

**Martin Heidegger**

*The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. by Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei.

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First published in German in 1995 and in English in a 2004 cloth edition, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* is volume 60 of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*. As the translator's foreword states, this volume was "compiled from Heidegger's notes and the notes of students in his lecture courses, rather than from material Heidegger prepared for publication" (xiii). Students of Heidegger will be accustomed to reading translations of material drawn from seminars and lectures, and yet in this case these notes offer a less complete picture of Heidegger's concern than some of the later volumes (e.g., in *What is Called Thinking?* or the *Zollikon Seminars*).

The volume includes materials prepared for two lecture courses: *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (Winter 1920–1921) and *Augustine and Neo-Platonism* (Summer 1921). Part three contains outlines and sketches for a lecture that did not take place: *The Philosophical Foundations of Medieval Mysticism* (1918–1919). There is also a translator's foreword, a glossary of key terms (mainly German, but with a few Latin terms), extensive appendices, as well as two afterwords explaining in detail the genesis of the published German text, but no general index. Towards the end of the final afterword, Claudius Strube writes that he sought to give the lectures a "bookly character and context" (262), and clearly much effort has been expended in working this formative period of Heidegger's career into a readable volume. But as has been already suggested, the result is a less complete narrative of Heidegger's phenomenology of religion than some readers might hope for. The English edition also includes page numbers for the German edition, which, for a serious engagement with this text, is vital.

As a consequence of the partial nature of these notes, Heidegger's meaning sometimes has to be inferred and interpreted from a broader understanding of his oeuvre. Without (and even with) such a broader understanding, this text presents interpretive challenges to the reader. But anyone with an interest in Heidegger's intellectual formation and his encounter with and later departure from theology will find that this book has hidden gems among the more opaque and dense sections. Heidegger clearly expects his students to have a working familiarity with Greek and Latin within these lectures, though the editors have done a fine job of providing accessible translations within the text. Also placed within the text are the many marginal notes added by Heidegger that the editors have helpfully placed in brackets.

The first part of the book examines phenomenological method applied to the religious life. Heidegger is keen to establish a stark contrast here between phenomenology and modern science: Heidegger shows the concept of rigor to be located primarily in philosophical rather than (derivatively) scientific reason. This important point is crucial in developing Heidegger's deconstruction of other contemporaneous attempts to reinterpret 'rigorously' (that is, scientifically) religious phenomena. The significance of this section is underscored by the editors of the German edition who convincingly state in the first afterword that "nowhere else has the

uniqueness of the philosophical foreconception (*Vorgriff*) been established as decisively in contrast to the scientific method, or are religious questions taken up with such extension and exegetical exactitude.” (257) (I suggest readers begin reading this book with the afterwords, which provide a useful orientation to the text.) As is characteristic for Heidegger, the attempt to open up an encounter with what he calls ‘factual life experience’ requires an ongoing deconstruction of the work of contemporary philosophy and theology. In general, the failure of contemporary theory of history and of religious life (e.g., in Simmel, Rickert, Dilthey, Spengler, and Troeltsch in particular, all of whom Heidegger all-too-briefly puts to one side) is grounded in a general attachment to scientific methodology. Heidegger’s return to factual life experience is defined in terms of ‘significance’ (9) a notion in which the seeds of ‘care’ in *Being and Time* are clearly evident.

The text states that in seeking to understand philosophy “in as lively a way as possible and to follow the sense of factual life experience rigorously... we will consider concrete tendencies of the philosophy of religion in their most typical representatives” (13). Prior to entering into an interpretation of the Pauline letters (here selections from Galatians and Thessalonians), Heidegger explicates his phenomenology through ‘formal indication’, a section that culminates with a disconcerting passage: “I will... take a particular concrete phenomenon as the point of departure, however for me under the presupposition that you will misunderstand the entire study from beginning to end” (45).

Heidegger’s phenomenological explication of the New Testament is speaking to a theological context in which reductive historical explanations are dominant, relying on interpretations which too often translate the New Testament writings into literary objects. The notes provide only a sketch of Heidegger’s interpretations here, but they do embody the methodology which is really the critical aspect of the text.

In Part Two, a manuscript taken from a transcription of 19 hand-written pages, the text turns to Augustine and Neo-Platonism. Again Heidegger is speaking against convention, in this case, the conventional placing of Augustine which locates and objectifies him as a literary historical figure within the strand of Greek and Neo-Platonic thinking: “Augustinianism has a twofold meaning: philosophically, it means Christian Platonism turned against Aristotle; theologically, a certain conception of the doctrine of sins and of grace.” (115) Brief notes outline the limitations of Ernst Troeltsch, Adolf von Harnack, and Wilhelm Dilthey’s interpretations of Augustine, with the following statement typifying the compression in the text: “Dilthey says that what Augustine wished to accomplish was accomplished first by Kant and by Schleiermacher. Thus, Dilthey entirely misunderstands the inner problem of Augustine.” (118) Heidegger does not expand on this and so a lot is demanded from the reader of these notes in terms of interpreting Heidegger’s full meaning.

The central focus of this section is book 10 of Augustine’s *Confessions*, the point at which Augustine moves from direct autobiographical discussion to more speculative metaphysical writing. The later books of *Confessions* are, for Heidegger, crucial since here we encounter a theological articulation of the phenomenology of care: structured, that is, through the process of seeking for God. Where Augustine contemplates the nature of searching for God, Heidegger appears to be moving in the direction of concern, or care, and therefore, of ethics and

the good life (one must wonder whether this elaboration of Augustine would go some way towards answering the concerns of Levinas that Heidegger's turn to ontology in *Being and Time* involved a failure to account for ethics).

The final section of the book, notes for a lecture on medieval mysticism that did not take place, is the least formed part of the book. As John Caputo argued back in 1986 in *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, there are important connections between Heidegger's ontology and Eckhart's theology, connections which are only tantalizingly hinted at here. Along with Otto and Schleiermacher, Eckhart provides the central figure of this section. Heidegger suggests that Eckhart's experience of God overcomes the ongoing tendencies to make an object of God. Perhaps this is what, in a much later work, prompted Heidegger to call Eckhart one of the "old masters of thought" (*Discourse on Thinking* [New York: Harper and Row, 1966], 61). To undercut the subject/object structure of being, as much as of God, is a keynote of Heidegger's philosophical career, expressed within the question of being. But is Heidegger then in danger of constructing an ontotheology? Are these early notes of Heidegger susceptible to a conflation of God and being that Heidegger is later so keen to avoid? This might explain Heidegger's reticence on theological matters after this period: that Heidegger sensed the metaphysical blindness implied in this forgetting of ontology, and so moved away from any language that might be construed as theological. Or perhaps this text can offer a preliminary critique of ontotheology if we are able to read between the notes. It would be tempting to say so, but it is by no means clear. Heidegger's concern in some of his later work that ontology and theology have become unhelpfully conflated can perhaps be traced in his desire to keep clear religious philosophy (e.g., the religious a priori) from the phenomenon of religion (237), but here the concern is more that the lived experience of religious life is given priority over the theoretical constructions that depend upon it.

Probably best approached with a specific question, or set of questions, this book does not provide a consistent overview of Heidegger's phenomenology of religion. For that there are secondary sources. This volume does provide insights into a serious scholarly engagement with theology, with mysticism, and with phenomenology, but only in a sketchy manner making the reading of this volume a fulfilling challenge.

**David Lewin**

Liverpool Hope University