

Heidegger's Existentialism and Public Religion

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In the article, religion is understood as a tribal story to enhance its permanent and even “universal” significance in the form of “monotheism” – in case of the West it is Middle Eastern monotheism. In this tradition, it is accepted that other divinities are available, but they must be rejected and only one – the tribal – divinity accepted. It is in this context that the figures such as Nietzsche and Heidegger raise a question: how is it that for two thousand years the West did not manage to invent other divinities? They see this as a sign of poverty of creativity, calling for an invention of new divinities appropriate to Western tribes and nations. Thus Heidegger's efforts to reinterpret classical Greek thought as a search for Being in its temporal mode, is an attempt to claim that such an interpretation discloses the possibility of human “being in the world” and thus in a particular place and time can result in a local religion of a given people.

Keywords: religion, death of god, creativity, permanence, change, Being, time, universal/local.

Heidegger's existentialism has been discussed in numerous contexts, ranging from such notions as the ontological primacy of being in the world, through the existentials, including care, language, historicity, etc., all the way to “Dasein” as ex-istence where the human is a place of ontological difference between “essents” and Being, an opening to the possibility of temporal manifestation of the Being of “essents.” Each depiction of such existentialisms has its merits, but to engage one more time in debates in order to propose a demonstration which of these interpretations is most plausible or even “essential” would be a futile effort to revive what has been done numerous times. Instead, in this essay a focus will be on the existential significance of religion and

above all on “national public religions” and their divinities. After all, in face of modern Western trends of reduction of all phenomena to technical mastery, Heidegger desperately called for divine salvation. That the divine must have a place in human life is obvious from Heidegger's basic outline of total human existence in terms of the “foursome” consisting of world, mortals, earth and gods. In brief, without gods human existence is inadequate and even empty. The task, therefore, is to delimit the interpretive context wherein a call for national public religion becomes visible.

In order to discuss the religious dimension of Heidegger's existentialism, his insistence upon the presence of gods, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by such

a religion. For this clarification Heidegger will rely on Nietzsche who encapsulates such a religion in *The Antichrist* where he points out that a people, who still believe in themselves retain their own gods. In brief, there is no existence without god or gods. This is in accord with what Rousseau, at the end of his *Social Contract*, calls “national religions” and which he seems to invoke in order to elaborate his own conception for a need of public religion but which, for vague reasons, he ultimately rejects. Nietzsche’s ultimate quest is, obviously, to demonstrate that Christianity cannot possibly be a national religion in the sense called for by Rousseau. For Nietzsche, the grand lie perpetrated by Christianity is not that it itself fails to offer national religion of this kind for a people in whose ethnic context it was invented, but that it sets in motion a tendency in Western civilization to make claims to the all encompassing universality of such a religion and thus renders it impossible for there to be a national religion at all. In this sense it precipitates a tremendous spiritual crisis in the historical destiny of the West, since it is not a religion that belongs to and is rooted in any national soil. This is expressed very powerfully in an aphorism in *Will to Power* where Nietzsche claims that religions are destroyed by belief in one universal morality. In this sense the Christian god is not tenable for the diverse Western nations and results in Western atheism – as if there could be no other kind of god. Far from joyfully celebrating the end of Western theism, Nietzsche blames Christianity for having driven the Western civilization to a dead end of atheism. According to Nietzsche, it is the greatest

argument against Christianity that it has undermined Western capacity as a civilization to retain or even create its own gods.

There are two important texts in the works of Heidegger suggesting that he moves in the context of the same concerns. One is his famous proclamation in the interview published posthumously in *Der Spiegel* where Heidegger admits his religious bias against modern inauthenticity by stating that only god can save us now. The term “inauthenticity” means the massification and standardization of persons to a level of ignorance, where the truth is a rumor by anonymous “they say.” The second is the inscription that prefaces Heidegger’s two volume commentary on Nietzsche. Here Heidegger agrees with Nietzsche’s concerns in *The Antichrist* that almost two thousand years and not a single new god. This simply confirms that at the highest level, human creativity has been completely abolished. These two texts disclose quite unambiguously Heidegger’s acceptance of Nietzsche’s verdict that the awakening of the West from its present spiritual coma will be signified by its finding the confidence, the courage, and the sense of its own destiny to summon up new – post-Christian – gods.

Some, as for example Gadamer, have pointed out that the image of Heidegger, made prevalent by thinkers such as Sartre, overshadowed any hint of Heidegger’s theistic side. Sartre’s admiration for Heidegger led the former to regard him as a complete accomplice of Nietzsche in being one of the representative atheistic thinkers of our times. Of course, such exuberance for Heidegger can only stem from an ap-

appropriation of his philosophy in terms of Sartre's own atheistic convictions and not necessarily from Heidegger's complex writings. Indeed, Sartre might not have followed Heidegger to the letter, but Sartre's reasons for being wrong are different from those who dismiss the complexities of Heidegger's atheism and a resultant theism. Such complexities, as shall be seen subsequently, place Heidegger much closer to Nietzsche than Gadamer would allow. Heidegger and Nietzsche move in the same historical hermeneutical circle of concerns that focus, at one fundamental level, on the despiritualization of the West, leading to the quest for re-spiritualization which, in turn, implies a call for new gods. Indeed, the writings of both are replete with almost desperate pleas for a renewed Western civilization that would become capable of creating new divinities. It might be suggested that such terms as "despiritualization" do not mean a deconstruction of Western metaphysics, even if Derrida would like to claim that this is Heidegger's meaning, but rather Heidegger's perception of the "unspiritual" character of modern political and cultural domains. To be clearer yet, metaphysical spirituality means an immortal reason, a stable *logos* that encompasses and explains all events eternally, while Heidegger seeks spiritual forces of a people that reason cannot command.

One profound level of the principle involved here is the notion that poetic *ethos* is more profound than rational *logos*, and therefore that no civilization can claim to touch the most profound depths without allowing an intimate relation to its own gods accessible to and emerging with poetic

existence. For Nietzsche and Heidegger the disenchantment of the world reaches back all the way to Plato. In Heidegger this is expressed in terms of the forgetfulness of Being. This is true as well of Christianity, since it too is completely entangled in the history of Western metaphysics. Thus it is quite obvious why modern god-killing rationalism is such a catastrophe. It condemns the West to an inescapable position of shallowness of existence and in the experience of the abyss of Being – a true crisis in human existence. Nietzsche and Heidegger are in accord in tracing this ontological shallowness of Western rationalism back to Greek philosophy. Heidegger's depiction of this state of affairs is well depicted in *The Letter on Humanism* where he contends that an existential *ethos* is preserved more primordially in Sophocles' tragic sagas than in Aristotle's formal arguments in his *Ethics*. In brief, existential *ethos* cannot be a set of smooth rules, devoid of tensions and even contradictions that face humans every day.

Meanwhile, Nietzsche's pronouncement that god is dead must be understood as a civilizational thesis, arguing that human existence is shaped by and committed to a set of beliefs, moral practices, cultural symbols and rituals. The irony of modern Western civilization is that its members no longer believe in the ultimate symbols or practice the moral edicts of a god and indeed no longer have any affinity to the empty rituals. As Nietzsche would state, it is you, the Western man, who have killed your god; I am only opening your eyes to the deed you have committed. It must be understood that both for Heidegger and Nietzsche the meaning of civilizational

symbols appears in concrete existence, in practice; without the latter those symbols are empty and meaningless – despite their inauthentic daily incantations by Nietzsche’s “last man” and Heidegger’s *das Mann*. If this is true, it represents a civilizational catastrophe of hitherto unknown magnitude. A social and cultural void opens up that no traditional-universal god and all the attendant metaphysics could fill. What is needed is a new public religion, a political response. This is to say politics, the *grosse Politik*, must fill the emptiness still disguised by the hypocritical pretense of a continuing allegiance to Judeo-Christian religious monotheistic horizon. Such politics presumes to open and delimit new horizons in response to this existential crisis of Western civilization. This crisis is sharply traced by Heidegger in his writing *The Will to Power as Art*, where he points out that the proclamation that god is dead is not an atheistic statement; rather it is an existential experience, indeed a fundamental experience of an event in Western history that sent shock waves across an entire civilization.

If poetics is prior to philosophical reason and if the latter was the dominant mode of thinking of the West, then it could be said that Western narrative sources have shriveled and vanished or are in a process of drying up. Reason, after all, is empty – as Kant had noted – and its discourse has nothing to say about creativity and gods. It is most instructive to note that some significant trends in modern Western art stem from artists who used narrative materials of other civilizations, such as those of the East and Africa, in order to maintain some semblance of authenticity

and creativity. No doubt such efforts were and continue to be important, but, in contrast to the prejudice that reason is the sole objective truth, their results are regarded as private, subjective fantasies having no contact with serious affairs of the day. A civilization cannot survive in the absence of a capacity for telling itself stories that give that civilization its destiny, its *raison d'être*, its sense of itself. As Heidegger once suggested, the world is not made of atoms, it is made of stories. It must be recognized that the all important sign of civilization’s ability to explain itself to itself is its creative and poetic devices to give itself worthy gods, to be able to be theo-centric. The last men who blink and stare stupidly in face of profound questions do so because they have no awareness that they have lost the possession of civilizational resources to make sense of their own existence. Hence a figure such as the Overman may inspire the creation of profound narrative resources to Western civilization. Nietzsche composes the figure of Zarathustra as a harbinger who comes back to correct his initial narrative of monotheism and one morality and to show that such monotheism and morality have dried up – calling for the invention of new ones by pure creative will power. Heidegger appropriates this quest for inspiration into his own narrative where will and creativity appear at the end of *The Will to Power as Art*. He contends that creation itself is to be estimated according to the originality with which it penetrates to Being. One must be able to estimate, to esteem, that is to act in accordance with the standard of Being as the creation of the highest order as tension, as *polemos*.

For it is a preparation for readiness for the gods which is equally saying Yes to Being. Overman is the *Dasein* who grounds Being anew – in the rigor of knowledge and in the grand style of creation. It is most striking how Heidegger emphasizes the notion that creativity is inseparable from preparation for readiness for gods. The text then begins and ends with the dream of new gods.

To the extent that the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger become regarded in its religious dimension, it is striking as a unique paradox. Nietzsche, who came from a family of devout Lutheran pastors is so furious in his denunciation of the Protestant reformation, and Luther in particular, that he sounds as if he were a kind of reborn Catholic in the depths of his Protestantism. Indeed, at times Nietzsche explicitly affirms the superiority of Catholicism. Heidegger, by contrast, was raised as a Catholic, was instructed in Catholic theology and, for a period of time, was actually a novice at a Jesuit seminary. Yet his first major philosophical work is pervaded by such an intensity of Protestant sensibility – appearing in Kierkegaardian *Angst*, Augustinian fallenness, the call of conscience, the authenticity of the individual face-to-face with his own mortality – that one readily thinks of it as elevating to philosophical expression a kind of extreme Protestantism. Add to this a further paradox that both Nietzsche and Heidegger, despite their intense preoccupation with Christian legacy, cannot resist pagan categories in thinking about possibilities of re-devinization, that is of pluralism of divinities, that it becomes clear where their common affinities converge: new gods. When Heidegger agrees with

Nietzsche's despair of two thousand years without a single new god, he indicates his sympathy for Nietzsche's verdict that Christianity leads into metaphysical dead-end and therefore the new gods that are needed seem to forecast a rebirth of paganism.

Yet what attracts Heidegger to Protestantism is not Christianity but Luther's rejection of the metaphysics of reason as the ultimate court of appeal for the veracity of all texts and understanding. While extolling the Biblical texts, Catholicism followed theology, i.e. rational logic concerning the "proofs" for the existence of an ultimate, one divinity. The Biblical stories were for the ignorant masses, while theology was the disclosure of the rationality of Catholic position. Meanwhile Luther demanded a return to the "stories" and human faith in them without exposing such stories to a sort of Abelardian *sic et non* interrogative logic. For Heidegger, humans live by the power of their stories – rejected by reason as myths – and not by explanations. The stories of the Bibles are those of a given people and belong to the historical tradition of such people. But these stories have no roots in another tradition and, while having been transplanted to the West, turn out to be rootless and empty of meaning. In this sense the search for new gods is equal to the need for Western civilization to create its own "divine narratives" with sufficient power to allow a newly rejuvenated West to acquire its own "essence." It could be plausibly maintained that Nietzsche's rejection of Protestantism is similar to Heidegger's search for new gods to the extent that for Nietzsche the Christian narrative no longer has any hold and thus the West needs its own gods.

The quest for new public religion is indicated by Heidegger in his lectures on European nihilism which he sees as stemming from the dominance of the subject in the modern age of the West. He contends that Christianity continues to exist in the development of modern history and, in the form of Protestantism, has enhanced this development. It accepted the modern thesis of the dominance of a subject that is totally distinct from and in a position to dominate the world. Indeed, it has inserted itself successfully in the metaphysics of German idealism and romanticism. In its corresponding transformations, adaptations and compromises it has, in all instances, reconciled with the spirit of the times. In addition, it consistently appropriated modern accomplishments for ecclesiastic ends. This proves more decisively than anything else how completely Christianity is empty of the power it had during the Middle Ages to shape history. Its historical significance no longer lies in what it is able to fashion for itself. This is the essential meaning of Christianity in modern age. It is to be emphasized that Christianity has compromised in order to survive by splitting the difference between faith and secular materialism, so obvious in Calvinism and Puritanism. Rather than remaining true to its own spiritual mission in the world, Christianity, certainly since the Reformation, has accommodated itself to the metaphysics of modernity.

Here Heidegger rephrases Nietzsche's main thesis that Protestantism is a half way house between the original Christian vocation and secular modernity. Heidegger, in fact, goes an extra step to claim that

Protestantism not only adapted itself to modernity, but enhanced its development and hence it forfeited its claim to make its own spiritual history – it became a part of the de-spirited modern world. Resultantly, it cannot offer a counter force to modern metaphysical vision. Of course, Heidegger also strongly objects to Nietzsche's solution which Heidegger regards not only as incorporating but actually radicalizing and further enhancing the dominant metaphysical tendencies of the West. And this is in face of Nietzsche's claim that he is the one who is overcoming Western metaphysics. Instead of becoming an alternative to modern trends, in his metaphysics of the will to power Nietzsche is caught by them. For example, Heidegger associates Nietzsche's idea of post-Christian absolute domination of the earth with Jesuistic spiritual army intent on spreading monotheistic theology around the world. Nonetheless, an essential agreement remains on the point that Christianity has irreversibly compromised itself and thus has surrendered the right to be the religion of the West. As already mentioned, it has resulted inevitably in atheism. The conclusion is unavoidable: if Christianity no longer exercises the history shaping force and hence leaves an existential vacuum, it should be asked to move aside and allow another civilizational force to take over and fill its place – a force that would be Western in origin. It is equally most evident to Heidegger and Nietzsche that the liberal, secular, humanistic rationalism of both, the scientific and political Enlightenments are inadequate to fill this vacuum. Thus we are in a world, abandoned by gods, and waiting for new gods.

It has been argued that Heidegger's preoccupation with the coming of new gods is a figure of speech to suggest that the modern mass planning, leveling down of differences, and emptiness cannot solve our existential vacuum. In other words, the figure of speech is intended to mean that more will be required than the calculating politics to give meaning and purpose to life. After all, modern progress has turned out to be purposeless progress for the sake of progress, running its mechanical course without any direction. Yet it seems that the call for new gods cannot be explained away by a mere rejection of such a call as a figure of speech in light of Heidegger's consistent use of it throughout his writings. In brief, Heidegger cannot be distanced from Nietzsche's concerns by making light of such use. If Heidegger's constant appeals to new gods is rejected, then Sartre's judgment concerning Heidegger's simple atheism would have to be admitted. Yet it is no coincidence that Heidegger writes such an extensive commentary on Nietzsche's thinking; hence the thesis should stand that Heidegger was serious in his quest for new gods as a way of filling the existential emptiness left by the demise of Christian god. It could be further argued that Heidegger's notion of *Angst*, arising in face of the possibility of non-being, in face of mortality, is more basically the result of the absence of meaning and purpose left by the demise of the once trusted divinity. In this sense, new divinities are required not to abolish mortality, but to abolish the existential emptiness that grounds *Angst*.

Perhaps more revealing than other aspects is Heidegger's insistence that what

moves philosophy cannot be motivated by religion. In this sense, Christian philosophy is a contradiction in terms because genuine philosophy cannot be determined by anything but itself. Thus, insofar as the concerns of philosophy coincide with those of religion, the way of treating this coincidence is determined entirely from within philosophy. In other words, the question of gods is derived strictly from within the context of philosophical issues of a given historical horizon: for philosophy, religious concerns are completely subordinated to those of philosophy. As is the case for Nietzsche, religion is one among other instruments in the hands of a philosophical legislator. This fits with the notion of national religion where religion is instrumental in the broader public regeneration of a civilization that Christianity made impotent. Religion, thus, is subject to political and above all civilizational purposes in a post-metaphysical sense. The essential thesis, here, is that Heidegger's talk of new divinities and of saving gods has no religious significance. It has strictly a political sense of a new public narrative necessary for the birth of a new and rejuvenated Western civilization. It must be clear that the new gods, just as the original Christian god, are and must be results of powerful narratives.

It must be clear that the public or political domain of new gods as philosophical and not metaphysical, both in Nietzsche and Heidegger, is very close to Plato and in general to Greek understanding of philosophy. For Plato philosophical metaphysics is political, even if for ancient Greeks in general the political was a domain of free rhetorical and discursive creativity –

including the creativity and interrogation of old and new gods. Thus when Nietzsche declares that due to Christianity nihilism has arrived, he makes both a philosophical and political claim. The same can be said of Heidegger with his understanding of the narrative depletion of the West, the darkening of the world, the flight of gods, the destruction of the earth, and massification of individuals; with these concerns he speaks both philosophically and politically, revealing the current tasks of philosophy to give rise to new stories, to reach for poetic depths and thus base philosophy in *poiesis*. Here human existence is no longer a logical discourse but poetic life. The question of gods is thus located at the very core of intersection of politics and poetic philosophy.

In this context it makes little sense to regard Heidegger's preoccupation with the history of Western ontology and metaphysics in distinction from the political domain. After all, the very existential emptiness of the modern man is the unconditional and hence disconnected autonomy of the subject – empty of content, a nothing. Indeed, this very empty, unconditional autonomy is at the base of modern metaphysics of an unconditional will that wills its own political world with abstract equality of all individuals and scientific technology to master the earth. Heidegger claims that Being has been reduced from spiritual destiny of the Western world to a meaningless word, leading to his conclusion that from metaphysical viewpoint Russia and America are the same in their dreary, technological frenzy and the same, unrestricted organization of the average man. This is the political metaphysics that means precisely the spiritual

decline of the earth and flight of the gods. It must be clear that Heidegger understands modern metaphysics in a way that differs from common notions, such as those of speculative arguments, debates between idealists and empiricists, and even proofs and counter proofs of various truths, realities, and ultimate beings; for Heidegger, as well as Nietzsche, metaphysics in its political sense, and specifically modern metaphysics, is unrestrained autonomous will to invent any possible world, but only at the technical-material level – a world reduced to mass production through the destruction of earth and man. If this is the modern political man's existence, then his anxiety cannot be resolved with the same metaphysical means; what is required is a spiritual politics suited for the Western existential crisis. Heidegger's and Nietzsche's death of old gods and awaiting for new ones is a dramatic way of calling for a new civilizational narrative, a new grand story as a dimension of Western political life.

Now the question arises what does Heidegger genuinely mean when he declares that Russia and America are metaphysically the same and, by implication, that the national self-assertion of the German *Volk* offers at least a possibility of a mode of being that is philosophically different? As already noted, Heidegger uses the term "metaphysics" in a way that subsumes what is historically given as political. Heidegger clearly calls for a metaphysical decision that admits of no compromises or intermittent steps. Such steps are both metaphysical and political, because Heidegger speaks here in the context of "reason, progress, political and economic socialisms, or mere

democracy as ways of attempting to deflect an inevitable nihilism instead of facing up to it directly in order to overcome it. All these are mere and irrelevant rescue operations of a corpse that cannot be revived. According to Heidegger, because the West is completely confused metaphysically and even ontologically, it is also confused politically. The West is blind to its own ruins and is forever perched on a suicidal abyss. It can be said that Heidegger, just as Nietzsche, has a vast rhetorical impact because he engages in a discourse that bridges metaphysics and politics. It could be said that Heidegger's rhetoric verges on the creation of earthly stories that are intriguing and foreboding, and thus transcends mere religiosity toward philosophy and its understanding of concrete awareness of Being. As he would want to say, whether god is dead or alive is not decided by religiosity of humans and even less by theological aspirations of metaphysicians or scientists. Whether or not god is, god comes to presence from out of the historical constellation of Being. In other words, god is not the source of Being but conversely, Being is the source of any god and the latter is one way that being is disclosed for a particular people in their historical context, in the context of existential crisis. Being means our ability to experience something as this or that in a given historical epoch, or that horizon that opens our experience to our destiny in some unique manner. To say that the presence or absence of god is a philosophical and not a religious experience suggests a conception of the philosophical that encompasses both the "spiritual" and the political.

The gods have fled – we await new gods; this is for Heidegger a philosophical conception and not a religious belief. It is philosophical in a sense that encompasses what is available to us, or opened up for us within a horizon of possibilities both spiritually and politically. Whether gods are present or absent, departing or yet to come is of interest to Heidegger not with respect to gods themselves, or as a matter of religious faith, but philosophically as to what a god narrative tells us about the spiritual possibilities of a political-historical community, a particular epoch. Thus Being can never be understood by Heidegger apart from the question of the coming about of spiritual-political possibilities within the historical destiny of various epochs. This is what makes the title of Heidegger's first work *Sein und Zeit* inseparable. Being is chronoscopic and cannot appear as if it were an indifferent, eternal presence. This also means that previously metaphysics formed a ground for a given epoch, and now philosophy is that through which a specific interpretation of what is and what sort of comprehension of truth is available that grounds our age of existential crisis. The latter holds a complete dominion over all the phenomena of our epoch.

This sense of philosophy allows the narrative of the loss of gods as modern destiny, and another narrative of regaining new gods that would frame a new destiny, to emerge with a philosophical decision. Neither science nor theology is in a position to offer such a decision, since both are surface phenomena of the existential crisis – between death and birth of gods. Heidegger is quite emphatic concerning

the modern “de-divinization” of the world which is not simply a bland atheism, a doing away with gods and enjoying our economically acquired “pleasant life.” The loss of god for the West consists of an image of the Christianized world wherein the source of the world is regarded as an infinite, absolute entity. It is well known that such an entity is no longer accessible to a finite, temporal human being and thus becomes unknowable and irrelevant. On the other hand, Christianity transforms itself into one “world view” among others and thus makes itself modern and up to date. In this sense there is a loss of decision concerning one or many gods. Christianity, thus has been the greatest contributor to the demise of its own god. Nonetheless the loss of god and gods does not result in the loss of religiosity; to the contrary, through the loss of gods the relationship to gods is changed into mere religious experience, into a sort of psychological set of ritualized feelings. This does to the experience of gods what “aesthetic experience” does to the understanding of an art work: reducing a mode of ontological disclosure to a mere function of a subject, a mere component of modern subjectivity. When this occurs, then the gods have departed. Of course the resultant void may be filled by historiographical, sociological and mainly psychological investigation of myths, with fantasmagoric beings that are depicted as stories to frighten children.

Yet Heidegger is hopeful that the existential void can be filled by philosophy as a quest for Being in whose openness new gods may appear. For him, the current epoch is reaching its culmination under

the presumption of the self evident correctness of modern metaphysics of will to master the earth. Only when this self evidence is totally secure and becomes a transparent world view, there will arise a fertile ground for an authentic questioning of Being that will open a region for the decision whether Being will become capable of gods and whether the essence of the truth of Being will demand an appearance of the primordial essence of man. This is to say, when the modern age will reach its self appointed greatness and fulfills itself in total arbitrariness then a future history will be prepared. Gods departed with the modern age and will return when the latter exhausts itself and humanity will be able to cross the limits of metaphysics and hence our mode of being political. The latter is still the realm in which we test our capacity to transform history and await new gods.

The possibilities for their appearing are not within the horizon of secular politics, since the latter has too many ontological limitations inherent in the context of modern West. Such limitations are paradoxical; modern man regards himself as a master of his own destiny, as a maker of his world and an autonomous source of all possibilities. In short, for the modern man there seem to be no limitations. So what would Heidegger see as a limitation to such a being who claims to have no limitations? To answer this question it is best to return to what attracts Heidegger to Nietzsche. In Nietzsche’s story of the madman, the murderers of god are completely severed from their own existential-ontological situation to such an extent that they are oblivious to the enormity of their deeds. They not only do not know that

god is dead, they do not even recognize that the blood dripping from their hands is that of the god they have murdered. They do not realize that their empty proclamations during rituals have no concrete meaning in daily existence of material pleasures and uses of power to guarantee their continuation. It is to be noted that Heidegger and Nietzsche have no interest in making these accusations from a religious position or in relation to religious concerns. To the contrary, they are astounded by modern secularization from a philosophically political-spiritual stance. Western civilization loses touch with its own depth and the possibility of experiencing that depth. Heidegger's terminology for this is both the metaphysical and theological forgetfulness of Being, that is the way that metaphysics and theology have covered over the depth of the question of Being.

In Nietzsche's narrative, the epoch of the last man, where Western secularism and empty religiosity is inhabited by blinking idiots who are being convinced by a grand illusion that it is possible to live a satisfying life in the absence of grand goals, grand passions and remote horizons. It could be said that the last man, in its current manifestation, lives on Prozac and practices politics of "security," where the elected or self appointed managers of public affairs are regarded as insurance organizations. It is worth remembering, that for Heidegger Nietzsche's madman, who announces the death of god, appears in the *agora* with a loud cry that he seeks god. This is the location where Nietzsche's recognition of Christian atheism is combined with the call for new gods. By contrast, those

whom the madman addresses are unaware that their god is dead and therefore cannot understand the quest for new gods. For Heidegger the simple awareness that Christian god is dead in its own form of atheism would be a step toward the depth of the existential crisis of the modern West and thus the opening of the possibility of the search for gods in light of the authentic understanding of Being. Such gods, and indeed public politics is, for Heidegger, closely related to Hölderlin's "theism." Hence no liberalism, democracy, Christian revivalisms can rescue us; rescue can come only from gods that are summoned by the poets and serve to express a people's reawakened grasp of its own destiny – gods of the people or the homeland, gods that encompass a newly respiritualized experience of Being capable of appearing in the guise of gods.

Perhaps now it is possible to hint at the answer that Heidegger would give to his suggestion for salvation of the West in the German *Volk*. For Heidegger language shapes historical being and a specific language is an embodiment of the spirit of a people. Thus, the German language is, for Heidegger, more akin to that of Being than things and much closer to the pre-Socratic Greek than any other European language. Early Greeks were philosophers closely tied to their own world that was inhabited by authentic divinities, spirited individuals, each a philosopher-poet in his own right, and an ability to speak such a world. The sacred/profane division was irrelevant and above all, human existence was identical with participation in public deeds and rhetorical disputes, attended by

divine poets and shepherds, announced opinions of divinities and their disputes over human affairs. In turn, instead of arguing for or against gods, the Greeks strove to become like them – they were “theo-centric.” This means their gods were not projections of human psyche, but rather were figures that provided a tension – *polemos* – between what humans are and how great they can become. Gods were not ideological images of humans, but humans were the striving images toward gods, daring to defy and contest them. Without the latter human existence would have no fulfillment – a mere floundering in search of one more morsel. But it is the *poetes*, who weaves the verbal tapestry and sets the paths for humans and gods. Heidegger envisages the German language as having the poetic power to open new pathways toward the clearing of Being wherein new *Dictung* would make the world a welcome place for gods and mortals – a gathering of truth such that every human creation would be a world formation. Whether other languages have

this poetic power is not here at issue. What is important for Heidegger is that the German language allows the human to live poetically; as Heidegger insists, *dichterisch wohnet der Mensch*.

In this sense, existentialism is not a thesis arising in the vacuum of modern despair, but a striving to retrieve the depth of Western civilization in its crisis, in its parting of the ways with metaphysics and its attendant monotheistic divinity and opening up authentic horizons for human existence beyond flat and empty reason to a full poetic voice that can listen to the call of the earth and announce the voices of new gods without which the existential *Angst* could not be abolished. Existentialism, therefore, takes on a different face that has nothing to do with religiosity but much to do with a given peoples gods appearing in the darkest hour of an empty civilization. It is the task of a philosophy that would release the human from the busy preoccupation with tinsel and allow a region where authentic existence could be the public norm of the day.

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