

## **Have We Need of Invoking Postmodernity? Identity and Difference in Theological Discourse**

Dr. Jeffrey Bloechl  
Faculty of Theology, K.U. Leuven, and  
Belgian Fund for Scientific Research (Flanders)  
St.-Michielstraat 6  
3000 Leuven, Belgium

*My reflections will concern theological discourse in what I will is often called "the postmodern condition." By "postmodern," I will understand primarily the state of contemporary rationality as it may or may not challenge Christian theology. However, it will also be part of my efforts here to clarify what that word can mean, at least within the limits of a confrontation with theology. My lens for viewing these matters will be a fragment of work from Martin Heidegger. This will not be Heidegger the fundamental ontologist, focussed on the analysis of Dasein which prepares the way for a new and more penetrating approach to the question what does it mean to-be?, but the later Heidegger, who no longer starts from that analysis of individual human existence and experience, but instead applies himself to studies of truth, language, and history. My reason for this approach is programmatic: I would like to suspend three main lines of response to Heidegger in favor of sketching the possibility of a fourth line which has the merit of openly addressing a new and timely challenge: the attempt to think of difference as somehow deeper than identity. The other three responses to Heidegger -and this always means the earlier Heidegger, either solely or primarily -are by now well known. The first response, usually voiced with a theology of creation in mind, refuses the early Heidegger's account of a world whose meaning is constituted by individual consciousness which is itself without any ground to stand on. Apart from this response, which can look more like a strategy of avoidance, the early Heidegger's position also appears susceptible to two other responses which concede the heart of his position while nonetheless also holding open the possibility to theologize. One can contend that reflection starting from faith in God and reflection starting from care for being are two distinct and mutually irreducible things (B. Welte). Or one can take the view that these two forms of reflection are not merely distinct but in fact opposed, so that each leads towards conclusions and a worldview which contradicts the other (J.-L. Marion). Whatever their important differences, these last two arguments make the debate between theology and fundamental ontology a question of existential orientation, which has the effect of reducing Heidegger's work mainly to its anthropological pole. This reading is far from evident for his later works, where it is straightforwardly a matter of rationality and truth.*

### **1. Heidegger on the principle of identity**

Heidegger's 1957 lecture "The Principle of Identity" begins by opposing a common assumption that identity simply means the unqualified and uninterrupted self-sameness of A as A. According to Heidegger, the logical formula  $A = A$  conveys only the belonging-togetherness of A with A. To say  $A = A$  is first to presuppose that there is a distinction between the first A and the second A. Heidegger thus understands the principle of identity as A *with* A, which enables him to say that there is difference anterior to either unity or sameness. At the heart of identity, in other

words, there is difference.

This already indicates that the principle of identity is not an objective condition which we stumble upon in the outer world, but something we say or assert. To identify one thing with another or even a single thing with itself, it is first necessary that the one who identifies them experience them in time and space. I see a flat surface supported by four legs to my left, and another flat surface supported by four legs to my right, *and then* I identify them each as tables. Or, more fundamentally, I see one flat surface supported by four legs first from one perspective and then from another, *and then* I identify those two perspectives as this one table here and now. Or, still more fundamentally, I see this flat surface supported by four legs and compare it to others I have previously encountered, *and then* I identify it and the image in my memory as a table. What matters is that meaning occurs through an act of identifying, and identifying presupposes a difference between the phenomena identified. For Heidegger, identification therefore depends essentially on lived experience. This is an argument against a static and logical definition of identity, in which the difference between A and A is erased from thought. The identity of A with A can not occur without *mediation* by concrete experience and, since all experience is shaped by a pre-existing context, history. The argument for difference anterior to identity is an argument for the dependence of abstract meaning on concrete and historical context. Heidegger does not fail to state his debt in this line of thought to speculative Idealism.

As for the definition of a thing, this means that it has a unity which, however, closes around dis-unity. Two impressions which are met with separately are united in a proposition that identifies them. What is the essence of this all-important proposition? That the meaning of two phenomenon *are* identical. In Heidegger's lexicon, "A *is* A." The principle of identity, which presupposes but covers up an anterior difference, depends on the verb to-be. The identity of beings presupposes their difference; the difference between one being and another presupposes the fact that beings *are*. It turns out to be one and the same thing to say that the identity of any two beings presupposes their difference, and to say that any and all beings presuppose difference. For this later Heidegger, *difference is another name for the sheer existence, the beingness, of all beings*. Presupposed in the most elemental function of experience, this beingness is the ultimate horizon for all meaning. As a concept, it is also the placeholder for the claim that difference is anterior to identity. It would not be difficult to show how this thought, in all its radicality, is essentially alien to the modern epistemology of someone like Kant, where he installs unity above plurality among the categories of quantity.<sup>1</sup> Nor would it be difficult to show that most thinkers presently called or calling themselves "postmodern" build on one or another variation of this idea.

There is more. Heidegger has said that the identity of "A with A" presupposes the

proposition that it is so. In other words, acts of identification, of giving meaning, of saying "A is A," depend first on the fact that we who commit those acts have a relation to what it means to-be; because of that relation we can affirm that something *is*, for instance, a chair and not a table. This means that it is possible to affirm that A belongs together with A only through and because of the fact that being and thinking belong together. The belonging-together (*Zusammengehören*) of being and thought is the central theme of Heidegger's later work. It is a remarkable feature of his essay on "The Principle of Identity" that he dares to call this relation one of *identity*, and then submit it to the same conditions he has just discerned for the identity of a thing with itself.<sup>2</sup> The identity of being and thinking entails, on one hand, that thinking gathers differences into identities around the word "is," and on the other hand that the word "is" never occurs in pure form but only in and through thinking. In this belonging-together of being and thinking, Heidegger discerns the ungrounded wellspring, or essence (*Wesen*) of all meaning. These are one and the same event (*Ereignis*): Being appears as beings (or: difference is manifest as identity) in and through thinking, and thinking is the act or process of being manifesting itself as beings.

All approaches to this event will, of course, be historically and culturally conditioned. The foregoing analysis of identity and difference gives us the outline of an explanation for this: it belongs to the nature of thinking, which gathers differences into identities, to impose a definition on a field which at a deeper level has no definition. Why is this deeper level without definition? Because thought is defined by a process which has always already imposed order on what must be considered in itself disordered. For this later Heidegger, the order of meaning -what we may think of as historical and cultural context -simply is (*es gibt*). Meaning and an order are always already in place. One can not even attempt to step fully outside the field in which one finds oneself without taking the lay of the land as one's reference point. As what makes all movement possible, this reference point, the lay of the land, the order of meaning already in place, can not be defined in light of anything else. This applies even to movement back toward the origin, as when one retraces one's steps in search of a watershed or benchmark defining the terrain. One can of course find that original and defining place, but this says only what the first surveyor made of the terrain, and perhaps why or by what calculations. It says nothing at all about the sort of event Heidegger is after, the event by which not only this land is oriented or this field of meaning opened up, but by which all orientation and every field of meaning occurs. We are accustomed to supposing that to think about the orientation for one's own thinking is perhaps to step back away from it far enough to catch hold of some of it. Heidegger's philosophy of the event implies a denial that this is fully possible. This is not because there is no way to gain reflective distance from the principles defining one or another field, but rather because all fields rest on a still deeper condition -the

priority of difference over identity -which eludes even the most ascetic and determined thinker.

The challenge for theology can be detected here, where Heidegger seems to reduce each separate form of thinking to an example of the conditions he describes. This would mean, for instance, that a Christian theologian is capable of returning to the basic conditions of his or her field, thus insuring that his or theology will be highly reflective within its proper limits as Christian theology, but never think beyond those basic conditions to their deepest character as an event of the belonging-together of being and thinking. One has no difficulty recognizing where Heidegger would locate the uncrossable frontier: precisely because a Christian is committed to the specific history rooted in the life, salvific death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, he or she can not, while holding fast to that commitment, think of that life, death, and resurrection as event.<sup>3</sup> Christians, as Christians, have forgotten the event. We should not mistake this for a defect in theological rationality: Heidegger's philosophy of the event which withdraws from every concrete effort to grasp it is therefore a philosophy which confirms that all thinking is historically and culturally particular. It is because the wellspring of thinking is always already gone that thinking is unable to grasp it. And this this absence of what we would like to serve as a foundation leaves thinking pluralized. Each form or line of thought will have its own mode of forgetting the event, and that mode of forgetting will define its particular identity.

## **2. Theology and the philosophy of difference**

Theologians are hard pressed to avoid these ideas, if for no other reason than they seem to correspond to both a growing sense of cultural plurality and increasingly plausible arguments that our own culture is itself less unitary than we once thought. Whether theologians attempt to discern the movement of the Spirit in contemporary times, or else simply wish to remain sensitive to contemporary consciousness, they cannot afford to ignore the possibility that closer attention to the category of difference will bring them closer to the life of faith as it is presently experienced. The challenge of the later Heidegger thus presents itself in the question *how far can and should theology go in its attempt to recognize a philosophy of difference?* This question hangs over all theologizing in or according to the postmodern condition.

It would be too easy to respond that theology has always known itself to be one among many disciplines, and that it is already centuries since it had to accept the fact that some of those other disciplines have become independent. Thomas Aquinas gave long and detailed attention to the division and methods of the sciences. Kant accorded philosophical theology and biblical theology separate but equal footing. In a manner going beyond these developments, Heidegger's philosophy of difference contains an implicit claim to understand conditions for theological

propositions which theology itself, as theology, could never see. However, it is also not enough to observe that philosophy has claimed some kind of ascendancy over theology at least since Hegel gave it the final word in his phenomenology of spirit. For one thing, Hegel does not permit spirit to arrive in the complete self-consciousness achieved only in philosophy except by the Christian theology of the Incarnation. There is no such dependence on theology within a philosophy of difference. Heidegger's philosophy of difference will have clarified the place of theological discourse without any necessary reference to theology itself.<sup>4</sup> Philosophy is defined by insight into the event as event, and all other forms of thinking, including theology, are instances of the event which can not grasp themselves as events.

Before requiring theology to respond to this argument, it is first necessary to ask whether it is consistent. Is Heidegger himself not bound to admit that his own thinking is a concretization of what he calls the event, imposing a particular identity on a more primordial difference? On one level, this is indisputable: the claim that any proposition is an event of the belonging-together of thinking and being is itself a proposition and so an event in that same sense. But this is far from supplying the basis for a critique of Heidegger. It *would have been* inconsistent for him to claim, on one hand, that at the bottom of all thinking there is truly only difference or plurality, while on the other hand also claiming that his own thinking has been able to identify it everywhere. A more modest Heidegger would instead concede that his own thinking is itself a particular historical and cultural expression of the event, and as such imposes identity on difference no less than any other thinking. What is unique about it, however, is that it seems to know this about itself. Heidegger's philosophy of the event does not pretend to be absolutely faithful to radical difference, but only to know that it has always already suppressed it. The critical point turns out to be relatively conservative: there is no claim that thought can somehow purge itself of an infidelity to its deeper condition, but only a call to see that infidelity and know that it is unavoidable. Of course, this is already enough for thinking to have already awoken from the more slumbering infidelity in which one acts without knowing what one does. It is also no small task, and moreover one which Heidegger seems to reserve for philosophy, with its drive to question every principle and foundation. Heidegger himself doubts whether the entire western tradition, let alone its theological strand, is capable of staying awake.<sup>5</sup> Precisely this, however, is the challenge awaiting the theologian willing to come this far with him, but uncomfortable with the notion that theology can not really think. *What sort of thinking occurs in theology, and what is its relation to the postmodern discovery of difference prior to identity?*

This question brings Heidegger's provocation extremely close. All discourses, we know, have at their center a specific thesis or set of theses which close them from the difference

philosophy tries to point to. This central thesis can not be questioned from within that discourse and it is non-negotiable when that discourse enters into debate with other discourses. It is difficult to say precisely what this thesis would be for Christian theology -though it will certainly have to do with faith in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ -but in postmodern thinking it is plainly *difference*. Theology, let us then say, rests ultimately on faith in the meaningfulness of a relation with Jesus Christ. It rests on an identification with his accomplishment and message and thus, most deeply, the category of identity. Postmodern thinking, as Heidegger has led me to define it here, rests rather on the category of difference. It is not necessary to decide which of these two precedes the other. The possibility of a truly postmodern theology -a theology fully in accord with the conditions of postmodern rationality -rests on a category mistake.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Truth and truthfulness

This does not mean that there can be no theologizing *in response* to postmodern thinking, but it does mean that such an exercise can not occur *according to* postmodern rules. It may even be that important conditions of the theological response to postmodern thinkers will come into new and better focus precisely because it is impossible to meet them on their own terms. It is important to see that, thought through to the end, postmodern thinking itself leads to the idea that it is in irreducible conflict with theology. Indeed, the fact that postmodern thinking rests on the unusual category of difference places it at extreme odds with most, if not all fields. In the case of theology, this situation has been worsened by the recent use in postmodern philosophy of ostensibly religious concepts, a gesture at least as confused as the theological appeal to radical difference. A concept may look remarkably similar in two distinct contexts, but when cast in light of two distinct categories or sets of categories it is bound to receive it two distinct meanings as well. An important example in this regard is the concept of eschatology, which appears, among other places, in Derrida's recent work on religion. Christian theology links eschatology to salvation, and thus to sin, guilt, and evil. But against who or what has the postmodern sinned? Before whom is she guilty? And who or what will save her?<sup>7</sup> The difference between a biblical answer to these questions and a philosophical answer involves more than a choice between distinct forms of expression. Philosophy, including Heidegger's philosophy of difference and the event, speaks with the aim of universally communicable knowledge, whereas even the most speculative theology speaks ultimately from "faith [and] to faith."<sup>8</sup>

This means not only that faith in God is necessary for theological reflection, but also that suspending the faith commitment -as a postmodern philosophy of difference must do -bars one from properly understanding what a theologian says. This two-fold insight has immediate

implications for the theological model of truth. While the truth-claims embedded in theological concepts and propositions will always have an absoluteness which derives from the unconditional character of faith, they now also display a particularity signalled in the fact that there is no common ground necessary to make that faith compelling. A theologian cannot prove to others what she herself believes is the one truth. This powerlessness is an effect of postmodern thinking, as bites at the edges of what grounds theological reflection today. From the postmodern perspective, still outside theology itself, the theologian is seen to uphold what can only be called a *particular absolute*.

This still does not diminish theology's right to assert the truth of what is experienced in faith. To the contrary, theology will have been reminded by a philosopher like Heidegger that no other field, including philosophy, has the capacity to speak in its place. What I have described as the categorial difference between theology and other disciplines is also a matter of truth. Theology begins from a commitment to what it is appropriate to call "the truth" within the field itself, but which is neither true nor false outside that field. This returns to the importance of distinguishing fundamental and speculative theology from philosophy: unlike philosophy, theological reflection tries to remain *in* the truth which it articulates. Theological reflection, cast in doctrine and dogma, can and must always be evaluated for its truthfulness. By truthfulness, I mean the degree of agreement with the truth, insofar as it can be determined. Naturally, this is almost never an easy task, as any historian of dogma knows well. And since this difficulty will certainly be heightened by the fact that conflicting parties nonetheless adhere to the same truth -after all, disputing theologians are nonetheless all believing Christians -one can well expect a continued use for philosophy, whose tireless questioning and exacting methods promise, at the very least, new insight into how and why particular arguments are put forward. This limited use, however, has never been in doubt, at least not at any real distance from fundamentalism. What has sometimes appeared less certain to me is precisely where philosophy should cease with its intervention, so that truly theological discussion can resume.

## Notes

1. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A 80 B 106.
2. Cf. M. Heidegger, "The Principle of Identity," in *Identity and Difference*, bilingual edition, with translation by J. Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 27f / 90f.
3. To a considerable extent, this is also the position of J. Derrida, "Comment ne pas parler. Dénégations," in *Psyché. Invention de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), pp. 535-595.
4. Such, at any rate, is how the position presents itself. Full entry into this debate would, however, require addressing, on one hand, the possibility of a sort of negative imprint left behind on Heidegger's philosophy as he worked his way out of early interest in Christian theology, and on the other hand the more dubious assertion that there is continued latent agreement between that Christian theology and its partially secularized counterpart in his philosophy.
5. Cf. M. Heidegger, "The Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics," in *op. cit.*, pp. 72-73 / 141-142.
6. My application of Ryle's "category mistake" to the unreflective introduction of philosophical concepts into theology is inspired by F. Jacques, "Entre philosophie et théologie: problèmes catégoriaux," in *Revue scientifique de philosophie et théologie* 81 (1997) 439-467.
7. Derrida himself raises these very questions over his own philosophy of religion in "Foi et savoir. Les deux sources de la 'religion' aux limites de la raison simple," in J. Derrida, G. Vattimo (ed.), *La Religion* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), pp. 9-10.
8. The expression comes from J.S. O'Leary, *Questioning Back. The Overcoming of Metaphysics in Christian Tradition* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), pp. 136-145.