history of Christianity, that opens up the core of the religious

10. Barash emphasizes in broader terms the dual character of the historical thinking we encounter in Troeltsch: "Heidegger first pointed out what he saw as the dual character of historical understanding, which is not purely problematic, but can exercise an affirmative role in directing attention away from all that is merely present, opening awareness to other periods and the possibility of other life aspects. . . . Against this disturbing aspect of the historical, Heidegger asserted that factical life-experience continually sought a means of self-assertion, which became the central motive for historical reflection." Barash, *Martin Heidegger*, 120–1.

a priori, but rather factical life-experience, which exposes the historical meaning of religious life. "Initially, after all, it is necessary to examine religion in its factuality, before one addresses to it a particular philosophical study" (PhRL, GA 60, 30 [21]). The second chapter of the Phenomenology of Religious Life elaborates the meaning of the religious a priori as something that cannot be properly conceived as a mere legacy of theories of historicity, but rather only as given by facticity itself. The third chapter then asks: "to what degree are 'Introduction,' 'Philosophy,' 'Religion' historical phenomena?" (PhRL, GA 60, 31 [22]). The historical shows up here not in a typological or formal sense, but in the sense of that life-experience which should lead us to philosophy's self-understanding. "Now the question is whether the possibility exists of discovering another sense of 'historical' altogether, one which cannot be predicated of objects in this way. Perhaps today's concept of the historical is only a derivation of this original concept" (PhRL, GA 60, 32 [22]). In 1919, in Basic Problems of Phenomenology, Heidegger distinguished the factical meaning of historicity from the objective and factual appearance of historicity in culture. History in the former sense is interpreted as an action—one influenced by one's particular self-world as well as by one's environment. This double meaning of historicity is composed firstly of the unchangeable event of the past, and secondly of an event that determines the present situation through the enactment (Vollzug) of factical life.

We attempt only to determine the meaning of the history out of factical experience. The difficulties of the problem are those with which philosophy must struggle anew at each step and with each problem. Despite this, the guiding thread for our study will be the old concept of the historical.

(PhRL, GA 60, 53 [36])

At the same time, a conceptual understanding of the historical phenomenon in accordance with its relationship to factical life can only be achieved in a formal sense, and this leads Heidegger to move his investigation on to a consideration of Saint Paul's Letters.

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLICATION OF CONCRETE RELIGIOUS PHENOMENA

This first introductory part of Heidegger's lecture course is followed in the second part (entitled "Phenomenological Explication of Real Religious Phenomena according to Paul's Letters") by a practical investigation of specific historical phenomena in Paul's Letters to the Galatians and the Thessalonians in the New Testament. According to Heidegger, the historical phenomena of religion can be only formally expressed in factual life. This raises the question of how, in the context of factical life-experience, the formation of historicity is to be interpreted—as an experience, that is, belonging to one's own religious life. For Heidegger, the various philosophical notions of the time convey a "formal indication" of the historical meaning that pertains to religious life. This means that that "formal indication" is neither the pure logical form of the meaning, nor the actual life-experience; rather, the actual meaning of life-experience falls between these two.11 Through reflecting on the Letters of Saint Paul, Heidegger is able to investigate the real meaning of "formal indication" against the background of early Christianity's reflections on its own historicity. This clarification of the historical background illuminates the relationship of factical life-experience to early Christianity as this relates to the following methodological question:

So long as it is not certain that the religious-historical and the genuine religious-philosophical understanding, that is, phenomenological understanding, coincide, it is still not at all said that the history of religion can deliver a material for the philosophy (phenomenology) of religion. To what extent does the religious-historical material, even if only as a starting point for the philosophy of religion, come into question? (*PhRL*, GA 60, 76–7 [53])

To be able to reflect on the occurrence of religious phenomena in the present, we must first arrive at some sort of primordial understanding of religion. Based on Paul's Letter to the Galatians, the primordial understanding of the religious situation is founded on the life-situation of early Christianity. Paul's interpretation of Christianity is based on the developing emergence of Christian religiosity—an event that includes his own conversion as well.

In the letters to the Galatians, Paul is struggling with the Jews and the Jewish Christians. Thus we find the phenomenological situation of religious struggle and of struggle itself. Paul must be seen in struggle with his religious passion in his existence as an apostle, the struggle between "law" and "faith."

^{11.} Cf. Theodore Kisiel, "Die formale Anzeige: Die methodische Geheimwaffe des frühen Heideggers," in *Heidegger—neu gelesen*, ed. Markus Happel (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann 1997), 22–40.

This opposition is not a final one; it is rather a preliminary one. Faith and law are both special modes of the path of salvation. (*PhRL*, GA 60, 68–9 [48])

The historical context of Paul's Letters to the Galatians is a period following soon after Christ that raised serious questions regarding the practice of Christianity. The apostolic synod of 48–49 AD, which accepted Paul's evangelical call, insisted on the distinction between ritual and moral laws. The Letters to the Galatians are thus situated in the middle of a specific hermeneutic situation: the Jewish Christian members would not accept the Galatians as Christians, unless the Galatians were prepared to abide by the ritual-related rules of the religion and allow themselves to be circumcised. This criticism of the Galatians relates not only to the practice of Christianity but also to the validity of Paul's evangelism. Since Paul was not himself one of Jesus' disciples, and only converted to Christianity after Christ's departure, the authenticity of his evangelism depends on how we understand the very term "Christianity."

A theory that is controversial in Protestant theology connects with this: [it is asserted that] Paul had no historical consciousness of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather he has grounded a new Christian religion, a new primordial Christianity which dominates the future: the Pauline religion, not the religion of Jesus. One thus does not need to refer back to a historical Jesus. The life of Jesus is entirely indifferent. (*PhRL*, GA 60, 69–70 [49])

The phenomenon of the historical Jesus that is characterized in Paul's view as a historical phenomenon is the primordial understanding of Christianity and the core of the "formal indication." In this sense, there is a double understanding within the Pauline interpretation: Paul's interpretation of the historical aspect of his religion and the explication of this interpretation.

The question of expression ("explication") seems to be secondary. Yet, with this seemingly external problem, we stand within the religious phenomenon itself. It is not a technical problem, separate from religious experience; rather the explication goes along with, and drives, the religious experience.

(*PhRL*, GA 60, 72 [50–1])

This double structure of religious-historical material is what makes up the historical phenomenon in factical life-experience—given to Paul himself on the one hand, and to us by Paul's own evangelical explication on the

other hand. The historical Jesus-event, meanwhile, remains completely independent from our factical life: a closed body of historical material which we ourselves just observe impartially from within the context of our own lives. The objective observation of the historical event assumes a relation between factical life and the past event, but the past is not involved in the present situation.

Object-historical understanding is determination according to the aspect of the relation, from out of the relation, so that the observer does not come into question. By contrast, phenomenological understanding is determined by the *enactment* (*Vollzug*) of the observer. (*PhRL*, GA 60, 82 [57])

The factical life-experience of the primordial form of Christianity is grounded in the historical phenomenon of Christianity and fulfilled at different stages of the latter's historicity. When the historical moment transpires within factical life itself, the historical understanding materializes as a situation of enactment (*Vollzug*). While in the early lectures of Heidegger the situation corresponds to the moment when the historicity of the object unites with factual experience during the course of one's comprehension, the lectures on the phenomenology of religious life emphasize the historical life-experience of the religion itself. The religious experience of Being is a reflection of the historical situation of Paul on the one hand, but, on the other, this same historical phenomenon receives its full meaning only in factical life.

Since the publication of *Being and Time*, Heidegger's relationship to Christianity has been controversial. Although the theological origin of his thinking cannot be denied, even in his later papers, his approaches to religion did become more and more aporetic as time went on. ¹² The aim of this paper has been to show how Heidegger linked philosophical questioning, which originates in factical life, with the factical-life character of religious life, by distinguishing the notions of historicity and tradition. While early Christianity shows up in our lives (in Heidegger's sense) as a tradition of religiosity (i.e., as the history of that religion), it is the historical phenomena of religious life that reveal the essential connection between factical

12. For an important remark concerning the influence of Heidegger on theology, see Fehér, "Religion, Theology, and Philosophy on the Way to *Being and Time*," 100: "It is important to realize however that there is a reciprocal influence operating here: the question of how Heidegger's thought—and from time to time which dimension(s) of it—influenced the theology should be integrated by the reverse issue concerning the decisive import of theology for Heidegger's beginnings and his whole part of thinking."

life and religious life—doing so in the form of the existential experience of religious life. It has not been the aim of this paper to examine the personal religiosity of Heidegger, or to investigate his own relationship to religion. Instead, the goal has been to show something that I myself consider highly important: namely, the extent to which the religiosity of life and the historicity of Christianity cohere with one another when seen from Heidegger's purview. Even if the notions of facticity, primordiality, historicity, and religiosity occupy rather specific positions within Heideggerian terminology, and form part of a closed philosophical system originating in the Husserlian phenomenological tradition, his observations are, in a wider sense, still extremely relevant for a theory of religion. Such an understanding of historicity as independently objective, together with its relation to facticity, can lead one to a comprehension of authentic life in all its historicity. The historicity of factical life, moreover, finds its own fulfillment in our comprehension of the primordial form of Christianity as our very own historical a priori, determined by our very own factical situation. Hence, historicity and factical life belong together amidst the foundations of religious life.

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