

## Heidegger and the Prospect of a Phenomenology of Prayer

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An attempt to contribute to a “phenomenology of prayer” ought to begin with the recognition that the word “phenomenology” means many different things to many different people. Moreover, it must be recognized that none of these usages has any obvious claim to being the normative one. Given these inescapable facts, it is therefore incumbent on one who would make such a contribution to define just what it is that he or she might mean by “phenomenology.”

At the beginning of the last century, Martin Heidegger presented the world with his own views on the nature and tasks of phenomenology. Following the lead of Wilhelm Dilthey, Heidegger conceived of phenomenology as a *hermeneutical* enterprise. It is in this sense that I use the term “phenomenology” in the present essay. Hermeneutical phenomenology, at least in Heidegger’s rendition, is premised on two basic claims: (1) life, even at the most immediate level, is always already meaningful; and (2) history is to be understood not primarily as a record of “facts” but as rich depository of meaningful expressions of life. Heidegger expresses both of these claims quite clearly. The first idea emerges in a lecture course from 1919: “Life as such is *not* irrational (which has nothing whatever to do with ‘rationalism!’)” (G56/57 219/187). Making the same point later on, he writes that “Life is not a chaotic confusion of dark torrents, not a mute principle of power, not a limitless, all-consuming disorder, rather *it is what it is only as a concrete meaningful shape*” (G58 148). Life encounters us as

having been interpreted in discourse and in practice rather than as raw sense-data or an assemblage of meaningless objects. Or, as he puts it in *Being and Time*, objects have practical significance for life, they are “ready-to-hand.” The second claim is also made during the winter semester 1919–1920: “The authentic *organon of the understanding of life is history*, not as historical science or as a collection of curiosities, but rather as life that has been lived, [history] as it accompanies [life] in actual living” (G58 256).

The primary aim of this essay is to present a hermeneutics of prayer. The more proximal goal, itself motivated by this larger purpose, is to clarify in more detail the nature of hermeneutic phenomenology as it applies to the phenomena of religious life. Accordingly, the discussion proceeds in two parts. The first part is largely expository and is aimed at clarifying the sense of hermeneutic phenomenology through a close reading of Heidegger’s lecture course for the winter semester 1920–1921. The second part is a contribution to the hermeneutics of prayer in the form of an interpretation of the New Testament that follows the guidelines gleaned from a reading of Heidegger’s essays and lectures.

## 1. Principles of the Hermeneutics of Religious Life

Heidegger’s own approach to hermeneutics is greatly indebted to the work of Wilhelm Dilthey. This is something that Heidegger himself explicitly acknowledges on many occasions, showering rare praise on Dilthey and attempting to defend his work against superficial critiques. The most well-known of these professions of allegiance comes from *Being and Time* itself: “The researches of Dilthey were, for their part, pioneering work; but today’s generation has not as yet made them its own. In the following analysis the issue is solely one of furthering their adoption” (SZ 377/429). Heidegger devoted a significant portion of his summer semester 1920 lecture course to Dilthey (G59) and gave a lecture at Kassel detailing his assessment of Dilthey’s contributions to modern German thought.

If we examine both Dilthey and Heidegger closely, it becomes clear that religion was by no means a peripheral issue in the development of hermeneutical phenomenology. Hence there is a certain appropriateness in applying a hermeneutical approach to the study of prayer. Both Dilthey and Heidegger frequently attest to their conviction that religion is a vital expression of the pretheoretical meaningfulness of life. Dilthey, for example, identifies “moral-religious truth”

with “our life as personal experience,” a sphere that is recalcitrant to both metaphysical and naturalistic explanations (GS 1 384–5/218). Dilthey uses terms such as “personal experience,” “lived experience,” and the like as ways of designating the immediate reality of human life from which the more rarefied discourse of the sciences takes its departure. His conviction is that this immediate level of experience cannot be adequately described using the categories of traditional metaphysics or of the natural sciences. Instead, religion and literature are able to capture its meaning much more accurately. Heidegger, too, regards religious life as a decisive exemplification of what he calls “factual life-experience” (see G58 61; G60 82, etc.). Both Dilthey and Heidegger also hold that religious life, particularly *Christian* religious life, harbors a unique “feeling for life” that has often been covered over or distorted by subsequent work in both theology and philosophy. To put it another way, both Dilthey and Heidegger consistently maintain that documents of the Christian religion contain a rare and rich understanding of the immediacy of life.

Given these views, it is no surprise that both Dilthey and Heidegger devoted their hermeneutical efforts to understanding religious life. In what follows, I briefly describe Dilthey’s approach to the hermeneutics of religious life. The primary focus, however, is on Heidegger, whose work represents a continuation and critical adaptation of some of Dilthey’s basic ideas. In Dilthey’s view, religion is to be understood under the rubric of “objective spirit.” That is, religion is a “purposive system” of beliefs, practices, and traditions that makes both self-understanding and mutual understanding possible for individuals (GS7 151/173, 153/175, 166/187). “Objective spirit” is Dilthey’s term for the manifest forms that inner life takes on a grander scale. He is careful to distinguish his usage from Hegel’s; for Hegel, “objective spirit” refers to a stage in the development of moral culture (GS7 148–149/170–171). For Dilthey, on the other hand, “objective spirit” describes the shared contexts of meaning that enable both self-understanding and mutual understanding between individuals to take place. The forms of “objective spirit” include “education, economic life, the law, political activity, religion, sociability, art, philosophy, and science” (GS7 166/187). “Individuals, as carriers and representatives of the commonalities interwoven in them, can appreciate and grasp the historical genesis of these commonalities. Individuals can understand history because they themselves are historical beings” (GS7 151/173).

Because history is viewed as a repository of “objective spirit” and of other “expressions” of pretheoretical life, Dilthey holds that “History is not something separated from life or remote from the present” (GS7 147/169). In accord with these ideas, Dilthey maintains that the only way to understand religious phenomena properly is to trace them back to the “inwardness of psychic life” (GS5 372). In practice, this means delving into the developmental process in which the various forms of religious expression, for example, myth, doctrine, prayer, come to be formed and articulated (GS5 372).

While Heidegger’s own approach to the hermeneutics of religious life bears many affinities with Dilthey’s work, there are also important differences. The most valuable source for Heidegger’s views on the hermeneutics of religion is his winter semester 1920–1921 lecture course, appropriately entitled “Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion.” In this course, Heidegger presents his own hermeneutical approach as a challenge to the usual approaches to the “science” of religion (G60 28). For this reason, Heidegger’s ideas constitute a useful point of departure not only for getting clear about what the hermeneutics of religion is but also for actually contributing to it in an analysis of the central religious phenomenon of prayer.

Much of Heidegger’s discussion in this lecture course is occupied with articulating the flaws of alternative approaches. One key feature of these approaches is the imposition of an alien “classificatory order” (*Ordnung*) upon the phenomena (G60 129–130). Different kinds of classificatory order have been proposed, and Heidegger considers several of them. One involves the attempt to “insert” the matter under consideration into historical, developmental contexts and then to go on to investigate the motives of this development (G60 130).<sup>1</sup> Other schemata might be based on what passes for “common sense” (G60 134). Heidegger does not explain what he means by these kind of classificatory schemes, but he probably has in mind the tendency to read religious concepts like other concepts that have arisen in a completely different context. Thus claims such as “God saved my soul” are *obviously* causal claims, and petitionary prayers are *obviously* like any other kind of request.

Another approach might be to classify phenomena in terms of “supratemporal problems” (G60 171), a kind of theological *Problematgeschichte*.<sup>2</sup> Here, the interpretation of religion would involve tracing out various responses to “problems” such as the existence of God, the problem of evil, predestination and election, and so on. Finally, there might be an “axiologizing” approach, which employs some in-

dependent hierarchy of values to interpret religious phenomena (G60 256).<sup>3</sup> What all of these approaches share is a tendency to conceal the “context of sense” that belongs to religion (G60 172). Or, as Heidegger puts it in another place: “Regional ordering schemata, or transcendental ideas, not only do not suffice, but actually block the problematic” (G60 258).

While Dilthey is not named explicitly, there is another aspect of the common approach to the “science” of religion that Heidegger is quite critical of and which seems to have played an important role in Dilthey’s actual investigations of religious figures.<sup>4</sup> In reflecting on how to go about understanding the “situation” of Paul’s epistle to the Galatians, Heidegger explicitly refuses the historicist epistemological problem of “empathy” and the crucial category of “personality” (G60 88). The task of a genuine “articulation” of the phenomena involved in such a subject matter requires that one disregard psychological schemata (G60 121). For example, the “knowing” that Paul discusses in 1 Thessalonians and the related concept of “spirit” are completely falsified if one takes contemporary psychology as a starting point (G60 123). This “knowing” is an integral part of the life of a Christian, a life of “service” and “waiting.” “Knowing” does not “swing free” of this context (G60 123).<sup>5</sup> That is, this “knowing” is not a matter of indifferent, objective cognition of neutral facts; to the contrary, it is a special kind of self-knowledge, a way of identifying oneself with a particular history or ministry. In a final remark, which surely aims at the kind of interpretation associated with Dilthey, Heidegger states unequivocally that “The *explication* of the *proclamation* does not have the purpose of producing a contributing page to some *picture of a personality as a particular type*” (G60 138; emphasis in original).

Heidegger’s principal worry about the sorts of approaches outlined above is that they fail to do real justice to their subject matter, in this case religious life. After all, a cardinal principle of hermeneutics is that one should try to avoid doing unnecessary violence to the text under consideration. But how is it that justice can be done? The key concept for Heidegger at this stage in his career is “life,” or “factual life-experience.” For Heidegger, concepts such as “mind,” “spirit,” “consciousness,” and the like must give way before a more nuanced appreciation between the interpenetrating context of meaning, individual, social, and environmental, that comprises the full richness of life (G60 11–14). The project for the philosophy of religion then becomes one of appreciating the sense of religious words

and actions within this context rather than reducing their meaning to some kind of explanatory ground or inserting them within some alien schema.

In both the winter semester 1920–1921 and the summer semester of 1921, Heidegger is concerned with *Christianity*, with the meaning of several very specific instances of Christian language. The claim is that we must understand the things that Paul or Augustine say within the context of an “anxious worry” (*Bekümmern*) about salvation and life (G60 69). Heidegger employs a number of different terms for this context, but they all essentially point to the same idea: the “enactment-historical situation” (G60 88), a “factual life-environment” (G60 128), a “structural context” (G60 129), a totality of relations in which linguistic content is embedded (G60 136), and a “context of enactment” (G60 138). These expressions are all more or less interchangeable ways of emphasizing the claim that religious language can be adequately understood only when it is viewed in relation to its practical context in actual life. The context in which religious words and deeds make sense is not that of giving a theory, demonstrating propositions, or explaining the way things are. Instead, to use Heidegger’s language, the context is the “how” of a certain kind of life.

How do we approach this context in order to understand religious meaning? Heidegger variously terms his basic approach “phenomenological” or “enactment-historical” (G60 173). We begin with a particular, definite religiosity (G60 124). Hence we do not take it for granted that there is some universal something called “religion” or even that there is such a thing called “Christianity.” The context that opens up the sense of Paul’s words is not that of Augustine nor of Luther, nor of anyone else besides Paul. The task, then, is one of “explication” of the sense from out of this context (G60 129). Our job is not simply descriptive, but one of “extraction” (*Herausnahme*) (G60 129). Our job is the hermeneutical task of making the meaning explicit through the “fundamental enactment of a preconception.” This is not achieved through the imposition of a classificatory order but in the hermeneutical back-and-forth between our preconception and the subject matter. Instead of uncritically utilizing our assumptions, we push ourselves out into the difficulties faced by trying to understand the sense (G60 129). What is required is not the pretended objectivity of “common sense” but radical transparency regarding one’s own assumptions (G60 131).

Heidegger's studies of Paul and Augustine provide a number of illustrations of this kind of approach. In looking at *Galatians*, we must have an eye to Paul's situation, which is one of "struggle" and has nothing to do with theoretical contexts (G60 72).<sup>6</sup> The seeming self-evidence of our usual readings of Paul's texts needs to be called into question (G60 79). Beginning with the context of struggle and of "proclamation," we must try to explicate the meaning of what Paul says (G60 87). In general, the "what" of these letters can be grasped in an accurate way only if one pays attention to the "how" of the community (G60 145). The real content, or meaning, lies embedded in a "factual life-experience" that has "come to language" in the exchange between Paul and the Thessalonians, not in the "polish and detachment of theory" but rather in the "turnings and aberrations of factual life in its travail" (G60 145). With respect to Augustine and his discussions of *tentatio* in Book X of the *Confessions*, Heidegger argues that we cannot understand this as an objective "theory" about human life but must see it within the overall structure of the presentation of these ideas, that is, as a *confessio* (G60 212).

What, then, can one say about the principles of a hermeneutics of religion? There are five main lessons to be drawn here, which are not to be taken as independent directives but as expressions of an overall strategy for doing philosophy: (1) one ought to renounce the urge for generality, instead contenting oneself with the task of understanding a particular instance of religious sense, which itself might be more ambitious than it looks; (2) one ought to eschew uncritical constructions, particular those involving theory and common sense, but instead let one's presuppositions be challenged by the subject matter; (3) the subject matter of philosophy of religion is not "doctrine" nor is it the psychology of believers but is the *sense* or *meaning* of what religious people say; (4) this meaning must be contextualized, viewed in terms of its "situation" in life—the things that religious people say are expressions of a particular *way of life*; (5) the task, then, is to "explicate" this sense in a way that does justice to its context, a task that ultimately amounts to finding the meaning of religion in *life*.

## 2. Contributions Toward a Hermeneutics of Prayer

Now that some much-needed clarity regarding the nature of hermeneutical phenomenology has been achieved, the task is to offer a contribution to our understanding of prayer that follows the principles set forth above. I begin my exposition with a brief synopsis of Hei-

degger's reading of the basic meaning of primitive Christian life-experience. I find this interpretation to be not only substantially correct but also illuminating with respect to the phenomenology of prayer. Hence I aim to fulfill the hermeneutical requirement that one make one's guiding preconceptions about a subject matter as explicit as possible.

On Heidegger's view, the "life-world" of the first Christians is structured by the uncanny uncertainty of being existentially suspended between the intrusion of the "proclamation" of the Cross and the incalculable arrival of the Parousia. Heidegger understands the core of the "proclamation" to be the announcement that Jesus of Nazareth, a man apparently cursed by God, has in fact been exalted by God to be the agent of universal salvation.<sup>7</sup> The meaning of Christian life can be most clearly discerned in the community's response to this proclamation: a "turning *toward* God and *away* from idols" (G60 95; emphasis in original). Indeed, the proclamation cannot be fully understood apart from its connection to this response, which Heidegger also describes as "running the course of one's life before God [*Wandeln vor Gott*] and waiting upon him in service [*Erbarren*]," and as the "achievement of a living, effective connection with God" (G60 95). It is precisely this new way of life, defined as a connection with God, which is the indispensable condition for gaining a proper understanding of prayer. It is also crucial to recognize that part of the meaning of Christian life is *eschatological expectation*. The proclamation of the Crucified is also the proclamation of the Coming One (G60 97–98). Hence, rather than allowing his flock to indulge in worldly curiosity about the date and time of the Parousia, Paul admonishes them to be "wakeful" and "sober" (G60 105). Again, the accent is not on getting hold of the right theory about the world or the proper view of history, but on one's own personal living link with God (G60 112).<sup>8</sup>

One aspect of this wakeful Christian life that Heidegger leaves out of his own discussion is *prayer*. This is somewhat puzzling, given that prayer is obviously a practice that is historically definitive for the life-experience of Christian faith. Prayer is an integral component of the web of practices and beliefs that constitutes the unique meaning of Christian life. Hence my aim in what follows is to correct this lacuna in Heidegger's exposition while attempting to remain true to his principles. How, then, must I proceed? First, I take as my material for this interpretation a specific religious "expression." Furthermore, I relinquish any claim to make pronouncements about the "essence" of



prayer as something over and above the meaningful content of this particularly expression. Third, if history is truly the “organon for understanding life,” then my focus will be on interpreting what has been *written* about prayer. Following these guidelines, then, I take prayer in the early Christian community as my theme, relying on this community’s own self-expressions in the New Testament.

Before carrying out this project, however, a few cautionary remarks are in order. First, what follows is not intended as a definitive theological account of the biblical concept of prayer.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, I am not offering a piece of biblical theology at all. Second, I will not examine in any detail many of the philological and exegetical issues involved in understanding what the New Testament says about prayer. For example, I will not explore the different kinds of prayer that are discussed, nor will I examine the absence of the Greek “*proseuchomai*” and its cognates from the “Johannine” writings.

The first thing that must be established is the claim that prayer is indeed an expression of the meaning of Christian life as it was lived in the first century of the Common Era. Fortunately, even the most cursory glance at the New Testament shows that it was indeed a crucial part of what it meant to be a Christian. For example, prayer is a central and recurring element in Luke’s portrayal of Jesus. Luke depicts Jesus either praying or teaching about prayer at least twelve times. Indeed, all of the so-called “Synoptic” Gospels have Jesus praying either before or immediately after important moments in his ministry (e.g., Matt. 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 3:21). It is no surprise, then, that Luke also describes the centrality of prayer to the post-Easter community (e.g., Acts 1:14, 6:4, 9:40, 12:12ff., 16:25). Similarly, Paul and the other epistle writers are continually exhorting their readers to prayer, asking for their prayers, and offering prayers of their own. “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone” (1 Tim. 2:8). “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it in thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2). The members of the early community regarded themselves as living a *new* life, albeit one that was yet to be completely fulfilled. More often than not, their prayers reflect their longing for this fulfillment. They also, however, reflect the attitude of mutual love and service that defined their ethos.

As I have already pointed out, Heidegger identifies *eschatology* as the central factor in early Christian life.<sup>10</sup> Eschatology, on Heidegger’s reading, is not so much a matter of one’s particular theoretical commitments regarding the meaning of history but rather is the con-

text within which one leads a certain form of life. As such, it forms the deep background against which we can best make sense of what it means to *pray*. This is revealed, for example, by the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. The eschatological meaning of prayer as it appears in this passage emerges most clearly if it is juxtaposed with an earlier scene in which Jesus delivers his eschatological message:

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to you all: keep awake. (Mark 13:32–37)

Holding this passage in mind, turn now to two passages from the story about the night in the Garden:

[1] He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:37ff.).

[2] He came to them a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.” (Mark 14:41)

This story, of course, precedes the arrest, trial, and death of Jesus. Here the disciples find themselves poised on the frontier of the new age, of the decisive revelation of God. This is clear from the saying about the “Son of Man” in Mark 14:41. Taken together with the earlier eschatological discourse, we can see that *watchful prayer* is an essential response to the message of the imminent kingdom of God. Praying in a spirit of “watchfulness” means praying with one’s eyes peeled and ears opened for the fulfillment of the new creation. It expresses a life that already has one foot in God’s future, so to speak. Those who are caught off guard, absorbed in worldly affairs, experience the arrival of this future as destruction and judgment. For those who are prepared, whose lives are lives of wakeful prayer, it is salva-

tion. For Paul, too, prayer (indeed, *constant* prayer) is the appropriate attitude to take for one who expects the dawn of a new age. See, for example, the frequently referenced lines “Rejoice always, *pray without ceasing*, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:16f.). Similarly, Paul admonishes the Romans to “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer” (Rom. 12:12).

What does all this tell us about what prayer *means*? Clearly, it is a practice that is integral to the “serving” and “waiting” that constitute the sense of Christian life. The primitive church regarded itself as the messianic community, the community of those who had been called out of the world to a new life of earnest prayer, mutual love, and eschatological anticipation. Unceasing prayer is taken as a definitive expression of this new life. It is an activity that, together with liturgical rites, charitable actions, and the proclamation of the Gospel, makes Christian life what it is. Divorced from this overall context, prayer takes on the character of magical formulae. Like enthusiastic eschatological expectation, a prayer that is not part of a *life of prayer* involves no personal commitment. At best it is a way to fit in with a particular group and at worst it is sheer presumption. The Christian denunciation of practices such as divination, magic, and fortune-telling is founded on the idea that these activities are rooted in a worldly *curiosity* about the divine secrets. It is as if one were trying to reduce the incalculable future of the kingdom of God to something that can be “managed.” Having done so, one can go on crying “Peace and security!”

If prayer is not to degenerate in this way, then it must be seen as part of a total life, a life that is a response to the proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God. Such a life is often called a life “in the Spirit.” Hence it is not surprising to find admonitions to “pray in the Holy Spirit” (Jude 1:20), to “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication” (Eph. 6:18). This life “in the Spirit” is central to the meaning of the eschatological way of life that itself makes prayer intelligible to us. But what does “in the Spirit” mean, especially when it is said of prayer?

The gift of the Spirit is regarded as yet another sign that a new age has begun and the old one is passing away. Jesus had promised his followers that they would be “baptized with the Holy Spirit” and would “receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon [them]” (Acts 1:5, 8). Praying “in the Spirit,” then, means recognizing prayer itself as a *gift*, as a part of the radically altered existential situation of

those who have received the gift of the Spirit. Following the return from the Babylonian exile, the consensus among large groups of the Jewish population was that the Spirit of God was no longer available as it had been during the period of classical prophecy. One of the hopes for the messianic age was that this Spirit would be “poured out on all flesh.” The gift of the Spirit regenerates broken lives, gives courage to live for the future of God, and, most important for the present discussion, bestows a new intimacy with the divine. But of what sort is this gift? Paul puts it this way:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!”, it is that very spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. (Rom. 8:14–17)

Prayer is the expression of a new life, a life of “adoption” or “filiation.” Indeed, “expression” is a more appropriate term here than “obligation.” While it is certainly true that the early Christians were admonished to “pray without ceasing” and to be “watchful,” it is equally clear that prayer expresses an attitude of joy and thanksgiving on behalf of people who had been liberated from sin and death. Indeed, Paul is careful to add “rejoice” to his exhortations to constant prayer (see Rom. 12:12; Phil. 4:4–7; Col. 4:2ff.; 1 Thess. 5:16f.). The sense of the new age, of which the early Christians viewed themselves as citizens, is that sinners have been granted the ability to share in Christ’s intimacy with God. This intimacy was expressed in Jesus’ life not only by his preaching and healing but above all by his *prayers*. Jesus often prayed in solitary places at times of the day when he was sure to be alone and undisturbed. Even his teaching about prayer reflects this spirit of intimacy. For example, he admonishes his listeners not to “heap up empty phrases like the Gentiles do” (Matt. 6:7). Ancient people often approached their gods as they did their rulers and felt compelled to observe all the proper protocols. Jesus, however, dismisses these practices as useless and harmful for “children” addressing their “Father” in a spirit of liberated intimacy.

Employing Heidegger’s hermeneutical principles has thus given us a definite picture of the meaning that prayer had in the life of the primitive Christian community. Prayer is part of a whole pattern of life, a pattern that is best understood as a joyful response to the gift of freedom and new intimacy with God. We would, however, be letting

ourselves off easy were we simply to rest with this sort of “objective” description of the meaning of prayer in a particular community. This is not to say, of course, that it is easy to stick “to the things themselves,” as phenomenologists like to say. But there is an element of Heidegger’s hermeneutics that I have so far left undiscussed. Unlike the “objective-historical” mode of analysis that he rejects, “Phenomenological understanding . . . is determined from the enactment of the one who is engaging in reflection” (G60 82). Or, as he puts it later, “One must only be directly and absolutely interested *in* the explication and *about* it, and *must* be so authentically” (G60 129; emphasis in original).

These remarks indicate that Heidegger belongs among those philosophers, such as Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Rosenzweig, for whom philosophy of religion is not like botany or toxicology. That is, it is not a matter of establishing the “facts” about religion so that one can file them away. The philosophical search for religious meaning puts the searcher herself into question, opening up the possibility that religious meaning is more than an interesting historical aside but is a real challenge to our own self-understanding. Dilthey formulates this hermeneutical principle thus: “History is not something separated from life or remote from the present.” In a lecture on Dilthey from 1924, Heidegger makes this point more dramatically: “We are history, i.e., our own past. Our future is lived from out of the past. We carry the past with us” (S 174).

This means that a hermeneutics of prayer must in the end also be a *call to prayer*. Hermeneutics illumines the life-context and basic attitudes that belong to a community not simply so that our historical curiosity might be satisfied but also so that the past might become meaningful for *our future*. The hermeneutical insight is that this cannot be accomplished by making pronouncements about the ahistorical “essence” or “nature” of a practice like prayer or by insisting on the use of “classificatory orders.” Instead, by reading a concept or a practice in order to determine its meaning for life, hermeneutics makes it possible for this concept or practice to become meaningful again for *our* life. Prayer, like any religious concept, really makes sense only as a *practice*—its meaning dawns on us in the work of living it out.

The hermeneutics of prayer that I have offered here makes a number of claims on our present and on our future. First, prayer ought to be an expression of a Christian’s alienation from the world of sin and death, an alienation that is ultimately grounded in the expecta-

tion of the redemption of this same world. Prayer is a practice that both expresses a new life and reconnects one with it. Second, prayer, even petitionary prayer, ought to be a joyous response to an experienced liberation from slavery of all kinds, the expression of a new intimacy with the divine. To “pray without ceasing” is to live from out of a future that places the patterns and practices of the past into question. Prayer expresses the new orientation of a life that has been set free. As an expression of such a life, prayer is not a burden or a “duty” but a grateful expression of a new creation. In the end, however, the meaning of prayer is something that must not merely be talked about but must be lived anew in each case. Apart from the actual practice of prayer in the context of a new life in the Spirit, “prayer” is a meaningless word.

### Abbreviations

#### *Works by Dilthey*

- GS1 *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1: *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*. Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1937. English translation: Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, eds. *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works*, vol. 1: *Introduction to the Human Sciences*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- GS2 *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2: *Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen seit Renaissance und Reformation*. Edited by Georg Misch. Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1957.
- GS5 *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5: *Die Geistige Welt: Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens*, Erste Hälfte: Abhandlungen zur Grundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften. Edited by Georg Misch. Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1957.
- GS7 *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7: *Der Aufbau der Geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*. Edited by Bernhard Groethuysen. Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1958. English translation: Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, eds. *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works*, vol. 3: *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- GS8 *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8: *Weltanschauungslehre: Abhandlungen zur Philosophie der Philosophie*. Edited by Bernhard Groethuysen. Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1960.

#### *Works by Heidegger*

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